

**The Underbelly of Ballet:
The Exploitative Empire of American Ballet Companies**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

The beautiful, graceful world of ballet may appear beyond the world of mortals in their brutish struggle for equality, but in reality, it is riddled with contradiction: power differentials based in gender and capitalization of its outwardly innocent image to keep its members enslaved within their roles on and off stage. American ballet companies, after nearly a century of operation, are only now being exposed for a culture that favors specific ages, races, bodies, and genders that are rooted in the ability to control its employees and retain male power in a seemingly female-dominated and centered artform. At the root of the establishment of this hierarchy of control, where male directors and choreographers domineer over young female dancers, is the American elitist and profit culture as a result of capitalism and wealth disparities. This research paper evaluates how the perception of female ballet dancers and capitalist exploitation allows for gendered hierarchies in American ballet companies.

Network Analysis Research Methods

In order to evaluate the role of the American economy and gendered stereotypes of female dancers on the resulting hierarchy on the basis of sex using actor-network theory (ANT), network analysis is utilized. Sources were collected from journal articles, databases, research studies, and news articles. The main keywords used were: hierarchy, exploitation, capitalism, ballet, and gender. The remainder of this document will outline how capitalist exploitation and the perceptions of female dancers, through traditional gender roles, bodily expectations, dance education, and the choreography of George Balanchine, contribute to the gendered hierarchical structure that exploits

female dancers for benefit of largely male leadership, as well as address the limitations of this study.

History of Ballet and Exploitation

The roots of the balletic artform are traced back to before the establishment of feudal systems in Europe to pagan rituals, folk culture, and village practices that were eventually incorporated into French royal court dance, which forevermore established an association of ballet to serve the elite (Hammond & Hammond, 1979). After technical terms were codified by the French academy, later to become the Paris Opera Ballet, it spread throughout Europe, Russia, and eventually took root in the United States (US) in the early 20th century (Hammond & Hammond, 1979). American ballet companies differed largely from European and Russian ballet in its rejection of traditional technique and development of contemporary and modern dance styles that focused on extreme athleticism, dynamic movement, and new emphasis on physical attributes of height and thinness, and inspired a new wave of ballet companies in the US (Denby, 1948; Hammond & Hammond, 1979). In particular, George Balanchine, developed a nuanced Americanized ballet style and founded the School of American Ballet (SAB) and the New York City Ballet (NYCB), which were dedicated to preserving Balanchine's choreography, aesthetic, and style (Denby, 1948). With the establishment of more American ballet companies, came obvious trends in the predominance of women and gays in dance with men disproportionately in managerial and choreographic roles (Hanna, 1987).

The accumulation of capital is both the basis of exploitation and the consequence of it, and under Marxist theory, considered a necessary and natural consequence of capitalism (Zuckerfeld & Wylie, 2017). Exploitation, in this context, is defined as control over economic, political, and social aspects of workers, dancers, within the hierarchy of an organization, American ballet

companies (McDermott, 1997). Relative social importance correlates largely to the extent of exploitation, as insignificant and highly important groups are largely unencumbered, but intermediate groups are vulnerable to exploitation (McDermott, 1997). Resulting relative and absolute wealth is directly influenced by exploitative degree and rational exploiters largely concern in maintaining their relative position (McDermott, 1997).

The culture of exploitation in ballet has been historically established. In the 1830s, Paris Opéra operated upon a system of sexual exploitation of impoverished female dancers to wealthy male *abonnés*, or wealthy donors (Garafola, 1985). After viewing ballet productions in the famous opera house, the *abonnés* would enter the Foyer de la Danse, a warm-up studio behind the stage, that functioned as an exclusive *maison close*, with madams negotiating dancers' bodies (Garafola, 1985). A large draw of the female dancers were their ethereal connotations in romantic spirituality, allusions to virginity, and class from satin, lace, and gemmed costuming (Garafola, 1985). Furthermore, the feminization of the male dancer, in aesthetic values of delicate figure, and frequent replacement of male roles with female dancers eliminated potential obstacles of the *abonnés* to their private harem (Garafola, 1985).

This capital-based cultural exploitation persists today in contemporary American ballet companies. In 1987, the largest companies in the United States, New York City Ballet (NYCB), American Ballet Theatre (ABT), The Joffrey Ballet, and the San Francisco Ballet (SFB), had male artistic directors (Hanna, 1987). Although today only NYCB has a male artistic director, of the 50 largest ballet companies in the US, 69% of works in the 2020-2021 season were choreographed by men, only 27% were choreographed by women, and 4% by people of other/mixed gender (*Research – Dance Data Project*, n.d.). Though there is a 10% overall increase in works choreographed by women since 2018, there is still an obvious lack of works produced by women and continuation

of male dominance in the choreographic sphere (*Research – Dance Data Project*, n.d.). Furthermore, many choreographers and directors value a misogynistic aesthetic in their female dancers marked by extreme thinness; ideals of arrested puberty to impress the male fantasy of deflowering a virgin and of control, further manifested in treatment of dancers schooled, obedient children and referring to women as “girls” (Hanna, 1987).

Actor Network Theory Framework

The science-technology-society (STS) field acts both as a field of academia, but is inherently a social movement (Waks, 1993). STS is the study of the impact of science and technology on society and has various established frameworks to analyze different areas of STS (Waks, 1993). Evaluating the interplay of innovation on human structures, culture, and behavior is important for engineers to consider, because technology does not exist devoid of human interaction or impact. As society is difficult to analyze due to its broad and complex nature, it is often useful to use a network theory to evaluate structures of power.

Actor-network theory (ANT) is a framework used to analyze the intrinsically complicated relations between ‘actors’ in a ‘network’ (Cressman, Darryl, 2009). The major contributors to this theory are Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law, who first coined the ANT term and have worked to clarify and critique ANT (Cressman, Darryl, 2009). When used in moderation, ANT can help discern the web of contributors that make up an overall network structure in order to “open the black box” of science and technology (Cressman, Darryl, 2009). Evaluating relationships between institutions, governments, economy, academia, and niche groups under a network reveals both the human and non-human elements that make up a system (Cressman, Darryl, 2009). ANT is further codified by stages of *translation*, or the process of an entity giving roles to others (*Actor Network Theory - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*, n.d.). The four stages

of translation include: (1) *problematization* where the nature of a problem establishes actor dependency, (2) *interessement* in which actors are sequestered to their roles in attempting to resolve the problem, (3) *enrollment* where as a result of interessement actors are anchored to their roles, and (4) *mobilization* where members of the network act as a collective (*Actor Network Theory - an Overview / ScienceDirect Topics*, n.d.).

In a study by Hafner-Burton et al., network analysis is used to evaluate international relations, specifically to evaluate how actors enhance their power through exploiting their network positions and the fluidity of the network itself (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). The study evaluated current and potential contributors to international relations to conceptualize in detail the intertwined relationships between countries (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). In a second paper by Steen et al., ANT is proposed as a method to analyze strategic organization (Steen et al., 2006). Due to the complexity of institutional structurization, the authors posit ANT will be able to more completely evaluate and value the role of individuals as well as their influence on other actors and the network as a whole (Steen et al., 2006).

In this research paper, ANT will be similarly utilized to evaluate and clarify the key players involved in the establishment of gendered hierarchies in American ballet companies not as independent actors but as an interconnected network. Specifically, this paper will focus on two general categories of ‘actors’: American capitalism and the perception of female ballet dancers. The perception of female ballet dancers is further investigated in the context of traditional gender roles, disparaging the female form, educating submission, and in the choreography of George Balanchine. Both the economic structure and idealized femininity play a role in resulting exploitation of female dancers for profit in American ballet companies. Accumulation of capitalism of the dominant group, provides them the capacity to exploit the workers through

various means of control. Gender plays a large role in group identity and culture and further extends the means of hierarchy through misogyny. In evaluating the factors that contribute to the complex hierarchy in American ballet companies, the circumstances that facilitate the establishment of other systems of power will be similarly evaluated using ANT and help to determine methods of dismantling problematic power structures.

Results and Discussion

Overview

The perpetuation of gendered hierarchies in American ballet companies is proliferated by American capitalism and perception of female dancers, which are influenced by traditional gender roles, requirements of the ballet female form, educated obedience, and gendered choreography by George Balanchine. Exploitation of female dancers is modulated by the accumulation of capital and asymmetrical exchange, facilitated by capitalist culture of profit. The perception of female dancers is subdivided into specific actor categories: traditional gender roles, disparaging the female form, educating submission, and gendered choreography by George Balanchine. Traditional gender roles that detail women as caretakers and men as income earners as well as the feminization of ballet, perpetuates female dancers' financial suffering and explains the masculine leadership presence. The ideal ballerina body is rooted in misogyny and is the focal point of female dancers' success. Submission and obedience are indoctrinated in young dancers in their dance education and infantilization of company members keeps them in a perpetual state of slavery. George Balanchine, a renowned ballet choreographer, perpetuates gendered ballets and female aesthetics that glorifies women only in relation to their service to men. These actors encompass the network of exploitation of female dancers under leadership of male directors, choreographers, and members of the board of directors detailed in Figure 1.

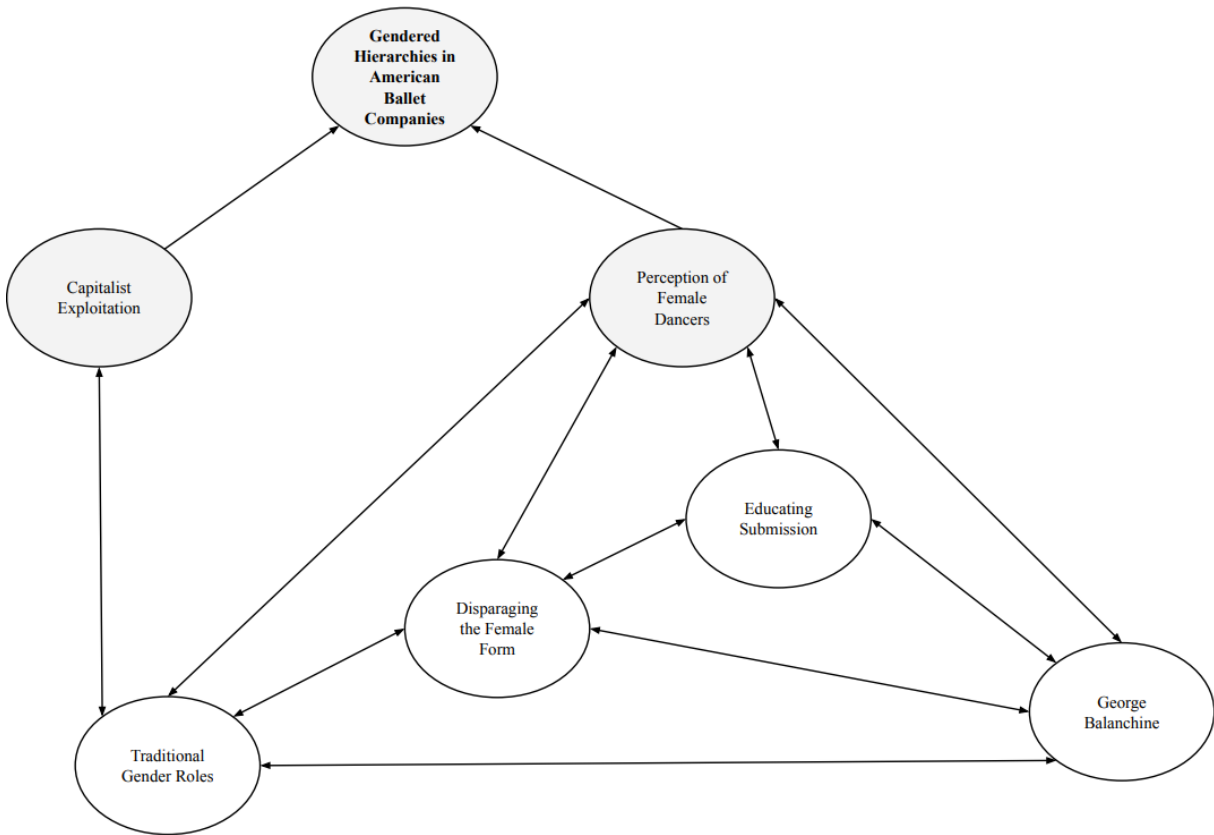


Figure 1. Actor Network Theory Map of Gendered Hierarchies in American Ballet Companies

(Cressman, Darryl, 2009) (Sano, 2023)

Accumulation of Capital and Exploitation

Exploitation is attributed to almost any relationship in which asymmetrical exchange occurs within production processes and one group gains value at the other's cost (Zukerfeld & Wylie, 2017). This research will focus on the problematization of capitalist exploitation, or specifically, exploitation as a result of the accumulation of capital, which is modulated by regulation, legalization, and legitimization of exploitation and expropriation (Zukerfeld & Wylie, 2017). The United States has a capitalist economy where business have control over own interests

and transactions without significant government oversight allowing for capitalist exploitation to occur (Clark et al., 1994).

Major American ballet companies, including the New York City Ballet (NYCB), not only rely on ticket sales from performances but from a board of directors who largely control the company's functions (*Let's Get to the Pointe*, 2017). The board of directors is composed of mostly elderly and wealthy individuals who decide funding for the company and indirectly control the direction of the company (*Let's Get to the Pointe*, 2017). A large portion of board members are CEOs and founders of firms whose *enrollment* is motivated by the desire to involve themselves in ballet and the arts to appear worldly in elite, high society (*Let's Get to the Pointe*, 2017).

With the composition of business-inclined boards comes a cultural emphasis on profit and a specific vision for who would be the most profitable representation as artistic director (*Let's Get to the Pointe*, 2017). As a result of interessement, the ballet industry that is dominated by young women would need a masculine leader to advertise itself as a legitimized artform in the masculinized business world. Additionally, board members are motivated to encourage artistic directors to create pieces and companies that appeal to the average American, which is *mobilized* as hiring whiter, skinnier, and sexually attractive dancers. Furthermore, the large portion of male choreographers and worldly renowned male choreographers, makes the qualified candidates for director and leadership positions majorly men and favorably men.

Despite world-renowned companies generating thousands from tours and performances, most struggle to overcome deficits from the millions in annual operating budgets, contributing to the sparse salaries for the majority of the company in the corps de ballet and enrollment of female dancers in a disparaged position (*Let's Get to the Pointe*, 2017). The majority of the company's dancers are women to fulfill the large corps requirement of the traditional romantic story ballets

such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, which feature impressively large formations of female swans and Wilis. The problematization lies in female dancers who work hours at perfecting their technique and maintaining their dance capacity, and who without them would not make the company possible receive the least compensation.

In order to compensate for annual deficits, ballet companies hold large galas and events to attract wealthy donors and advertise the arts as a product for the elite, as detailed in Michael Langlois' recount of his time dancing for American Ballet Theater (ABT) (*B Plus*, n.d.). Many of these events take advantage of the children of board members and donors who attend the accompanying school and provide a small performance or are paraded around in Nutcracker costumes (*B Plus*, n.d.). Students and company members are used for their darling and attractive appeal in order to entice continued contribution to the company (*B Plus*, n.d.). Female dancers in particular are implicitly encouraged to wear lowcut and tight dresses to inspire board members to encourage the artistic director to place them in solo roles and simultaneously benefit the company's profits as a result of their enrollment (*B Plus*, n.d.).

In 2018, Alexandra Waterbury, a dancer with the NYCB, sued her ex-boyfriend Chase Finlay for circulating nude photos of her without her permission (Cooper & Pogrebin, 2018). The suit unveiled a fraternity-like culture associated with NYCB where male dancers and an unnamed donors commented on their desire to "violate" dancers and "abuse them like farm animals" (Cooper & Pogrebin, 2018). Subsequently, ballet master, Peter Martins resigned after allegations of sexual abuse were made against him (Cooper & Pogrebin, 2018). The allegations against Martins and the lawsuit against Finlay unveiled an explicit misogynistic culture to the general public that has previously only been suggested or rumored among the ballet community. The ability for this abuse to occur is mobilized by capital control by Martins in a position of power in

the company, Finlay as a principal dancer, and the unnamed donor as a source of profit for the company.

Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional division of labor by sex historically allocates maintaining of the home and caring for children to women and generating income and protecting to men (Zhu & Chang, 2019). These expectations create a problematization that largely limit the economic and political power of women in favor of reproductive resources contributing to power asymmetry that proliferates in many structures of American society (Zhu & Chang, 2019). Traditional gender role enrollment has continued in American society largely due to its proliferation among many conservative groups and its productivity in allocating work to prioritize child rearing (Zhu & Chang, 2019). These expectations have evolved to maximize reproduction but are not an inherently biologically fixed cultural practice (Zhu & Chang, 2019).

The influence of traditional gender roles is seen in the historical shift of ballet to a largely male dominated artform to its current feminized form. Historically, ballet was dominated by men who codified balletic terms and used ballet as a form of feudal cultural unification in the early 1800s (Garafola, 1985). As the artform became feminized, diverging from its political unification purpose and became an entertainment art, male dancers were replaced by all female dancers (Garafola, 1985). The shift from male to female reflects the influence of gender roles on the sex composition of ballet when its purpose shifted from traditionally masculine imperialism to feminine amusement. Even though ballet is still an associated feminine art, the intersement of masculine exercise of political and economic power is seen in the largely male board of directors who control ballet companies, not through manifesting the arts but in distilling ballet into an economically and socially profitable past time.

The feminization of ballet has continued to present day because of the perpetuation of these traditional gender roles. Ballet and the arts are encompassed under the ‘starving artist’ expectation of to suffer physically and financially in order to pursue the arts (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). Sacrificial transcendence, or the sense of sacrificing aspects of life for the arts, creates a tunnel vision around ballet and avoidance of personal pleasures from income or relationships (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). This expectation allows for limited salaries to be allocated to dancers as well as limit the amount of men who pursue ballet as they are expected to carry the burden of income (Hanna, 1987). The expectation of suffering and the traditional allowance of women to not accumulate income, perpetuates an image of women who are undervalued and controlled by its masculine leadership, mobilizing the hierarchical sex-based structure in ballet. Their undying devotion is rewarded with a system that profits off of their delusional grasp for promotion to principal dancer, which very few dancers achieve, and of their love for dance.

Disparaging the Female Form

Physically, ballet encourages and worships a particular female body that both infantilizes and defeminizes women (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). The ideal ballet body is bone thin, lacks curves in the hips and breasts, and is rooted in misogyny and control of women (Hanna, 1987). The slicking back of hair into the classic ballet bun, both caches the femininity and sexuality of long hair and prevents dancers from cutting their hair in a short, masculine manner because it would prevent the ability to tie back hair. In reducing women to a prepubescent, pre-sexual body type and image, ballet appeals to the male fantasy of deflowering a virgin (Hanna, 1987). The problematic connotation being complete control of women and preventing their power through sex.

Artistic directors and teachers indoctrinate and encourage interestment of these bodily values early in ballet education and in the values of the company (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). Ballet teachers will tell larger students to lose a weight and many of the prestigious ballet schools regularly weigh their students and require them to remain under a certain weight (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). Dancers may be told they have to lose weight for costuming reasons or to be able to affectively dance with a partner or to be able to dance on pointe (Daly, 1987). Spending hours in front of mirrors and directors when your commodity is your body, impacts many dancers' mental and physical health. A dancer could be fired for not maintaining the physical aesthetic of the company and many dancers as a consequence develop eating disorders and body dysmorphia, further enrolling female dancers within bodily expectations (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.).

The influence and power of female dancers only in relation to and as a result of their bodies and male choreographers is mobilized in studying the criticisms of NYCB dancer, Wendy Whelan (CROFT, 2014). Whelan was largely criticized for her masculine, animalistic body and movements, only to be renowned positively feminine when seen in famed choreographer Christopher Wheeldon's pieces wearing pink and in love with a man on stage (CROFT, 2014). The exaggerated criticisms of Whelan's body, namely masculine, athletic, and overly skinny, underlines the valuation of female dancers in their beauty and attraction to men (CROFT, 2014). The necessity of Whelan in relation to men in choreography and in love on stage to be perceived and enthused as feminine, demonstrates the control of the female form in the artform as well as the power of men to change the perception and success of a dancer.

Educating Submission

Through the education of young dancers in ballet schools and conservatories, a culture and enrollment of mechanization, obedience, and infantilization is fostered. Dancers are programmed

to have “robot-like allegiance” to dance instructors and to schools, facilitated by depersonalization in favor of their physical abilities (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). They thus see themselves not as individuals but of a conforming part used for the function of dance and as “property” of their companies and schools (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). These controls and interselements allow for dance schools to grow dancers with perfect technique who will also follow the instructions of their superiors without question. The deindividuation of dancers removes their autonomy and voice, and also stifles their intellect as their education is compromised in many dance programs (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). A common sentiment among dancers is that of not having enough qualifications to have opinions or question leadership, which contributes to the lack of female choreographers mobilizing the hierarchical structure.

Most notably, ballet educates dancers in a manner that maintains their childhood to retain control over them and enroll their submissive roles. As a result of early and prolonged isolation from parents and family in order to attend ballet schools and summer intensives, the impact of infantilization is indoctrinated at a young age with minimal oversight (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). Many ballet teachers and choreographers in the company are called, ballet mothers or ballet masters that reflect the sense of an unending childhood and infantilization of the dancers (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). In addition of stifling sexuality to pre-pubescent character through the expectations of the female form, dancers maintain a primitive notion of only existing for the purpose of fulfilling the dreams of their choreographers and ballet mothers as a result of interselement (Gray, Kendra M., n.d.). Furthermore, women in the company are often referred to as “girls” when addressed perpetuating the mobilization of male dominance over female dancers and the lack of respect to female dancers (Hanna, 1987).

Impact of George Balanchine on the Female Dancer

A major result and problematization of gendered hierarchies in dance are the large and worshiped male presence in the choreographic sphere. Choreographers shape the perception of female dancers on stage and contribute to their reception as powerful or belittled through interestment. George Balanchine is one of the most worshipped choreographers, noted for his contribution to the development of neoclassical ballet and for founding the School of American Ballet (SAB) and the NYCB (Garis, 1980). Balanchine developed an avant-garde postmodern style that diverges from traditional storylines and classical movements, to present angular, exaggerated, and more dynamic movement. Balanchine is highly revered in the ballet world and his work is consistently performed by the NYCB and other companies, and his exaggerated technique is proliferated in the SAB which provides and trains dancers for the NYCB company (Garis, 1980).

Many argue “Balanchine glorified Woman,” through his all-woman ballets, such as *Serenade*, that allowed all dancers on stage to dance and be seen, however Balanchine represents and enrolls women in a patriarchal manner (Daly, 1987). A major theme in Balanchine’s ballets are the dynamics between the man and woman in traditional gender schema. Much of his choreographer frames women at the control of the man who manipulates and controls her and who needs male assistance to move (Daly, 1987). The implication of Balanchine’s work is the mobilization of gender-dichotomized ballets that continue to be restaged and performed over works which may push the traditional gender barriers such as works with men on pointe or same sex partnering.

Balanchine places a large emphasis on lines, or extensions of ballerina’s leg, elongated by pointe shoes, reminiscent of the objectification of the legs of women and the use of shoes, namely high heels, to accentuate their sexuality for the male gaze (Daly, 1987). Balanchine’s obsession

with lines led to his favoring and collection of tall, slender dancers with long legs and perfect turnout for his company (Daly, 1987). Balanchine's ideal ballerina demonstrates his glorification of women under the masculine gaze by emphasizing their body in terms of sex. The ideal, lightweight ballerina on her toes, supported by a male partner represents an image of woman in relation to man and not a representation of women alone. Perpetuating this extreme physique on stage encourages ballet companies to perpetuate the misogynistic body type especially due to the high reverence of NYCB.

Limitations

This project is limited by the time and resources available to me as a student. Due to the nature of this project in analyzing a network that is comprised of many different actors, there are likely contributions to the gendered hierarchy that were omitted in this analysis. This study only references major themes in capitalist exploitation and the experience of female dancers, that exist in published documentation. Further research should be done to fully encompass the factors that contribute to exploitation of female dancers in ballet. Finally, the current atmosphere surrounding ballet and gender is changing, with many companies hiring female artistic directors, rises in female choreographers, and openness to diverse body types and men on pointe, which was previously only a female aspect of ballet. It is likely that the particular factors that contribute to the hierarchy analyzed in this paper will shift and will need to be reevaluated under new contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the perpetuation of exploitation of female dancers by male actors in American ballet companies is due to capitalist culture and perceptions of female dancers that perpetuate their abuse. Particular focus areas that could reduce exploitation of female dancers

would be increasing governmental funding of the arts and encouraging higher salaries for dancers through unionization, as well as reformation of ballet education to encourage individualization and choreographical skills among dancers and allow them autonomy from their paternal financial reliance. In evaluating this hierarchical network based on sex, other structures of power can be analyzed similarly for the factors that bolster their proliferation. Determining the historical, political, social, and economic reasons for hierarchy can provide frameworks for generalizing the causes of asymmetrical allocation and illuminate possible routes of dismantling these systems.

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