

Women's folklife, women's culture essay

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Recognized as a natural occurrence of human expression, the folklore of dance has existed since the beginning of time. Ballet's elegant quality of movement and expression was established in these ancient demonstrations of dignity in the human spirit. The culture of ballet has been a reality for over 400 years, yet the tradition of women performing in ballet has only been for slightly over 300 years. It is an art form that has engaged millions for over four decades and still continues to grow worldwide. When one thinks of ballet, most often the first thing that comes to mind is the image of the ballerina, the female performer representing femininity, yet ballet was a male only art form for over 100 years and male dominated for 200 years. The evolution of women in ballet has progressed from non-existence to being becoming the symbol of ballet. (great introductory paragraph!)

Directly related to the development of European civilization, ballet's roots can be traced from ancient times up to the sixteenth century.

Historians credit ballet's origin from the Renaissance courts of Italy in the sixteenth century. It then moved into the French courts brought by Catherine de Medici of Italy when she married a duke in 1533[i] who later became Henry II of France in 1547. [ii] Dance in the 1500s was considered to be one of the arts of gentlemen and the first recorded dance was in 1581, Ballet Comique de la Reine, originally Balet Comique de la Royne. [iii] Though it was referred to as a " ballet", historians do not regard this choreographed dance as the first ballet because it was far from what we know as " ballet" today. (great historical background) These court spectacles were elaborate amateur theatricals, exclusively male, and performed only by nobles. "

Renaissance court dances and eighteenth and nineteenth century ballroom dancing acquired many of its forms from the dances of medieval folk”.

[iv] Many of the steps in ballet resembled the same movements exhibited in ballroom dances of that era. It is interesting that only men danced in the ballets and performed the female roles even though women were free to participate in the ballroom dances consisting of the same steps. v] In this male dominated social order, men wore a mask of a female when performing female parts and dressed in what is known as “ en travesti”,[vi] a term that describes performers who appear in roles disguised as the opposite sex.

Women didn't perform in the dances in the beginning not only because it wasn't considered “ proper behavior”, but because their attire of long heavy gowns and shoes with heels made the execution of movements very difficult. (excellent detail!)As ballet became important in France, King Louis XIII of France participated in court ballets, but it was King Louis XIV who opened the first ballet school in 1661, the Royal Academy of Dancing.

[vii] The opening of the school started the codification and professionalization of ballet. It quickly developed as an art, yet it was not until 1681 that women were allowed to enter the school. This change occurred when an aging King Louis XIV retired from performing.

The professionally trained dancers from his school became the entertainers for himself and his court's amusement. Starting in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the beginning of the nineteenth century, the practice of “ en travesti” was then reversed because tastes changed and the number of male dancers began to dwindle. Up until 1789, these “ ballets”

were the court spectacles where performers not only danced, but recited poems and sang songs. Though women were beginning to perform in ballet, men continued to dominate throughout the early part of the 1800s.

The social upheaval of the late eighteenth century, when society began pushing for more equality under law, gave rise to the Industrial Revolution. (good historical context) Lasting through the early nineteenth century, this social transformation greatly affected the course of ballet and its masculine domination. Life for many became exceedingly difficult with extraordinarily long work days accompanied by poor working conditions, ill health, and cramped urban living. Daily living became mundane and together with the increasing harsh realities that humanity was forced to endure, the “ Age of Reason” began to erode. Dissatisfaction with this way of life greatly changed ideas concerning feelings developed from rational thinking. As a remedy for this altered way of life, the arts looked to nature and the idealistic expression of beauty, profoundly affecting the women in ballet. Choreographers drew upon themes from folklore and set their ballets in exotic magical lands.

Sanctuary was sought in romantic performances. The legends changed from plots containing a general moral importance or a comment on social situations originating from literary sources to stories of mystical tales. People looked for escape from present reality to a “ dream world”. This created an international movement that swept through ballet mirroring the changes in society's attitude towards life. From this environment the Romantic era in ballet was born, elevating the status of the female dancer to a feminine ideal, an elusive entity.

It transformed ballet into an art about women, presenting them as the embodiment of the ideal which gave them greater worth than men. Coupled with the introduction of wearing pointe shoes, Romantic ballets almost obliterated the male dancer. Pointe shoes served as a metaphor for femininity and gave the female dancer the illusion of being a heavenly life form, a symbol of the unattainable.

Enhancing that image, men became porters and their sole purpose was to lift the ballerina to make her look even more ethereal. Along with the Romantic styled tutu that ended just below the calf, keeping her legs well covered, and being white in color, symbolizing purity, the picture was a breathtaking representation of the imagination. With its roots in social history, the Romantic era of ballet brought feminism to the forefront and made it a social practice. This was the time when ballet became the woman's specialty, the single place where women were crowning. Appropriation is a powerful coding strategy in many cultures"[viii] and illustrating this was women moving into the roles in ballet that men traditionally danced, eventually monopolizing the art form.

" The Romantic era birthed ballet as we know it today",[ix] wrote Violette Verdy, a former principal dancer in Balanchine's New York City Ballet. The twentieth century brought George Balanchine, one of Russia's great master choreographers of all time. He continued the custom from the Romantic period and was responsible for keeping the male dancer in the background behind the woman. Heavily promoted during his reign from the 1960s through the 1980s, ballet remained the woman's domain. He was known to

have said many times, “ Ballet is woman. ”[x], (great quote!) and his choreography is a testament to that statement. He saw women as goddesses and paid tribute to them through the many ballets he choreographed. It is known that the “ star” of his ballets is his choreography, but they always featured the female dancer.

George Balanchine did as much for women in ballet in modern times, as the Romantic era accomplished for them in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Rudolph Nureyev, one of the greatest male ballet performers ever, pushed the male dancer in front of the ballerina. What Balanchine did for the female dancer, Nureyev tried to do for the male dancer.

Following the pinnacle of the Romantic tradition, this, is the continuing gender struggle in ballet today. The danseur, male dancer, as yet does not rule over the woman in ballet even though today's audiences are more aware of many fine male dancers than in past decades. It is the narrations that have changed. Fairytales and love stories have replaced the tales regarding mythical objects. Though the commentary is now often concerned with conflicts of reality, ballet still follows the tradition from the 1800s and remains the woman's art form. The prevailing culture in ballet that started with the Romantic period lasted strongly through the 1970s, but by the 1980s changes began not only in the world of ballet, but in the general society. While women continued a strong effort for equality in the outside world, the male dancer sought equality in the ballet world, greatly facilitated by Nureyev's endorsement.

Traditions in ballet began mixing with other cultures of dance. The possibility of the male dancer again rising to greater prominence became evident, but Balanchine's untouchable influence prevented that from happening. More equality exists in the ballet world today, but most professionals would agree that the ballerina's status has yet to be undermined by the male dancer. Many have suggested the effect of ballet as a feminized art form is that it remains a minor art form for the simple reason it is considered "woman's art". This attitude seems to be a strongly supported opinion in America, but others argue it remains a minor art form because it is an elitist art form. The arts have always been an integral part of European culture and the art form of ballet is no exception. By elevating a woman's status to that of distinction, she becomes empowered. A ballerina, the woman, is recognizable for accomplishment and beauty.

She represents art, inspiration, and fantasy. Taking over three centuries to evolve into a highly feminized field, the culture of ballet has given women encouragement by showing dominant ranking can be achieved. The culture in Europe is surrounded by art and the culture in America is surrounded by sports. Still considered a man's sphere by many, sports dominates over the arts in America. Education in Europe starts early and is absorbed as part of their upbringing.

Barriers stemming from gender prejudices and biases concerning the profession of ballet are a fact in America, not only because ballet is regarded as a woman's or elitist's art form, but also because of the perceived effeminate issue. I consider man's fear of ballet humorous and viewing the

glass as half empty. Ballet is where the females are, an aspect that should be considered “ heaven” from the male point of view. There is much male admiration for athletes in sports in this country and since dancers are athletes, their outlook remains mystifying. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the great philosophers in the eighteenth century, emphasized publically the “ return to nature”.

He understood that when “ given free reign, the power of individual emotions reflected each person's will. ”[xi] Art in all forms can have a powerful effect on man's will. The European culture understands the importance of art in one's life as a necessary “ richness” to renew the spirit. The beauty of a performance can be a very personal moment and immersing oneself in that beauty is healing to the soul. Perhaps, if the human race could be educated more thoroughly along these lines, less violence in this world would take place, resulting in better tolerance and unity. Walter Sorell, a cultural historian, stated, “ Dance is inextricably related to the ebbs and flows of its own times. ” An important aspect greatly affecting women's lives in the culture of ballet was the costuming, or gradual lack there of. From society's interest in archeology when dance productions were originally based on Greek and Roman myths, the costuming in ballet was now dictated by the changing street fashion of the times.

As more of the female body became exposed, ballet costuming always strived to keep its aesthetic of elegance, not only to uphold the vision of the art form, but to distance itself from the comparison to prostitution. As a result of exposing the female body further over time, we have arrived at

today's entire exposure of the body's form to the audience. This “exposing of the body” leads to the one negative facet in the ballet world that is still prevalent today. It contributed to eating disorders dating as far back as the early 1800s.

Originally brought about by society's acceptance and desire for the corset giving a slimmer appearance,[xii] many in the ballet world suffered from an unrealistic body image. Dancers' bodies earn their living and this requires strict body proportions. The required “illusion” of ballet demands long lines, necessitating extreme underweight. Also, to not cause harm to the male dancer, the female must be light enough to lift. The control over the ballet world that Balanchine possessed through his choreography accelerated this ideal body image to its height during the 60s through the 80s.

His desired depiction of the ballerina demanded the longest line, only achieved by a thin body type. Many a career has been shortened due to the lack of enough physical strength to meet the demands of the profession. Worst of all, it instills a negative body image for a lifetime.

Society today is still surrounded in anti-feminist messages despite the progress that has been made over the years. The folk tradition of ballet provided me with a cocoon in which I could slowly adjust to adulthood while receiving respect from the masculine gender with which I was involved daily. I entered this profession at a time when the female dancer reigned supreme. She was always first, her male partner was second. This culture in ballet applied to everything from classroom etiquette to the stage. In class, barres

were carried on and off the floor by the men and the women stood in front of the men during center work.

When executing traveling exercises across the floor, women went first and the men were always the last to go. This environment shielded me from the awareness that women were treated as second class in most occupations with the exception of motherhood and housewifery. (great point! What a gift of self-confidence this was that has helped me cope with anti-feminism outside the sheltered world of ballet. Perfectionism is synonymous with ballet and because of its inherent difficulty to achieve the required caliber of technique a dancer must conquer, the culture of ballet demands daily sacrifice, which builds tremendous discipline. It is a known fact that the “working world” loves to hire retired ballet dancers because nothing is harder than the profession they have just left. (a new fact I had never heard) Working at something that is never considered “good enough” produces a work ethic that supersedes most. To strive for perfection is always the goal, but never attainable because it can always be better. To keep the spirit fulfilled, the balance to this seemingly endless drudgery is the heartfelt passion a dancer has for the art.

From this, the culture of ballet fosters a unique tenacity and resilience that produces a well grounded perspective in dealing with life. (is there a down side to that – overt perfectionism?) “ Music, rhythmic accompaniment, and other modes of heightening and marking performance styles may be the most common folkloric means of distraction from subversive messages”. xiii] Since its birth, ballet has used distraction to deliver messages of

significance. Continuing with that tradition, all the great classical ballets are based on stories featuring the female that make statements paralleling women's lives today. Metaphors for the plight of women exist in numerous ballet scenarios.

The great blessings and tragedies that are the center of our lives are presented in fairytale fashion. These great classical ballets are far from myths for childish entertainment as some critics like to hype in the twenty-first century. Not always ending “happily ever after”, these stories all center on the woman and her eternal hope for a better life. The importance of maintaining this tradition is not only for human expression, but to keep that “eternal hope” alive as food for the soul. Just like in the Romantic period, people today need a form of escapism from the mundane and problematic lives we lead, even if only for a few hours at a time.

Ballet, like all forms of art, stimulates imagination, which rejuvenates the psyche. Male dominance over the female and how women dealt with it through all sorts of creative behavior was the persistent topic in our course material. Ballet is a symbol of woman's victory over male superiority.

From ballet's beginning of male dominance with King Louis XIV taking the stage as the Sun God, through the Romantic era of Marie Taglioni's reign where the male dancer was demoted to being the ballerina's servant, to present times upholding the tradition of the female as supreme, the art form of ballet has gone from one extreme to the other in its sexist attitude. The history of women in the culture of ballet is an illustration of women's triumph over the oppression of men. The final line in Goethe's Faust, “The Eternal-

Feminine Lures to perfection”, seems to personify the time women held power in ballet during the Romantic period,[xiv] but ballet's magnetism for the enduring “feminine” is still visible today. Whether ballet represents feelings, reflects a mood, comments on moral significance, simply entertains with a story, or presents an interpretation of music to spark the imagination, it promotes cultural consciousness, both social and educational. Based on movement, the most instinctive behavioral expression known to mankind, ballet is considered by many to be the highest form of movement. Even with its intricately structured training, strict rules within which one can move, and its intrinsic complexity, it still remains a powerful expression of human emotion, an inherent necessity of being.

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