

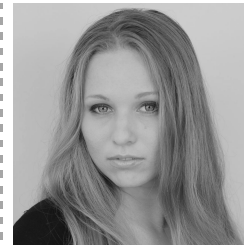
Anatomy of Ballet

How the Physicality of a Ballerina Shapes a Sense of Self

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Dance 453 (Dance History II: 20th Century to the Present)

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Aloha, I am a recent graduate from University of Hawaii at Manoa class of Spring 2016 with a

Bachelors in Anthropology. Raised in Kailua, Hawaii I have been dancing since I was a toddler and my passion for ballet was reignited several years ago through Manoa's Dance Department. Written during my senior year for my Dance History Writing Intensive course, I was inspired by my own experiences in reentering the world of ballet to explore how others have been shaped by ballet as well. It was fascinating to learn the ways in which dance has touched so many aspects of people's lives, and it is an honor to be part of such a beautiful community of talent.

The unique sense of self we have as human beings is colored by our relationship with our physical self, assumptions which we then take to help us understand the world around us. This paper explores this notion by comparing and contrasting ballerinas with the typical young, American female-and how the additional demands placed on the body of a ballet dancer lead not only to differing physiques, but different body ideals, lifestyles, and ultimately, different realities. Case studies in research in dance education, books on dance medicine, and magazine interviews and autobiographies of professional ballerinas both past and present, support that ballerinas have their own unique understanding of the human body in terms of aesthetic ideals, athleticism and nutrition, injury, and personal identity, proving that each one of us lives in our own reality.

Introduction

It started with little things. Shaving in a suspended *grande battement*¹ in the shower. No longer having to bend my knees to pick things up, and *plieing*² when I did. And then I started pointing my toes everywhere. Stretching my arches³ in class. Practicing *petit allegros*⁴ in grocery lines. Spending school tuition for textbooks and dance shoes, too. Watching my body transform in front of my very eyes. I had been out of dance, *serious* dance, for nearly a decade, and when I finally took the plunge back into the dance world, the contrast was startling. My world had changed.

Everyone has a body, and their world is colored by how they understand it. A doctor views the body as a biological entity, the purpose being to stay healthy and the means being anywhere from introducing chemicals to cutting into it and manipulating the insides to achieve and maintain health. A prostitute views the body as a sexual entity, and sees the world through a sexual lens. A dancer, then, sees the body as a vehicle for expression, and the purpose of a dancer's body is to achieve the artistic expression of that beauty through strength, stamina, flexibility, and grace.

In *Dance Injuries* by Daniel D. Arnheim, dance is either recreational and social or theatrical and concrete – the latter including ‘ballet, modern, jazz, ethnic, and character...’ (Arnheim 3). My focus is primarily on the *modern female* ballerina who is serious about dance. My criteria for this is to only include research about women who have studied ballet for *at least* two years with the intent of continuing.

I am fascinated by the changing relationship between me and my body, the change in my physical appearance, and how my self-identity has changed. I have always identified as a dancer, but it had been a long time since I was seriously active in the dance *world*, and there are big differences between being a preteen dancer and a dancer at twenty-two. When I danced ballet as an eleven-year-old, I was not as aware of aesthetic expectations, and I had never had to dance “through” an injury. When you are sick, your mother lets you miss rehearsal, and

at eleven, we all more or less looked the same – no one had *curves*. Upon my re-entry into ballet as a young adult, these were some of the differences I noticed, and it is these differences, between that of a regular young American female, and that of a young dancer, that I wish to explore: how the body is understood and experienced in terms of body ideals, physicality, nutrition, sexuality, injury, and illness, and how these different physical experiences shape individual realities.

Body Ideals

If you were to ask any woman on the street what the ideal female body looked like, most American women would probably tell you that the perfect female body is an hourglass figure, with wide hips, a slim waist, and a shapely behind (Perfect Woman Body). Special attention in American culture especially is paid to the breasts, which should be perky and generally cup size C-DD. The current ideal hip-to-waist ratio stands at about 0.7 (Warmflash).

Anthropologically, the theory is that all of these characteristics should contribute to a woman's ability to attract men, the body being a means to attract a mate and reproduce. Curves have been theorized to be advantageous, physically in that their slim waist indicates they are not pregnant, while their wider hips may indicate an easier childbirth (Warmflash). This 'ideal' aesthetic is celebrated in our society's idolization of celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé, whose influence can be felt in young American women's clothes, language, and even behavior.

Concepts of ideal aesthetics influence young ballerinas just as profoundly, yet the difference in ideals is striking. Misty Copeland describes in her memoir *Life in Motion* how her body was perfect for ballet: "I have legs and arms that go on forever...my neck is long, my head is small, and I have knees that veer backward as I stand straight" (Copeland 162). In *The Healthy Dancer*, "...the image of the tall, lean, narrow-hipped, long-limbed ballet dancer..." is described, with the average ballerina being "23 years old, 5 ft. 5½ in. tall, and weighed 107 lbs, with 13-16% body fat" (Ryan 5), not to mention high insteps of the foot.

Ballerinas generally do not *want* to be curvy, for the emphasis is all on the lines: "the balletic body emphasizes preciseness in line, placement and visual design. This corporeal perfection is usually defined as bodily practices and the slender ideal" (Pickard 7). Line, a very important concept in dance, can be described as an aesthetically pleasing placement of "head, shoulders, arms, body, and legs" (The Healthy Dancer 258) – not unlike the importance of line placement in a painting. Many choreographers of the twentieth century favored straight lines over curving ones in their art, giving rise to the narrower figure of the modern day "ballet body." In particular, the "Balanchine body" (after infamous former New York City Ballet director George Balanchine) has gained much popularity in the ballet world, with such a ferocity that had even led some dancers to eating disorders to attain the impossibly prepubescent ideal, for talent alone is not enough to have a career in ballet. In her memoir of life in the New York City Ballet, principal dancer Gelsey Kirkland reminisces about how Balanchine remarked "must see the bones." He did not merely say "eat less," he said repeatedly "eat nothing" (Kirkland 1986, 56).

A fantastic illustration of the contrast between the body ideals of a non-dancer and a ballerina was in *Competing with the Sylph*, where "Jane," who took a hiatus from ballet for several years, tells the author about how her attitude about developing breasts would have been very different had she never stopped dancing:

Vincent: How did you react to your first period?

Jane: I was relieved. Because I remembered thinking, "Now I'm going to get breasts."

Vincent: So you wanted breasts?

Jane: Oh, yes.

Vincent: That isn't the usual...

Jane: Because I wasn't dancing, remember? I stopped dancing [between the ages of nine and fourteen].

Vincent: So you think if you had continued dancing you wouldn't have wanted breasts?

Jane: Well, maybe. Because I would have been around girls who weren't developing. I was around girls who were developing [in public school]. But the most incredible thing is that I developed very quickly. I went from a skinny little girl to this."

(Vincent 103-104)

Having large breasts bears no physical disadvantage to the art of ballet. Arguably, an ample bosom simply interferes with the continuation of lines. Nonetheless, it is the vision of choreographers that has created this ideal, for isn't the point of choreography to bring a vision to life? As *The Healthy Dancer* so aptly puts it, "The dancer's dilemma is the imperfect body in the perfect art" (Ryan 22). Normally there would be no "hiatus" from developing due to strenuous physical activity, yet here, body ideals are not only being created by the choreographer's vision; the practice of ballet is actually shaping the body as well.

Physical Expectations

Body aesthetics aside, there are many practical necessitations needed to study dance, particularly ballet, that the average young American female does not ask of her body. Ballet dancers demand their bodies to perform feats of balance, strength, endurance, and flexibility that seem to test the laws of physics. Ballerinas must be excellently conditioned, with exceptional posture required for balance, hips constantly "turned out" or rotated outwards, and a level of flexibility far greater than that of the average human being, so that they may progress through splits, multiple pirouettes⁵, etc for hours during rehearsals and performances.

Dancers aspiring to become professional ballerinas dance an average of two classes per day, totaling ten to fourteen hours a week, while both *The Healthy Dancer* and *Dance Injuries* list the same statistics; that professional ballet dancers spend dance season (about thirty-six weeks out of the year) following a grueling schedule of nine hours in class, twenty-six hours in rehearsal, and eight to twelve hours performing, totaling forty-three to forty-six hours in a six-day period (Arnheim 116 and Ryan 7). In short, "dance is the epitome of motor control and physical endurance" (Arnheim 52).

With expectations of a skill level such as this, several things come into play. First and foremost, a ballerina should not be overweight, for in terms of physics, smaller, "tighter" body mass makes it easier to turn, jump, balance on *pointe*⁶ and *demi pointe*⁷ and generally carries less risk of traumatic injury. While it is definitely not necessary to take it to

the extreme and starve oneself, one must absolutely be in fantastic shape. Here, unlike many American women, the body is not only meant to *look* fantastic, it must *be* fantastic as well in its physical feats.

Athleticism at this level also requires the right nutrition. In an interview in *Glamour Magazine*, company dancer Keenan McLaren (Nashville Ballet), principal dancer Laura Faidley (Pennsylvania Ballet), and principal dancer Lesley Rausch (Pacific Northwest Ballet) shared their daily eating habits during dance season. Their diets were low in dairy, and included water and vitamins with breakfast, lots of fruit and vegetables, and protein at least once a day either in the form of fish, meat, or vegetarian alternatives (Lindenmuth). Compare this to the diet of the average American, which is high in sodium, red meat and dairy, and full of "empty" carbohydrates – a diet that is not nearly as conducive to strenuous physical activity. With the forty-something hours professional ballerinas dance per week, they use that healthy diet to fuel their constant activity--contrast this with over 80% of Americans aged thirteen and older who do not get enough physical activity per week (Facts & Statistics).

Physically, the dedication asked of ballet is a deep one; when committing to such intense training, ballerinas' whole lives are affected as they donate much of their free time to classes, rehearsals, and performances, daily stretching sessions, and even revised diets so that they may perform to the best of their ability – a unique blend of athlete and artist.

Sexuality

Another interesting, and seldom addressed aspect of frequent and intense dancing, is sexuality and dancing's effect on the reproductive system. Agnes de Mille stated in *And Promenade Home*, "dancing...means freedom from sex. The forces which impelled women to the austerity of the church operate to form the great dancer. In a strange transmutation dancing is a form of asceticism-almost a form of celibacy" (DeMille quoted by Vincent 107). Another anonymous female dancer remarks, "I know that as long as I dance every day, I'm on a very even keel sexually. But if I stop dancing for two weeks, all I want to do is have sex. I'm so aware, my energy is so intense, God help my husband" (Vincent 109).

While the main function of sex is to reproduce, it also serves as a physical and emotional outlet for stress, passion, and other strong emotions. However, it seems that dance serves as an almost substitute, for dancing requires extreme passion and physical exertion to the point where when one retires at the end of the day, they could not possibly have any energy left for anything else (Vincent 109).

Other possible explanations for the lack of sexual desire, and a curious phenomenon that also serves as an explanation for the prepubescent build of so many female ballet dancers, are the documented cases of irregular and absent menstrual cycles as well delayed onset of puberty. Says *The Healthy Dancer*, "There is a possibility that ultra leanness, along with the associated nutritional deficiencies and physical demands of ballet, may contribute to delayed menarche and the development of menstrual irregularities" with irregular menstrual cycles being reported, respectively, in Ballet West (38%), American Ballet Theatre (47%), and the Cleveland Ballet (50%) (Ryan 43). Additionally, in a survey of fifty-five dancers over the age of sixteen in New York City, only one third reported regular cycles, with another third reporting irregularities, and the final third never menstruating while dancing, fourteen percent of whom had never had a period (Vincent 78-79). It is not an unusual phenomenon for athletes to forgo their periods. Anthropologically speaking, during times of great stress, the female body will decide that conditions are too inadequate to support a growing child in the womb, and the menstrual cycle is put on hold.

Puberty doesn't seem to stop completely-but is only staved off until the dancer is not under as much physical stress. A third of the ballerinas in the above survey only had irregular menarche *while actively dancing*. In *Competing with the Sylph*, the author remarks that it is possible that "Jane," who was interviewed above about breast development and the ideal body for ballet, may not have developed until much later than she did had she never taken a hiatus from dancing. Furthermore, "another gynecologist and researcher related her experience in following several dancers with delayed puberty, some of whom did not begin menstruating until their late teens and twenties. After gaining adequate weight, she said, they seem to go through a "second puberty...hey go

through a metamorphosis – it's amazing." (Vincent 103-104).

Injury

"Although the public is generally aware and appreciative of the art of dancing, it is not usually cognizant of the considerable physical, intellectual, and emotional demands of being a dancer...These battles are not for the public to see. They view only the parade of victors and know not of their scars" (Ryan 3).

With all physical activity, there is the risk of injury. Most, if not all, dance injuries comes from one of two reasons: overuse and/or poor technique, often caused by exhaustion (Ryan 217). Due to the nature of this particularly demanding lifestyle, a whole host of injuries are common to dancers, and with that, a unique attitude toward injury itself.

Most dance injuries are "quite similar to those found among athletes" (Ryan 3), with sixty to eighty percent of all injuries occurring in the knee, ankle, or foot (Ryan 9). While most people, upon sustaining an injury such as a split in their skin or a sprain would generally take it easy for a week or so, the general consensus among ballerinas is to simply dance through the pain. "Dancers are used to the idea of living with pain and are quite content to 'work through' an injury provided that they are reassured that they are not doing any serious damage" (Ryan 158). Here, sometimes where a brace could help minimize re-injury or worsening of the original injury through added security and support, aesthetic expectations do not allow for medical assistance that distract the eye, so ballerinas cannot wear a brace during a performance the way a basketball player is able to during a game (Ryan 9).

I have danced with severe muscle pain, fatigue, and cramping, a chronic knee sprain, and the flu. None of them were pleasant experiences I ever want to relive. Though it would have been better if I had rested, I would have missed class, and my muscles and my technique may not be as strong the following week, as the repetitiveness of ballet exercises in class is crucial to muscle memory, which solidifies proper technique. For elite dancers in professional ballet companies, the consequences for

not dancing can be even more severe; ballet dancers, who already make a small salary, cannot economically afford not to dance. In *The Healthy Dancer's* chapter on *The Etiology of Injuries in Ballet*, Robert E. Stephens, Ph. D. notes that many dance union contracts only allow for two weeks at most off with pay (which many times is not long enough to fully heal), not all necessary medical intervention is covered by health care plans, and principle roles and solos will be given to someone else – the chance to move upward in the dance company is often missed due to an injury (Ryan 17).

There is also a culture of silence and acceptance of injuries in dance, an almost unspoken understanding of what dancers endure physically. One cannot dance ballet all day without a serious physical toll. Together, my classmates and I complain in the locker room before and after classes about how sore we are. We perform adagios⁸ at the barre⁹ with relaxed expressions, as though it was easy, and then we change out of our leotards and we shake.

And then there is simply the love of dancing, no matter what. As articulated by soloist Ashley Laracey of the New York City Ballet, “when you’re out, you feel worthless; you feel disposable” (Matthews). When dancing is part of your *identity*, how can you not dance? Even when you are sick, even when you’re depleted, you’re still *you*.

Identity

So how do these differences touch the rest of a dancer’s life? Different views of physical ideals, expectations of strength, flexibility, stamina, and balance, as well as different health and nutritional needs and approaches to injury contribute to an overall unique understanding of the body, and therefore, a unique understanding of self.

Since a ballerina uses her body for *expression* the relationship between the mind and the body, or neuromuscularity, has to be unique. There is a “kinaesthetic awareness, a conscious feeling of motion and the positions of the body, as a prerequisite for optimally learning dance skills...The instinctive awareness of exactly where one’s body is and what it’s doing (sometimes called ‘the sixth sense’)” (Radell 170). Unique connections are employed by

the brain while dancing. While this is a much more in-depth topic than I can do complete justice to in this paper, a brief illustration of this concept can be seen in the following example. As a beginning ballet student, trying to remember choreography was overwhelming, and I relied on watching other class members to be able to execute movement sequences. A year later I preferred *not* to watch the person in front of me as I found that distracting and I have no problem being first at the barre with no one in front of me. Mind-body connections of the brain assist in this process.

The need, the very nature of expression in dance, calls for a unique relationship between emotion and the body, whether it be a direct output of emotions or pure isolation from it as demanded in some abstract, non-narrative, choreography. Either way, however, one must be completely focused: “Dance training is very different; dancers are not encouraged to isolate cognition from emotion or perceptual and movement skills; they must be able to convey to an audience a wide range of feelings through their movements. They are not simply playing the role of an actor, convincing the audience to believe in the artifice; rather, performance is a reflection of the dancer’s worldview and lifestyle” (Ryan 239). To dance is to communicate, and to communicate we must *feel*, we must *believe* in what we are saying also, so that our audience can believe it, too.

Furthermore, dancing becomes part of their identity as well. “Students also become highly invested in the identity of ‘dancer;’ they begin to feel like dancers, taking on the characteristics of others they admire in the school” (Ryan 243). Here, dance teachers and exceptional dancers in the class or in a company become role models of sorts, from senses of style, behavior, and physical prowess. Being a “ballerina” goes from an occupation or a hobby to an identity.

Beyond a sense of self, this unique relationship with the body also affects the sense one has with his or her surroundings: “One study of thirty-six college students taking dance classes, some of whom were serious dance students, found that the group had a high internal control belief system and low beliefs in chance or powerful other control...this result appears to support the idea that serious dance students see their bodies as being under their own

control but their lives being controlled by outside forces” (Ryan 251). Someone who executes feats of physics has to view their bodies this way to maintain any sort of consistency; for example, an elite dancer needs to be able to execute pirouettes *all* of the time--something that can only be accomplished if the dancer sees success through his or her ability, focus, and control over one's body and not an accomplishment of chance. Basically, the more involved and connected one is with their body, the more control they feel they have over themselves. While they may not be able to control the world around them, they have the power to control themselves.

Conclusion

Overall, the factors of aesthetic bodily ideals, body physicality, and views on injury make the relationship between a serious dancer and their body, particularly that of a ballerina, very different from that of the average young woman. Where most young women now idealize body types like Beyoncé's, hourglass curvy figures from well-placed body fat, ballerinas often prefer no curves at all, a minimum amount of body fat, and several other unique characteristics like long necks, small heads, and good arches of the feet. While not all “ballerina body” ideals are necessarily ideal in the physical practice of ballet, such as the infamous “Balanchine body” and its correlation to eating disorders, at a physical level, ballet can be very beneficial for the body too. Serious ballet demands a high level of conditioning, flexibility, and stamina, which encourages ballet dancers to eat a healthy diet full of fruits and

vegetables, a daily intake of protein, and lots of water. This diet is much healthier than the typical American diet, which is overloaded in sodium, fats, and empty carbohydrates. The physical demands of ballet require a much more substantial diet.

Then again, overexertion of the body can lead to injuries. Many dance injuries

concentrate on the lower limbs caused by overuse and poor technique. The frequency of ballet injuries contributes to a unique attitude towards injury. Ballerinas, often unable to properly care for their injuries, are forced to dance through them to the point of sacrifice for their art, sometimes dancing through pain unimaginable to most (Ryan 3).

Athleticism to this extreme even has a unique influence on the female reproductive system. Menstrual irregularities are common during dance performing seasons, and the physical stress of ballet can even cause a delayed onset of puberty to occur. Libido is also affected, as all sexual “energy” is used up while dancing (Vincent 107).

Through all of this, a distinct identity of a ballerina then emerges. There is a unique mind-body connection known as an almost “sixth sense” called kinaesthetic awareness that allows the dancer to form a connection to the feeling of movement, the necessitation to be utterly in tune with their emotions, their bodies, and the music in order to communicate with an audience. Through this, stage presence is born. Where most young women buy what they see in magazines to wear, and act how they see their idols in popular culture behave, there is a dance culture that ballerinas follow, styling their hair and dressing as if they always have a dance class, for in a way, you never really do leave the studio.

Notes

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grande battement-a movement with both legs completely straight, where one leg is kicked up high before returning to a standing position 2. Plie-bending of the knees 3. Arches-the instep of the foot 4. Petit allegro-a category for small steps that are quick and ‘lively’ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Pirouette-a spin, or complete turn of the body 6. Pointe-balancing on ‘tippy toes’ while wearing pointe shoes 7. Demi pointe-balancing on the balls of the feet 9. Adagio-a series of slow movements 9. Barre-horizontal bar along the wall to help with balance |
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