

Spring 2019

Storytelling in Contemporary Ballet

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STORYTELLING IN CONTEMPORARY BALLET

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Dance
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By

Abbey N. Lutts

May 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my CE/T advisor Anna Patsfall for supporting me and always giving me insightful and helpful critiques and advice throughout the entire research process. I am also grateful to my committee, Amanda Clark and Dr. Christopher Keller for giving me their time and effort to see this research process through. I would also like to thank FUSE for the grant that I received to start this research. The FUSE grant provided me with the opportunity to travel and conduct my research, which allowed me to gather the research material to complete my thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank the Mahurin Honors College for their plentiful opportunities and beneficial support.

ABSTRACT

The goal of my thesis is to challenge the conventions of classical ballet and fully grasp storytelling within contemporary ballet in a way that appeals to modern audiences. I used postpositivist research, historiography, and dance ethnography as modes of research to uncover common themes and trends of traditional ballet, which led to a deeper understanding of contemporary ballet and the modes choreographers and educators use to challenge classical ballet stereotypes. My methodology was to identify common themes from folklore, classical ballet, and traditional storytelling. I have studied traditional folklore and fairytales and have evaluated and reviewed the thematic content of the same themes within classical ballet. I also conducted an analysis of works by contemporary choreographers who are deconstructing, retelling, and reworking traditional tales in new ways. This research has allowed me to evaluate traditional values and thematic content found in these stories on a deeper level and to understand American cultural and social evolution.

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INTRODUCTION

Ballet is a revolutionary art form that first appeared in the 15th century in the Italian Renaissance court. It gained popularity in the 17th century, but really reached its full peak in the 19th century as it became a serious profession. Classical ballet is classified by its codified technique, the use of pointe shoes, and the classic ballets that came from it. Contemporary ballet is the newest form of ballet to emerge. This genre is typically considered a hybrid of classical ballet and modern dance, but it is also danced with pointe shoes. Contemporary ballet challenges the conception that ballet is patronizing, feminine, and obsolete. When viewing classical ballet today, it is evident that it does not continue to match the ideals of culture and is fixed in the past. Classical ballet storylines are fairytales that have traditional outlooks and themes., They have outdated moral lessons embedded within the structure and overall meaning of the story. Contemporary ballet grew out of a need to challenge these ideals. If ballet does not continue to fully adopt contemporary culture and modernity, the artform can no longer grow and progress.

The first chapter, “Folkloric Agendas Adopted by Classical Ballet,” looks at the commonalities of fairytales, folklore, and classical ballet. It defines and gives examples of common themes and agendas found within the stories that have been adopted by classical ballet. The next chapter, “Points of Contention and Contradiction On and Off Stage,” highlights some of the controversy that deals with how dancers are treated and viewed both on and off stage. Examples of the highlighted topics are female agency, representation of the body, and gender roles in ballet. The last chapter, “Contemporary Choreographers: A Perspective of Change,” evaluates and compares contemporary choreographers who have worked both with and against these constructs. This chapter

analyzes work by Alonzo King, Michael Smuin, George Balanchine, and Lauren Lovette whom have choreographed original works that break classical conventions of storytelling while maintaining a narrative. In addition, this chapter evaluates contemporary ballet choreographers Matthew Bourne and Mats Ek who have taken classical ballets and reworked them in order to challenge their content.

FOLKLORIC AGENDAS ADOPTED BY CLASSICAL BALLET

Classical ballet storylines revolve around fairytales, which introduce ideas of good versus evil, happy endings, and love. Beyond that they reveal messages about the constructs of marriage, physical image, and fate. While fairytales and the classicism of ballet have the ability to produce nostalgia, they possess outdated moral lessons and false idealizations. They were gender-coded lessons for children “to become the perfect aristocrat” (Banes, 45). Through analysis of classical ballet storylines, fairytales, and folklore, I have found that their histories and agendas tell a unique story about the time in which they were introduced. Many of these ballets are still being performed today, which creates an interesting and controversial dialog in their usage and popularity.

Fairytales were created to teach children of the morals, manners, values, ideologies, and social constructs of the time. These stories were written down and distributed in Europe under the reign of Louis XIV (Zipes, 3). It should be noted that the very first ballets were being presented in Louis XIV’s court. Oral folktales had been around far before they were written down however, the classical ballet did not flourish until the 19th century. Charles Perrault and other European writers were specifically writing fairytales for children in the 1700s (Zipes, 15). *Sleeping Beauty* is just one of the fairytales that came out of this era and was later turned into a classical ballet. These tales subsided for a while due to the French Revolution but can be directly correlated to the rise in tales seen in America and other parts of Europe after the revolution.

Folktales typically follow a standard hero journey. The hero in these tales embark on a journey to “achieve happiness, most often marriage” (Zipes, 4). The hero goes

through many trials along the way that are incorporated to teach children about certain temptations, how to overcome conflict, and how to act with nobility. In addition, the heroic story reveals messages and agendas throughout. The plot is for the hero to save the princess, and for her to reward him with matrimony. This “happily ever after” tells a lot about society and what they were trying to sell to society.

Classical ballet revolved around the idea of fairytales. The storylines and constructs of the ballet followed the plot line, narrative, and the ideals of a fairytale. The literary fairytale was turning folklore into ‘high art’ or ‘elitist’ property (Zipes, 16). Also, ballet was exclusive to the upper-class at this point in time. Both the literary fairytale and ballet featured hierarchy, rank, and social status into their messages and within their establishments. The fairytale and ballet were the perfect match. However, as time has passed ballet has tried to open its doors to everyone. Although, it has yet to fully grasp ‘new’, ‘modern’, and ‘contemporary’ ideas when it comes to story.

These stories are still very much a part of culture today, and we can see this by the popularity of Walt Disney’s films. Jack Zipes is a folklorist who studies the social and political role of the fairytale and is the author of *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. In his text he brings up many vital points and questions such as, “If ‘contemporary fairy tales have been greatly informed by the aesthetics and ideology of seventeenth and eighteenth century French fairy tales’, then are these still the morals and lessons we want to teach the next generation and even adopt into our modern-day culture? (Zipes, 17).

POINTS OF CONTENTION AND CONTRADICTION ON AND OFF STAGE

Classical ballet has grown around its dance vocabulary which is classified by steps and positions. However, there are other elements that are engrained in the roots of classical ballet. These elements deal with three primary concerns: female agency, body types and representations, and gender roles. Traditional ideals have been absorbed into this dance genre due to its rich history. However, as a popular dance genre these constructs must be acknowledged in order to progress.

Female agency is a lacking trait in the female characters portrayed in classical ballet. Ballerinas are supposed to be dainty, light, graceful, and beautiful. These traits have then been transferred into the female protagonist character. They are also usually young, innocent, and pure. The female character does not have a voice or control over her fate. The male character, however, is strong, noble, and royal. He is a confident hero ready to save the damsel in distress. However, female agency goes beyond the makeup of the characters. It is also an issue seen within the movement. The ballerina dances with help from her partner. In classical ballet, there is continuous partner work where the audience sees the male dancer's hands on the ballerina controlling her movements and moving her through space. All eyes are on the female when she is dancing, but who is the initiator of these movements the female or the male?

There are many female roles within various classical ballets that match this stereotype. One female that exudes these characteristics is *Giselle*. She is a young, beautiful girl and of the working class. She falls in love with a man of a higher class, whom is engaged to marry someone else. It should also be noted, however, that it is

forbidden for him to marry someone of her status. Giselle becomes heartbroken and what seems to be psychotic as she dances herself to death. She has no control of her situation as everyone has made decisions for her. In addition, the fact that she cannot obtain this “happily ever after” automatically means death for her. She is not the only female in this ballet, however. The second act of *Giselle* is invaded by the willis. The willis are spirits of female virgins that died before they were married (Banes, 33). These spirits represent a large mass of individuals; however, they all look identical. They are all white females in white ethereal dresses, and they move with exact precision and unison.

Swan Lake is also a popular ballet that emerged after the premiere of *Giselle*. In *Swan Lake* the principal roles are usually described to be the dual roles of Odette and Odile. But what about the prince, Siegfried? Gregory Sporton, Professor and Head of Westminster School of Arts writes that, “Siegfried’s status was decidedly defined as ‘secondary’” (Sporton, 283). His actual dancing is minimal as he uses grand gestures and dramatic expression to portray his character. In fact, historically this role was insignificant, and his character was seemingly undeveloped. Although, his nobility and status are what causes him to be highly desired by the women in this story.

In classical ballets, both the story and the individual movement implies that females are in need of males, they must find a suitable partner, and they are not in control of their own destiny. The issue of female agency comes with these factors on and off stage. When classical ballets were first presented on the stage, the ballet was predominately made up of females. The female ballerina was highly sexualized. This was due to the fact that the majority of ballet masters and the audience itself were males. Following their

performances, suitors stood backstage, seeking sexual affairs with ballerinas. Wealthy patrons and subscribers of the ballet would seek out the female ballerinas sexually and then support them financially. “For subscribers, backstage was a kind of men’s club where they could meet and greet other power brokers, make business deals and bask in a highly sexualized atmosphere” (Blakemore). The ballerinas were getting praise, fame, and wealth during this time. However, they felt harassed and violated



(Blakemore).

Figure 1. A painting by Jean Beraud 1889

(Credit: Leemage/Corbis via Getty Images)

Gender roles and stereotypes effect both the male and female dancers. In classical ballet it would be rare to see a ballerina’s movement exude confidence, nobility, and strength. As well as it would be strange to see a male danseur dance with grace and

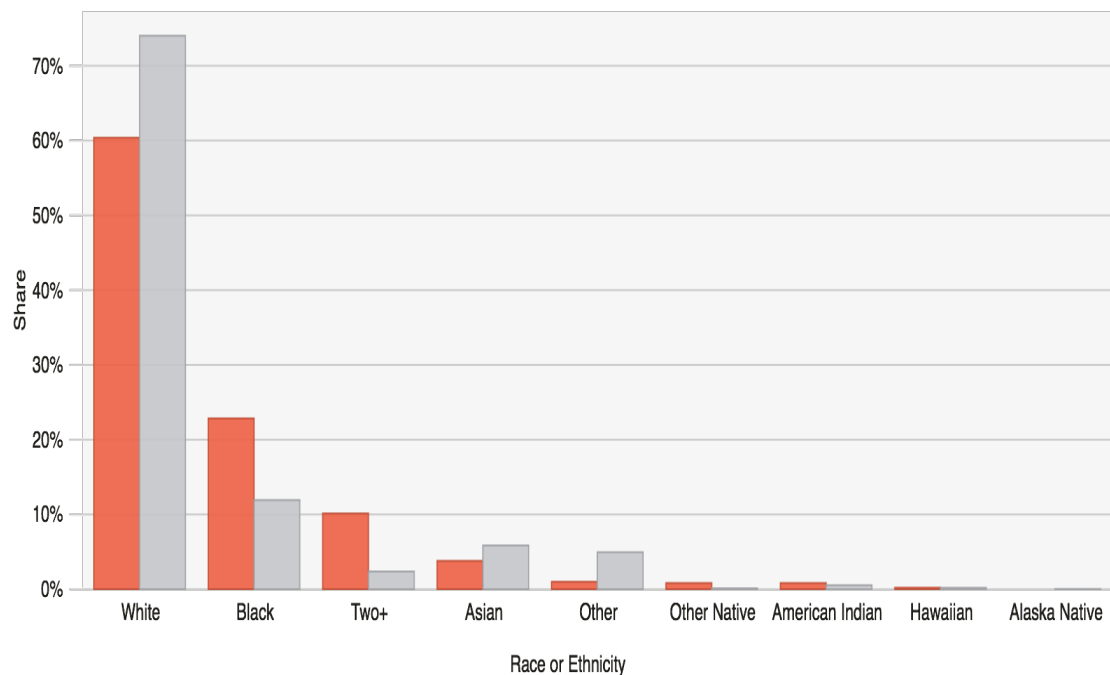
elegance. There are many differences when it comes to males and females on the stage that choreographers have yet to challenge. In her essay “Classical Ballet: A Discourse Difference,” Ann Daly states-

ballet discourse as a whole...is inextricably rooted in the notion of “inborn” or “natural” gender differences. Across the centuries, these differences have been an unabashed hallmark of classical ballet at every level: costuming, body image, movement vocabulary, training, technique, narrative, and especially the *pas de deux* structure. Like a thicket grown fat around a fencepost, discourse has entwined itself with stage practice in inscribing gender difference as an aesthetic virtue. (Desmond, 313)

The types of bodies on stage in classical ballet is also a point of contention within the dance community. Classical ballet strives for perfection, structure, and symmetry. This ideal has further affected casting who is on stage by not only their weight and body type, but also by their color or ethnicity. Choreographers aim for everyone to look exactly the same. This is implemented by casting only white female dancers to perform in the *corps de ballet* that have close to the same body structure, height, weight, and even hair color. This is because the *corps de ballet* is a large mass of ballerinas that dance in unison. They sometimes act more as scenery on the stage and for the soloists (principal dancers). Choreographers have gone as far as having the dancers wear matching wigs on stage. This is a huge issue in current ballet discourse concerning the discrimination of race and bodies.

Since the beginning of ballet in the 17th century, ballet has adopted the aesthetic that comes with white bodies on stage. Only recently has classical ballet tried to move away from this discrimination and the mindset that individuals with darker skin cannot move with the same grace and elegance as “white bodies” can. The trouble that ballet has had with this shift has proved that it is “resistant to evolving beyond its roots as an elite, rigidly European art form. Balletomanes, choreographers and directors generally concurred that black bodies were unsuited to the lines of classical technique” (Woodard).

Race & Ethnicity for Dancers & Choreographers



Dataset: ACS PUMS 1-year Estimate
Source: Census Bureau

DATAUSA:

Figure 2. Data: Race and Ethnicity for Dancers and Choreographers

CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHERS: A PERSPECTIVE OF CHANGE

Contemporary ballet, an emerging dance genre, aims to discover new movement that expands on the technical and precise movement that classical ballet offers.

Choreographers started to adapt and expand into the genre of contemporary ballet in the late 1900s, the genre continues to shift, change, and expand today. This genre seeks to find less rigidity in the movement and also questions the constructs of stereotype and storytelling. It is a means to challenge the strict conventions of classical ballet, and contemporary choreographers are straying from those traditional commonalities in a couple of ways. Some inspiring choreographers have created original works that break the classical canon of storytelling while maintaining a narrative. Others have taken classical ballets and reworked them in order to challenge their content.

Alonzo King is the founder of the prestigious Alonzo King's Lines Ballet company. His main goal as a choreographer is to dismember "centuries-old racial, ethnic, and political tethers" (Jensen, 91). He believes that dance can be as effective and influential as written text and that the movement is language. Troubled at the fact individuals try to disassociate dance with real life and position "dance as specialized or privileged," he aims to break these ideas through his own choreography (Jensen, 93). He creates work about interconnection and relationship and wants to bring light to the fact that dance is a large part of humanity.

King also "dismisses gender archetypes in favor of seeing dancers as 'energies'" (Jensen, 101). King is extremely aware of the fault of stereotyping gender in ballet, and he challenges this idea by having both the men and women in his company dance against

their stereotype. One of King's dancers has classified herself as a "new world ballerina," which is a ballerina that has "less quaintness and more of an edge. Less delicacy and more boldness" (Jensen, 106). He also challenges the elitist hierarchy of ballet by asking his dancers for input (Jensen, 102). He allows for collaboration among his dancers and believes that they have a voice.

Micheal Smuin is an example of an individual who choreographed classical ballets and then created his own contemporary ballet company. He was the co-artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet and then created the Smuin Contemporary Ballet. Smuin's main goal was to entertain and capture the audience. Instead of having his company perform *The Nutcracker* like the majority of ballet companies do at Christmas time he choreographed his own ballet, *The Christmas Ballet*. This is a unique ballet because there is not a through-line narrative. There are short narratives within each piece. While interviewing company member and choreographer Nicole Haskins about how Smuin approached contemporary ballet storytelling, she stated, "putting a show together that seems cohesive and smooth when every piece is different, choreographed even in different decades, is its own story in a way" (Haskins). Each year the company members themselves choreograph a few dances that will premiere in *The Christmas Ballet*. In doing this, Smuin Contemporary Ballet has challenged the hierarchy of ballet. In addition, by constantly adapting, shifting, and choreographing new material Smuin Contemporary Ballet is staying true to "contemporary". This ballet has become tradition for this company, but even after Smuin's death, this ballet has the ability to be revived without becoming "old".

Many contemporary choreographers are challenging social structures and norms within ballet by messing with the structure of the *pas de deux*. The *pas de deux* is typical within classical ballet with stereotypical structure and with male and female dancers of the same race. The structure consists of an introduction, an adagio, two solo variations, and the coda. The *pas de deux* is a symbol of matrimony as they come together to celebrate connectivity after dancing alone. In 1957, George Balanchine created *Agon* a contemporary ballet *pas de deux* with a white female lead and an African-American male dancer. *Agon* does not have a narrative and is not a part of a story, yet it “creates meanings regarding human relationships” (Banes, 195). This duet challenges the representation of women in ballet by showcasing an independent woman. Also, it was politically progressive due to the fact he choreographed this duet in the heat of the civil rights movement and depicted love between this inter-racial couple (Banes, 195). Balanchine did not have to create an in-depth story to spark controversy and to call attention to classical ballet stereotype. By placing a white female and black male on stage, he created a story within itself. He states that, “Storyless is not abstract. Two dancers on the stage are enough material for a story; for me, they are already a story in themselves” (Banes, 195).

Lauren Lovette is a modern-day choreographer that is currently making changes to the *pas de deux* structure. Lovette choreographed a same sex *pas de deux* with two African-American males en-titled *Not Our Fate* only last year. This duet sent shockwaves through the audience and included Lovette into the debate in same-sex duets on stage (Kourlas). She not only called attention to gender and sexuality, but also race. During the

duet there is “a moment with the African-American dancer Christopher Grant that references racial injustice” (Kourlas). This moment spoke about how it is not our fate to hate everyone. Lovette speaks to hate and differences and choreographs about change. Lovette also notices that she is one of few female choreographers even today, and she is taking advantage of this.

Contemporary ballet choreographers that choose to rework famous classical ballets have a much different struggle. They read “against the grain of canonical dances, reworkings adapt, embrace and question our dancing heritage, drawing attention to history and processes of historiography” (Midgelow, 25). Reworkings call attention to a piece of history and morph it in order to tell the same story in a different way. This allows the audience to also be challenged as they recall the past and experience the now. Two choreographers that take entire story ballets and work to challenge them are Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne.

Mats Ek has reworked many of the classics such as *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*. In Ek’s version of *Swan Lake*, he works with the original musical score and storyline while also pairing down the narrative and the number of dancers on stage. One major difference is the movement vocabulary that is used. His style is much more grounded and eccentric. These qualities cause Odette’s movement to become more “assertive and provocative” (Midgelow, 43). They challenge the stereotypical movement quality of the ballerina as passive and graceful. The other swans on stage are also described as “awkward” (Midgelow, 43). The angular movement and bent knees cause this awkwardness, but also the swans all wear bald caps. This is an interesting parallel.

By having all of the ballerinas wear bald caps there is a sense of unity and sameness just like in the original *Swan Lake*. However, the bald caps challenge this idea of beauty and our picture of what this sameness should look like. Another major element of this reworking is Siegfried's role. In *Reworking the Ballet: Counter Narratives and Alternative Bodies* by Vida Midgelow she describes Ek's revisions stating, "At the very start of this work Ek stages an extended solo for Siegfried, establishing his character through his danced actions rather than through his interaction with others and before any extended narrative has had the chance to develop" (Midgelow, 44). The development of Siegfried's character through dancing challenges this ballet in an extremely healthy fashion. He no longer has to hide behind pantomime and dramatic interaction but becomes integrated and important to the ballet through his own performance.

Matthew Bourne has also reworked many classical ballets as well as *Swan Lake*. He, too, uses the musical score and full-scale theatricality and narrative like Ek. However, Bourne challenges this ballet in other unique ways. In his version, male dancers are cast as the swans. While the prince does fall in love with the male swan, the homosexual romance seems not to be the focus for Bourne (Midgelow, 53). The main goal of this cross-casting is to "bring to the fore the previously restricted images of gender and sexuality presented on the ballet stage" (Midgelow, 53). The prince's character is also adapted in this version to stray away from the stereotypical heroic figure. Instead, Bourne's prince is consciously reserved and "overshadowed by his mother" (Midgelow, 54). He struggles with this reality as he is struggling with homosexuality. His character has much evolved. While Siegfried also deals with this hesitancy throughout

the ballet, he is still seen as strong and noble, and the audience cannot truly understand his reservations.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary choreographers have the opportunity to create new and original works that showcase individuals, humanity, and beautiful and elegant movement. They can challenge the constructs of classical ballet as they create something that fits “the time”. Also, they can rework or re-wire classical ballets to make them “new” or challenge history through the strategic changes they make. Contemporary ballet as a whole has a duty to keep ballet alive and fresh in today’s society.

Through my own contemporary ballet choreography, I aimed to create a work that thoroughly enveloped my previous and current research, while creating thematic content through dance that represents current and progressive ideals. As I choreographed, I explored ways to challenge classical ballet and the various constructs such as: female agency, gender roles, and body types. In addition, I approached ballet story-telling through movement and abstraction rather than character development and pantomime. I did this by using a modern-day poem as the storyline of ballet. In addition, I had the dancers verbally speak on stage and told the story through the bodies on stage. I choreographed with intention to showcase individuals rather than a mass of dancers. I asked the dancers for their individuality and unique movement quality, to fully speak to the audience. I took this research, to influence and create a ballet that not only includes contemporary movement styles but involves contemporary ideas, subject matter, and addresses outdated conventions like other contemporary choreographers are doing today.

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