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Choice to Change

With the rise of meaningful discourse about issues regarding sexism and gender normativity in past and present societal structures, themes of standardized roles for male and female dancers have come up quite frequently in the dance world—in particular, the realm of ballet. However, due to the clear issues with this art form, there are plenty of people who form a meaningful connection with the art and openly choose to engage in it. This is because of choice. Although no one can deny that there have been bleak moments in the history of ballet regarding aesthetics and ideals, dancers and choreographers today must choose to strengthen the current notion that so many hold which is that ballet is both empowering and pleasurable.

Ballet has for years been regarded as unhealthy for both the body and the psyche due to certain ideals set forth by leaders in the field about how a dancer must look on stage. *In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency and the Philosophy of Pleasure* by Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou outlines this idea of ballet bashing as being associated with “the physical and mental health of dancers, its elitist implications, its aesthetic triviality and highly authoritarian teaching methods” just to name a few (Kolb and Kalogeropoulou 107). There have undoubtedly been focuses in the world of ballet specifically for women on lean bodies and low calorie intake, body image issues due to mirrors and strict dress codes, and lack of individuality due to dreary repetition. For many, ballet generally perpetuates an ideal of lack of self-care and self-respect. Some worry about the objectification of women that ballet portrays especially for children and

for girls specifically. Children have a fascination with the concept of moving one's body in space, but certain introductions to the art form can be dangerous for future beliefs about body image and health in general. Additionally, male dominance over the female body is a common theme in not only the plotlines of classical ballets, but also the workings of the choreography itself. Because of such heteronormative issues in ballet, many are turned off to the art form. In the words of Elizabeth Streb, "As long as people are speaking about gender in just the boy/ girl way, you're not telling my story, meaning my physical story of what it's like to be alive in the world" (*Dance Magazine*). Even when it seemed as though progress was being made in the 1930s and 40s, many of the dancers that we see as historic leaders in the field were enforcing sexist beliefs from the start. Gene Kelly, for example, stated that men were "capable of stronger, more intricate dancing" than women and that "a woman shouldn't try to compete with a man on his own ground" (Jowitt, 233). Similarly, Ted Shawn had said that he "did not admire the great German modern dancer Mary Wigman, because of her 'defiant, aggressive movements...a great many of which should rightly have been performed by a man'" (Jowitt, 238). While these were supposed to be leaders in the forefront of progress during the time, even they were pushing for gender normativity. So how do we address these issues through the medium of dance? How do we reconcile the fact that so many people have felt marginalized by this art form?

This is where dancers and choreographers begin to make choices. Either this patriarchal system continues through gender normative expectations, or it is deconstructed and taken for what it was truly meant to be—a source of pleasure and ability. Not only do dancers find pleasure in the actual kinesthetic movement of dance, a belief that Isadora Duncan held, but we also relish in intellectual success. In an August-December 2011 study described throughout *In Defence of Ballet*, dancers reported that discipline was ultimately their top source of pleasure. As

a part of human nature, we enjoy problem solving. This means that if a dancer receives a critique, it is an exciting process to put effort into correcting this issue and remarkably satisfying when we are able to accomplish such as thing. *In Defence of Ballet* states, however, that teaching environment has everything to do with how critiques are perceived and taken to heart which is a fine line. The fact is that the human body was created for movement. It naturally longs for synchronization and fluidity from infancy to death. This idea is something that we discussed during the J-term dance and disability course when learning the Brain Dance; we are all intrinsically desperate for rhythm within our bodies. It is so natural for human beings that it is difficult to explain in rational language as discussed in *In Defence of Ballet* (122). This joy in process rather than product is something that needs to be focused on to draw attention away from pure aesthetics and to appreciate dance for what it truly is. We all must learn to enjoy movement as it should be, which is gender nonspecific. Jennifer Fisher's article states that female dancers have begun to embrace the fact that they can be both intellectuals and dancers, bringing the mind and the body to a natural harmony (Fisher 14). I believe that Loyola's program is a direct example of strong women storming this front and choosing to advocate for the fact that there is indeed hope to reconcile ugliness through intellect and artmaking.

Fisher states that although slowly and with time, ballet is a world in which change is possible and furthermore, inevitable. Alwin Nikolais embraced the idea that a person is a dancer first and can implement masculine or feminine strengths as they please. Mark Morris refuses to buy into the necessity for gendering everything in the world of ballet. With effort and persistence, dancers have the choice to create a world of ballet that is equal and just.