

THE BLOG

Spectral Ballerinas: On a Pedestal, Written Out of History

When women are not promoted into positions of leadership, we stop hearing their voices.

By Emily Coates, Contributor

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In classical ballet, though the ballerina is often the center of attention -- partnered, catered to, alone in the spotlight -- once off stage her authority is diminished in ways that limit the next steps in her career. When women are not promoted into positions of leadership, we stop hearing their voices. Their contributions slip out of recorded dance history -- as has happened far too often.

It's true that a recent [New York Times article](#) on ballet dancers branding their images seems to point toward a changing balance of power between dancers and artistic directors. Lending a measure of hope for women's ability to make a mark in the history books, ballet star Natalia Osipova, a dancer in Britain's Royal Ballet, her fourth troupe in two years, is leading this new way -- she is now more a free agent, like a football player. Yet her story is still an anomaly. There remains a gap -- comparable to the ballet world's version of the 1 percent -- between how the contributions of men and women in ballet are perceived. As a consequence, the men reliably rise into leadership positions, while the majority of the women tend to disappear.

Joy Womack, a 19-year-old American and former dancer with Russia's Bolshoi Ballet, recently made international news when she leveled accusations of pay-to-dance financial extortion at the company and quit. She has remained in Russia to dance with another company, ready to face any backlash for speaking out. Before she went public, she felt invisible. As a senior ballerina described Womack to the [Los Angeles Times](#): "...she practically turned into a kind of ghost..."

It can be difficult to break the stereotype of ballerina as object, as coverage of a sensational crime in that same company has illustrated. During the trial of Pavel Dmitrichenko, sentenced to six years in jail for his involvement in a brutal acid attack on Bolshoi artistic director Sergei Filin, a ballerina emerged in a role worthy of a dramatic ballet.

At the time of the attack, Bolshoi soloist Dmitrichenko was the boyfriend of fellow dancer Anzhelina Vorontsova, and newspaper stories reported that Dmitrichenko had been angry that Filin had not given the ballerina, once Filin's protégée, star parts. In a rare interview in [Time](#) last February, when Vorontsova spoke for herself, she ascribed problems in her career to feuding between Filin and

her Bolshoi teacher and mentor Nikolai Tsiskaridze. She called Tsiskaridze a "living genius," and said, "I am prepared to suffer a lot for the honor of working with him." Though she was never charged or connected to the crime, Vorontsova's life and career have been tainted by an orbit of men taking charge.

In the New York Times, Russian ballet scholar Vadim Gayevsky described her situation in another way: "No one ever asks her," he said. "They decide everything for her." Vorontsova declined to be interviewed after Dmitrichenko confessed to the crime. In the meantime, after being dismissed from the Bolshoi, Tsiskaridze has risen again, through his recent appointment to acting director of the Vaganova Ballet Academy in St. Petersburg.

Some may argue that Vorontsova is less important in the story of the Bolshoi scandal. I think her voice -- or lack thereof -- actually is the story.

Even the most outstanding women can become invisible in the archive that shapes perceptions of women in dance. I teach 20th-century dance history at Yale. A main theme in the course is recovery projects: dance scholars engaged in reclaiming voices -- usually those of women and minorities -- whose contributions are more significant than critics and historians originally recognized. Dance scholar Lynn Garafola has written eloquently about pre-World War I female soloists Natalia Trouhanova and Ida Rubinstein, whose careers have been forgotten, despite accomplishments celebrated in their lifetimes.

One hundred years later, the exclusions come in new forms. I learned something surprising while preparing my lecture notes for a unit on the Ballet Russe: the last name of the great Russian dancer-choreographer "Nijinsky" passes spell check. The last name of his sister Bronislava "Nijinska" -- an important choreographer in her own

right -- does not. That glaring red underline, spell check's mark of non-recognition, is a metaphor for how the women in ballet history tend to be viewed.

To be sure, we celebrate the great interpreters, from Anna Pavlova and Margot Fonteyn to Maria Tallchief, Suzanne Farrell, and beyond. And through their interpretive virtuosity, these artists have wielded aesthetic influence. But the question of what else they might have accomplished had they directed major companies is unanswerable, because it never happened. (Pavlova, Tallchief and Farrell simply went ahead and founded companies of their own.)

Decades later, the situation noticeably persists. Between 1992 and 1998, I danced with New York City Ballet -- a company far more stable than the Bolshoi. Among the dancers in the company then, a significantly higher number of men have gone on to choreographic careers and appointments to direct major ballet institutions. Among the principal women, Lourdes Lopez now directs Miami City Ballet and Wendy Whelan is establishing a solo career in contemporary dance. Other women in that talented group rarely appear in the press -- that invisibility is not a reflection of their abilities. The men are doing thoughtful work; Peter Boal, artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, has even organized [programs](#) to feature female choreographers.

In 2010, Dance Magazine reported that men lead all of the top-tier companies with budgets over \$7 million. Lopez's arrival hardly balances the scale. While more women have led ballet institutions abroad, the issues cross international lines. Luke Jennings this year asked in [The Guardian](#): "Sexism in Dance: Where are all the female choreographers?"

The complex answer is that the relationship between young female dancers and male company directors positions the man as a mix of

father figure, lover and the mutually created illusion that he is an all-knowing god. This relationship affects the sense of self and voice -- at its best it shapes and supports it; at its worst it chips away at and degrades it. Women tend not to be cultivated as leaders. The very definitions of "director" and "ballerina" sit in uneasy conflict. One well-meaning teacher from whom I sought counsel disregarded my own ambitions, and instead assured me: "Your boyfriend is going to fly." I left the ballet world soon after for modern dance, which isn't utopia but it is still more egalitarian.

Many of the prominent female modern dance choreographers of the 20th century wrote their own accounts, and in doing assured their voices would be part of the historical record. Ruth St. Denis, Katherine Dunham, Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp, Yvonne Rainer and others marshaled the power of writing not necessarily for short-term gain, but with a long-range view toward preserving their perspective in the archive. We have less of a paper trail from George Balanchine and other major male choreographers partly because, I believe, they trusted they would be seen and heard.

One solution is an increased diversity of critical voices, including more ballet artists writing honestly, openly and thoughtfully about the form. Another solution is a concerted effort to change the 19th-century values that keep ballet companies apart from the social progress that surrounds them. As a celebrated female choreographer once told me, "ballet is the last bastion of patriarchy in this country."

To address this issue, I'm suggesting not only that we nurture more female choreographers, although that's important, but also that we skip straight to more aggressive measures, including leadership training for the women of the ballet and more active diversity initiatives. Re-think the structures that anoint single, powerful gatekeepers to careers and aesthetic innovation. One of the

companies undertaking such self-reflective measures is Ballet Memphis, led by founder Dorothy Gunther Pugh, for whom I co-created a piece with Lacina Coulibaly in 2010.

Ballet in the United States is searching for new audiences and relevance partly because of these antiquated institutional structures carried forward through generations. Ballet's leading tastemakers come from such a slim percentage of society that a broad demographic does not see itself or its concerns represented in the art form. I'm not arguing for socially conscious art, but rather more socially conscious leadership, which means widening the perspectives that will contribute to envisioning ballet in the 21st century.

After I left NYCB, I joined Mikhail Baryshnikov's intimate ensemble, White Oak Dance Project, which led to my first encounter with the work of Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and many others. Choreography authored by women does not have a single shared characteristic -- instead, the work collectively presented me with a range of options, by turns conceptual, full-bodied and slyly political. Through performing their work, I learned what it means to be a creating artist and have an intelligent voice as a woman in dance.

French choreographer Angelin Preljocaj said in a recent interview that he had been fascinated by the concept of "spectral evidence" while creating his newest piece for New York City Ballet. Preljocaj makes work about women, or more specifically, the violence enacted upon women and their survival strategies in the face of it. True to his ongoing concern for women's stories, he may have been picking up on the unrealized talent haunting the ballet -- the voices of artists such as Vorontsova, Womack, the New York City Ballet women of the 1990s and countless others.

Where are the women of the ballet? What are their stories? Chances are they've got some good ones.

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