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CULTURAL, POLITICAL, AND CHOREOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENTS OF FEMINISM IN CLASSICAL BALLET

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Abstract

This paper explores how the ballerina can be better represented in the culture, aesthetics, and politics of ballet. Despite the patriarchal and misogynistic traditions that this art form is steeped in, women have made significant strides in reclaiming ballet as a tool of female empowerment rather than of suppression or objectification. A disparity of leadership positions, a traditionally disempowering training system, misogynistic ballet narratives, and patterns of abuse and harassment all combine to create a world that disempowers female dancers on multiple levels. Despite these realities, women have been at the forefront of narrowing wage and opportunity gaps, encouraging transparency about mental and physical health, speaking out against harmful power dynamics, and creating ballets that tell a more complete story of the female experience. This thesis aims to emphasize the work that is being done to remedy these systemic issues, while also further exploring the question of female empowerment through the ballet technique. In conjunction with the research that was done into the broader topic, I created a full-length piece designed to illustrate the process by which the ballet technique might be able to serve the ballerina herself, rather than the man who constructed her. This collaborative choreographic process incorporated inspiration from several other choreographers who have also grappled with the topic of female representation through ballet movement. I aimed to collaborate with my dancers to portray the intrinsic strength of the ballerina and the freedom of artistic expression that can be found through the technique.

Introduction

“Ballet is woman.” This George Balanchine quote is an iconic catchphrase that has come under great scrutiny by women of various standings in the ballet community as it becomes increasingly clear that, in fact, ballet is “a woman made by a man” (Peters). Choreographer Pam Tanowitz is credited with first articulating this important distinction in a 2016 New York Times article. In several different facets—administrative, physical, artistic, historic—women exist at a disadvantage in the ballet world; nonetheless, over time, women have, in all of these areas, made massive strides in reclaiming and equalizing the ballet world.
The first and most important step to diminishing the sexist tendencies in ballet is to recognize that they are problems that need to be fixed. Many people in this art form remain resigned to the facts that demonstrate inequity as inevitable necessities rather than adaptable cultural markers. In a 2017 Facebook post, dancer and choreographer Alexei Ratmansky controversially captioned a photo: “Sorry, there is no such thing as equality in ballet: women dance on point, men lift and support women. women receive flowers, men escort women offstage. not the other way around (I know there are a couple of exceptions). And I am very comfortable with that” (Ratmansky). This comment incited very justified anger from both men and women who aren’t comfortable with the ramifications of such casual misogyny.

Although few men tend to be quite this candid or brusque, inaction by those in positions of power reflects a similar message of indifference. In a 2017 article on reinvigorating ballet, Christopher Wheeldon commented on gender inequality in the dance world: “There is such an obvious imbalance. I’m not sure why it exists and persists. In my experience, directors today are seeking diversity and would love to present the work of female ballet choreographers, so I don’t think overt misogyny is at work” (Sulcas, “A Conversation”). Whether or not explicit sexism is still at play, women are still at a distinct, undeniable, and problematic disadvantage within several dimensions of the ballet world. Nonetheless, it is true that great progress is being made toward true gender balance and equality.

Although women still hold statistically fewer powerful positions in the ballet world, they are quickly shrinking the gap between themselves and male artistic directors, executive directors, and choreographers. Despite a traditionally disempowering training method, many female students are managing to disregard an indoctrinated feeling of subservience and are breaking through the glass ceiling. Although objectification and sexual assault are grim, ever-present realities of ballet tradition, women are slowly beginning to find the strength to speak out against abuse and harassment. From multiple directions, the culture of objectification, dehumanization, and oversexualization is slowly dissipating. Dancers and choreographers are beginning to reject sexist conventions of the ballet technique while also addressing mental health, eating disorders, and poor self-image. In this way, students are beginning to deinternalize any sense of dehumanization or objectification that can leave them more vulnerable to abuse. Even as the ballet technique advances and increasingly showcases the strength of the ballerina, women are constrained by a technical and narrative tradition that was designed to satisfy men. Fortunately, the narratives of new ballets are increasingly being revised and replaced for the sake of painting a more complete story of womanhood. With this thesis, I wanted to illustrate that ballerinas are making progress toward comprehensive gender equality in these various areas. Specifically, I wanted to create a piece to illustrate the process by which women are reclaiming the ballet technique to represent their own experiences and perspective.
Positions of Power and Statistical Inequalities

The Dance Data Project is an online resource dedicated to promoting equity in classical ballet. This annual compilation of statistics reveals that progress has been made but that there is still a real, demonstrable disparity in the approach to gender equality in ballet. Looking primarily at the top 50 American ballet companies—defined as those operating with the greatest expenditures—the Dance Data Project found that in the 2019–2020 season, men choreographed 72% of works. Specifically looking at full-length world premieres, men choreographed 83% of works by major American ballet companies during the 2019–2020 season (2019–2020 Season Overview).

This lack of representation is as much a problem executively as it is artistically. In looking at the boards of trustees and directors at major ballet companies, the disparity in female representation becomes even clearer. In the top 10 American ballet companies, 70% of board chairs are male (Boards of Directors & Trustees). Additionally, the issue of unequal pay has not spared the world of classical ballet, even for women in positions of power. Not only do women only hold 25% of artistic director positions within the top 50 American ballet companies, but those female artistic directors earn, on average, 63 cents for every dollar a male artistic director makes (Artistic and Executive Leadership Report 10); as of 2018, female executive directors earned only 83 cents for every dollar that men earned in these same positions (Artistic and Executive Leadership Report 15).

Although women make up 71% of the ballet world (“Dancers and Choreographers”), they typically only fill the roles of dancer, performer, teacher, and ballet mistress. They are rarely granted the opportunity to express their unique artistic voices in powerful positions such as choreographer or artistic director. Rather, their skills and expertise are consistently employed, and perhaps exploited, in more traditionally feminine roles. In fact, within the schools and academies associated with the top 50 American companies, 77% of the faculty members are female. Of those women, 85% are in “non-titled” positions, meaning that they are “independent contractors or ‘gig workers’ and are less likely to have the benefits or job security afforded to permanent faculty members with titles” (Artists and Other Cultural Workers).

These problems are certainly not limited to leadership positions within the dance world. A 2016 study found that, on average, women in the arts earn approximately $20,000 less per year than their male counterparts (Kaplan). Considering that 46% of dancers and choreographers have incomes at less than twice the poverty threshold, this paints a grim image of how the work of dancers, particularly female dancers, is valued (National Endowment for the Arts).
Statistics don’t reflect the even bleaker reality in which many dancers are expected to work and perform for no pay at all. Often, companies simply cannot afford to pay all of their dancers, and unpaid apprenticeships and traineeships are typically considered part of the pecking order of the professional world. Being unable to stand up for herself and to even ask to be paid for her work only furthers a dancer’s sense of being replaceable and undervalued, however. The issue is succinctly captured in a 2018 Dance Magazine article: “Dancers deserve to get paid for their work. I wish I knew how to make this a reality for all artists today as well as the next generation. We as dancers should know our worth. The only way the outside world will respect us is if we respect ourselves first” (Anonymous).

While these problems are well illustrated in the professional ballet world, discrepancies in training for boys and girls lie at the root of larger, systemic inequalities. Robin Lakes, a University of North Texas professor whose research focuses on dance pedagogy, explains, “The dance world has held on to a pedagogical method that disempowers the dancer before sexual abuse would even occur” (Wingenroth). Ballet training is founded on principles of discipline, routine, and tradition. Unfortunately, those principles can sometimes cross a line, straying into territories of authoritarianism and repressed individualism. One recent study suggests that because of “authoritarian methods in training dancers and directing rehearsals . . . women in particular suffer from the demeaning treatment and implicit approbation of voiceless, docile bodies inherent in such disciplinary regimens” (Meglin and Matluck Brooks 3). From a young age, female dancers are told, either explicitly or by implication, to be quiet and obedient if they want to be successful. “Girls are trained to be the perfect third swan on the left, to stay quiet and be ‘good girls,’ to fit in and show no personality of her own” (Basco). Young girls internalize the idea that their role is uncreative performer rather than revolutionary leader.

In contrast, young boys, as a marginal population within the dance community, internalize a very different message about their potential. Within schools and academies, boys are regularly given preferential treatment financially, during class, and for performances. Of course, much of this stems from the scarcity of male dancers at both academic and professional levels. As they are more sought after, they are given more scholarships, more attention from teachers, more soloist roles, and, ultimately, better and better-paying jobs. “Even when they’re teenagers and in school, the boys get the scholarships, are feted, are courted . . . The boys are coddled, but the girls . . . know that if they speak up or show individual personality, they’ll be replaced” (Basco). Although this trend might seem like a necessity of the field, it also puts women in the demoralizing position of constantly feeling disposable. Men are trained to believe that they are individually important within the dance world, which bolsters their confidence to go on to become artistic directors, choreographers, and other leaders within that world. This automatically puts women at a disadvantage in any pursuit of leadership roles in the ballet world.
The specific issues facing women in the ballet world are furthered by larger, societal stereotypes about gender and leadership. “Competitive, self-confident, objective, aggressive, ambitious, and able to lead” (Defrank-Cole and Nicholson 86) are some of the qualities most often associated with leaders. Unfortunately, these qualities are often considered incompatible with the expectations of femininity placed on women, particularly ballerinas. To break from the traditional feminine quality of a ballet dancer threatens the way a woman is perceived as a dancer and also makes people less likely to view her as a competent leader. “Could it be that the ethereal dancers are deemed ‘not aggressive enough’ to lead?” This question, which confronts every powerful woman in ballet, indicates an inaccurate cultural belief that one cannot be both capable and feminine, influential and nurturing, or authoritative and beautiful.

Examples of and Attitudes Toward Female Leaders

Despite the barriers and challenges that confront women in the ballet world, there are countless examples of women who prove that these trends are changing and that women are slowly gaining the recognition and opportunities they deserve. Artistic directors Lourdes Lopez of Miami City Ballet, Julie Kent of Washington Ballet, and Victoria Morgan of Cincinnati Ballet are just a few examples of women who have risen to positions of power. Many companies are also beginning initiatives designed to showcase and highlight women. Projects such as Boston Ballet’s ChoreograpHER Initiative and American Ballet Theatre’s Women’s Movement are providing increased opportunities for female choreographers (Basco). Many companies, including English National Ballet, Carolina Ballet, and Tulsa Ballet, have presented all-female bills designed to showcase the work of female choreographers. Patricia Baker, artistic director of Royal New Zealand Ballet, planned a 2020 season made up exclusively of works by female choreographers. These included works and productions by Danielle Rowe, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Kiara Flavin, Andrea Schermoly, Sarah Foster-Sproull, Twyla Tharp, Alice Topp, and Penny Saunders.

Individual women are also finding ways to highlight female choreographers and to encourage future generations of women. Ashley Bauder commissions pieces by female and marginalized individuals through her arts collaborative, the Ashley Bauder Project. Misty Copeland created Project Plie to promote ballet to children who are currently underrepresented in the art form, encouraging diversity of gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Defrank-Cole and Nicholson 79). In 2013, educator, advocate, and choreographer Sandra Parks founded Women in Dance, which hosts biennial international leadership conferences designed to expand the voices of female dance artists by giving them a more visible platform (Women in Dance). And although women created only 26% of all works in the 2019–2020 season, that was up from only 17% in the 2018–2019 season. Change is clearly occurring slowly, but in meaningful increments. Women in powerful leadership positions are continuously empowering
other women by showcasing their work and encouraging them to take initiative within the ballet world.

Despite these very promising examples, the unfortunate reality is that women who do manage to break past the glass ceiling of the ballet world are still faced with biases and prejudice. A 2010 panel that included women such as Stoner Winslett, artistic director of the Richmond Ballet, and Victoria Morgan, artistic director of Cincinnati Ballet, discussed the “boy’s club” attitude that women often confront in meetings and conferences, especially when they first assume leadership positions (Meglin and Matluck Brooks 2). It is still too much of a novelty for women to be in these types of powerful positions, and it needs to become as normalized as it already is for men. A 2016 journal article on female leadership in ballet describes a glass cliff that women sometimes experience. This refers to the idea that their reputation in that position might be more precarious or risky than it is for men: “Women who want leadership roles sometimes have no choice but to take posts that are somewhat less desirable due to significant issues, such as financial troubles. However, they may be blamed for poor performance when the damage was done before they actually took on the mantle of leadership” (Defrank-Cole and Nicholson 82). In other words, women aren’t given the luxury of being selective or picky about the positions they are awarded, which can ultimately reflect poorly on them. Because these women are often tokenized in largely male-dominated environments, they are also given the pressure of representing and embodying all women. This makes it virtually impossible for women to fail, for fear of proving that misconceptions about female leaders are actually accurate. Many women are therefore put in the stifling position of having to take any opportunity that’s given them while also needing to fulfill the position of artistic director or executive director without mistake or flaw. Although women in these positions are at the forefront of any feminist victories within the ballet world, a truly equal system would not place them in such precarious positions.

Sexual Exploitation, the Female Body, and the #MeToo Movement

History of Female Representation

Ballet began in the Renaissance courts of Italy and France, where it was a symbol of the aristocracy and highlighted male dancers, particularly Louis XIII and Louis XIV, who epitomized French noble dancing. During the French Revolution, ballet was disparaged as a symbol of the aristocracy, and the male ballet stars of the court were replaced by romantic, sylph-like female dancers. Revolutionary female dancers such as Marie de Sallé and Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo largely directed the revolutionary dance reformation of the early 18th century by rejecting aristocratic regulation and the hierarchy of French court dance. These women, alongside others such as Françoise Prevost and Marie-Madeleine Guimard emphasized sensuality, femininity, and technical virtuosity in performing noble steps. As ballet d’action began
to take the place of court dancing, the impressive artistry and athleticism of these women redefined 18th-century ballet as a feminine art.

In the following century, Romantic ballet, defined by the supernatural, the exotic, and the ethereal, began to develop in France. The creation of the early pointe shoe literally elevated women such as Marie Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi, Lucille Grahn, and Fanny Ceritto to an otherworldly, revered status. The Romantic ballerina was depicted as fleeting, powerful, and seductive in ballets such as Taglioni’s La Sylphide, Perrot’s Pas de Quatre, and Perrot and Coralli’s Giselle. The women in these ballets captured the hearts of their male counterparts on stage, as well as those of their adoring fans in the audience; however, their prestige on stage was marred by the darker reality of courtesanship at the Paris Opera: “Sex work was part of ballerinas’ realities during the 19th century, an era in which money, power and prostitution mingled in the glamorous and not-so-glamorous backstage world of the Paris Opera” (Blakemore). Although there was great empowerment in the liberal boldness of this revolutionized ballet, it came with the sacrifice of degradation for these ballerinas who relied on wealthy men for financial support. Notably, the Impressionist painter Degas painted and sculpted a behind-the-scenes look at these Paris Opera ballerinas and the lewd men who preyed upon them.

In the second half of the century, ballet began to become an increasingly globalized art form, and women such as Carlotta Brianza and Virginia Zucchi performed ballets such as Coppélia, The Sleeping Beauty, La Esmerelda, and Swan Lake across Europe. Airy Romantic tutus were slowly shortened into pancake tutus, giving women more freedom of movement. Petipa, Cecchetti, and Bournonville began creating iconic classical ballets that demanded impressive strength and athleticism from dancers. The librettos of these ballets revolved around a female protagonist but always placed her next to a male lover, hero, or villain who drove the plot: “It’s Petipa’s stage drama that shows us what’s at stake: a society in which men honour women, support women, frame women. He makes that seem the cornerstone not only of ballet but of psychology and civilization, too” (Macaulay, “Is Classical Ballet Sexist?”).

As ballet moved throughout the Continent and to Imperial Russia, Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes became the hotspot of 20th-century ballet. Anna Pavlova, Olga Spessivtseva, and Tamara Karsavina performed groundbreaking works by choreographers such as Petipa, Fokine, Nijinsky, and, importantly, Nijinska. Bronislava Nijinska had a successful career as both a dancer and choreographer and is remembered for works such as Les Noces and Les Riches. As the only female choreographer at this renowned company, she set a revolutionary precedent.

Meanwhile, in London, Marie Rambert, Ninette de Valois, Alicia Markova, and eventually Margot Fonteyn spearheaded the development of British ballet. Back in Russia, dancers and choreographers including Pavlova, Mikhail Mordkin, Adolph Bohn, and Leonide Massine defected and began bringing ballet from the Ballet Russes
to the United States. The New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and San Francisco Ballet Company are all direct descendants of Diaghilev’s legacy (*Descendants of the Ballet Russes*).

Despite various contributing influences, Balanchine is credited as the father of American ballet. Along with Lincoln Kirstein, he founded both New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet. His prestige is marred, however, by stories of how he treated women and by his legacy of misogyny and body shaming. The women in his ballets were the stars and the centers of attention but were limited to portraying a very small scope of the female experience: “Even in Balanchine’s many plotless ballets, men tend to be consorts and cavaliers, while few of his women—with or without stories—are wives, fewer are mothers, none work for a living, few seem trapped by their societies. And where the man is an artist, the woman is his muse; the roles may not, for Balanchine, be reversed” (Macaulay, *Of Women, Men*”). As much as Balanchine revered women as the stars of his ballets, his treatment of them was deeply tinged with objectification and oversexualization. He had sexual relationships with many of his dancers and married four of them, normally around the time that they turned 21. He gave his favorite ballerinas distinctive perfume scents so he could recognize them in and out of the studio. He would remove dancers from roles if they refused his advances and openly discouraged dancers from getting married or having children (Steichen). He would openly critique the bodies of his dancers, one of his most famous quotes stating that in a ballerina, he “must see the bones.”

From a modern perspective, all of these behaviors are clearly predatory and sexist; however, “Mr. B’s” cult-like present-day enthusiasts tend to ignore these failings in their reverence of his artistic work. Ignoring and normalizing these actions and continuing to idolize Balanchine, however, makes it much easier to excuse similar present-day behaviors as traditional. By protecting Balanchine’s lineage, his successors, including Peter Martins, felt protected to practice similarly abusive tactics.

Balanchine’s methods of sexual and psychological manipulation were particularly abominable, but many of the male icons of the 20th-century dance world are remembered as abusive. “Jerome Robbins was known for his temper (one scholar mentioned he threw chairs at dancers), and Antony Tudor would intentionally humiliate performers during rehearsals. Far from expunged from dance history, all three men are icons” (Villarreal). It is very possible to admire and perform the work that these choreographers created without glorifying the men themselves. By openly condemning the behaviors of predatory men throughout ballet history, the culture of the dance world will be able to grow and evolve away from these traditions.

As the broader culture of American dance began to develop, many women found great success in portraying the female experience through dance techniques besides classical ballet. The biggest example of this is the feminist approach taken by
many modern dancers in the 20th and 21st centuries. Unlike ballet, the modern dance movement “cuts through directly to the source of all dancing… to convey through movement the most intangible emotional experience. This is the prime purpose of modern dance, it is not interested in spectacle” (Copeland). Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, Agnes de Mille, Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey, and Mary Wigman were all powerful women in the modern dance world who used dance to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions that ballet had not yet begun to delve into. Instead of using certain techniques to portray these ideas, these women used their own bodies as material by moving in ways that felt natural, free, and strong. Duncan in particular is associated with having rejected ballet as restrictive and patriarchal: “She will dance not in the form of a nymph nor fairy nor coquette but in the form of a woman in her greatest and purest expression” (Craine and Mackrell). Duncan’s work was intended to dissolve the body entirely, making it genderless and sexless, while also focusing attention on the soul and inner self. Martha Graham also created countless works that told the internal stories of female characters. The women she presented on stage were based on strong women from history and mythology and were portrayed as complex and multifaceted, capable of the whole of human experience. Just a few examples are Medea in Cave of the Heart, Jocasta in Night Journey, the Bronte sisters in Deaths and Entrances, and Joan of Arc in Seraphic Dialogue. Meanwhile, Katherine Dunham, as a champion of black feminism, used dance as activism to bring attention to the racism and sexism of America in the 1940s and 1950s. All of these women aided in reframing the perception of the female body as well as the various capacities of the dancing body.

Postmodern choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown worked with minimal, pedestrian movement, often creating identical choreography for men and women, and postmodernism relied on the idea that anyone can choreograph and anyone can dance. The movement began to erase the very idea of gender in dance, as women partnered and lifted other dancers, movement was often identical regardless of gender, and heteronormative costuming, stage placement, and other conventions were done away with entirely. People such as Twyla Tharp began introducing more-innovate and less-normative works and ideas to ballet companies. Tharp crossed ballet with jazz, musical theater, and modern dance to create dozens of pieces that are still performed today by companies around the world, including her own, which she founded in 1965. Pina Bausch was instrumental in the creation of German Tanztheater, a blend of movement, sound, and art. She created infamous works designed to challenge spectator and dancer alike. She emphasized improvisation, relationships, and gender dynamics in her work and is credited as one of the most influential choreographers of the 20th century. Companies such as DV8 Physical Theatre and Urban Bush Women further experiment with movement today, incorporating studies into race and sexuality to express the diversity of the female experience.
These approaches have all been very effective in portraying empowered women and are certainly foundational to the burgeoning feminist movement in the ballet world; however, the female experience is not monolithic, and I believe that ballet, with its structure, elegance, and femininity, can also provide a glimpse into a different, but equally profound, share of the complete human experience.

Self-Image and Physical Maturation

For female dancers, the political and cultural reality of the female body intersects with the reality that “any exchange about a dancer’s body, whether it takes place on or off the job, relates to work…. Her body is inseparable from her work” (Kourlas and Burke). This reality is an element of ballet that is often detrimental to a female dancer’s self-image, skewing her approach to training, damaging her mental health and further solidifying gendered power dynamics. Whether one is portraying the ephemeral, sylph-like eroticism of classical ballerinas or the extended, unemotional lines of a Balanchine ballerina, the expectations for female ballet bodies are made clear from a young age. With up to 70% of professionals being delayed in maturation, there is a well-established preference for later-maturing dancers. “Later maturation in female ballet dancers has been associated with greater psychological well-being, while earlier maturing female dancers report greater incidences of disordered eating, negative body image and higher psychopathology.” In a qualitative study of young student dancers, many reported feeling that puberty could either make or break their careers, depending on whether they would maintain a “pre-pubescent look, conforming more easily to the expectations of the ballet world” (Mitchell et al. 238).

Wider hips, larger breasts, and other qualities of female menarche are quite clearly deterrents toward the ideal ballerina body, despite being inevitable results of being a woman. The culture of ballet; the classical corps of all female dancers; the hierarchy of principal over soloist over corps; the competitive standards of acceptance to intensives, colleges, and companies all combine to make women feel as though they will be successful only if they can maintain a particular physical appearance. This is a feeling that is often only enhanced by teachers, coaches, and directors. Students describe teachers as exhibiting more negative, punitive, and punishing behaviors toward students who are taller or weigh more. Further studies have shown that risk and disordered eating behaviors are “closely associated with perceiving and receiving pressure from coaches regarding the body” (Toro et al. 47). Female dancers are rewarded for appearing childlike and are punished for looking like women.

While high expectations and internalized motivation can serve a dancer well, when these qualities are focused exclusively on the body itself, they can become detrimental to a dancer’s self-esteem and mental health. Amid a culture that objectifies the female body and encourages women to fulfill a very specific and often
unattainable body image, it is inevitable that women would start to internally reduce their own bodies to objects. A case study on ballet students’ perceptions of their reflection in the mirror explains this phenomenon well:

In using the mirror, however, many students will disassociate their somatic selves from the reflection they see in the mirror and become “absent” from their bodies. As a result, they come to view themselves as objects rather than as holistic, kinaesthetic, “feeling” human beings. Many become obsessed with their individual body parts, becoming intimidated or even humiliated by this “dismemberment process.” (Radell et al. 15)

This process of constantly analyzing and fixating on one’s body is made increasingly problematic by dancers’ drive for perfection. External pressure from teachers, coaches, and directors, combined with internal self-criticism, causes dancers to consistently display signs of clinical perfectionism. Although a certain level of perfection-driven thinking can help dancers work hard and perform their best, perfectionism is also strongly correlated with eating-disorder pathology and psychopathological symptoms (Serrano and Amaral Espírito-Santo). In fact, “clinical perfectionism is one of four core mechanisms that maintain ED pathology” (Penniment and Egan 15). Nearly one-fifth of ballet dance students suffer from an eating disorder, about 15% of which are categorized as EDNOS, or “eating disorders not otherwise specified.” While this disordered behavior does not meet the criteria for anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, it is maladaptive, atypical, and very serious. Compared to nondancers, dancers have twice the chance of developing this type of disordered behavior (Arcelus et al.).

Various research has correlated the high rates of disordered eating with the perfectionist tendencies so common in dancers. Weight dissatisfaction is associated not only with attitudes toward food and eating but also with depressive symptoms, as well as anxious or worried feelings regarding weight and body image (Toro et al.). Cognitive fusion, experiential avoidance, and psychological inflexibility are displayed in dancers who have excessive involvement in the content of internal events, including thoughts, emotions, and self-criticism.

These traits are correlated with depression, anxiety, and eating disorders and can also cause dancers to avoid situations that agitate such internal thoughts. Coupled with potentially distressing external criticism, comparisons, and corrections, the mental health of dancers is both delicate and widely disregarded. Many dancers—including Abi Stafford of New York City Ballet and Kathryn Morgan, former New York City Ballet and Miami City Ballet dancer—have publicly begun conversations about their own experiences with eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. Many have begun pushing for companies and schools to better address and treat the mental health of their dancers, but it is still rare that such efforts are actually implemented.
Beyond issues of mental health, internal and external pressures toward perfectionism can have detrimental effects on physical health as well. Dancers weigh an average of 10%–12% under their ideal body weight; delayed menarche occurs in 70% of female dancers; and amenorrhea occurs in 78% of adult dancers. “The energy deficiency caused by low caloric intake causes complications related to menstrual function, decreased bone density, metabolic rate, immunity, and cardiovascular health;… and an elevated risk for injuries” (Gorrell et al. 57). The way that ballet culture treats female bodies not only damages their self-image and psyche but also physically makes it more difficult for them to dance to their full potential. The problems inherent in this system are not necessary to sustaining the dance world, and extensive research has shown that interventions promoting body acceptance can produce “significant reductions in global eating pathology, body dissatisfaction, and dietary restraint” (Gorrell et al. 64). These interventions cannot be purely dancer-led, however; there must be institutional change from companies and schools. Research into eating pathology interventions has found that dancers feel it important that there be a “companion module of this intervention delivered to artistic and other administrative staff in hopes that resulting systemic change would be impactful and sustainable” (Gorrell et al. 68). To address the core issues of these trends, companies and schools must take it upon themselves to support their dancers in meaningful, functional ways.

These cultural realities maintain a system of power in which the female dancer is virtually powerless. A fear of being contentious or disagreeable discourages her from sticking up for herself, even if it would better serve her mental and physical health. Perfectionism, disordered eating, and poor mental health are all evidence of the female dancer’s ingrained sense of being an object. Such a belief system, no matter how unconscious it is, disempowers the female student and dancer, making her vulnerable to a power hierarchy that is too often abused by men at the top. Finally addressing the core problems at the root of larger systemic issues is slowly helping to diminish these disempowering realities; nonetheless, the way female dancers are raised to objectify their bodies to the detriment of their own health is problematic, regardless of whether it leads to abuse or harassment.

#MeToo Movement

Any field in which most participants are women and most leaders are men presents a very real potential for abusive power dynamics. Research has shown that “male-dominated organizations are more prone to sexual harassment” (Wingenroth), and the ballet world is no exception. The risk is only increased by the objectification of female dancers, which too often is morphed into sexualized dehumanization. The same habits and patterns that empower men to be leaders while undermining the individuality of women also foster an environment in which abuse can occur. Throughout their training and careers, students and professionals look to teachers,
choreographers, and directors for approval and validation. This dynamic can also quickly become problematic if it is inappropriately exploited. Additionally, the competition of the ballet environment, the scarcity of dance jobs, and the hierarchy in which one person decides a dancer’s fate combine to create “a culture where harassment is tolerated for fear of losing a job or being black-balled” (Wingenroth).

In conjunction with the #MeToo movement, a string of allegations exposed many powerful individuals in the ballet world for their predatory behavior toward female dancers. One of the best-known of these cases was Peter Martins, the sole artistic leader of New York City Ballet from 1990 to 2018. He retired amid accusations, which he denied, of sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse. Despite several reports of harassment and abuse, there have been no other punishments or consequences for Martins. Another widely publicized instance was a lawsuit filed by Alexandra Waterbury, a model and former student at the School of American Ballet. Chase Finlay, Zacharay Catazaro, and Amar Ramasar all either resigned or were fired from New York City Ballet after being “accused of exchanging, via text messages, naked photos of—and degrading words about—their female colleagues, including Ms. Waterbury and company dancers” (Kourlas and Burke). Similar complaints have been made by dancers at major companies around the world.

In 2017, Marcelo Gomes resigned from his position as principal dancer at American Ballet Theater after a sexual misconduct allegation was brought against him (Fortin). In 2018, an internal questionnaire at Paris Opera Ballet revealed that 26% of their dancers reported either being a victim of sexual harassment or witnessing harassment while at work (Sulcas, “Paris Opera”). That same year, Kenneth Greve was removed from his position as director of the Finnish National Ballet after reports of inappropriate conduct, including commenting on dancers’ appearances and personal lives.

More recently, Yat-Sen Chang, former English National Ballet principal dancer, was granted conditional bail after being charged with 14 counts of sexual assault (PA Media). Around the same time, the Royal Ballet announced that they had removed Liam Scarlett from his position as artist-in-residence after he was accused of sending inappropriate messages to several students (Marshall). Despite the very public media coverage of these high-profile cases, the legal retribution against these men is generally very limited. This only makes it more necessary for companies and schools to address these problems internally, both to protect their dancers and to alter the ballet culture that has normalized remaining silent about abuse.

The ballet world poses several unique barriers to an open discourse on abuse, sexual misconduct, and harassment. This field is difficult to succeed in, and the threat of losing roles, jobs, or opportunities can often make dancers more susceptible to tolerating abusive or predatory behavior. The intimate, physical nature of ballet also requires a level of trust among dancers and between artists and artistic staff that is not
currently being upheld by many men in the art form. Fortunately, the recent rise of these accusations indicates that the culture is finally changing. As more women are empowered to speak out against abuse, the structure of ballet culture and politics must change; however, changes to policy must take into account the unique demands of a dance world that sometimes blurs the lines around a dancer’s rights. In a 2018 Dance Magazine article, Lauren Wingenroth points out that “creating rules around affirmative verbal consent in the studio can feel at odds with dancers’ ability to communicate through their bodies with intention and nuance.” That is why she argues that specific research must be done into sexual harassment in the ballet world. Definitive policies, harassment training, daily check-ins, practice of verbal consent, and a decentralized power system are a few strategies that companies can implement to reduce the chance of harassment. Wingenroth even said that company leaders who convey a sense of urgency about the problem are more successful in preventing it. Developing clear chains of accountability and electing responsible people to positions of power will help reduce any misconception that abuse or suffering is a necessary part of producing great work. These changes will only occur if women feel that they are in an environment that not only permits but also encourages them to speak out.

Increasing Physicality and Advancement of Technique

The changing power dynamics of the ballerina are as clear on stage and in the studio as they are in a boardroom or courtroom. Present-day ballerinas are capable of incredibly advanced technical and physical feats that often contradict their outdated, stereotypical, misogynistic image. In an article on embracing the conflict of the ballerina, author and PhD Jennifer Fisher articulates how effectively the dichotomy of the pointe shoe functions as a metaphor for the dancer herself: “The pristine pink satin on the outside and the unseen blisters, calluses, bunions, and ingrown toenails inside . . . [the] ballerina’s shiny surface unnecessarily masked whatever strength she had, and her technical mastery, achieved through rigorous daily routine, was confused with total submission” (Fisher 5). Although this dichotomy is precisely what makes ballet so challenging, impressive, and beautiful, it also can depict the ballerina as significantly weaker than she is. Of course, the ever-present dichotomy of ballet is that physical prowess and ethereal artistry must coexist. Nonetheless, present-day ballerinas who can turn and jump and dance en pointe with power, strength, and energy challenge the notion that the ballerina herself is fragile or weak.

A 1975 study found that of 61 different activities, ballet was the “most physically and mentally demanding, followed by bullfighting and then football” (Kinetz). Considering that this study was done 45 years ago and that the expectations of the ballet world have become increasingly demanding over time, present-day ballerinas are clearly capable of withstanding enormous physical and mental pressure. The changing demands of the ballet world mean that a dancer must be able to perform various techniques, roles, and styles, oftentimes all in the same night. These demands
generate dancers who are constantly pushing the boundaries physically and artistically. This reality is not lost on audiences: “As a child watching the prima ballerina on stage, her evocative power for me resided only minimally in the role she played. . . . The ballerina was an admired female . . . a public figure who had achieved technical perfection” (Carter 93). It is growing increasingly difficult to confuse the narrative demands of classical ballet—and their reinforcement of traditional gender roles—with the actual empowerment of the woman and her performance.

Male Gaze and the Ballet Technique

According to Alexandra Carter, “Male gaze is [a] metaphor for the gender power relations in society and not literally confined only to men.” Although this concept originated as a film theory, many feminist critics have applied its components of a superior masculine gazer and inferior feminine performer to ballet practice. In classical ballet, gender roles are strictly adhered to on stage and in the studio. Classical works such as Giselle, Swan Lake, Le Corsaire, and The Sleeping Beauty are iconic, revered embodiments of ballet that often depict women quite poorly. The music, choreography, and story lines are ingrained in ballet dancers from a very young age and contribute deeply to our understanding of the technique and certainly of our place as women in ballet and in the outside world. Giselle dies of heartbreak handed to her by an unfaithful man, a plotline that even the most avid romantic would recognize as oversimplifying and belittling toward women. In Swan Lake, Sigfried fetishizes Odette in her swan form and then easily confuses her with another woman, quite evidently distilling her to only her physical form. Le Corsaire revolves entirely around the women being sold into slavery and sexual servitude, and inevitably, Medora and Gulnare are saved by Conrad, the male hero. Although these stories can be told beautifully and are often performed by strong, powerful women, they represent a time and place in history that drastically undermined women. Feminist journalist Ann Daly articulately defines the need for a distinction between athletic virtuosity and representative worldview: “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 as agents of their own desire” (Daly 286). These stories were created by a masculine society’s desires and evolved in a culture steeped in difference between the sexes. Although women exist at the center of classical ballets, men control plot and narrative, in addition to physically lifting, turning, and leading the ballerinas.

The idea of male gaze also extends beyond gender’s most literal interpretation to explain the general view of femininity as inferior. Oftentimes in classical ballets, the view of the feminine extends beyond physical sex differences. For example, the stepsisters in Cinderella are typically men dressed as women, a point of humor and ridicule, as if being feminine is degrading the men in some way. Given that these
classical librettos were created by men and for male audiences, they clearly adhere to the exact specifications of male-gaze theory.

Additionally, many of the positions essential to the ballet technique were originally created to display—and sell—the female body to wealthy men at the Paris Opera. The very nature of pas de deux and the precariousness of pointe shoes create a system in which the woman appears to rely on the man. In an essay on the Balanchine woman, Daly explains how the ballet technique impedes true female representation: “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 287). She continues to explain that the woman’s function is to fascinate men and that the ballerina remains silent about her own ambitions or hopes. This is true of most popular classical and Balanchine ballets; to too great an extent, the misogyny of antiquated cultural and social practices has shaded the physical tradition of our art form.

The larger 21st-century world is continually redefining gender, but the ballet world is often too steeped in tradition to quickly adapt to the trends of the world surrounding it. Since the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and ’70s, women have begun to reclaim their sexuality and to emancipate themselves from the binary gender model. Unfortunately, the ballet technique does still rely on strictly defined gender and heteronormative conventions, which directly contradict this sort of bodily autonomy. That said, the nature of art is that it adapts to and reflects both culture and society—and ballet certainly has the potential to redefine its understanding of gender. Daly poses several hypotheticals about redefining art as genderless and posits that the ballerina must find a way to define beauty without the contingencies of objectification. She makes the point that gender exists as a cultural ideology and is capable of adapting to society. Beauty itself can and does exist outside the boundaries of a culture steeped in male desire.

Female Choreographers

Fortunately, this problem has become apparent to many people who, in different respects, have begun to redefine ballet’s narrative and technical realities. Many choreographers are in fact pushing to create pieces, ballets, and stories that better portray real womanhood, which was the legacy I hoped to follow in the creation of my piece. Women such as Aszure Barton, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jessica Lang, Crystal Pite, Pam Tanowitz, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Amy Seiwert Cathy Marston, and Helen Pickett are just a few of the most prominent female choreographers currently creating major dance works. Their very existence as renowned creators in this field stands testament to the massive progress that has been made to greater egalitarianism. Additionally, these women stand at the forefront of reimagining what ballet can look like and talk about.
Helen Pickett is an American choreographer who studied with Michael Smuin and Lew Christensen. She creates narrative-based, powerful but distinctly feminine pieces such as Petal and Tsukiyoo. Many of her works, such as The Crucible, directly reshape female characters to empower them in ways that the original stories failed to do. In this piece, which was performed by the Scottish Ballet, she shaped the “women’s characters with more defiance, and choreograph[ed] bigger roles for them” (Marriott). Pickett has also created various works for Pennsylvania Ballet, Tulsa Ballet, Boston Ballet, Ballet West, and many other leading companies. She has spoken to having experienced internalized feelings of inadequacy at the beginning of her career and giving more “credence to male voices than female voices” (Brandt). Having learned from her experiences, she is now very outspoken about the need for equality in ballet, holding workshops and speaking at panels on the issue. She also specifically chose to keep her work in pointe shoes so as to actively alter the ballet world and create a positive influence for young female students. This intention of actively altering ballet, rather than rejecting the technique altogether, is something that also guided my choreographic exploration of this issue.

Annabelle Lopez Ochoa is another choreographer strongly pulled to narrative-driven ballets, with a distinct focus on portraying women’s stories. She recently created a piece about the life of Frida Kahlo designed to portray the painter’s agency, artistry, and complexity. Lopez Ochoa speaks to the process by which women can better portray the expansiveness and complexity of the female experience: “As women we can expose more layers—sometimes we know we are breaking inside, but we have to keep strong on the outside—and we can be nuanced instead of using cliches” (Peters). Some other pieces of hers that were created to tell women’s stories include a rewriting of A Streetcar Named Desire in 2012 and Locked Up Laura in 2009. She has created pieces for more than 50 companies, each incorporating her “Colombian roots . . . Belgian roots . . . knowledge in the Vaganova classical technique, hip-hop, jazz and flamenco” (Longley). The detail and complexity of her work, and her commitment to rewriting familiar narratives to emphasize the female story, have made her deeply influential in establishing a more accurate representation of femininity in dance.

Crystal Pite is presently one of the most renowned choreographers in the world. She trained under William Forsythe and currently directs the company Kidd Pivot, which she formed in 2002 in Vancouver. Her work is recognized for its distinctive precision, rigor, risk, poeticism, and complexity. She fuses classical technique with improvisation, original music, text, and rich visual design. She has created more than 50 works for the biggest companies in the world, including the Paris Opera, the Royal Ballet, and the National Ballet of Canada. She feels strongly that audiences need to be able to see themselves in a piece if they are going to become truly invested in it. Much of her work deals with conflict, violence, and darkness, but she is “unfailingly appreciative” of her dancers during rehearsals. She believes that several factors influence the disparity of male and female choreographers. Although she
doesn’t feel she has been disadvantaged because of her gender, she has experienced the broader trend of training differences in ballet: “Girls are less likely to be prized for being a maverick, they’re more likely to be encouraged to look and dance like everyone else—which means that a lot of the creative women will end up in contemporary dance” (Mackrell).

While these women tend to create pieces deeply incorporating a variety of styles, they are all very much rooted in the classical ballet technique—as is much of the 21st-century western concert dance world. As women in ballet become increasingly aware of their own empowerment, change begins to permeate both ballet culture and the entire dance world. These empowered women creating today’s repertoire influence women and girls at every level of training and professional dance. These changes can be seen not only on stage and in the studio but also in the politics and culture of ballet schools and companies across the country. These changes have begun to set off a chain of events that will continue to alter the very existence of ballet. The stereotypes of ballerinas are deeply intertwined with a training system that must also “account variously for its detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of dancers, its elitist implications, its aesthetic triviality and highly authoritarian teaching methods” (Kolb and Kalogeropoulou 107). The beauty and joy of performing and training as a ballerina are things that should be celebrated. With critical examination of the various shortcomings of this system, ballet can be redefined as a place where all female dancers are able to thrive creatively, professionally, and personally.

Choreographic Process

Original Objectives

All of these different issues combine to create a ballet world that disempowers female dancers on multiple levels. Having spent sixteen years as a participant in the ballet world, however, I have had the honor to meet, learn from, and dance alongside dozens of powerful, intelligent, and thoughtful women. Having witnessed these women overcome so much to pursue an art form that they love has affirmed for me that ballet is more than capable of empowering all genders. Despite the obstacles placed in front of us by the existing structures of this world, women consistently use ballet to become stronger emotionally, physically, and mentally. As the practical component of this thesis, I wanted to create a piece to visually represent the process by which women are reclaiming the ballet world. Many different aspects of the ballet technique, as a remnant of the patriarchy, are rooted in objectification and sexualization. With this piece, however, I wanted to assert that the beauty of ballet can be empowering rather than objectifying and that women can tell their unique stories through the technique.
Analysis of Process

My piece, *Pas de Femme*, was a part of the Choreography 3, Senior Production, course, which is open to all senior dance majors. The goal of this course is for each student to choreograph a full-length piece on first-year dancers. The piece must have a specific meaning and intention, which must be adhered to clearly throughout the yearlong process. Long before registering for the course, I’d had the idea to create a piece to illustrate female empowerment through ballet. I decided that getting to work with first-year dancers on the piece would be especially meaningful. Reflecting on myself and my peers during our first year as members of Butler Ballet, I recalled a great desire to please the faculty at Butler and, ultimately, an artistic director at a company. Oftentimes, this was at the expense of our own mental, emotional, and physical health. As I progressed throughout my four years in the program, I found healthy ways of working hard and committing myself to the art form; however, for myself and many around me, it has been an uphill battle to improve our self-image, focus on mental health, enforce healthy eating habits, and eliminate the many harmful tendencies ingrained in us by the ballet world. Additionally, while at Butler, I have become increasingly opinionated, outspoken, and indignant about a variety of social, political, and personal issues. These qualities are not always encouraged in a ballet dancer, but I believe that they are an important aspect of a truly well-rounded artist. Dance has increasingly become an artistic outlet for me to express the totality of my experiences and ideas; however, I recall as a first-year student feeling a definite wariness about being perceived as controversial or too opinionated. Knowing the sorts of pressures placed on dancers coming to their first year of college, I assumed they would be familiar with a sense of the ballet world stifling their minds or overall well-being. The goal of my piece developed into giving my dancers a chance to find power through the technique and to reclaim ballet for themselves.

On May 5, my piece, along with four others, was performed in Clowes Memorial Hall, but this process began in late August, when we auditioned the 50 first-year dancers over Zoom. Going into the audition process for my piece, I knew that I wanted to work with dancers who seemed most ingrained in the ballet technique, but I greatly wanted to avoid choosing dancers because of how their bodies may or may not adhere to the typical expectations of a ballerina. After all, doing so would directly contradict my piece’s intention from the very beginning. Rather, I focused on choosing dancers who seemed most comfortable in the technique of classical ballet. Working with dancers who were secure in that technique would most effectively convey a piece about empowerment through ballet.

After choosing my cast of 10, my first priority was to clarify the meaning of the piece to them. I wanted them to fully comprehend the brevity of the piece, as well as the individual ways that they could each connect to it. As the rehearsal process progressed and the piece began to develop, I further explained my specific intentions
to the dancers. It was important to me that they understood the meaning of each movement so they could instill their own experiences and perspectives into the story.

Much of the movement in my piece was intended to be a literal interpretation of an idea or concept. I began the piece with the dancers facing backward in a V formation, the peak of which was upstage. The piece opened with one of the girls tapping out four notes with her hand on her leg, hip, stomach, and shoulder. This movement was repeated several times throughout the piece by various dancers. It was inspired by the way dancers will sometimes count a piece of music by tapping their legs or clapping. The tapping begins in a strict 4 but is later altered and quickened. As dancers, we spend our entire careers dancing to counts given to us by choreographers, and with this movement, I literally wanted the dancers to start dancing to their own personal rhythms.

Early in the piece, there’s a moment when the dancers turn around and notice that they are being watched by an audience, which initiates a series of robotic, angular movements in which the dancers physically manipulate their own bodies. Ballet dancers stare at themselves in the mirror, constantly critiquing themselves and their bodies. Body dysmorphia, outside criticism, and even minor changes in our bodies can have an extreme impact on our perceptions of ourselves. Oftentimes, we can’t help but wish we could literally sculpt our bodies with our hands to fix problems we’ve been conditioned to believe exist. Dancing when you know an audience, a teacher, or an artistic director is watching you is an added pressure that can restrict the freedom of a dancer’s movement. The next phrase illustrates a sense of frustration with this, as well as an attempt to break free from the feeling of being watched. This section was the only moment in the piece when I had the dancers improvise their own choreography; my only requirement was that it be as quick and expansive as possible.

Another facet of being watched while dancing is that the dancer is constantly trying to improve their technique, implement corrections, and adjust to the preferences of the teacher or choreographer. Although these are important aspects of advancing the ballet technique, they also restrict a dancer’s sense of freedom and expression when they dance. In an effort to represent every dancer as an individual, I asked each of them what sort of correction they most frequently receive, what they’re always working on and thinking about. I choreographed a short phrase for each dancer based on this concept. At the end of this section, I had most of the dancers repeat this phrase once before exiting stage.

Three dancers remained on stage and began a phrase of movement in which they revolved around one another. Each of the three took a turn in the center of the stage, where they performed a series of movements designed to appear puppet-like, rote, and mechanical. Meanwhile, the other two dancers continued to revolve around the stage, performing traditional ballet steps with limp, robotic upper bodies. I wanted this section to represent the hierarchy of the ballet world and how dancers can become
so caught up in the labels they are given. When a dancer is so focused on earning the next job, promotion, or role, they lose sight of creating art for the sake of art and risk becoming derivative in their approach to dancing. Two more dancers entered the stage, tapping their legs in unison, again harkening to the rhythmic metaphor. As they veered from the unison pace, their tapping began to expand beyond their thighs, to other places on their bodies and the stage floor itself, further illustrating a search for artistic freedom.

The next two dancers to enter the stage represented the sense of competition that permeates the dance world and often becomes more harmful than encouraging. From opposite sides of the stage, they appeared to be fighting one another before finally finding solitude and comfort in their shared experiences. The next two dancers who entered stage reflected a similar development. The more upstage dancer carefully and methodically followed the dancer in front of her. She copied each of the other dancer’s movements to represent the constant striving of many dancers toward replicating those ballerinas they believe are better than them. Although you can learn a lot from watching and emulating the dancers around you, it can also be harmful to constantly repeat the narrative that everyone around you is better than you are in some way. After following the other dancer for a while, the upstage-most dancer broke free from the relationship, performing a choking motion that the other dancers on stage mimicked at random intervals. The upstage dancer began running around the stage at full speed, trying to get her partner’s attention. Unfortunately, as the center dancer slowly revolved, she kept barely missing direct eye contact with the other dancer, until finally, they caught up to one another, as if to show that they had realized how much they shared as dancers and how much they could support each other rather than remaining in constant opposition. Together, they performed a short, slower phrase designed to show them relying on each other for comfort and encouragement. COVID partnering restrictions posed a distinct challenge here, as it needed to appear as though they were leaning on each other without them actually touching.

By the end of this section, all but one of the dancers remained on stage, posed in total stillness broken only by the random instances when I had them jump with flailing limbs and land with their hands wrapped around their necks. Throughout the piece, I wanted to have those little moments when each dancer could express her stifled frustration in this very literal way. This tiny movement proved to be one of the most difficult parts of the piece to make look authentic. Ballerinas are so rarely encouraged to express negative emotions such as rage, grief, and irritation, and it was especially difficult to pull those feelings out of them.

As this middle portion of the piece dwindled, I chose to have each dancer remain on stage, holding her hands over her ears or eyes or wrapping her arms around her stomach or shoulders. In this moment, I had the dancers become props or scenery, as they so often are in classical ballets. Their hands over their eyes or ears represented the way the world of classical ballet sometimes devalues their opinions in the creative
and administrative process. Their arms wrapped around their stomachs or shoulders represented the dancers protecting themselves by becoming smaller and more condensed. At this point, I had one dancer enter from the upstage right wing to represent the idea that empowered women empower other women. Her movements were decisive, intentional, and powerful as she walked around the stage, through the dancers, repeating a similar jump with her fists extended in the air. After she repeated this jump multiple times as if to inspire and compel the other dancers, all 10 women repeated the jump in unison. From there, they ran to a new spot on the stage and began a short, unique phrase of movement very clearly incorporating balletic movements. In a seemingly random formation on the stage, each dancer progressively became faster and angrier, creating an increasingly chaotic tableau. As each woman finished the repetitions of her phrase, she ran off stage.

The dancers reentered in two straight lines, one along the front of the stage, and the other along the back. The dancers walked slowly and passively, with their arms in first arabesque and their legs turned out, walking through first position. This image is an ode to the iconic line of corps dancers entering stage as the elusive Shades in La Bayadere. As beautiful as this image of the 32 perfectly synchronized dancers can be, it also forces dancers into a very specific and generalized mold, which can be a demeaning process for the individual. One of the dancers broke free from this line and began running and leaping from the front of the stage to the back, performing, in short increments, her unique phrase from earlier. She managed to break free from the cookie-cutter expectations placed on her, while still striving to achieve perfection and greatness within the technique.

As the dancers exited stage, they immediately reentered along the opposite parallel. They followed this pattern relentlessly, as if it might never end. When it finally did, the dancers entered again from the corner, performing a series of specific movements as they moved along the diagonal and across the front of the stage. Although each dancer was executing the same decisive, striving movements, all were performed in canon, again creating a sort of chaotic image. This section was a distinct intensification in pace and emotion. The tedium of the beginning sections and the irritation of the middle phrases were now morphed into energetic determination. Each dancer finished out this section with several repetitions of her earlier “fixing, correction” phrase. The cast made their way into a circle, where they shared a breath together, with their hands over their chests. This was designed to represent the meaningful impact that a community of dancers can have on one another. In canon, each dancer leaped off stage during the choreographic and musical climax of the piece. At this point, I had imagined the dancers to have achieved total freedom of expression through the execution of this saut de chat, saut de basque sequence.

The next section was designed to allow the dancers to dance for their own joy and pleasure, which I find to be one of the most rewarding experiences allowed to any dancer. As I mentioned earlier, the desire of the female is an often-ignored concept in
ballet narrative, which is something that seems deeply contradictory to me. I asked each dancer in my cast what step or aspect of technique she thought she did best. Many of the dancers had similar answers, allowing me to place them in pairs and to give them short phrases inspired by whatever they looked and felt the best doing. This was, inevitably, a difficult question for each dancer to answer, as we are all so inclined to focus on our shortcomings. Some said they believed their arms and port de bras were strongest; others mentioned their jumps, extensions, control, or turns. I gave them all a sort of artistic freedom with this section, encouraging them to add their own style, make eye contact with the other dancers, and enjoy the movement as much as they could. As their phrases concluded, I had them abruptly switch to very pedestrian movement as they traveled to their final pose. I instructed the dancers to move and fidget and adjust in the way they might if the curtain were down. I wanted to briefly break that fourth wall between the dancers and the audience and showcase their raw, human side. The final pose of the piece was an inversion of the original V, but the peak of the formation was at the front of the stage and all the dancers were facing front. Rather than shrinking or retreating, the dancers were now approaching the audience in a very human, honest way. The final movements of the piece are the same few that it begins with. A simple switch from sixth position to first, a raising of the arms to fifth position, and one final lift of the head to make lasting eye contact with the audience.

Music and Costumes

Throughout this process, I was lucky to work with a variety of talented artists and collaborators. Early on, I realized that I wanted an original score for the piece and chose to work with Sam Stucky, a JCA composition student. I explained the general intention of the piece to him and invited him to attend rehearsals so he could better understand the process. We decided the music could represent the transition from the more predictable, refined, and classical to the frustrated, angry, and contentious. He used similar minimalist themes throughout the score but edited it to reflect each mood of the piece. We chose to begin with a more somber, simple mood to reflect the stoic monotony of the beginning. As the dancers became increasingly aware of their autonomy, the music brightened, sped up, and became more complex. To reflect their rage in the middle of the piece, the music became complicated and dissonant, while still continuing to return to some of the earlier themes. It hit a particularly chaotic, grandiose point at the climax of the piece. As the piece came to a close, it steadily became minimal and modest again. I believe that the classical simplicity of this piano music, coupled with the clear development of each section, made this score the ideal accompaniment to my piece. Having originally looked for an existing piece of music to use for Pas de Femme, I know that nothing else would have fit the intention or choreography so seamlessly.

Additionally, I was very lucky to have had assistance in creating the costumes for the piece. My good friend and fellow Butler Ballet dancer Kassi Tiedjens has
worked in the costume shop for several years, helping to create various costumes for our performances. I gave her my broad idea for the costumes, knowing that I wanted them to embody a classical femininity. We ended up with a vague sketch of a short, sheer, mesh dress in various shades of pink, which would be worn over a leotard. As we developed the original prototype, the costume started to embody an Isadora Duncan-like Greek classicism. We chose to belt the dress at the waist, letting some of the fabric out over the belt. The costume ended up being deeply reminiscent of the silk or jersey chitons worn by the early-1900s ballerina. We also created three different color varieties: a very light pink, a lilac, and a dark rose. I wanted the colors to deeply embody a very typically girlish ideal, so as to immediately emphasize that the piece is about embracing femininity, not rejecting it. I have included several photos taken during the dress rehearsal of the piece to showcase the costumes and their adherence to the theme of *Pas de Femme*. 

![Photo by Maura McHugh](image1)

![Photo by Maura McHugh](image2)

![Photo by Maura McHugh](image3)

![Photo by Maura McHugh](image4)
Reflection

Two things were very important for me in ultimately determining whether I could consider this piece a successful representation of feminism in classical ballet. Foremost, I wanted to ensure that the dancers were deeply involved, affected by, and empowered by the piece. One of the ways I achieved this was by creating individualized choreography for each dancer that would best suit their personal connection with the various intentions of the overall piece. I also wanted to constantly ensure that the dancers understood the meaning of the piece. At one point in the process, I asked them what sort of things they love most about the ballet world and what things they would change about it. Their answers to what they love included the opportunity to express themselves using something other than words, the unique bond formed with other dancers, and entry into a world that is constantly challenging them, pushing them out of their comfort zones, and demanding their very best. They also mentioned the energy and excitement of performing; the value of using physical movement to convey strong, powerful emotions; and the infinite opportunities for improvement, hard work, commitment, and discipline. In response to what they wish they could change, they mentioned the norms of race and gender, the constant feeling of inadequacy, and the often-unrealistic expectations placed on bodies and minds. Above all else, they mentioned the desire to feel more human when they dance, the wish that teachers and choreographers would view them as people, not just bodies to be molded. All of their responses resonated deeply with me and spoke to the idea at the core of this exploration. Wouldn’t ballet become better, more honest, more beautiful if
it celebrated the individual minds and bodies of women rather than distilling us to our bodies and then giving us enormous pressure to make them look a certain way?

These discussions with my dancers made it clear that each woman understood the brevity and importance of the piece’s meaning, as well as her own personal connection to it. That said, it was sometimes still very difficult for them to represent these ideas while dancing. For classically trained dancers, it can be difficult to represent passionately negative concepts. I needed them to not only feel these emotions but also project the emotions throughout Clowes Memorial Hall. While a lot of this responsibility fell on the dancers, I also played a big role in creating a connection between the intellectual and physical. I think the one thing I should have done more during the early rehearsal process was really push the dancers outside of their comfort zones. One lesson I will certainly take into future choreographic projects is that being kind to your dancers cannot restrain your ability to push them further, expect more of them, and be tough with them until they give exactly what you want. Fortunately, as we neared production week, it became increasingly feasible for me to give them the harsh, tough love that would push the piece to where it needed to be. Although I felt that all of the dancers were technically very dedicated, there were consistently some dancers who appeared more committed to the actual emotions of the piece. Nevertheless, by the time we got to the performance, the whole cast was able to connect to the piece in a personal and presentational way that ultimately made this a very meaningful and successful process for me.

The second important marker of success for me was that the meaning of the piece was very clear in its performance. Because I had watched the piece so many times and was intimately familiar with the choreography, it was difficult for me to tell if the message was coming across. Although I couldn’t guarantee that every person watching would completely understand my message, I was confident that nothing extraneous or meaningless had been put in the piece. Every step was intentional and crammed full of symbolism, imagery, and meaning. Although I was fortunate to receive positive feedback after the performance, something I realized throughout this process was that every audience member is going to bring something distinctive to their perspective of my work. To that end, one can only do one’s best to effectively present one’s message and trust that the work is strong enough to affect dancer and audience alike.

Conclusion

This thesis and the accompanying choreographic piece were created to assert that the feminine focus of ballet can be deeply empowering for the modern woman, so long as the community rejects the harmful stereotypical tradition with which it often paints and perceives women. In multiple contexts, women are leading the movement toward rewriting the existing statistical inequalities, reforming traditional
pedagogical methods, addressing longstanding issues of abuse and harassment, and advancing the technique to better portray a true image of femininity. By looking at the historical and present-day political, cultural, and choreographic context, I was able to better approach my own study and exploration of using ballet to reframe a modern-day perspective on the ballerina. In an essay on classical ballet, Ann Daly states, “The first step to creating an alternative discourse is to ask questions—new, difficult, and even disturbing questions. Perhaps it is the only way to present any challenge to the ballerina icon, given that we can never posit who she would be outside of the male constructs that have created her” (289). I believe it is this process of students, teachers, directors, and choreographers continually asking—and trying to answer—questions about what we are doing, why we’re doing it, and how we could do it better that will get us closer to an artistic liberation. Although I don’t think that my thesis answered the perhaps unanswerable question of whether classical ballet can exist without the cultural pressures of gender, I do feel that it discerned that this art form can exist to serve the ballerina herself—in all her personal, artistic, and intellectual complexities—rather than to serve the man who constructed her.
Works Cited


“Dancers & Choreographers.” Data USA, datausa.io/profile/soc/dancers-choreographers#employment.


