



Changing Ballet

by Anne Easterling-Freifelder, March, 2016

In a recent article in the New York Times, Benjamin Millepied lamented the resistance to change that he experienced during his tenure at the Paris Opera Ballet. Many agree that change is needed, but ballet's roots in tradition and its seclusion in an insular world make it an art form very difficult to change.

As a ballet teacher, choreographer, and director, I often find attending the ballet dispiriting. There is much more to ballet than arched feet, high extensions, and pirouettes. Ballet can and will continue to thrive as an art form once it moves beyond these values.

How do we bring change? My answer is that there are three aspects of ballet training today that restrict development, and that a conscious effort by directors and teachers to change these aspects could give ballet a much needed rejuvenation. These aspects are: aesthetics, approach to choreography, and allowing for a broader education in general.

First, let's consider aesthetics, of which body type plays a big part. How many students, even at a very early age, are told by their instructors that they lack the "body type" for ballet and therefore should go into jazz or modern or tap? I have no figures to cite, but anyone familiar with the classroom devoted to developing the precise and demanding ballet technique, knows that this type of discouragement is all too common. Dancers physiques are evaluated on the basis of their feet, body proportion, flexibility, hip rotation, and slimness. But not all of these qualities are required to execute ballet technique well. Many of the qualities are a matter of aesthetics, and aesthetics can change. Broadening and changing aesthetics would allow for greater racial diversity and reduce negative body images and eating disorders. Balanchine changed the look of dancers — preferring tall and very slim, even bony, dancers. This look can change again, and it does not mean loosening or downgrading the precision of ballet or the quality of technique.

Of course some basic physical requirements are necessary, but even so, many are over emphasized. Consider ballet's preoccupation with feet. There is, to a certain degree, a sound basis for this, besides the idea that a well-arched foot is aesthetically more pleasing, in that to master pointe work, one needs a foot structure with enough mobility to allow the body to align on the tip of the toe without bending one's legs. However, although ballet is often defined by the



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presence of pointe work, it need not be. Ballet existed for 200 years before pointe was invented, and there is no reason why it can't continue to thrive, incorporating both pointe and non-pointe work, where a well-arched foot would not necessarily be required or important.

Second, choreography. There is a reason why ballet companies today reach out to modern dance choreographers and even non-dance artists such as the French artist known as JR to develop new work for their troupes. They are looking to develop new visions of ballet, and this outreach often produces interesting and successful projects. These projects however, while interesting, are not capable of sustaining real development in ballet choreography, because they are imposed on top of the ballet vocabulary and form, rather than coming from within the complex language of ballet. True success in developing new and lasting works for the ballet repertoire requires a fluency in that language.

Here again, ballet training falls short. In ballet, choreographic skills are for the most part not a part of classroom training for young students. A common scenario for the developing ballet choreographer is when a professional dancer, perhaps dissatisfied with his or her role as a dancer or anticipating retirement, looks to choreography for diversion. In contrast, the world of modern dance incorporates choreographic skills side by side with technical skills from the very beginning of training. Choreographic skills are woven into the essence of modern dance and result in a vast diversity of styles and forms of modern work. In ballet, the pool of selection for choreographers comes from a narrow group of people who were originally selected for their physical attributes. Lost to the ballet world is the child who loves ballet and perhaps has the potential to envision new and interesting choreography, but has been pushed aside for not having the supposed "right" physique.

Third, extending the period for a student's general education. Another approach for improving ballet includes rethinking the age at which dancers enter a professional company. The practice of hiring talented 18-year olds, or even younger, is out of date. The ballet world excludes those young women and men who thirst for broader knowledge, who want an academic education. These students recognize that in today's world a college education is needed for future, long-time success. Accepting older, more mature dancers could bring



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additional advantages: potentially a higher quality, relatively more stable economic life for dancers; a strengthening of college ballet programs, (which in turn, would perhaps create more job opportunities for retired dancers), and a possible reduction in the risks of injuries that come with the early years of enduring the brutal schedule of corps de ballet dancers.

Raising the age of ballet hires would not harm the aesthetics of ballet; again and again we see beautiful dancers mature and perform beautifully throughout their 30s and into their 40s.

Furthermore, by allowing dancers to broaden their education, the ballet world would broaden its source of creativity, bringing new ideas for interpretation and choreography.

And finally, one other big advantage coming from a broader, more educated dance corps would be the elevation of women into positions of influence and control. It is almost unfathomable that in a field where swarms of young girls enroll in ballet classes, vastly outnumbering the number of boys, there are so few female directors and choreographers. There are days when I am embarrassed that I ever wanted to be part of an activity in which women's roles are so limited. But then I think of the practice, and physical freedom of ballet. It is one of the few physical activities where men cannot out perform women, as opposed, say, to basketball or tennis. In ballet, men and women are true equals.

In my studio, I practice what I advocate. I have only two requirements of my students: that they love ballet and that they work very hard. I observe their love of ballet, their development, and their reactions to ballet at many levels. I expose them to the music and stories of the traditional ballets and encourage them to explore their creativity in movement in various ways. I assume that if a student truly loves ballet enough to work hours on end learning it, there is a talent of some sort there to be developed. Regardless of whether it leads to being a swan queen on the professional stage, students will have gained something wonderful, an art they can pursue and enjoy throughout their life. And I believe that as an art form, ballet has much more to look forward to than just another generation of swan queens.