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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Snow White in Early 21 st c. Dance Performances: Subverting Fairy-tale Female Models

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### Abstract

Fairy-tales are usually initiatory stories, serving as auxiliaries when crossing important stages in life or as foundation for moral reflection. Some convey images which are upsetting even disturbing for the modern era with regard to the status of women. This is even more evident today since that status has improved over time, evolving from a situation of dominance to a progressive conquest of women's freedom and rights. In the light of this, fairy-tales can be a testimony of past times while their adaptations in the 21st century can be evidence of occurring changes. Writing in 1958, modern dance pioneer, and choreographer Doris Humphrey in *The Art of Making Dances* compares dance to Sleeping Beauty pointing out that, like Aurora, it needs to wake up, renounce the role of the delicate princess and present to the world its independent, passionate nature. Seemingly following her advice, contemporary choreographers stage fairy-tales subverting female roles that have become role models for generations of girls (and boys). Through four choreographic adaptations of brothers Grimm's fairy-tale *Snow White* by Angelin Preljocaj, Laura Scozzi, Liv Lorent and hip-hop crew Addict Initiative, this article studies the modernisation of archetypical female figures in the tale under the prism of intersectional feminism and gender: princess, mother, villain and (as it happens) mirror. It aims at examining each choreographers' approach; evaluating staging and narrative choices through a specific lens while avoiding reductionism; pinpointing the stereotypes and received ideas and denouncing how dance and/or the performing body serves as means or opportunity for a discourse on hegemonic conceptions of sexuality, femininity and gender.

### Keywords

Snow White, Dance, Intersectional Feminism, Fairy-Tales, Contemporary Dance

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## Introduction

Initially told and written by adults for adults, fairy-tales are initiatory stories, serving as auxiliaries when crossing important stages in one's life or as a foundation for moral reflection. However, as a form of literature for adults, and studied under the prism of intersectional feminism and gender, some versions of fairy-tales perpetuate stereotypical perceptions of women or convey images which are upsetting, even disturbing in the modern era with regard to women's status. This is even more evident today since that status has improved over time and has evolved from a situation of dominance to a progressive conquest of women's freedom and rights. German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's 'The Tale of Little Snow-White' (story n°53, published in Grimm's collection of German and European folk tales and popularized stories in 1812 under the title *Grimm's Fairy Tales*) or simply *Snow White* (as we know it from the 1857 version) can be a characteristic example to be discussed in that context. In fact, the 19<sup>th</sup> century story can be a testimony of past times whereas its choreographic adaptations and rewritings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as their recurrence can be evidence of occurring changes.

In 2008, Angelin Preljocaj placed the stepmother at the heart of his staging of *Blanche Neige (Snow White)* to question the figure of the (female) villain who, driven by her narcissistic nature, is not willing to give up on seduction; he focused on what bodies, energies and space say. In 2014, the dance crew Addict Initiative presented a short and extremely condensed adaptation of *Snow White* for the television show *Britain's Got Talent*, casting a powerful Snow White who does not hesitate to kill the evil stepmother herself, who refuses to be a victim. Also in 2014, Laura Scozzi creates *Barbe-Neige et les sept petits cochons au bois-dormant (Snow-Beard and the seven little pigs in the sleeping-forest)* parodying well-known fairy-tales to denounce received ideas on women's position and life purposes, strict Catholicism, the idealisation of physical appearance and the myth of the all-powerful male perpetuated through them. In 2015, Liv Lorent staged the 1812 Brothers Grimm's version of the fairy-tale to comment on dysfunctional mother-daughter relations and excessive female vanity.

This article studies the modernisation of archetypical female figures in the tale – the princess, the mother, the villain and, as it happens, the mirror<sup>1</sup> – under the prism of intersectional feminism and gender. Its aim is to address the following questions raised by these performances: Are 21<sup>st</sup> century dance adaptations of traditional (fairy-)tales indicators of evolution and changes in mentality regarding female identities, women's emancipation and status or, on the contrary, remain a vector of patriarchal values? To what extent are fairy-tales able to free themselves from stereotypes and hold a poststructuralist gender-neutral discourse on sexuality, femininity and gender? In this

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, a capital letter will be used for the personification of the mirror to distinguish the role from the object; she/her pronouns will be used when referring to the dancer that embodies it.

context, how does dance reflect these issues through the performing body, how does it illustrate them and what story – of women, of femininity – does it tell?

### **Theoretical background**

According to historian Lucy Delap (2020) feminism can be considered as “the most ambitious of political movements”; she also points out that its evolution was a succession of ‘waves’ spread out in almost seven decades. However, feminism is also a philosophical movement claiming political, cultural, juridical, economic and social equity between men and women both in the private and public sector. As early as the 1980s researchers and scholars in gender studies and sociology pointed out that the main three systems of oppression - race, class and gender - may interact as well with other power relations and inequalities, introducing the notion of intersectionality to gender studies. Sociologist Mary Romero affirms that

As an activist project, intersectionality provides analytical tools for framing social justice issues in such a way as to expose how social exclusion or privilege occurs differently in various social positions, and it does this by focusing on the interactions of multiple systems of oppression [...] It also helps us to understand privilege (Romero, 2018: 1).

In 2014, civil rights advocate and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2023) used the term to explain that it is impossible to study or examine inequalities in only one field of research, for example feminism, since the experience is not the same for white and non-white women. By extension, race and gender power relations should also be taken under consideration when talking about social inequalities and therefore an intersectional approach is key to the study and understanding of such inequalities. As such, intersectionality is a study tool that describes inclusivity, highlighting the complexity deriving from various power relations and the necessity of addressing discriminations (racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) as a whole rather than separately. In other words, intersectionality serves to fight against inequalities within inequalities. Intersectional feminism takes into account the various and variable ways each woman experiences inequalities and discrimination, transcending or intertwining race, class and sexual orientation, thus examining feminism through a broader, more inclusive lens where these factors overlap or concur. The intersectional dimension is also a way to overcome a strict, short sighted or monolithic feminist approach that goes beyond the disagreements that feminists may have within the movement. In view of the above, it would seem more accurate to examine gender relations in fairy-tales under the prism of intersectional feminism interpreting them as stories for adults. Gender relations in fairy-tales are mainly viewed in binary terms or opposing dualities favouring positive stereotypes (good, beautiful, smart etc.) (Retzl, 2001), whereas this article will favour a poststructuralist view of those relations as being fluid, multiple, and produced through contextual intersections. In other words, the article establishes that despite the fact that

in fairy-tales gender relations matter, in modern rewritings or representations of fairy-tales gender relations become irrelevant through the female characters' empowerment.

## Data and Methodology

This research is approached through the prism of gender and in particular the intersectional dimension of feminism as applied to dance performances. The approach involved the viewing and analysis of the four performances followed by the interpretation of various observations in order to pinpoint the different ways in which the modernization of fairy-tales in dance raises and answers gender issues and to catalogue the axis that are most recurrent in the choreographers' works. The analysis also establishes how dance and body movement in general reflects those issues (sexuality, class, ethnicity). Observations included the context of the performances at large as well as the context of specific scenes, and technical elements such as set and costume design, or music. The focus is not only on the visual elements but also on the dancers, their placement, gestures, and other aspects of interaction between them associated with gender power relations and feminism.

## Empirical Results

### The Princess

If studied according to contemporary standards and perceptions, the image of the princess in fairy-tales is gendered or even sexualized: she is a young, beautiful, desirable woman who does not have to do anything to be chosen by the prince, and can only identify or fulfil herself through him. In addition, she is a damsel in distress and therefore considered fragile and weak. In the same context, the story of Snow White can be interpreted as a girl's coming of age process, a woman's social, psychological and sexual maturity, in other words, an initiatory process. However, since the 1980s, choreographers have been diverting from the original female models of fairy-tales, adapting them to the modern era to convey messages and denounce stereotypes through their choreography and staging. In fact, modern princesses go against the model of the housewife and her reproductive role promoted since antiquity<sup>2</sup>.

In 2008, Angelin Preljocaj's *Blanche Neige* premiered at the Lyon Dance Biennale, transcending the legend of Snow White to illustrate the story in a gothic choreographic universe, focusing on what bodies, energies and space say and reminding the audience of the fairy-tale's initiatory character. Although the creator mainly retells the Grimm's version by maintaining the Evil Queen's punishment, he modernises the well-known, child-friendly Disney version of the tale. Fashion designer Jean-Paul Gauthier chooses white for Snow White's costume which certainly rehashes the stereotype relating

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle is one of the first to mention the weakness of the female gender. His account of "female nature" emphasises on what females cannot do, going as far as to compare them to animals to deduce their inferiority. (Aristotle, 2021[1912]).

the colour to innocence, chastity and/or virginity. The costume's design, a plunging neckline, sexy, Grecian type dress sewn on a leotard which leaves her hips bare, obviously breaks the conventions and hints to a more sensual princess. Moreover, the choreographer opts for an Asian dancer thus non-conforming to norms related to Snow White's ethnicity that usually depict her as a white female. In order to highlight Snow White's coming of age, Preljocaj illustrates her physical growth: as a baby, in her father's arms, she disappears behind a wall at the back of the stage on the left side and comes out on the right (alone) as a young girl, only to disappear again pirouetting in the opposite direction to come out as a young woman. Then, the audience witnesses the awakening of her sexuality during the reception at the palace, expressed by the innocent flirtation with the prince (also a non-white dancer) and underlined by the red scarf that he offers her. However, Preljocaj's Snow White does not hesitate to choose her prince among the suitors present, timidly walking amongst them and shaking her head in disagreement until she finds "the one". The narrative hints at an emancipated young woman who contrary to her docile equivalent in the original tale has the courage (and the right) to assert her opinion. She is the one that initiates the game of seduction with the prince by dancing in front and around him, only once touching him by sliding her hand lightly from his face all the way down to his torso. She bows before him in invitation, then playfully escapes with a light hop when he takes her hand, until they finally engage in a *pas-de-deux* consisting of identical movements of the dancers either facing or parallel to each other and rarely touching, mostly during lifts. Her naughty and mischievous behaviour while interacting with the creatures during the sensual forest scene (playing with the above mentioned scarf as if playing with her sexuality) as well as the more intimate embraces with the prince throughout a routine repeated twice, with and without music, confirm her physical and sexual coming of age. Finally, an apple scene between Snow White and the Evil Queen establishes this maturity since the fruit is considered a symbol of the transition to adult sexuality. In view of this, Preljocaj's Snow White is closer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century perception of modern young women clearly breaking from the 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotypical female model.

In 2014, choreographer and ethnologist Laura Scozzi created *Barbe-Neige et les sept petits cochons au bois-dormant*, a commission for the Festival Suresnes Cités Danse. The creator adapted well-known fairy-tales in a one-tells-all story which questions the traditional sociocultural models they impose, the codes they inculcate and their absence of perspective to denounce stereotypes and long-standing ideologies about gender identity and (female) gender performance. Opting for a Disney-like universe and mainly pink cartoonish set designs, stage objects and props, Scozzi's dance-theatre adaptation parodies fairy-tale characters pointing out their obsolescence and denouncing biased, male-gaze storytelling. Through caricatured stupid, wicked, sexy and likely to fail male and female characters she addresses their stereotypic perception as well as the ambient sexism of fairy-tales. The choreographer states in her note of intention:

I wanted to assassinate the 'imposed' blueprint of romantic encounters, the worshipping of beauty, the moralising good that offers up examples of obsolete Catholic virtues and, above all, the supreme myth of the Prince Charming in every fairy tale destined for young girls. [...] I wanted to subvert the myths, dissect the characters, distort the key actions, and massacre the imagery of Walt Disney mass culture (Scozzi, quoted in *numeridanse.tv*, 2014).

In Scozzi's retelling of *Snow White* the subversion is flagrant, breaking both ethnicity and gender conventions: the choreographer reverses the roles by using one (non-)dwarf and seven Snow White(s), three of whom are non-white and three male. The seven protagonists are grotesque replicas of the now stereotypical Disney representation of the princess, all wearing identical costumes, that is, the identifiable blue and yellow dress with the short red cape and red bow on their head. Achieving an almost identical physical appearance for both female and male dancers leads to subverting gender performance stereotypes that ultimately replaces the male providers of the tale with female ones. This is further accentuated through the choreography which alternates between feminine and masculine short routines. For example, the seven Snow White(s) enter the stage in little hops (forward takeoff with a knee-bend while the other leg kicks back stretched), holding their skirts and squealing as little girls would; then, holding axes in their hands, they perform what vaguely resembles a hip-hop version of a *haka* dance (a traditional Māori ceremonial dance which in its sports form aims to intimidate the adversary)<sup>3</sup>: it consists of a series of energetic jumps close to the floor landing on spread legs or on one knee, accompanied by aggressive war cries and offensive arms movements resembling an attack. Throwing the axes in the air they run away with high-pitched yells to avoid being hit. Picking up their axes and throwing them over their shoulders while skipping and giggling, they leave the stage as they entered, seemingly heading off to work. Furthermore, they are depicted as seven hysterical nymphomaniacs that sexually harass their (non-)dwarf counterpart. In one instance they chase him while taking off their clothes piece by piece to reveal attire associated with 'pinup' photographs, high waist shorts and push-up bra; luring or pulling him seductively in the roughly illustrated pink house (resembling a child's sketch) where garments start to fly over its roof before he runs out exhausted and terrified. They also harass him verbally when they aggressively give him orders or when one of them dismissively sends him to fetch a beer. Scozzi's choice to reverse the roles is doubly significant: on one hand, it clearly indicates that a modern Snow White would not be a housewife but a working woman who is able to provide for the household and do physical labour as well as a man. On the other hand, the macho-man model is denounced while implying that although women might be as competent as men, they can also have the same flaws. In this sense, this is a feminist yet non-radical and rather refreshing observation that is not often alluded to in feminist discourse,

<sup>3</sup> For more on the significance and history of the dance see Jackson, S. J., Scherer J., & Héasm S. (2007). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-corps-dilecta-2007-1-page-43.htm> [Accessed 10 January 2023].

namely radical feminist ideology which opposes men and women in a decisive way.

The choreography further confirms Scozzi's non-discriminative, inclusive approach. While it uses a classical music score by Niccolò Paganini, it does not hesitate to dip into all sorts of dance techniques as the performers mix elements of hip-hop, breakdance, ballroom dance and voguing with classical ballet in pointe shoes and contemporary dance, as well as with mime and theatre to create an iconoclastic show. Using scathing yet intelligent humour, Scozzi choreographs an ode to tolerance which, although sometimes seems superficial, transcends origins and genders, beyond Bruno Bettelheim's (2003) psychoanalytic interpretation of fairy-tales. As an ethnologist, Scozzi also seizes the opportunity to point out that fairy-tales have had a negative effect on women's identity:

All these influences have, in my mind, led generations of women to identity issues, to the inexorable and interminable wait for a day that will never come, to the confrontation of the impossibility of this dream and, finally, the difficult acceptance of compromise in the face of daily life (Scozzi quoted in *numeridanse.tv*, 2014).

Scozzi's realistic retelling of the fairy-tale is a sharp look at society and time at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century where things do not always end well. The final scenes of the performance make that abundantly clear, namely through the reversing of roles: Snow White acts as a macho-man lying on a couch and asking for a beer while the (non-)dwarf cooks and cleans. However, Scozzi emphasizes the fact that women today are part of a generation determined to renounce or subvert the story they have been told before going to sleep, women who know how to defend themselves, choose to make fun of their so-called Prince Charming and marry the dwarf instead. Through her feminist approach to the fairy-tales, Scozzi seeks to reverse or completely rewrite them. She then puts them to the test through urban dance and modern scrutiny to break the moralizing impulses of known stories in order to bend the rules and denounce long-standing ideologies and perceptions of gender performance.

Also in 2014, the horror themed hip-hop crew Addict Initiative presented a short and extremely condensed, concise and revised adaptation of *Snow White* in one minute and forty five seconds for the televised talent competition show *Britain's Got Talent* (created in 2007 by entrepreneur and Sony Music executive Simon Cowell). They cast an emancipated, powerful Snow White who does not hesitate to confront the evil stepmother herself and refuses to be a victim. Although Snow White is female and her physical appearance is intentionally a copy of the sweet Disney princess using the same trademark dress and hairstyle, the heroine is far from gullible, nice and tender: she is a fighter. When the Evil Queen demands her heart, she shouts "never", affirming herself by standing tall, legs spread, torso pushed up, arms stretched parallel to her body and hand fisted, indicating she is ready to fight. She immediately calls

for help after the Evil Queen's demand and as soon as her peers arrive (there are no dwarves in this version), a confrontation similar to the dance-off battles in hip-hop crew competitions ensues. Snow White and the Evil Queen engage in a simulation of hand-to-hand combat in which the former finally prevails, grabs the Evil Queen by the back of the neck and forces her to submit before throwing her on the ground declaring "it's over". The public (and the judges) are struck not only by the variety, speed and precision of the movements and the absolute synchronisation of the twenty-six dancers onstage moving as two opposing groups, but also by the energy, violence and aggression released that infects the (clamouring) audience. However, if the battle scene is a clear illustration of a Good vs. Evil confrontation, the crew's version of the fairy-tale reveals a deeper reflection on contemporary power relationships. On the one hand, the allusion to women's empowerment and freedom from patriarchal restrictions or sexual objectification is obvious since there is no prince in this retelling of the story and Snow White not only fights her own battle but appears as the leader of her own gang/crew. Indeed, Addict Initiative's version focuses on the female protagonists as it highlights Snow White, claiming her right and asserting her power over the Evil Queen. On the other hand, a second reading in the performance suggests that this short battle scene also denounces the recurrent issue of bullying and points out a more effective way to resistance: asking for help. Thus Addict Initiative not only addresses the problem but also gives an alternative to solving conflicts through dance, using a very effective paradox: promoting non-violence through the depiction of a violent battle.

In 2015, Liv Lorent and her company balletLORENT's *Snow White* modernized the fairy-tale, based on the 1812 Brothers Grimm's version to comment on dysfunctional mother-daughter relations, excessive female vanity and social class inequalities. *Snow White* is the second tale of a broader artistic program on fairy-tales which premiered in Newcastle (home of the company) including *Rapunzel* (2012), *Snow White* (2015), *Rumpelstiltskin* (2017), and a new tale by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy *The Lost Happy Endings* (2019). The original tales were rewritten by Duffy and all the performances included in their cast a group of children selected through castings in each community where the balletLORENT toured. Lorent walks the thin line between fantasy and reality, keeping the magical elements of the story like the magic mirror which she personifies and the true love's kiss that awakens the princess. She replaces the dwarves with a group of mine workers; the public is informed by a narrator<sup>4</sup> that the Head Miner also acts like the queen's Huntsman. The choreographer modifies the prince's role and makes him a trophy husband that the queen aspires to marry without success. In fact, the superficial young prince's open interest in the young Snow White instead of his betrothed becomes the reason and at the same time explains why the queen turns into

<sup>4</sup> The fairy tale is narrated by Olivier and Tony Award winning actress Lindsay Duncan (recorded voice). Duncan's authoritative and dry although compelling voice brings out both the cruelty and the compassion of the story. Her final sinister words leave the audience in suspense and maybe a little fear: "and so they all lived quite beautifully ever after...pretty much...".



a villain. Female characters are therefore established from the start as independent, power holding women: the queen rules after the sudden death of her husband and decides to remarry, choosing her own consort. On the contrary, male characters are presented either as servants, auxiliaries and mere workers or as superficial young men preoccupied with marriage and beauty. Standardised heteronormative perceptions are thus reversed related to women and men's sociocultural conditions and behaviour.

The heroine's appearance is stereotypical to comply with the voiceover narration of the Grimm's tale, stating clearly that "the queen had her wish. A little daughter who was as white as snow, with lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony"<sup>5</sup>. As in Preljocaj's ballet the three stages to adulthood are emphasised. Snow White's growing up is centred on the main set piece designed by Phil Eddolls. The compact set is a three-faceted rotating structure possibly alluding to the importance of the mirror in the tale, and this version in particular, with lines that recall the Gothic elements of the original story. The structure starts as a huge vanity or dressing table with a set of drawers on each side that serves also as the royal palace and bedroom; it turns to become the enchanted forest retreat or reveal the home of the mine workers. Seven-year old Snow White rises from one of the right side drawers to briefly interact with her mother playing at catching an apple from her hands. The queen continuously deprives Snow White of it during the game which might refer either to the mother protecting her daughter's innocence or (befittingly) preventing her from discovering her sexuality (in accordance with the apple's symbolism). The older Snow White, dressed in a simple white mid-length dress, rises from one of the left side drawers and continues to play the apple game with her mother although it is noticeable that the mother still will not allow her to bite into the fruit. At the same time, the narrator informs the audience that the queen taught Snow White "to love pretty things and to learn how to look gorgeous at all times [...] perfect, pretty, pouty", stressing out the queen's excessive vanity that will turn her to a villain. The allusion to the princess' passage to adult sexuality is illustrated by a large red ribbon that she candidly attaches around her waist at the end of her duet with the queen. Lorent's *Snow White* depicts an emancipated heroine who not only chooses herself her happy ending but instead of the prince she marries the queen's Huntsman doubling as the Head Miner. This choice is at the same time a tribute to romantic love (Snow White still falls in love with her saviour) and a denunciation of social class discrimination. By deciding to marry a man of a lower social status, that is, an ordinary manservant to the palace, Snow White goes against societal norms dictating one's choice of consort, highlighting the fact that such categorizations and imperatives are obsolete and not applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the dance's text are drawn from a transcription of the narration.

## The Mother

In fairy-tales, the figure of the mother often serves as a channel for crossing cultural boundaries by addressing social and generational issues relating to parenthood and, by extension, the fine line between filial adoration and resentment. In this context, the tale of *Snow White* can be viewed as a reflection or an illustration of the stepmother-daughter or the mother-daughter relationship in the case of the 1812 version of the story.

In Preljocaj's ballet, the heroine's mother is an unconventional, eerie character; she enters stumbling on the smoke covered stage dressed in total black and her face is veiled by lace that does not allow the audience to distinguish her features or her facial expressions. The ghostly, sinister figure would be more suitable to a personification of death if she was not holding her protruding belly. After the apple scene, she literally flies down towards her daughter, takes her in her arms and completely reversing her body as she is pulled up, she lifts Snow White with her while maintaining their upper body contact. Holding the position, she descends again, places her daughter back on the floor softly and flies away. The slow movements that initially appear ominous lead to a tender caring embrace that turn the mother into a dark yet divine protector when she obviously decides against lifting Snow White to her death. At the same time, as with all female protagonists in this ballet, the mother's sensuality is accentuated. This happens twice during the introductory scene while giving birth to Snow White and when she dies; a third time, when she comes to Snow White's rescue after the latter has bitten the poisonous apple. Her costume is composed of materials that conventionally have a sexual innuendo: high heels, lace, netting, and tulle. Her mysterious, forbidding attitude, her concealed face and her slow moves make her appear like an unattainable sexual fantasy since when she walks, crawls or rolls on the floor, when she flies and even in her death posture her bare legs, thigh and hip are revealed. In other words, the choreographer replaces the stereotypical image of the mother as a luminous, smiling dedicated housewife by an equally caring and devoted yet utterly obscure one. In addition, by painting her as a sensual woman he suggests that her role as a mother does not imply she ceases to be a desirable almost idealised lover. He thus breaks from patriarchal perceptions of the wife as a means of reproduction and the mother as a carer and household manager.

Ballet LORENT's rewriting focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, and on the mother as the villain. Duffy adds more details to the narrative: Snow White's father dies shortly after she is born and when her mother decides to remarry, the potential husband's clear preference for Snow White triggers the mother's jealousy, bringing to the surface her dark, maleficent side. The queen is depicted as a vain woman, preoccupied only by her beauty and her well-being, and using everyone around her to ensure that she lives in luxury (a casually mentioned detail with a clear socio-political

connotation on the exploitation of workers). The mother/queen's frivolous nature and her gradual addiction to physical appearance are accentuated as she teaches her 'values' to Snow White via a mother-daughter duo where dancers play with hand mirrors. They use identical gestures: they place the mirrors between their big and second toe, stretch their legs in a *developpé*, then bend the leg at knee height behind them while still looking into it as if to change the perspective. When asked about the main theme being the loss of beauty Lorent replied affirmatively and explained:

That comes from my training in dance, as with most dancers, which was based on comparing your own body with someone else's and ultimately being a failure due to the loss of beauty, like in *Snow White* (Lorent quoted in Jevons, 2016).

The mother's gradual loss of beauty and youth is inversely proportional to her relationship to Snow White which becomes progressively dysfunctional and the audience witnesses the initial tenderness between mother and daughter degrading through their dance. Initially, in the mother-daughter duet, the dancers' intertwined bodies interact with liquid fluidity and convincing affection. However, although ballet LORENT's *Snow White* reveals the importance of inner beauty and forgiveness<sup>6</sup> it also addresses the issue of competition. The mother loves her little girl until she jeopardises her status as the 'fairest of all' and creates a feeling of jealousy. As is clear in the episode with the young king, Snow White's sexuality is eclipsing the queen's: the king dances a few steps of a box-waltz with the queen, but every time she approaches him, he turns on his heels putting distance between them; he then reaches Snow White who escapes his embrace with a pirouette and brings him back to her mother. The change is also reflected in the mother-daughter dance or lack thereof: after the Mirror's unpleasant reply, the mother clearly distances herself from the daughter and practically avoids her touch, never interacting with her again until the end of the story. However, it would seem that although the figure of the mother carries cultural expectations of domestication through marriage and motherhood, the fact that the mother takes charge of the entire kingdom at the death of the king (father) promotes an empowered female model. In addition, the narrator specifies that she makes the decision to remarry and chooses her future husband (as Preljocaj's Snow White chooses her suitor) implying that her decision was a result of her vanity and her need to feel desirable and not dictated by cultural expectations of marriage or the need to be protected and cared for by a man. This twist in the narrative is indicative of the evolution of the female model becoming self-sufficient and no longer dependent on the male. Duffy's and by extension Lorent's approach can be viewed as feminist, and the mother's narcissistic features can be interpreted as those of a modern self-confident woman, and therefore, positive since in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a woman who takes care of herself and her appearance is no longer reprehensible.

<sup>6</sup> In this version the villain does not die dancing. The Mirror shows her she was wrong and, horrified, she repents. The narrator informs us later that "Snow White said she loved and forgave her mother [because] she had found love where she had least had hoped for" meaning the lower-class Huntsman.

## The Villain

In fairy-tales villains are (unsurprisingly) mostly female, old and monstrous; they physically and morally abuse the persons in their charge by being vindictive and condescending. Preljocaj places the stepmother at the heart of his staging to subvert the figure of the (female) villain. Certainly, the Evil Queen's imposing and aggressive entry on stage illustrates her meanness but also reflects her social status as a queen and justifies her provocative attitude. Furthermore, Gaultier's costume underlines her sensuality: a black and red dress with leather details and a train, fitted mid-thigh high heeled boots, arm length satin gloves and a spiked crown immediately bring to mind both the original tale's gothic universe and a sadomasochistic one establishing her as a dominatrix. Her intense gaze completes her menacing open-armed gestures and high leg kicks compelling everyone to cower from the energy emanating from her body, allowing her to dominate her surroundings; fittingly, she is accompanied by two feline submissive creatures (reminiscent of film director Tim Burton's characters). During the apple scene, the Evil Queen disguised as an old woman engages Snow White in a violent hand-to-hand combat before the former asserts her dominance by sitting, victorious on the princess' inert body. However, contrary to the fairy-tale descriptions of the evil-witch characters, the Evil Queen does not lose her sensuality in her old form: she looks wilder and sexy despite the worn-out black coat she is wearing which reveals the plunging neckline of her black satin leotard, her long bare legs and her slim figure. She remains arrogant and menacing even during her impending punishment when she struggles fiercely against her jailers: her energetic dance in the white-hot iron slippers is reminiscent of tap dancing while its intensity becomes increasingly aggressive until her ultimate defeat. Her craftiness and power are considered 'unnatural' and threatening placing her in the villain camp and therefore qualifying her as the one to be put to death because they are an expression of her physicality and her assertive creative energy. Although the two examples clearly suggest that Preljocaj's Evil Queen subverts the villain model by depicting a self-sufficient, powerful yet still desirable and sexy woman, they also address feminist issues. The choreographer's take on the Evil Queen denounces indirectly the stereotypical perception of the (female) villain as a narcissist. He is thus associating their dominant personality and their desire to be seductive with sexual deviance and, by extension, evil. This may in turn suggest that an individual's attractiveness and eroticism should be acknowledged as such regardless of their classification as good or evil. Moreover, in both examples the Evil Queen refuses to be side-lined in a world obsessed with youth which is a denunciation of ageism, as a system of oppression and privilege intersecting with sexism and undoubtedly with feminism (Calasanti 2006). In this context, Preljocaj criticizes received ideas such as the discrimination of women based on their age, the perpetuation of which leads to the perception of an aging woman wanting to be seductive as an anomaly.

In Addict Initiative's version, the Evil Queen is equally fierce and extremely aggressive. She is the first to appear, suspended from the stage ceiling *via* a steel-wire lifting device placed on a higher level than everyone else, as if to assert her dominance as well as her royal status. From the waist down she is covered with what appears at first glance to be a very long skirt. Her acolytes will pull it to reveal attire which clearly suggests an evil character: tight fitting black vinyl pants and a corset with a high collar adorned with black feathers that evoke Disney's Maleficent or the stereotypical costume of a dominatrix or possibly a vampire (although those references are not mutually exclusive). Interestingly though, the 'skirt' also serves as a screen where the face of Snow White is projected or reflected suggesting she views the princess as a subordinate or inferior and therefore unworthy of power. In addition, the idea of the reflection alludes to the mirror as a magical object. In this case however, instead of being at eye level, the mirror is placed under the Evil Queen as if it was at her command<sup>7</sup> which further increases the extent of her dominance. Considering that Addict Initiative members' age span were seventeen to thirty-one years old when they presented *Snow White*, it would seem that young men and women are not concerned, much less intimidated by a woman's power. This suggests that long-standing ideologies about gender identity and (female) gender performance tend to be discarded by new generations. Instead of illustrating the battle of the sexes Addict Initiative centre the conflict on the more pressing contemporary issue of class, through the confrontation of a polished elite group – the Evil Queen's – versus what appears to be a second-rate one – Snow White's – both led by strong, confident women.

### **The Mirror**

In every fairy-tale, magical or enchanted objects impact the story's plot and/or outcome either positively or negatively as is the case of the mirror in *Snow White*. In Preljocaj and Lorent's versions a (female) dancer embodies the object to accentuate a feature of the villain's personality. Preljocaj devises an intricate face-to-face scene in front of the mirror frame underlining the dominant power of the witch, further accentuated by the physical duplication: the two dancers, dressed identically, mirror each other in perfectly synchronised and thoroughly detailed movements. BalletLORENT opts for a more subversive Mirror who castigates the queen using caustic humour and faint praise. She goes as far as to imprison the queen, taking her place to make her see the error of her ways. Moreover, the smoothly flowing style of the Mirror's classical ballet solo becomes (progressively) more demanding in physical strength through the accumulation of pirouettes. Thus the developing strength of the Mirror's movements reflects the queen's developing conscience. Contrary to the Preljocaj version, the Mirror and queen's moves in balletLORENT's are variations of the same movement and

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<sup>7</sup> This detail is not mentioned in the original story; it is a plot twist used in the fantasy adventure TV series *Once upon a time*. In the series created by E. Kitsis and A. Horowitz (2011-2018), the mirror is one of the Evil Queen's victims bewitched to serve her to eternity.

not identical, as one would expect from a mirror image. The Mirror's classical ballet movements are held and suspended whereas in the mother's contemporary style, they become more rounded and closer to the ground. Thus each dancer's individuality and at the same time the main principles of each dance are preserved without diminishing expressiveness. Of further interest is the fact that classical ballet rigidity is here juxtaposed to contemporary dance versatility; by analogy, the Mirror represents tradition and old practices or perception of women whereas the queen's modernism represents feminist ideology and emancipated strong women. By extension, the similarities and differences in the dancers' gestures, could lead to an understanding of the mirror's relation to the queen as an individual's relationship with their reflection and an incentive to self-criticism.

According to feminist literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert and women's studies scholar Susan Gubar "[the story] dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman" (quoted in Bacchilega, 1988: 2) as they are perceived by the tale's authors and, by extension, a man's authority. As such, they reflect a male gaze towards early 19<sup>th</sup> century German society and societal norms. Interestingly, the mirror's words do not specify the gender of the 'fairest of them all' in any version of the English translations of the fairy-tale, merely replying to an individual's question by attesting their supremacy. On the contrary, in Duffy's rewriting, the Mirror replies directly to the queen, through the narrator: "Queen, your beauty is a gift, from scissors, surgery and facelift" and criticises in modern terms (some) women's excessive vanity while denouncing the stereotypic association of vanity to femininity. In any case, the mirror feeds the (step)mother's narcissistic side but also carries and perpetuates societal expectations and appropriate behavioural models about beauty and the importance of physical appearance. In this context, the Mirror is present to define the two women, Snow White and the queen, as fairest and ex-fairest thus establishing the rivalry between them as the base of their relationship. It also reflects the mother's internal image of herself externalized as a wish for a daughter with specific features. In other words, the Mirror reveals how complementary and at the same time diametrically opposite Snow White and the queen are, possibly reflecting disagreements within the feminist ideological frame.

### ***Snow White and Intersectional feminism***

Undoubtedly, the fairy-tale revolves around timeless themes such as wealth, beauty or the struggle for survival, and seemingly illustrates stereotypes of sexuality (the feminine features, the manly prince), ideals of women (young and beautiful) and social success (marrying a prince). However, the examples studied suggest that the fairy-tale is reviewed and rewritten at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to transcend long-standing gender related ideologies. Preljocaj's contemporary dance choreography, Scozzi's

and Lorent's fusion of various dance styles with theatre and narration and Addict Initiative's hip-hop approach of *Snow White*, engage bodies beyond their conventional representation. They also challenge stereotypes of gender, race, sexuality and physical abilities, while denouncing practices and ideologies that influence our daily lives.

All in all, the four dance rewritings of *Snow White* confirm, through their choreographies, that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, princesses and villains break from traditional fairy-tale models. The dancers' bodies contribute through the virtuosity of forms, the precision of poses and postures, the beauty of their presence, and especially of their movements. It may be deemed acceptable that the heroines/princesses of fairy-tales are rewarded with an allegedly happy ending, that is, becoming the wife of a future king. But it is certainly disturbing for the modern woman that the only thing Snow White learns is that men can be at the service of her beauty and always there to save and/or protect her. Such is the case of the dwarves and the prince in Preljocaj's version or the miners and the Huntsman in ballet LORENT's. In this sense, calling fairy-tales initiatory stories makes one wonder how relevant this initiation would be today. That is why, in my view, Preljocaj's *Snow White* chooses her prince herself and takes the initiative in the game of seduction, Lorent's decides to marry the Huntsman, Addict Initiative's stays single and Scozzi's seven *Snow White(s)* reverse the roles but still do not live happily ever after. The staging and choreographies suggest that as the representations of *Snow White* in dance performances evolve, the heroine becomes a much more complicated being thus reflecting the complexity of the contemporary era through subversive representations of socially constructed stereotypical female roles. The performances analyzed here prove it; they propose four different endings to the fairy-tale, each feminist in its own way and all reflecting modern 21<sup>st</sup> century society where *Snow White*, as an individual acting freely, has no need of any (magical) intervention.

The intersectional dimension of these feminist approaches is also clear, since the performances address at the same time class, ethnicity, appearance, age, and sexuality discriminations. The choreographers focus on the choices *Snow White* owns up to as a self-sufficient individual who depends on herself and does not in any case need, much less want to be saved, who is capable of asking for help without it meaning that she is weak. All these highlighted features confirm that *Snow White* is certainly a timeless tale but the protagonist is now revised and updated to fit/conform to modern standards which are far from their Disney or literary equivalents; as if they illustrated the history of the emancipation of women. It is clear through the observation of the narrative dialogue of bodies and the mastery of the details in staging and choreography that the creators convey subtle messages on equality between the sexes, the power of women and the irrelevance of gender identities. Thus they build a bridge between generations and highlight social evolution through the rewriting of the well-known fairy-tale.

## Conclusion

If fairy-tales serve as foundation for moral and/or sociocultural reflection, then *Snow White* can be considered as evidence or a hint to social practices, behavioural norms and conventions of an era. Its timelessness can serve as a link between eras and generations or as an uninterrupted chronological map of the evolution of society, perceptions of women, and female identities. Indeed, the ideal of beauty in *Snow White* does not merely prescribe features of appearance, but also images of accepted female conduct. The works examined under the prism of intersectional feminism clearly subvert the tale by transcribing text into movement through the language of a performer's body. In addition, the creators read into the fairy-tale focusing on the archetypal female characters and the way a stereotypical female model resonates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (or rather does not) with regard to social and gender power relations, in an obvious effort to develop and encourage critical reflection. As explored here, feeding on stories by removing their stereotypes or replacing them by questions closely related to contemporary sociocultural feminist issues is essential to raise awareness as well as tolerance and acceptance of diversity and possibly to obtain a new type of happy endings.

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