

## **Striving to be Thin: Pressures, Unrealistic Ideals and Essential Reformations in the Ballet World**

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### **Abstract**

The physical demands and aesthetic expectations for the female, adolescent, pre-professional ballerina to maintain a low body-weight are substantial and may impact her physically, mentally, and socially. As a result, eighty-three percent of female ballet dancers have a lifetime incidence of some form of clinical eating disorder<sup>1</sup>, the two most common being anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.<sup>2</sup> The first purpose of this ethics study is to investigate why such a large percentage of adolescent pre-professional ballerinas develop symptoms of eating disorders. The second purpose is to address the values that should guide society on this issue. Through reviewing academic literature and interviewing six individuals (all having connections to the classical ballet world), the researcher argues that the main factors relating ballerinas and eating disorders include pressures from teachers, the ballet environment, and perfectionism. Furthermore, the researcher argues that the ballet world is not evolving and institutional sexism continues to exist. Solutions include promoting and integrating nutrition education and creating supportive environments with available resources for pre-professional ballerinas. To support and eliminate the number of adolescent, pre-professional ballerinas with eating disorders we must change the ideals of society and audience members and empower females. Ballet ought to be understood as collaborative art and a celebration of human life and experiences.

**Keywords: Eating Disorders, Pre-Professional Ballerinas, Perfectionism**

### **1. Introduction**

The physical demands placed on female, adolescent, pre-professional ballet dancers are substantial. To properly and precisely execute steps, such as high jumps, multiple pirouettes (or turns) in a row, and to be lifted by male partners, ballerinas are expected to maintain a low body weight.<sup>3</sup> The increasing negative pressures from ballet teachers to lose weight, constantly looking in the mirror during dance class, and the competitive atmosphere of the ballet world lead to unhealthy eating patterns and negative self-image. A major study found that eighty-three percent of their sample of female ballet dancers had a lifetime incidence of some form of clinical eating disorder.<sup>4</sup>

While the ballet world has evolved, especially in the last century, there still exists the image of an “ideal ballet body.” While more pre-professional ballet schools and professional ballet companies have become accepting of ballet dancers with different body types, there are several key factors that play an important role in determining which dancers will successfully “make it” and achieve the most successful careers. These factors mainly revolve around the ballerina’s physique. One pre-professional dancer who is currently in the Alvin Ailey Scholarship Program and was a former trainee with the Joffrey Ballet describes,

One should have a small head and long neck with long thin legs and a short, non-existent torso. Arms should be long and wispy. When I was studying only classical ballet, I read a book [that] said that a ballerina should be between 85-115 pounds. That didn't account for height or anything like muscle and body composition. For my height at 5'7", even the maximum weight in that range would have made me anorexic.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of focusing on the ways that their technical or artistic qualities of dancing can improve, numerous pre-professional ballerinas get caught up in the never-ending battle of sacrificing their lives to achieve an unrealistic appearance.

## 2. Factors

Certain groups are more at risk for eating disorders than others, including teenage girls and young women. People in sports and activities that emphasize thinness are more at risk, including models, runners, gymnasts, and of course, dancers (specifically ballet dancers). Dancers who are undergoing puberty are especially in need of proper nutrition for healthy development. The habits of excessive exercise and low food intake lead dancers to lose weight and to potentially develop an eating disorder

While there are many types of eating disorders, the most common affecting female, adolescent pre-professional ballet dancers are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Both of these eating disorders are extremely serious, affecting a woman's mentality, lifestyle, physicality, emotions, relationships, and in some cases even leading to death. Psychologist and author, John Santrock defines anorexia nervosa as "An eating disorder that involves the relentless pursuit of thinness through starvation."<sup>6</sup> Three main characteristics apply to people suffering from anorexia nervosa: (1) They weigh less than eighty-five percent of what is considered normal for their age and height; (2) They have an intense fear of gaining weight; and (3) They have a distorted image of their body shape.<sup>7</sup> Bulimia nervosa on the other hand is an "eating disorder in which the individual consistently follows a binge-and-purge pattern."<sup>8</sup> Criterion for the diagnosis of bulimia nervosa include bingeing at least once a day for an average of 4,800 kilocalories and engaging in purging at a minimum of twice a day for at least three months.<sup>9</sup> During bingeing one will lose control when eating and will result to purging. As the DSM-5 states, in order to prevent weight gain, individuals with bulimia nervosa will display, "recurrent inappropriate compensatory behaviors...such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise."<sup>10</sup> The combination of several factors incorporated within a ballerina's everyday routine significantly plays a major role in whether the female, adolescent pre-professional dancer will develop an eating disorder.

### 2.1 Pressures From Teachers

It is evident that female, adolescent pre-professional ballerinas are in a point in their careers where they are spending an equal amount of time (if not more time) at their ballet studios than their homes. Ultimately, through the guidance of her teachers, the female dancer will hopefully develop into a successful professional dancer with a thriving career. However, this is difficult if her teachers do not believe in or support her. In many cases, the ballet teacher may take on the role of an additional parent. Female pre-professional ballerinas constantly feel the need to please their so-called "parents" to feel accomplished, successful, and confident about their future careers. One dancer discusses from her past experience,

My teachers who were like parents to me had me write a food journal for them without being clear about why I was the only one doing it. I had never been large. Soon I began to put calories next to the items so they wouldn't think it was more than it actually was. A day at the mall with a friend would earn a scolding. "You can't apologize to the audience and say 'I'm sorry, I went out with a friend to the mall yesterday, I am sorry I appear rather large.'"<sup>11</sup>

As a result of trying to please her teachers and then experiencing immense pressures to lose weight, count calories and consume as little food as possible, this dancer's anorexia led to bulimia.

Furthermore, dancers going through puberty earlier may experience more negativity from teachers. In a study by researchers Nordin-Bates et al. (2011) dancers who dropped out of the prestigious School of American Ballet (SAB) were more likely to have matured earlier and to report eating disorder symptoms than the dancers who stayed in training at SAB.<sup>12</sup> Teenage dancers whose bodies are going through drastic changes (such as increased body fat in

the thighs, hips and breasts) are undoubtedly the ones to face struggles, often being ignored by teachers and eventually (in the case of the prestigious SAB) are asked to leave. When ignored by teachers, dancers often feel they need to drastically change their bodies. Many female pre-professional ballerinas develop the mindset that “If they’re thinner, they’ll be better.”<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Environment

The environment and atmosphere of ballet studios can also be a factor in eating disorders. One huge component that can lead to the development of eating disorders is the mirror. For hours on end, every day, dancers are constantly looking at themselves in the mirror. In the words of one dancer, “With the pressure of looking in the mirror every day and seeing yourself gain weight [especially during puberty], you don’t see things gradually.”<sup>14</sup> She recounts how one day at the beginning of class, she looked at herself in the mirror and something just switched in her head. She saw herself as obese and needing to lose weight by drastically reducing her caloric intake, dropping eventually to five hundred calories a day.

Even if participating in ballet in may not cause eating disorders, the current atmosphere is detrimental. Researchers Herbrich et al. (2011) write, “the cultural context associated with ballet (e.g. immense pressure regarding body shape, competitive atmosphere of ballet schools, and daily training in front of mirrors) needs to be considered.”<sup>15</sup> They note the pressures that competitive pre-professional schools place on their dancers:

An increased risk for disordered eating attitudes and behaviors was found in ballet dancers in highly competitive environments, such as ballet schools affiliated with professional nationally recognized performing troupes. In contrast to non-exclusive and primarily recreational local ballet schools, the atmosphere is more intense as there are only limited spots during auditions. Without the right proportions, even technically talented dancers will fail to be accepted for a professional training. Accordingly, there is greater demand for thinness and greater pressure for competition.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, another environmental factor influencing eating disorders is the strict dress code given to ballet dancers. As one dancer states, the universal dress code in the world of pre-professional ballet schools “is another [environmental factor]. What [a ballerina is] required to wear: black leotard and pink tights.”<sup>17</sup> Female, adolescent pre-professional dancers are left completely exposed, unable to express themselves. As a result of dressing in the same uniform and constantly looking at her figure in the mirror, overtime a pre-professional ballerina may start judging her body, hating her appearance, and comparing her physique to that of her peers. She may start failing to see the assets of her body, thereby only concentrating on her flaws, which may eventually lead to an eating disorder.

## 2.3 Perfectionism

Perfectionism is another significant influence on ballet dancers who develop symptoms of eating disorders. Ballerinas are conscientious perfectionists as they strive for excellence and want every step, performance, and class to go superbly, without mistakes. Many ballet dancers are self-evaluative perfectionists: they develop a deep concern over mistakes, possess the need for approval, and are highly sensitive to pressure from their peers and teachers. As one dancer says, “eating disorders call for the perfectionism we already possess by nature.”<sup>18</sup> Researchers Nordin-Bates et al. (2011) show that while positive perfectionism entails “striving high for positive outcomes,” negative perfectionism signifies, “striving to avoid negative outcomes, and experiencing great concern as a result.”<sup>19</sup> They write, “females reported more disturbed eating the higher their scores for negative perfectionism.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, the negative “desire to become more ‘perfect’ may translate into unhealthy weight-loss methods and cognitions when pressure is high and stress emerges.”<sup>21</sup> Since several pre-professional ballet dancers possess the traits of excessive-perfectionism, many of these young women constantly feel as though they are never good enough for their art form.

## 3. Addressing the Issue

Due to its emphasis on lean physiques, the culture of the classical ballet world continues to promote negative health behaviors across the globe.<sup>22</sup> The researcher will argue in this section that the ballet world is not evolving and that institutional sexism continues to pervade the world of ballet.

### 3.1 A Stagnant Ballet World

The ballet world is not evolving as an art form in several different ways. There is rarely open communication between the ballet dancers and their directors, causing some ballerinas to jump to the wrong conclusions and silently abuse themselves. In many ballet companies, ballet directors look down upon ballet dancers who ask questions and share their thoughts. Some dancers are verbally abused by their directors or are ignored altogether. When ballerinas feel unsure about their progression in the company, some of them address their doubts by starving themselves.

While other forms of dance, such as modern and contemporary dance, have continued to successfully evolve and develop, many aspects of the ballet world remain unchanged. In many cases, ballet continues to value an ideal body type, ballet company directors choose a few dancers to favor and ignore the others, and few ballet company dancers lack the necessary freedom and integrity to share their thoughts and emotions. Additionally, numerous ballet companies have explicit hierarchies, and even show this directly in the performance programs. For example: principle dancers will appear first in the program with their pictures and biographies, followed by soloists, principle character dancers, corps de ballet, and possibly apprentices. Unlike other dance companies with different styles of dance (such as modern, hip-hop or contemporary dance companies), it is rare that an equal playing field will exist in a major classical ballet company.

In a study on ballet versus contemporary dancers and their perceptions of their body image, researchers Swami and Harris (2012) found that advanced ballet dancers had significantly lower body appreciation than beginner ballet dancers, whereas advanced contemporary dancers had much higher body appreciation than beginner contemporary dancers. They write:

Contemporary dance affords individuals greater opportunities to explore their emotions (particularly the mind-body connection) and bodily experiences. In addition...contemporary dance may also allow individuals to more fully appreciate their bodies as functional in a kinesthetic manner, which is consistent with our finding that contemporary dancers reported significantly higher body awareness than ballet dancers. In turn, this may result in contemporary dancers developing more favorable opinions of their bodies, accepting their bodies in spite of imperfections, and being more respectful and protective of their bodies.<sup>23</sup>

The ballet world remains a primitive place. Ballet dancers are continuously maltreated through verbal abuse, being ignored, and by not being able to effectively communicate with the director of the company. Consequentially, the development of eating disorders is a major problem that will continue to grow if it is not properly addressed.

### 3.2 Institutional Sexism

There are not nearly as many male ballet dancers in pre-professional schools and professional companies as females. Therefore, competition is higher among females than males. As Nordin-Bates et al. (2011) discuss from their research, "given that there are many more females than males in dance, females may feel under greater pressure to conform to a specific body stereotype."<sup>24</sup> Due to the immense competition between females in the ballet world, female "ballet dancers show a greater desire to be thin, have a greater lack of confidence in identifying emotions...and also experience a stronger need for...self-restraint."<sup>25</sup>

Most importantly, within the ballet world, almost every director of a major ballet company is male. These male directors are the ones who decide on their company's repertoire each season; they decide who to hire, fire and replace; they hold the company's auditions; and they tell certain dancers to lose weight. With such a large percentage of female dancers employed by a large percentage of male directors, institutional sexism continues to pervade the world of classical ballet. Specifically, males continue to take the dominating role, severely impacting a ballerina's future in the company. Unfortunately, this male-dominated role often results in a negative and harmful abuse of power. For example, researcher Buckroyd (2003) explains that in the course of her research over a time period of fifteen years, she heard "many accounts of bullying by teachers in professional schools and by those in power in companies."<sup>26</sup> Adolescent ballet dancers feel pressured to fit to the stereotype of a perfect ballet body not only to please their teachers and fellow dancers, but also to eventually please their possible future male employers.

Finally, ballerinas are being used more commonly as instruments than as individuals. Directors and choreographers will set and create pieces on ballet dancers, placing them in positions as if they were mere objects, instead of unique human beings. Ballerinas are almost treated like robots, expected to read the minds of their directors and discouraged from using their own creative voices or trying to collaborate and share their artistic ideas.

This is a fundamental problem because the point of view of pre-professional ballet dancers is “essential since they are the ones on the receiving end of training and employment and know best the realities of that situation.”<sup>27</sup> While we need to cultivate strong, healthy artists, this is hard to do in the world of ballet where ballet dancers are seen as aesthetic objects, not human beings with emotions and aspirations.

## 4. Solutions

While no single person or institution is to blame, all parties must be willing to make the appropriate changes to adequately address the problem of eating disorders among ballerinas. The researcher proposes that dance companies and schools integrate nutrition, health, and wellness education into their programs and create supportive environments.

### 4.1 Nutrition, Health, And Wellness Education

A fundamental solution would be to implement nutrition, health, and wellness education into the daily schedules of these young, aspiring ballerinas. One dancer admits that if she had been more aware of proper nutrition, her chances of developing an eating disorder might have been lower. She said that she probably could have done a much better job in her performances if she had not been so fatigued from inadequate nutrition. She says,

[A ballet] dancer’s knowledge of proper nutrition, health and wellness is so important that it should be done from an elementary age. That way it could automatically blend with the technique. [It must] be stressed that people would feel at their best as dancer[s] if they [were] following healthy living practices.<sup>28</sup>

If adolescent ballerinas had deeply rooted nutritional knowledge, they would be less likely to be convinced by false health practices.

Doyle-Lucas and Davy (2011) found that several summer ballet intensives offer nutrition classes, but that they vary in quality. In some programs the qualifications of the lecturers were not identified, and two companies specifically stated that a former dancer or instructor taught their nutrition classes, instead of a nutritionist. Out of twenty-three companies, only three indicated that nutrition education was provided by a registered dietitian or physician.<sup>29</sup>

The “Nutrition for Optimal Performance” intervention program implemented at one school saw positive improvements in the ballet dancers’ lifestyles. This successful program was associated with boosting “self-reported dietary intake habits, such as reduced candy, fast food, and soda consumption and increased milk consumption.”<sup>30</sup> Programs like this one can enable young ballet dancers to understand the importance of sustaining high-performance bodies through a healthy lifestyle. It is essential that pre-professional ballet schools work to hire highly credentialed nutritionists who can teach a wide range of wellness lessons to aspiring adolescent ballet dancers. These lessons should include the following: eating a balanced diet; maintaining a high performance body; understanding the importance and benefits of different vitamins, minerals, fats and nutrients; learning about human anatomy; and educating young, pre-professional ballerinas about healthy life skills (such as decision making and goal-setting).

### 4.2 Supportive Environment

Many times, dancers who develop eating disorders find it hard to seek help. One dancer explains that ballet dancers with eating disorders do not want to ask for help because they often feel incredibly embarrassed or ashamed, and they do not want others to take control of their eating habits and weight. She says that these ballerinas “don’t want help, so having the help available to them without them having to come ask for it”<sup>31</sup> is of utmost importance. Furthermore, pre-professional ballerinas need to get the message that they don’t have to be ashamed of an eating disorder, that they don’t have to hide it, and that they can talk to anyone.

The lack of communication in the world of ballet must be addressed. Many times, pre-professional ballerinas will develop eating disorders because they receive mixed-messages, are quick to jump to conclusions, and do not have the opportunity to engage in honest discussions with teachers, directors, or fellow peers. As one adolescent ballerina explains, if a pre-professional ballet student was enduring difficult problems with her weight, an ideal teacher would

be able to say, “I can help you figure this out. We’ll come up with a...plan together. We’ll sit down...we’ll make a schedule.”<sup>32</sup> She further advises teachers to

Make sure that [pre-professional ballerinas] have other things to think about in class...Make sure that they don’t feel like it’s all about the weight: That [weight is] the only area they can improve on and nothing’s go[ing to] get better because that causes a lot of problems. Make sure that they have something to be thinking about like, ‘maybe work on using your feet in class.’ But make sure that the ‘weight’ stays outside of ballet and keep it separate.<sup>33</sup>

One artistic director and dance teacher credits no eating disorders among her students to open communication and a supportive environment in her studio. She explains, “We educate our students...We actually take the time to talk to our students. Not just the gifted ones. I think that’s our responsibility.”<sup>34</sup> One dancer emphasizes that teachers need to “encourage self love and self acceptance and working within your own range and facility so that you can be a safe and healthy dancer for a long time instead of focusing on an external reality that isn’t even your own.”<sup>35</sup> The combination of giving students positive reinforcement inside and outside of ballet class and consistently being available to meet with them is incredibly fundamental in the pre-professional and professional world of classical ballet.

### 4.3 Educating Parents, Teachers And Directors

For healthy, supportive ballet studio environments, parents, teachers and directors of pre-professional adolescent ballet dancers must be educated regarding proper nutrition, the health risks of ballet, and how we can effectively nurture growing adolescents who are rigorously training for careers in ballet. A psychiatrist in Northern California says it is a problem that ballet teachers and directors are not required to have any credentials to open their own studios and companies. She explains,

There are no credentials necessary even though they are working with growing children pre-professionally or on the professional level. They don’t have to have teaching credentials, nutrition credentials, no idea about medication...They are preaching all of these ideals, so it’s a bad combination of factors that lead to dancers feeling like thinness is good.<sup>36</sup>

This psychiatrist proposes that, “Dance teachers need to prove what’s appropriate and what’s not. They need to be held accountable. If they’re encouraging someone to be eating-disordered, then they need to face the responsibility of that. That’s abusive. A credentialing of teachers would be necessary.”<sup>37</sup> In the classical ballet world, however, pre-professional ballerinas must ask teachers and directors for health advice. Unfortunately, even if a ballerina has the courage to ask, a large percentage of ballet teachers and directors lack the proper education and credentials (some never attended college and only danced professionally, later opening ballet studios). Teachers and directors with risky dieting strategies and recommendations are putting their dancers at risk. If teachers and directors were required to have extensive credentials and degrees related to the health, wellness, and socio-emotional aspects of training their dancers, young and rigorously training ballet dancers would likely be at less of a risk for developing eating disorders. Having standards for ballet teachers and directors to achieve through credentialing tests on nutrition; human anatomy; ballet pedagogical skills; and adolescent development would create healthier and happier environments in the world of classical ballet.

Many times parents are uneducated about similar concepts (e.g. nutrition, anatomy, adolescent development) that are essential in order to support one’s child who is rigorously training to become a professional ballerina. Often, parents are driven and want their children to go to highly renowned schools to have the best chances of becoming professional ballerinas in highly acclaimed companies. Unfortunately, as the artistic director of a pre-professional ballet school in Northern California notes, the parents of these children are not educated. They make the choices to put their children into ballet schools with big names, and “if the child doesn’t do well in this school, [the parents say that] it’s the school’s fault...[but] it’s the parents’ fault...[They do not do] enough research”<sup>38</sup> prior to enrolling their children in these schools. Therefore, while parents may differ in their philosophies regarding how to treat, nourish, and challenge their children, to lower the percentage of eating disorders among ballerinas, parents must be able to make decisions that will benefit their children in the best ways possible. Parents should visit multiple ballet schools prior to deciding where they should send their pre-professional dancers to train and they should have a foundational knowledge regarding proper nutrition to nourish their children who are growing and training.

Building healthy relationships between parents and teachers is also essential for pre-professional classical ballerinas to thrive. Many times when an intensively training adolescent ballerina is hearing differing perspectives from her family and from her ballet teachers and directors, the conflicting views may lead her to develop symptoms of an eating disorder. Moreover, not only is it essential for there to be open communication between parents and children as well as between ballet teachers and these pre-professional ballerinas, but it is equally important for there to be clear, consistent, and open communication between the parents and ballet teachers. In elementary and even middle schools, there are regular parent-teacher conferences where parents and teachers have the opportunity to discuss their child's strengths and weaknesses. The same should happen in the ballet world, allowing parents to develop healthy relationships with their child's ballet teachers and directors. If parents and teachers discussed the best ways to support the student and enhance training, there would most likely be a decrease in the large percentage of pre-professional ballerinas who develop symptoms of eating disorders. It is also essential that all three parties – parents, teachers and the pre-professional ballerinas – be present in these discussions early on in the ballerina's training. Once a pre-professional adolescent ballerina feels more independent from her parents, parent-teacher discussions are not as essential, but in the early adolescent years, the development of relationships between parents and teachers is incredibly vital, as this is the time when the adolescent's primary physical, mental and socio-emotional growth is occurring.

## **5. Values Reorientation**

In addition to understanding the problem and the solutions needed to decrease the vast number of adolescent pre-professional ballerinas who develop eating disorders, society also needs to reorient its values. Namely, society must change its ideal of the ballerina physique and find ways to empower ballerinas.

### **5.1 Changing Ideals**

When one asks a non-dancer what comes to mind when they think about a ballerina's physique, most will describe a ballerina as being skinny, with long legs, a long neck, and lacking curves and fat. Does this mean, however, that the public will only pay for tickets to see ballet companies if the dancers are thin? The large, renowned ballet companies are in business because the public is buying tickets to see their shows. We might ask whether the ballet world is revealing the sickness of our culture or actually contributing to it. On the one hand, a large percentage of adolescent pre-professional ballerinas develop eating disorders as a result of the choices of directors and choreographers. On the other hand, this problem might reflect the weight obsession, especially of females, in our society. As a Northern California psychiatrist explains, "if audience members are paying to see thinness, then the audience is encouraging ballerinas to engage in unhealthy eating patterns"<sup>39</sup> leading to eating disorders.

The audience is paying for tickets to see people with perfect and sometimes even unrealistic bodies, putting incredible pressure on ballerinas. If neither the directors nor the audience members are satisfied with what they see onstage, a ballerina is at risk of losing her job. Therefore, the audiences' perceptions may determine whether or not a ballerina will have a career and may heavily impact whether she will develop an eating disorder. Can audiences change their ideals and construct a new definition of ballet? An audience member could say, "Well we don't care if the lifts happen. We're not interested. We want to see more diverse body types."<sup>40</sup> If society changes its ideas about ballet and stops buying tickets to see performances, ballet companies would not be able to continue performing, touring, or even existing. If society became more intrigued by a ballerina's artistic expression and shifted towards preferring ballerinas with curvier and more muscular figures, the ballet world would most likely adapt to these preferences to remain financially stable.

### **5.2 Female Empowerment**

A huge societal misconception is that female ballerinas are light, dainty, fairies. If we continue to see women as passive, fragile, and submissive, there is no way that the world of classical ballet can ever evolve. We must begin to see woman as full, autonomous human beings. Moreover, we must view female ballerinas as having both internal and external strength and power. One dancer explains, "Sometimes we're angry, sometimes we stomp, sometimes we sulk and sometimes we're depressed. Sometimes we're not just these perfect things."<sup>41</sup> As audience members, directors, and dancers, we should all promote acceptance of individuality. By picking a diverse range of repertoire

and casting different ballerinas with different body types in lead roles, we will promote self-acceptance instead of self-harm.

For the world of classical ballet to change, we must allow female ballerinas to communicate their true emotions through their bodily movements. A university professor of “Dance and Spiritual Expression” argues that we must be able to incorporate repertoire that speaks candidly. In relation to Martha Graham’s renowned modern dance piece, *Lamentations*, the professor states, “That’s a perfect example of the wisdom of the body. [*Lamentations*] is not symbolic of what grief or lament is. It’s the body showing what lament is. It’s not the body acting out grief...it’s the body speaking. This is grief, and in those movements we see what lamentation and grief are...it’s very powerful.”<sup>42</sup> Researcher Julia Buckroyd (2003) explains the importance of valuing the dancer: “The dancer needs to be at the centre of dance. For all our techniques and traditions dance, as a thing in itself, does not exist. There is no such thing as ‘dance’, only people dancing.”<sup>43</sup> Enabling and encouraging young women to individually interpret choreography and express their unique identities through the art of ballet will promote a healthier world of ballet. More pre-professional ballerinas will stay true to themselves rather than reform their physiques in unhealthy ways.

The director of a new professional contemporary ballet company in Northern California seeks to empower women and honor dancers as strong individuals. In her company there are no mirrors, the dancers can wear whatever feels comfortable to them (avoiding black leotards and pink tights at all costs), and they can share and communicate their artistic ideas. She believes that ballerinas ought to be able to effectively collaborate with the choreographers instead of being treated as machines. She says, “Artistic expression needs to be pushed more than internal correctness. There needs to be a balance between technique and artistry.”<sup>44</sup> In her company the dancers choreograph as much as she does. She asks her dancers to come up with phrases and material to share with the rest of the company and encourages them to create honest work, not trying to be another dancer, but instead striving to find out who they are as unique, individual people.

## 6. Conclusion

The conventional understanding of ballet has led ballerinas to sacrifice their lives and bodies for their performing art. We must redefine the art of ballet. Harvard professor and dancer Kimerer LaMothe writes,

Dancing, we cultivate a sensory awareness that helps us discern how to think and feel and act in ways that honor nature—the nature surging through our veins, crackling in our thoughts, roaming with our senses, moving in and out of our bodily selves—as a creative power greater than we can imagine, in which we, nonetheless, participate with every move we make.<sup>45</sup>

Dancing does not just include a dancer’s ability to execute proper steps and perform tricks that wow the audience. If dancers lack inner awareness, passion, and senses, they have not encountered their inner artist and inner dancer. As one professor says, “We dance because we have an impulse to move. We are not bodies that move, we are movement in our bodies. There’s a big difference. Dance increases our sensory awareness and sensory experiences.”<sup>46</sup> Dance comes from internal human senses and ideally expresses what humans feel on the inside with full openness, trust, passion, and truth. One dancer says, “The art of dance is a philosophy. It is life itself. We are a representation of what the human body can do and we live it every day, using it to the maximum degree and exploring our limits. Dance is love, fear, and everything else that any human has ever felt.”<sup>47</sup> All of these qualities are very human. She further explains that dance is a philosophy and way of living that is intricately intertwined with everyday life. She eloquently says,

I think that Martha Graham said it the best that, ‘The body is a miracle and dance is a celebration of that miracle.’ I think that dance, as an art form to me is of honoring the human experience that we all share and creating dances that can move people to tears, or move people to joy, or move people to any sort of emotion on the spectrum that you choose to dwell on, but really be able to portray that emotion, connect it with people so that as an audience member they feel it viscerally. Dance is life. If you’re alive you’re moving. If you’re not alive you’re dead. And everything in the whole entire universe is based on movement...kinetic energy, it’s just like a beautiful, endless cycle of ebb and flow...Dance to me is so much more than just an art form. It’s a way of seeing things. It’s like a life philosophy as well. It helps me to tune into wisdom that’s available.<sup>48</sup>



Dance should be a celebration of life. We should not only award dancers who can execute challenging steps, but also praise them as human beings who have developed emotionally and mentally, and overcome challenging obstacles throughout life. With more opportunities for ballet dancers to express their triumphs and hardships through dance, to retain individuality and to connect dance with everyday life, ballet will remain a real and truthful art form that will continue to touch the hearts and souls of all human beings.

## 7. Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Laura Stivers for her dedication, support and consistent efforts in helping me turn what started out as an honors project for a required class into a project that has connected deeply to me as an aspiring future professional dancer and teacher. I hope to continue further with this research in my future studies. Dr. Stivers' dedication to my research and paper is truly exceptional. Second of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the six interviewees who gave up their time to participate in my project. Their honesty, compassion and help all gave me new insights and information for this paper. Without these six people, this paper would not have been possible. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me and listening to my ideas as I transformed what I once thought would be a term paper into a major academic research study.

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