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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women-Made – the Future Women Choreographers are Here!

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Abstract

The marginalisation of female ballet choreographers at the time of writing in 2023 is as evident as it was thirty years ago. Whilst a few exceptional women (Cathy Marston, Helen Pickett, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa) excel in using a balletic language to create dance works their male contemporaries dominate the world's ballet stages with elevated positions as artistic directors and choreographers. Since dance scholar Lynn Garafola raised the alarm in 1996 the conversations relating to the dearth of women choreographers have accelerated and whilst the changes are not as significant as one would hope there does appear to be a more consistent approach to women breaking the glass ceiling in this artistic arena. This article aims to challenge the question “where” are the women? in exchange for “why” aren't there more women making ballet? I examine the educational constructs and potential barriers found in conservatoire training to illuminate the perspectives of the next generation of ballet makers. Finally, I present the ethnographic data collected from a practice-led research residency that took place at St Hilda's College, Oxford in 2022, to demonstrate how and what may be done to educate and advocate for women to adopt a balletic choreographic practice in the future.

Keywords

Ballet, Choreography, Marginalisation, Feminism, Practice-Led Research

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Introduction

The substance for this article grew from a practice-led research project to investigate how female dance students engage with choreographic techniques to create ballet works. Noticing the different approaches to educating young dancers in the art of choreography¹ it became apparent that whilst they are often interested in making work they lean towards contemporary dance as a medium rather than using a balletic language. Exploring the institutional roots of British Ballet in relation to training emerging dance artists, short case studies were structured using ethnographic interview and observational processes, to further understand the current position of professional women ballet choreographers and their lived experience of creating work over the past thirty years. The article offers perspectives from dance scholars who have examined the work of women choreographers, notably the work of Lynn Garafola (2006) and Julia Gleich (2022). The scholarship is complemented with observations of the work of British ballet choreographer Cathy Marston and her rich trajectory as a female choreographer in the twenty-first century.

The vexed issue of gender imbalance among prominent choreographers continues today, despite Garafola's initiation of the debate in 1996 in a presentation at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender conference at the University of Michigan. In order to raise awareness of this urgent problem with a group of women choreographers, this article positions a practice-led research residency that took place in Oxford in July 2022 a part of the Dance Scholarship Oxford (DANSOX) Summer School series as an ethnographic case study to explore the role of women choreographers in today's creative ballet world. Examining the participants' work and reflections offers an opportunity to understand educational approaches for choreographing ballet, emerging artists' observations on the gender imbalance for women ballet-makers, and the impact of recent changes within ballet's leadership roles on recent choreographic commissions.

At the time of writing there appears to be an inevitable slow but necessary overhaul within ballet training, particularly in relation to the binary gender focus of the genre, attention must also turn to the question; why do so few women ballet students aspire to choreograph ballet? Whilst there is often a focus for female students to follow and sustain a teaching path, post-performance career, discussed during their training, there is limited engagement in the concept of a choreographic career specifically focused towards ballet-making by women students. During my thirty-five years as a student, teacher, and doctoral candidate researching women ballet choreographers it has become apparent that there are some fundamental gaps within most ballet training programs that do not support women's choreographic ambitions towards creating in a balletic

¹ The Creative Workshops explored choreographic methods defined by artists such as Jonathan Burrows, Merce Cunningham, Twyla Tharp or Improvisation Classes exploring modes of moving in the post-modern contact improvisation style of Steve Paxton or Gaga Technique created by Ohad Naharin.

language. This article reports on a practice-led research enquiry to investigate why there is such a dearth of female ballet makers, and what could potentially be stopping the flow of emerging women choreographers using ballet as their medium to make dance.

Background Context

Where are ballet's women choreographers?

(Garafola, 1996)

Dance historian, Lynn Garafola's paper 'Where are Ballet's Women Choreographers?' was presented in 1996 at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender conference at the University of Michigan. Garafola revisited this enquiry in her book *Legacies of Twentieth Century Dance* (2005) acknowledging that three decades on the question is still relevant and unresolved. The essay fundamentally challenges the generalisations and assumptions as to why there were so few ballets choreographed by women during the twentieth century. Garafola gives six fundamental reasons to validate her counter-argument by questioning what constitutes "genius" in choreography and showing how value judgement was formed exclusively by male writers. She states "by viewing the ballet past as a succession of individuals of genius, this approach consigns most of ballet history to the dust-bin" (Garafola, 2005: 216) having acknowledged Jean Georges Noverre, Jules Perrot, Marius Petipa, Michael Fokine, Frederick Ashton, and George Balanchine as 'the individuals'. She continues "Yet it is here, in the now invisible crannies of the popular, ... one finds the women choreographers of early twentieth century French ballet" (Garafola, 2005: 216). She examines the work of several significant French women ballet choreographers including Madame Mariquita, Louise Virard, Adelina Gedda, Rita Papurello, and their creative practices before acknowledging that after the golden years of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes (1909-1929) in Paris, including the work of Bronislava Nijinska, the French institutions "closed their doors to women" (Garafola, 2005: 216).

Garafola's 2022 publication *La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Modern* is the first biography of Nijinska, and as 2023 marks the centenary of the premiere of her work *Les Noces* (1923) it is a timely contribution to the recovery of the significant role Nijinska played in ballet history as a woman choreographer. Delivering a guest lecture about Nijinska in 2020 for DANSOX, at St Hilda's College, University of Oxford Garafola states in her opening remarks that there is "unfinished business" surrounding the conversation about the absence of women choreographers in ballet (Garafola, 2020: n.p.).

Garafola worked as artistic advisor for the co-edited book *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Dance* (2021). This rich volume hosts chapters by over thirty scholars and practitioners, and was the outcome of *Contemporary Ballet: Exchanges, Connections,*

and *Directions* an international conference held at Barnard College, Columbia University and The New York University Center for Ballet and the Arts in 2016. Editors Katherina Farrugia-Kriel and Jill Nunes Jensen acknowledge the text was meant to “highlight the relationships within the discourse of dance, to set in motion new ideas of what could be possible, and to open channels for ballet to contemporize” (Farrugia-Kriel & Nunes Jensen, 2021: xv). The prominent women interrogating the role of women as ballet makers are all present within this volume, notably Julia Gleich, Molly Faulkner, Deborah Norris, and Carrie Gaiser Casey, all of whom make impactful contributions to support the research initiated by Garafola in 1996. Observing the creative trajectories of Nijinska and American choreographer Karole Armitage, Faulkner and Gleich note that “there is an eerie commonality of marginalisation both in how they are perceived as artists and in their ability to push the art form of ballet into the margins” (Faulkner & Gleich, 2021: 62). With these two prolific, groundbreaking choreographers of the twentieth-century being identified as ‘marginalised’ it becomes more apparent for further examination into why women still appear so reticent to adopt a balletic creative practice, and how dance education could adopt a more proactive approach to encourage future women ballet makers.

1. British Women Ballet Choreographers – Past and Present Positioning

In relation to this gendered history of ballet, the UK’s situation was distinctive in the twentieth century. ‘British Ballet’ can be credited to the work of two women, namely Dame Ninette de Valois and Dame Marie Rambert. De Valois’s Vic Wells ballet, founded in 1926, has a rich history, establishing its home at Sadler’s Wells Theatre, London in 1932 and creating a host of celebrated artists in the British Ballet landscape as performers and choreographers, throughout the twentieth century. Now The Royal Ballet, at Covent Garden, De Valois’s legacy is entwined within the company’s history and repertoire, which included several of her own works.

Another major figure, the Polish dancer Dame Marie Rambert, established her school and later company in London in 1926, had initially choreographed her own solos as a recitalist. She became an artistic mentor and abandoned her own choreography, favouring the opportunity to nurture and encourage the talent found in her school and company. “Of the two, de Valois was the institution builder; Rambert the gleaner and nurturer of talent; among her many “finds” were Frederick Ashton and Anthony Tudor” notes Garafola (2005: 223). Whilst both women are celebrated for the companies they established and that continue to flourish and dominate the contemporary ballet and dance global field, their first success came from the schools they created. Here they experimented with and explored balletic language through their teaching and encouraged creative and artistic expression in their students. De Valois’ The Academy of Choreographic Art, and Rambert’s Ballet Club, were crucial to the development

of ballet training in Britain. Arguably considering de Valois' attraction to the work of Nijinska, she was not responsible for supporting creative talent in other women choreographers at the time in comparison to Rambert (Garafola, 2005: 224).

However, Garafola shows the tension between administrative leadership and choreographic creativity in this situation: Ironically, given her admiration for Nijinska, de Valois did little to foster choreographic talent in women. Rambert, by contrast, nurtured the careers of two major women choreographers, Andrée Howard and Agnes de Mille' (Garafola, 2005 p. 224). Rambert's tradition is in fact sustained at the school today. One hundred years on, it is most encouraging to note that women students at Rambert School continue to be nurtured and supported as individual, creative dancers with regular choreographic lessons, and student choreography platforms happen termly alongside their technical training in both ballet and contemporary dance.

Whilst historical pedagogical practices appear to thwart many ballet conservatoires and training institutions Rambert School has made significant advances into progressive teaching methods, particularly within the ballet strand of the curriculum in relation to gender. Ballet teacher Paul Clarke recently presenting at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Leeds, shared the creative process he and colleague Nicole Guarino led to choreograph a gender-neutral repertoire solo to be performed by any student regardless of their gender identity (Clarke, 2023, n.p.).

To further emphasise the restrictions imposed upon female dancers from a young age in relation to stifling their creativity, Susan W. Stinson (2005) reflects upon the notion of discipline and silence in the ballet studio. Her article observes how this creates a sense of conformity for women but offers a springboard for men's creativity:

Most women begin dance training as little girls, usually between the ages of 3 and 8. Dance training teaches them to be silent and do as they are told, reinforcing cultural expectations for both young children and women. In their landmark work, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986). Mary Belansky and her colleagues point out that adult women are silenced much more often than men... Traditional dance pedagogy, with its emphasis on silence conformity, does not facilitate such a journey. Dancers typically learn to reproduce what they receive not to critique or create. (Stinson, 2005, p. 53)

Whilst some of the significant British ballet institutions were established by women, their power has diminished over the years, to the point that in 2013 British dance critic Luke Jennings echoed the question Garafola explored years earlier – where are the women choreographers? As part of my doctoral research, my ethnographic investigation centralises the work of British ballet choreographer, Cathy Marston, whilst positioning this wider question in context of the current demographic of female choreographers making ballet in Britain.

As a nation we are well supplied with choreographers. Matthew Bourne, Akram Khan, Wayne McGregor, Liam Scarlett, Christopher Wheeldon... the list goes on. All are highly acclaimed, players on the world stage, their services booked for years ahead. So why are their female colleagues struggling for visibility? Why, when British dance was founded by women like Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert, and has always employed more women than men, are there no high-profile women choreographers? (Jennings, 2013, n.p.)

Marston's works are at the centre of my doctoral research, and her penchant for narrative is important to her position as a woman choreographer and has arguably allowed her to cement a place amongst her male contemporaries, whilst battling for the same exposure. Her work was finally elevated to the Royal Opera House main stage in January 2020, with her biographical work *The Cellist*, which explores the traumatic life of cellist Jacqueline du Pré.

In an interview Marston (2016) considers why there are so few women engaging in balletic choreographic practices, as she comments on the very essence of her creative processes, and also her position within the debate relating to women ballet makers. Her view stems from her early experience at The Royal Ballet School in London. Her male contemporaries Will Tuckett, Christopher Wheeldon, Christopher Hampson and Tom Sapsford, were all offered contracts with the company and quickly given choreographic opportunities. Her mentors Norman Morrice and David Drew, who had led the choreographic components of the curriculum, fought for her to be offered a similar opportunity but in vain as Marston was denied a contract at The Royal Ballet as a dancer. However her choreographic talent was recognised by Deborah Bull who was Creative Director of the ROH2 programme, for which Marston created *Ghosts* (2005) (Marston, 2016). Having worked with Marston for the past six years has deepened my knowledge of her work. Recent elevation as a world leading choreographer stems from commissions for San Francisco Ballet, Houston Ballet, The Royal Ballet, and a new position as Artistic Director of Ballet Zurich in Switzerland later in 2023. I am even more curious to explore the reasons why there still seems to be so few women interested in making ballet during their training and beyond.

As a Lecturer in Dance at Rambert School I was able to investigate this topic further. With the support of the principal, Amanda Britton I developed the following practice-led research project in partnership with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, supported by its Head of the BA Modern Ballet Programme Kerry Livingstone. The objective was to gain greater understanding and to ignite some enthusiasm and curiosity amongst the current students at both institutions with an ambition to nurture and encourage them to create in a balletic language.

2. Cultivating Choreographic Practices using a Balletic Language

Shifts in ballet training in the twenty-first century are becoming more and more apparent and the dialogue amongst ballet pedagogues shows the potential for change.

It is not a small feat to challenge and alter a century of dance teaching methods, and yet there is arguably a need for reform. With dancers becoming more aware of their physical, emotional and psychological needs within their training programs it is the responsibility of the leaders of conservatoires and training institutions to find new and improved methods of delivery and engagement, allowing for accessibility, diversity and inclusion for all aspiring ballet dancers.

As explained above, Clarke and choreographer Guardino created a ‘Gender-Neutral’ ballet solo as part of the progressive curriculum at Rambert School for Ballet and Contemporary dance in London, allowing all students to access ballet vocabulary that has previously been relegated specifically for either male or female dancers.

The Research Project – Stage 1

In June of 2022, a research project was advertised at both Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, London, and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow, offering female students the opportunity to participate in a series of workshops to investigate the lack of women making ballet. A voluntary, unpaid educational research project, the students were given some contextual information and a selection of titles for each workshop. Ethical considerations were explained, and consent given and all of the students who expressed an interest in the project were invited into the project. Each conservatoire had a slightly different schedule to accommodate the workshops, yet the outcomes were similar at each institution.

Workshop - The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow 16th June 2022

I delivered a three-hour workshop at the Wallace Studios in Glasgow. The twelve student participants were at different stages of their training from across three-year groups, ages 16 to 21. The focus of the workshops was to firstly ascertain the students’ knowledge and understanding of context and rationale for the project. Thus, the session began with a brainstorming exercise which posed the following questions,

- 1) Name as many Male choreographers as you can
- 2) Name as many Female Choreographers as you can
- 3) Name as many Female BALLETS choreographers as you can

The student’s answers confirmed the hypothesis, that whilst training on a ballet programme they are less familiar with female choreographers than male choreographers, and more significantly even less so with female ballet choreographers, only naming Sophie Laplane, Helen Pickett, and including Crystal Pite into this demographic, based on the amount of works that she has made specifically for ballet companies. Once the discussion had sparked debate amongst the students, there was a mounting

surge of curiosity as to why this situation had arisen in relation to the lack of women making ballet.

A further conversation led to questioning why, during the choreography modules within their taught curriculum, they chose to create contemporary dance works, rather than works using a balletic language. Reasons cited included contemporary dance choreography allowed for 'more expressive movement and was used 'to highlight world issues' and also to explore 'real life situations, gave more freedom and enabled choreographers 'to provoke discomfort' (Students, RCS Workshop, 2022).

However, in discussion about the potential of creating in a balletic framework, a series of positive and negative concepts were highlighted and the students proposed that ballet offered a sense of structure and a codified language. They also recognised that ballet as an expressive art form has great potential for storytelling and that it is a dance style that offers the opportunity for wide audience engagement as it is arguably a familiar genre to many.

In contrast, some issues were raised concerning the restrictive potential of working in a balletic language as it potentially offers less freedom for creativity with physical actions and can be perceived as too traditional. The students also acknowledged that there are stricter ideals on the physical body aesthetics of a ballet dancer which inevitably appear to impact the choreographic choices when using a balletic language.

In order to understand their rationale for these opinions the workshop developed into a series of practical choreographic tasks that were designed to provoke a re-evaluation of their reasoning as to why they were not drawn to choreograph using a balletic language/structure. These tasks were also used as the framework for the series of workshops delivered at Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, over a period of six weeks, with each workshop lasting ninety minutes, allowing for in depth discussion, debate and practical exploration.

Workshop Series – Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance June/ July 2022

In correlation with the longer workshop delivered in Glasgow, the series of weekly workshops at Rambert School were made accessible to all of the participants from the Glasgow experience via Zoom, and some of the dancers were able to engage with the workshop series to enhance their understanding. Seven students from across each year group at the school attended each workshop, and other students were invited to be dancers within the choreographic explorations, thus enabling the participants to focus on their role as the choreographer. The schedule of workshops (Fig 1.) shows the focus of each session in relation to ballet choreography.

7 th June	Introduction - Balletic Language in Creative Practice
15 th June	Narrative versus Abstract
21 st June	Pointe Work with Julia Gleich
30 th June	Music – Composition & Collaboration with Chris Benstead
5 th July	Structure - Traditional/Contemporary (Pas de Deux/Pas de Quatre etc.)
12 th July	Evaluation - Choreographic Trends

Figure1: Schedule of Workshop Series

Rambert School supported the project with studio space and time, and the Ballet Faculty were invited to attend the sessions. Recordings/documentation were disseminated to facilitate their engagement with the project, to support their day to day teaching practice.

Whilst the workshop series, led by myself, offered a plethora of starting points for discussion and creative experimentation, two of the workshops were led by guest practitioners in order to broaden the conversation and dialogue with specific areas, pointe work and music collaboration.

Julia Gleich: A Women Choreographers' Ambassador

On the 21st June 2022 American Choreographer and Dance Educator Julia Gleich was invited to speak with students via Zoom, about her role as an activist and ambassador for women ballet makers and her interest in pointe work. Gleich has been questioning the role and work of women ballet choreographers for many years. She has 'long issued an advisory to the code and conduct deemed proper by classical ballet—a form ruled historically by a patriarchy' (Gleich Dances Website). In order to amplify the impact of the patriarchy on the lack of women making ballet Gleich co-curated an annual platform 'CounterPointe'. This was for women choreographers to collaborate with women visual artists to create and share original ballet works with a focus on the use of the pointe shoe.

Gleich's dedication to making this platform internationally accessible and increasingly visible to a wider community of artists, dance critics and media has most certainly made an impact, and there is much to be grateful for, 'A lot of people have described it as life changing in terms of their artistic impetus' (Gleich 2022)

CounterPointe is dedicated to presenting the latest experimental, innovative, risk-taking choreography that shows a depth of investment in ballet by women dance makers working with the pointe shoe. Investigating new and old territory the series highlights new work, opening up discussion, and creating a forum for women, young or old, emerging or established, to take risks. (Norte Maar Webpage. n.d.)

During the workshop with the students, Gleich's infectious sense of determination helped them to question the lack of work made by women choreographers and encouraged them to further engage in this debate. Gleich quoted author, Virginia Woolf to support her observations as to why women are arguably faced with multiple challenges within

an artistic environment, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf [1929] 1935). This emphasized how Gleich’s feminist view point is arguably driven by the wider landscape of gaps in modern history where women are invisible or at least unwritten.

Having presented my choreographic work at three of Gleich’s annual CounterPointe events in New York and London, the platform elevated my own choreographic work as a woman ballet choreographer to new audiences. My work pictured in *Fig.2 A Waulking Song* (2020) was created in collaboration with visual artist Anna Hymas to celebrate the waulking process² used in the Scottish Highlands when making tweed. Participating in each event ignited a strong sense of community amongst the women involved, encouraging in each female artist a renewed confidence that we are capable of making important, expressive and innovative ballet works.

The opportunity to create ballet works with other women artists enables a powerful collaborative experience drawing from a collective understanding of how women think, process and activate ideas. Gleich’s CounterPointe platform has been a catalyst for several female ballet makers including Elisabeth Schilling and Jo Parkes.



Figure 2: *A Waulking Song* (2020) Melissa Braithwaite and Anna Esselmont in performance at Counter Pointe 2020. Photographer: Jeremy Ward

The Art of Collaboration: Compositional Focus

Composer Christopher Benstead is a member of Rambert School’s music faculty and accompanies ballet and contemporary classes using a hybrid approach with piano,

² Waulking is an alternative term for fulling woollen cloth, which is a traditional process used by women across the Scottish Highlands to cleanse the fabric from impurities.

voice and percussion. His expertise as a composer however, was most interesting to the participants of the workshop series where he shared his experience of over forty years' worth of choreographic collaborations composing more than 150 scores for full orchestra to chamber music, choral and ballet works. Having received commissions from Rambert, English National Ballet, London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Royal Danish Ballet, Gothenburg Ballet and many more, Benstead's work has an international reach (Villa 2020) and he is currently composing a new score for choreographer Robert North in Germany.

Whilst not a trained dancer, Benstead uses a physicality in his composition workshops that engages dancers with the kinesthetic qualities of music, alongside the audible aspect. Discussing his role within a collaborative process Benstead guided the dancers through a series of tasks, focusing on embodiment of tempo, rhythm and structural processes that are used in music making. He explained that listening to a wide range of music and engaging with a variety of styles is key to pursuing a career in composing for dance noting that

the research usually constitutes continuing a dialogue with the choreographer/dance-maker, finding a common language, discovering a sound palette, a style – and often immersing oneself in writings (prose/poetry/biography), paintings, nature, theatre – whatever might seem relevant to the current project, thus allowing oneself to absorb different influences and then to find one's own individual voice. (Benstead, quoted in Villa, 2020: n.p.).

The final task required the dancers to listen to a piece of music, choose one of the instruments within the orchestration to follow and to conduct or move their arms to the pattern or flow of the music. This physical understanding is crucial to Benstead in its benefits to the collaborative process and how the music and dance must connect and appear in dialogue with each other. He recommends that composers take a dance class to truly understand the processes undertaken by dancers and choreographers.

The workshop led to an informed discussion about the similar gender gap found in music, particularly in composition and conducting. Whilst there are balanced numbers of men and women studying music, there is a gender imbalance in the music profession demonstrated by the demographic of women working as composers compared to their male contemporaries. Classical music has been dominated by male composers for hundreds of years, and yet as in Garofola's research, female composers are being discovered. Whilst their work has been largely unacknowledged there are many historical examples, such as the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Maddalena Casulana and Vittoria Aleotti, eighteenth-century Charlotte Bachmann, nineteenth-century Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and early twentieth-century Ethel Smyth. When working with Cathy Marston on her adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (2016) for Northern Ballet, composer Philip Feeney used melodies written by Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847), Felix Mendelssohn's sister, at Marston's request to demonstrate her influences as a female composer of the Romantic period.

Woman Made: The Future Choreographers Are Here!

The Research Project - Stage 2

Dance Scholarship Oxford (DANSOX) was founded in 2013 by Susan Jones, Fellow and Tutor in English Literature, St Hilda's College and University of Oxford. She was formerly soloist with Scottish Ballet. With patrons Dame Monica Mason and Sheila Forbes, and support from The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), DANSOX, was created to provide a platform for dance scholarship in Europe and has been significant in raising practice as research led dance projects and cultivating "dialogues between prominent academic disciplines and the worlds of dance theory and practice" (DANSOX Webpage n.d.). Based at St Hilda's College, Oxford, an annual Summer School provides dance scholars the opportunity to host a series of residencies, offering space and time to collaborate, investigate and disseminate their creative practice.

The culmination of the Workshop Series hosted by Rambert School and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland led to a five-day residency as part of the DANSOX 2022 summer school. Six dancers, three from each institution, participated in a week of lectures and workshops and were given time and space to begin a creative rehearsal process for their own work using balletic language as their medium. Curated by myself and hosted by Jones, we invited some highly experienced women choreographers, Kate Flatt, Susie Crow, Jennifer Jackson and Julia Gleich, to deliver practical workshops and seminars to lead the choreographic explorations and enable further discussion amongst the dance students.

The aim of the residency was:

To encourage and support an open dialogue about the dearth of women choreographers making narrative ballets this research project will consider the creative process, the role of the woman choreographer and the specific working practices associated with balletic texts. (Norris, 2022:n.p.)

The opening Keynote Lecture was delivered by Gabriela Minden, from the University of Oxford with a focus on narrative, gesture and corporeal storytelling in a dramatic context. Minden facilitated a discussion with the dancers about the potential of collaboration between dancers and dramatists as she guided the participants through excerpts of a dramatic text. They were asked to perform their own interpretation of scenes and stage directions, using every day gestures, and creating dialogues from within the text, responding to the spoken word solely through movement. This was a challenging experiment but was a carefully informed way to commence the week of choreographic exploration that was to follow.

Over the next three days women choreographers from the world of ballet and theatre were invited to explore ideas and methods from their experiences to provoke and encourage originality and creativity amongst the participants. The practical workshops offered a safe space for criticality, experimentation and reflection, and challenged the participants to embody and engage with the medium of a balletic language as a movement vocabulary from which to create.

The following discussion articulates the choreographic style and interests of each of the women in relation to their creative processes. A brief biographical insight examines their position and work within the ‘made by women’ ballet canon, which is supported by an analysis of the intention, aims and objectives, and outcomes of the workshops they delivered as part of the practice-led research residency.

Movement Direction: Character and Narrative

The first choreographer to share a creative exploration into characterization at the residency was Kate Flatt. Flatt is a celebrated movement director and choreographer, who has been creating work in text-based film, dance, opera, and theatre for over forty years, notably on the original production of *Les Misérables* with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her connection to ballet stems from her original training, and she led the choreographic studies of the upper school programme at The Royal Ballet School (2000-2019). In her book Flatt discusses her research into Louis XIV, and C. W. Beaumont’ translation of *Le Maître à Danser* (1775) by French choreographer, Pierre Rameau (Flatt, 2022, p.93). Discussing the “certainty and correctness still to be found in the formal training studio etiquette of classical ballet” in relation to the fundamental requirements at court in the 18th century, devised by Louis XIV “how to advance, retreat, remove a hat, to bow and curtsy, hand movement and appropriate deportment” (Flatt, 2022: 45) it is clear that these elements are still an important part of the creative process.

Flatt comments upon ‘A Dream Play’ (2005) directed by Katie Mitchell at the National Theatre, London and details how ballet was used as the main language of the play;

We examined the sensations found within the principles of classical ballet;

- Verticality, by using an uplifted torso and spine
- Line, symmetry, using extended arms reaching through the upper back to the fingertips
- Elevation as nimble, springy, small jumps in a devised sequence
- Balance achieved by how a dancer feels connection to the ground
- Lightness, embracing both poise and grace

(Flatt, 2022: 82)

As Flatt worked with the students during the workshop she embodied all of these elements, articulating the experience for the dancers physically and verbally, offering a series of imagery and possibility throughout. Flatt's workshops opened up an opportunity for her to "introduce ballet principles as a flexible framework for intervention...to find new ways of developing material and action, not from a choreographic or dance point of view but more from the movement director's perspective, and involving intention, circumstance etc" (Flatt, 2022).

Martha Tribe, a student of Rambert School, reflected on the workshop posing a series of self-directed questions / intentions from which to work creatively from in the future, including: "How would your character enter the space? How do they interact with others?" She also observed that there were opportunities to develop her work, critically examining her process and offering intentions such as aiming towards "clearly painting the scene/setting to become more convincing", considering how "it helps to go 'too far' to be able to test both extremes" and to, "think about the background of the character – Context matters!" (Tribe, 2022).

Tribe engaged with these workshops in relation to her choreographic work and her keen interest in narrative through literature. During the residency she created a dance centrally positioning the Charlotte Brontë novel, *Villette* (1853) as a stimulus, using three dancers to explore a site-specific environment in the conservatory of the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building. Entitled *Chapter 19 – The Cleopatra*, Tribe used music by Alexandre Desplat, and worked with Amy Groves and Felicity Chadwick to explore an encounter between the two main protagonists of the novel, Lucy Snowe and M. Paul Emanuel. Tribe created the scene with two women, dismissing the original gender of the characters, whilst exploring the directorial tools including slow motion walking shots and the use of symmetry as used by the film director Wes Anderson.

In the final sharing as sunlight streamed through the windows, the audience observed the dancers from outside viewing sculptures and paintings in the conservatory area. Tribe reflected on how she was interested in the relevance of space and the set, and the importance of directing the audience's gaze, questioning "how can you draw attention to a specific area of the space?" Whilst the creative process was engaging, it brought challenges to the emerging choreographers and feelings of fear, and meeting self-expectations became apparent especially in relation to translating ideas amongst the performers, Tribe noted challenges such as "choreographing pas de deux when not dancing – what is physically possible and what's not?" Her aim became clear in her reflection, as she sought to use space effectively, whilst figuring out if she was being too ambitious within the specific timeframe available. (Tribe, 2022).



Figure 3: Martha Tribe choreographing with Amy Groves & Felicity Chadwick Jacqueline du Pré Building, Oxford (July, 2022) Photographer: Deborah Norris

En dedans and En dehors: From Class to Choreography

Jennifer Jackson is a former soloist with The Royal Ballet, lecturer at the University of Surrey, and choreography tutor at The Royal Ballet School. She was Artistic Director of London Studio Centre's *Images Ballet Company* and has choreographed for ballet companies and vocational schools. Her recent publication *Ballet: The Essential Guide to Technique and Creative Practice* (2021) has quickly become an essential resource for both teachers and students and has a focus on finding parallels between the technical aspects of the ballet class and choreography.

Jackson's writing and lecturing on ballet in diverse contexts raises questions around the placement of creativity in vocational ballet programmes:

You may be on track for a successful career as a ballet dancer. Why study choreography? Can choreography be taught? You might be able to teach someone how to write a dance but does that make a choreographer? And many people say, 'choreographers are born, not made.' ... A course of study will not 'produce' a choreographer...but we can explore aspects of choreographic craft...we can stimulate creative thinking and action around the elements, nurture confidence in the dance artists' creativity and provoke questions...

(Jackson, 2021p.156)

Jackson studied with ballet master Roger Tully for many years acknowledging how his approach and methods have informed her understanding of the balletic language. The concept of centering, and working inwards and outwards, towards and away from the spine, is essential in the weight placement and framing of the space around the body within classical ballet. Jackson proposes that "the principles of *en place* [in place], *en dehors* [outwards], *en dedans* [inwards] describe actual physical shape and movement as well as inferring sensibility and psychological states" (Jackson, 2022).

As part of the workshop Jackson invited musician/composer Patrick Wood to provide a soundscape for the dancers to work with. For Jackson, "The particular music/dance relationship is fundamental to ballet creation. I have found that approaches from contemporary dance practice (e.g. working in silence, juxtaposition, random mixed tapes) have helped me open up the dynamic of balletic movement/shape itself and working in the way can lead to insight and surprising, often delightful, outcomes" (Jackson, 2022).

The dancers' individual sketches of created movement, drawing material from the ballet class, were then performed with improvisations by Wood, on piano and guitar. They were challenged to find dynamic responses, shifts, or highlights in their performance in response to his accompaniment. Participant Olivia Hunter, from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, experienced a range of responses and reflected on her choices in the moment:

- Music versus silence: More use of potential expansion and presentation, with presence of self-rhythm.
- Expression through use of repetition: Difference between piano and guitar texture
- Rhythmic / Dynamic clarity: Clarity of breath with the music

(Hunter, 2022)

Music and Movement: A Class Improvisation

Susie Crow performed as a soloist with The Royal Ballet and Sadlers Wells Ballet for over twelve years and has since choreographed numerous works internationally, including *FIBBA* (2000) for the National Youth Ballet and *Black Maria* (2007). Her company *Ballet in Small Spaces* “makes and presents ballet-based works for small and unconventional spaces in response to its local environment” (Ballet in Small Spaces Webpage n.d.).



Figure 4: Susie Crow takes class with dancers, Felicity Chadwick, Elizabeth Ortega, Amy Groves, Rose Barford, and Olivia Hunter in the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building, St Hilda’s College (July 2022) Photographer: Deborah Norris

Discussing her aims for the workshop in Oxford, Crow reflected on how ballet class material has a “communicative potential as a resource for choreography” (Crow, 2022). A concept that coincidentally found a parallel in each workshop, Crow’s encouragement for the dancers to use class not only as a place for technical progress, “but as an opportunity to start to explore how those skills and that knowledge may be used to creative and expressive ends” (Crow, 2022).

Participant Elizabeth Ortega reflected on the similarities between Jackson and Crow's creativity workshops in response to the classical codification of steps and expressive creativity:

Three movement principles that we explored creatively were en dehor, en dedan and en face. We then improvised and created material using the idea of these concepts applied in movement in various body parts whilst applying these three concepts simultaneously. This heightened my awareness to my kinesphere, as well as thinking about the use of spirals. A common theme explores across the improvisations creation process was the idea of finding nuances in movement in form and structure.

(Ortega, 2022)

Considering the choreographic ideas discussed in earlier workshops it was of great interest to the dancers to explore concepts that were so specific to the balletic language and creativity. The notion that ballet could be created from the conventions of the ballet class has been at the heart of research by both Jackson and Crow and is arguably essential for emerging ballet choreographers to draw from the wealth of codified material whilst acknowledging the form as a creative medium.

Critical Activism from a Balletic Viewpoint

Gleich and her longtime collaborator, Molly Faulkner re-joined the discussion exercising their thoughts on the role of women choreographers as activists. They focused on their co-authored chapter (Faulkner & Gleich 2021 p. 29) that is "a seven-point manifesto of inclusion that considers the nature of the female ballet canon, illustrated through examples of creators, both past and present, addressing the pitfalls of tradition and the seemingly radical notion of inclusion". They question "if the large ballet institutions continually omit non-male choreographers from their regular programming, could/should there be canons of works by female choreographers and would they be examples of inclusion or isolation?" (Faulkner & Gleich, 2021: 29). In dialogue with the dancers this question acknowledged their own experiences in relation to gender-bias within creative processes, guest choreographers, and repertory projects and there was a positive response by participants to this proposal to elevate and position the work of female choreographers more significantly within their own canon of work.

Whilst all this dialogue evidences the consideration of the role and position of women choreographers within academic research and investigation it is important to note the lack of awareness of this issue amongst current dance students. Initial questions at the start of this research project demonstrated that most were not aware that there was a problem, or had even thought about the gender imbalance within the creative industries as a whole:

I had recognized patterns in leadership, especially historically, of the male leadership figure. Growing up most of my teachers were women and my directors has always been too, therefore I had never felt a barrier towards a leadership role in the dance industry... Since I had never been a part of discussions where a choreographer career had been an option for me, nor did I see many women as large scale choreographers, I think I had subconsciously exiled this as a possibility in the near future; that I would need to succeed in a career as a dancer before I could consider choreographic work.

(Devine, 2021)

Women Making Waves: Reflections for the Future

The current landscape for women making ballet is changing very slowly, but there are definite shifts and patterns emerging within ballet's global picture. Whilst individual artists are receiving regular commissions from companies of all sizes, there is notably more conversation and interest in the actual cause, which in turn is helping to increase the visibility, and necessity to engage with more women choreographers internationally.

As the quantitative data gathered by the American-based organisation Dance Data Project demonstrates, a gender imbalance is still prevalent amongst the directors and choreographers engaged by ballet companies across the US. However it also identifies the progress that is being made, albeit slowly as it emerges that there is shared a responsibility from ballet training programmes and faculty members to ensure that future women choreographers are prepared, confident and empowered to be able to fight through the glass ceiling, at whatever height it may be in the future (Dance Data Project, 2022).

Considering the wider landscape being examined by the Dance Data Project it is timely to acknowledge the impact of the decision made by leaders both professionally and within educational settings that are limiting the opportunities and learning for women ballet choreographers. The motivation for this research arose within an educational context, and the outcomes demonstrate that there is room for supporting female students' balletic choreographic work with renewed investment. Acknowledging Rambert and De Valois' mission to nurture creativity, it is perhaps a timely opportunity for a revised approach to teaching choreographic practices through a balletic lens in dance conservatoires with a more invested focus on women graduating with the knowledge and practical skills to create ballet in both abstract and narrative forms. Noting the frequent guest ballet choreographers employed in conservatoires to make new work for student performances, is there potential for choreographic residencies to include mentoring or assistant opportunities for students to be more closely involved in the creative process from an external position, rather than as a performer within the work? Can choreography modules be designed with a focus on using and adapting the balletic language and structuring ballet? For example, The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

offers a collaborative module for students from the BA Modern Ballet programme to choreograph ballet work with piano students from the music programme. Innovative inter-disciplinary modules such as this inevitably broaden creative understanding and give students practical opportunities for research and exploration enabling them to develop a choreographic practice.

When asked to reflect on their understanding and position within this landscape participants from the Women-Made research project articulated their thoughts:

It is sad that there are not a lot of women ballet choreographers, but that also means that there is a lot of room to insert myself in there as well (Arizmendi, 2022).

There is a need for wider debate as to what extent ballet is gendered, whether and how female ballet choreographers bring inherently different perspectives to the use and presentation of balletic material, and to challenge norms which have traditionally been set by predominantly male directors and choreographers (Crow, 2022).

By making ballet more accessible as a creative medium, less controlled by rules and expectations of ballet vocabulary and its established order. Also, to understand its components and gifts as a language to manipulate and shape to expressive ends (Flatt, 2022).

I quickly became aware of this small yet highly knowledgeable and passionate community that promotes women's ballet choreography. The space gave me confidence to feel like I had something to offer in the ballet space (Tribe, 2022).

An apparently invaluable research project, the opportunity for emerging choreographers to be emboldened by the experience and knowledge of women makers is inspiring. The current canon of work by female ballet choreographers is significantly smaller than that created by male contemporaries, however there is definitely a growing awareness, which gives hope that perhaps a new generation can be further informed and prepared to establish their choreographic voice within ballet's challenging environment. The women who have been working in this field for some years are essential to this shift, and the residency demonstrated the importance of conversation, sharing lived experience and opportunities for choreographic exploration to ensure this awareness becomes an active response and resolve to re-address the gender balance amongst ballet choreographers in the future.

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