



# Articles





# Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse

Jennifer Fisher

The image and interpretation of the ballerina has shifted over time since she first took her place in the pantheon of romantic female performers in the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> For many, she is still romanticized, respected, and revered; in other circles, she has become suspect as a creature who may be obsessed, exploited, and retrogressive in light of the egalitarian strides women have made or are still trying to make.<sup>2</sup> The female ballet dancer's basic contradiction—her ethereal exterior and her iron-willed interior—has not been sufficiently accounted for in either scheme, nor has it been woven into the kind of complex, contextualized analysis that includes practitioners who embody the form, audience members of various kinds, and the multiple, shifting locales and attitudes that surround them. As an elite art form, ballet has until recently relied on the more univocal discourse of bouquets and brickbats from critics and other specialists. In 1993, when dance anthropologist Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull called for a consideration of ballet's relationship of dance to life in ways that other cultural forms are investigated, few took up the call.<sup>3</sup>

My own ethnographic-centered approach started with influence from Cohen Bull and led me to territory I have crossed and recrossed for about fifteen years.<sup>4</sup> This article starts nearly that long ago, at a birthday party for a North American toddler whose attitudes toward ballet would be, to some extent, shaped by those around her, by her own personality and choices, and by the images she saw and read about. The article then proceeds to reflections on the ballerina, an image of which the three-year-old embodied long before

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*Figure 1. Xiao Nan Yu (2005). Photo by Chris Nicholls. Courtesy of the National Ballet of Canada Archives.*

she might have sensed its contradictions. The unseen catalysts for any contemporary discussion about the ballerina's worth are always nearby; they are the feminist attackers and defenders who have wrestled with this most stereotypically dressed of feminine figures. They hovered in the background of a child's birthday party, or at least in the consciousnesses of some of us in attendance.

The scene unfolded in a Toronto living room, after I gave a pink tutu to my three-year-old godchild for her birthday. She seemed enchanted, but her mother privately expressed some fear that little Iris might be lured into the exploitative, rarefied world of too-thin ballerinas whose shoes deformed innocent feet and whose ultrafeminine profiles somehow erased all progressive gains for which feminists had fought so hard in the twentieth century. It was a lot to fear from a tutu, but I was not without an understanding of such concerns. For women committed to issues of agency, gender equality, and the interrogation of patriarchal hierarchies, ballet has often seemed a mixed blessing, with its strictly defined version of femininity, weight restrictions, impossible challenges, and relentless competition. Still, pink tulle did not scare me; I had experienced ballet as a positive force in my life, a tool that had facilitated my learning about personal agency, collaborative effort, and spiritual expansion. That is a lot to credit a tutu with, as well, and I was already deep into research territory that was relatively uncharted—namely, the ballet world in ethnographic perspective. After reading early feminist indictments of ballet, I had pondered the difference between theoretical arguments that “proved” the ballerina was a dangerous figure and the experience of women who thought otherwise. Among other things, I wanted to record and add to the discourse the voices of women who had strong relationships with ballet. My friend, on the other hand, wanted to take no chances with her growing daughter, who would face enough challenges, she thought, without adding the rarefied demands of ballet. Was this a viable concern? I use the story of Iris's encounter with ballet to bookend voices from an ethnographic study I was doing at that time. That project was followed by another, smaller study to find out why adult women take ballet, and after that, the topic of women's relationships to ballet was also woven into my dissertation and the book that followed, *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World*. This article returns to my early focus on the issue of interpreting the ballerina in a more general way.

As is the case with many latter-day ethnographers, I started with insider knowledge that led me to ask particular questions and to suspect more complex meanings than had previously emerged in the literature.<sup>5</sup> Before I came to ballet as an academic, I was steeped in its language, conventions, and mythologies, having trained fairly seriously, performed briefly, and read widely before I entered graduate programs in dance. When I presented the first version of this article as a paper at the 1993 Feminist Theory and Music Conference at the Eastman School of Music, I did not know what response to expect. I fully expected someone in the audience to insist that the ballerina was a retrogressive throw-back to the idealized pedestals and prisons of a pink ghetto; yet, if my previous encounters with nondance people were any indication, I knew they might not know enough *about* the ballet world to have formed an opinion. In the end, they did not challenge any aspect of my hypothesis about the potentially positive aspects of ballet. In the question period

afterward, some people expressed interest in a subject they said they had never thought about; others said that my topic awakened their own reflections about ballet classes they had taken or performances they had watched in the past. It was probably a rare audience for a dance paper—only a few insiders and many curious, sensitive outsiders.

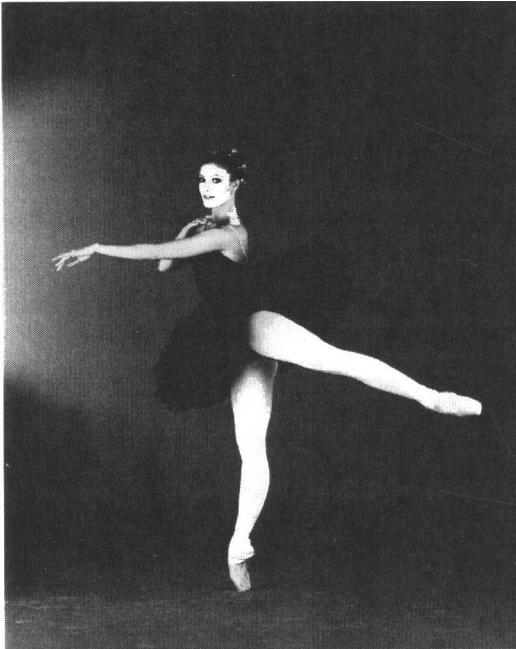
Throughout my subsequent *Nutcracker* research, I found even more people who related to the theme of empowerment in ballet; many were also just on the verge of thinking about it analytically, seeming to discover an importance ballet had for them that had gone previously unarticulated. I do not want to suggest that this is a prevailing view; there are no viable statistics, and, to some degree, my projects have focused on women who “self-select” in that they are interested in talking about ballet. These are the relationships I have had occasion to probe. I suspect it is still more likely that the old stereotypes arise and that condemnations of ballet have not disappeared. And when negative attitudes do not appear at all—in the realm of staunch ballet fans, for instance—the sometimes genuinely oppressive operations of the ballet world remain unquestioned.<sup>6</sup> Neither categorical way of characterizing ballet seems viable.

### The Ballerina in Critical Focus

After early feminist critiques demonized ballet in the 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed clear that the contradictions inherent in women’s changing roles and the ultrafeminine aspects of the ballerina were not easy to figure out.<sup>7</sup> For detractors, the ballerina’s shiny surface unnecessarily masked whatever strength she had, and her technical mastery, achieved through rigorous daily routine, was confused with total submission to the multifarious technologies of power proposed in the schemas of Foucault and others. For ballet partisans, the ballerina’s strength and fortitude were evident—who today does not know that talent and hard work lies behind the seemingly effortless grace? How many careers *are* there where so many women participate and achieve on so many levels? Is there not a difference in suffering for totalitarian regimes and suffering for art? But there were still the very real problems of the ballet world that, in truth, might be keeping the female dancer within certain boundaries, even as she soared above others. I refer to the fact that women predominate in the world of ballet as dancers, teachers, and volunteers; yet there are comparatively few female ballet choreographers and artistic directors. Is the ballerina implicated in maintaining this offstage “glass ceiling” for women in so-called “power positions”? Questions that surround the issue have tended to be the following: Is ballet a positive or negative force in the lives of women? How much of the fairy-tale plot and ultrafeminine technique, costumes, and style of ballet do women internalize? Do they confuse art and life, so that a ballerina becomes a role model? If so, what sort of role model? Does the audience interpret ballet women as passive partners in a relationship controlled by men?

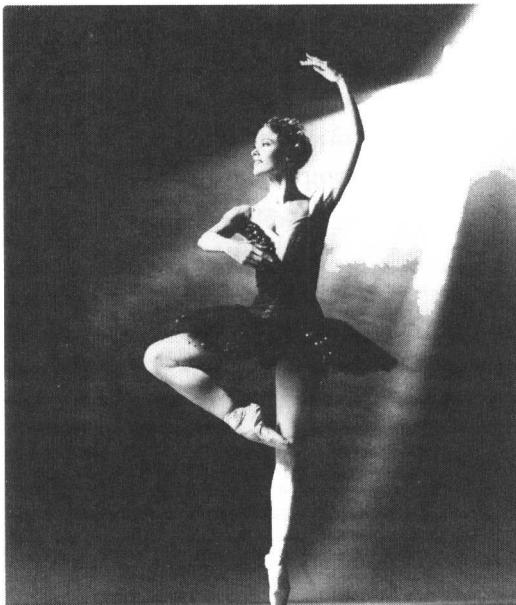
In the early 1990s Ann Daly’s forceful argument about balletic gender inequities exerted much influence, and it continues to be read and supported in some universities (Daly 1987, 1987/88).<sup>8</sup> In two well-constructed essays written in the late 1980s, Daly persuasively outlines choreographic clues that seemed to symbolize women’s oppression in ballet—for instance, that the male dancer maintains a solid stance and appears in control,

while his partner needs steadying and is led, handled, and manipulated. Daly concluded that women could not represent themselves on the classical ballet stage as long as they were unstable on the tips of their toes, and as long as they had to be as superlatively strong but were not allowed to exhibit that strength in a recognizable way and receive the respect that obvious power accrues in contemporary society (1987/88, 17).<sup>9</sup> Critiques from other dance writers pointed to the training process that produces the ballerina as inevitably damaging, both physically and psychologically.<sup>10</sup>



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*Figure 2. Karen Kain in Swan Lake (1977).  
Photo by Andrew Oxenham. Courtesy of the  
National Ballet of Canada Archives.*



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*Figure 3. Karen Kain in Swan Lake (1975).  
Photo by Anthony Crickmay. Courtesy of the  
National Ballet of Canada Archives.*

On the other hand, sociologist Angela McRobbie (1991) and dance historian Sally Banes (1998) championed the ballerina as a figure of strength, both in purpose and limb. Their analyses suggest that her yielding, pink-clad first impression in no way precludes resistant readings and can be counteracted by a forceful subtext, which is recognized by a knowledgeable audience and interpreted singularly. Banes reinterprets nineteenth-century ballet heroines as women who may in some ways fit into the status quo but who also can show independence—Aurora turning down suitors in *Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, or the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* exerting influence as the “magisterial, the supreme commander of her realm” (Banes 1998, 56–60).<sup>11</sup> McRobbie focuses on the way the active, energetic, motivated heroine of ballet fiction inspires “fantasies of achievement” that suggest escape routes for women trapped in adverse circumstances. McRobbie proposes that “dance operates as a metaphor for an external reality which is unconstrained by the limits and expectations of gender identity and which successfully and relatively painlessly transports its subjects from a passive to a more active psychic position” (201). Dance, in this scheme, can be “a participative myth . . . a way of taking one’s destiny into one’s own hands” (217).<sup>12</sup> During my extensive immersion in the *Nutcracker* world, I encountered myriad ways in which girls and women exercised assertiveness and independence both onstage and off, in amateur and professional ventures. Although *The Nutcracker* is not usually counted in the realm of ballets that afford opportunities for resistance or for progressive roles, I found this to be an unwarranted stereotype in terms of what women I spoke to experienced. For many in North America, *The Nutcracker* often stands in for the whole world of ballet, and it remains a readily accessible place where women are encouraged and expected to achieve—a place where they are set in motion in the world, both literally and figuratively.<sup>13</sup>

### Expanding the Pool of Critical Voices

Interpretation of the ballerina, then, appears to depend on any number of contextualizing factors that are not accommodated for in otherwise impressive conceptual schemes, such as that relying on the so-called male gaze, for instance.<sup>14</sup> The “theoretical spectator” who receives messages because the performance dictates them seems an inadequate concept when you consider the many ways different people operate, with both cultural and idiosyncratic forces exerting influence.<sup>15</sup> I became interested less in closed systems that put limits on the possibility of agency and more in the way people *believe* themselves to have agency and argue for the validity of their viewpoints gained through experience. Eschewing psychoanalytic schemes and many poststructural ways of conceptualizing the closed universe of signs and wonders, I began the pursuit of “ethnographic truth” with the idea that I could uncover at least some aspects of the ways my respondents perceived themselves to operate in relation to ballet. Eventually, I called my approach “participant-oriented”; it was highly influenced by aspects of reception theory, reader-response criticism, and rhetorical hermeneutics, which highlights the way individuals argue for the perceived truth of their thoughts and experiences.<sup>16</sup> I started by discussing the “ballet experiences” of a group of diverse women who had in common a strong connection to ballet. I use

the term “ballet experiences” to include a whole range of experiences, from professional training, to recreational classes as a child or adult, to reading or watching movies about ballet to watching live ballet performances. One major aspect of my interviews was the way these ballet experiences, with their physical, intellectual, and emotional resonances, through memory and consideration, affected interpretations of the ballerina onstage. I asked questions that revolved around how each woman interpreted her, identified with her, resented her, and took meaning of any kind from the image of the ballerina in her tulle-bound persona. I consider these discussions part of “ballet territory,” which is both a geographical realm—where dancing occurs—as well as an imaginative space—where thoughts and feelings about ballet arise.<sup>17</sup>

The ten women I interviewed for this project were in various stages of articulating their involvement with ballet, which occurred on many levels, but they had in common many ideas and attitudes. They ranged in age from twenty-five to eighty-three and came from various social and ethnic backgrounds, with current middle-class economic status prevailing. Seven of them lived in Toronto at the time, two were in New York City, and one in Ohio. All had grown up in North America, except for one immigrant who had moved from Hong Kong to Canada as an adult. In deciding on this small group, I tried to include women of various ages and experiences, choosing at least two who were professional dancers at an elite level, several whose ballet classes as children or adults had had a vivid impact on them, and a few who were self-described balletomanes. I had a general idea that I had chosen women who liked, loved, and hated ballet. One middle-aged woman had never taken classes; one I knew had been overweight as a girl in ballet classes; one was an African American woman in a very white ballet company; a few had problematic relationships to ballet but stayed connected to it; and the one octogenarian was a woman who astounded everyone by taking ballet classes weekly. I offer this small sample as potentially representing a number of experiences and attitudes to which other women (and perhaps men) might relate. The unifying factor, as I defined it and described it to each respondent, was the fact that each had a strong relationship to ballet and that it had affected their lives in some significant way.<sup>18</sup>

I take a small methodological detour here to note the atmosphere in which information was gathered. My respondents had rarely been called on to articulate their “relationship” to ballet and to answer questions such as “What did the ballerina mean to you?” and “Did your friends or family think of ballet the way you did?” Therefore, I used an open-ended interview format with guiding questions and did something a group of sociologists who studied young dancers called “engaging in interested conversation . . . in the spirit of participant hermeneutics” (Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and Van Dyke 1990, 15).<sup>19</sup> This meant not only following the lead of my respondent but occasionally “sharing” and “suggesting” my own experiences and associations with ballet. Another way of spurring conversation was to produce, at a relevant part of the interview, a pair of pointe shoes—primary artifacts in the world of ballet. Whether conversation was slow or flowing, the shoes tended to open a flood of memories and opinions. Some respondents handled the shoes fondly while remembering details about longing and achievement; a few women recoiled with disgust at painful

memories and defeats. Both reactions were offered with some humor in recognition of the unexpected power these symbols of ballet achievement can have.

All of my respondents noted the dichotomy of pointe shoes, which is, in some way, the dichotomy of ballet itself: the pristine pink satin on the outside and the unseen blisters, calluses, bunions, and ingrown toenails inside. But even the women who came to see them as instruments of torture (one quoted an article that compared pointe shoes to Chinese foot-binding practices) had experienced a thrill of achievement at times and spoke with pride about mastering some aspect of pointe work. One woman summed up her feelings by saying it was another notch toward growing up, like being promoted from pee-wee league to little league, from softball to hardball, when you could suddenly start to “hit harder.” The sports metaphors are not unusual when you consider that half of my respondents were tomboys and did not come to ballet to be princesses. From my interviews and from reading many ballerina biographies and memoirs, I came to call the two major ways girls got into ballet the “princess” route and the “tomboy” route. You were either the girly girl who longed for tulle and tiaras, or the rambunctious daughter whose parents hoped ballet would wear her out or tame her impulses while satisfying a voracious appetite for movement. Either way, young dancers needed to learn to deal with the opposing quality they had not expected ballet would require.

The one respondent who had never taken a ballet class offered a rare opportunity to see how attachment and interpretations arose without the experience of dancing. This middle-aged ballet company volunteer felt she had discovered the New York City Ballet “all alone,” having come from a working-class family that had no interest in the arts. As a young working woman, she had attended performances regularly and particularly wished City Ballet still offered the festive New Year’s Eve galas she and a girlfriend used to attend. After retirement, she spent even more time volunteering backstage, where her hushed reverence and respect for the dancers seemed easily combined with her image of them as hardworking “regular” people. She was surprised to hear of the feminist critique of ballerinas and mused in her flat, definitive New York accent that she had never thought of the woman depending on the man to balance. What she remembered most were the brief moments of triumph when the ballerina balanced alone on pointe, “on just that little point of the shoe.” Seeing dancers living unglamorous lives backstage only increased her wonder. A single woman who had always supported herself, she seemed to think of ballerinas as working women like herself, only more exalted. Unlike other balletomanes I have met over the years, some of whom fall definitively into the “ballet princess” category, this woman had never thought of ballet as particularly feminine, though it certainly was not *unfeminine*, she was quick to say. But it was more vigorous than that word indicated, and she thought of the ballerina as having “a kind of beautiful, athletic stance.” Female ballet dancers were not about one overwhelming thing like femininity, she said; they had their individual personalities, and that was what she liked best about the dancers she saw regularly—that each could be dramatic, effervescent, mysterious, or aloof in her own style.

The image of the ballerina on an isolating pedestal or as a dependent adjunct to her more powerful partner had not occurred to most of my respondents. Most tended not to follow the fairy-tale plots of ballets, so the narrative plights of betrayed maidens and

doomed swans barely figured in their assessments of the ballerina's power. When the image of the princess was evoked, it was often linked with strength, autonomy, authority, and independence. One woman who had become a psychologist described her Midwest childhood ballet teacher as a princess, but not a passive one. She recalled that this teacher was not like other women in the suburbs of the mid-1960s, who were almost all housewives and mothers. Instead, the ballerina teacher was unmarried, childless, glamorous, and successful at running her own school.

The exceptions to this view of ballerinas as empowering were two women who had become involved in dance research and criticism as adults. They knew the various feminist critiques of ballet but had never discussed their personal relationships to the art form in the way I was asking them to do. In fact, one requested that I record her objection to being described as "someone who had a strong relationship to ballet," which was the primary research project description I used to tie my respondents together. Though it was clear to me that ballet loomed large in her life (she was critiquing ballet for a master's degree thesis), she wanted it formally noted that she thought ballet had no significant effect on her "personally." The other respondent contributed dance reviews to a major newspaper and was pursuing a career in physical therapy. Both of these women said they preferred to couch our discussions about ballet "strictly in theoretical terms," although they spoke personally as well. Both had enjoyed aspects of their childhood ballet training, but one of them felt intimidated by and angry about being asked to live up to ballet's version of femininity. The other became aware of ballet's negative effects on women when she saw more of the ballet world as a journalist. Both became converts to modern dance and no longer wanted to go to the ballet, though they did so on rare occasions, for which they offered various mitigating circumstances. Echoing admired critiques by Evan Alderson (1987) and Ann Daly (1987; 1987/88), both women said they were no longer seduced by the beauty of the ballerina but instead saw a kind of masochism involved in her creation—the mutilated feet, the underweight body, the elite, exclusionary practices, and the narrow definition of femininity.

In my interviews, another theme that arose was the connection between social background and the way ballet was prized as a "high" art or "mainstream" activity. The minority viewpoint was that ballet was an exclusionary world; most of the women described ballet expertise as something anyone could attempt; they said its study made them feel "special," whether it was in terms of serious dedication at an early age or being associated with a respected art form. The respondent who had grown up in Hong Kong spoke more self-consciously about class issues than the others, calling ballet a "classy" or "high-class" activity that she sought out as an adult immigrant to Canada. Like the family of the New York ballet volunteer, her working-class family could not have afforded to send her to ballet classes, even if they had considered it important. As an adult, taking classes became more interesting to her than viewing ballet, as if the posture and associations with the art form imparted a special glow to those who took them on.<sup>20</sup> The intrepid octogenarian who still went to ballet class had a very formal way of alluding to the more "refined" aspects associated with ballet, in that she found it preferred by the "genteel" people she respected. These attitudes pointed to positive ballerina assessments that could easily seem

exclusionary to those whose economic, social, and physical realities made involvement with ballet less likely.

It was beyond the scope of my small study, or, indeed, my subsequent longer study of *The Nutcracker* realm, to identify all the factors that affect the way women interpret the ballerina and the world of ballet in general. Women who danced in or saw *The Nutcracker*, for instance, often felt their experience contributed to fulfillment of personal ambition and education, for themselves and their children. Others saw the ritual of attending or participating as emphasizing the positive values of art and community. The ballerina took on many personalities for different women in this realm. Religious participants connected their dancing to the glory of god, while atheists related it to deep personal satisfaction; both groups spoke positively about the feeling of communal celebration during the holidays. Conservatives thought ballet reinforced a status quo orderliness; liberals said it was all about nonconformist role-playing and socialist dreams of imagined community.<sup>21</sup> Among the adolescents who danced in an amateur *Nutcracker*, some seemed to be solid rule-followers, while others thought their ballet ambitions represented rebellion against dutiful daughterhood (or maybe especially, of course, dutiful sonhood). It seems clear that many circumstances in each woman's life could lead her to individual relationships and reactions to ballet, a fact that can be glimpsed in the elite ballet world by comparing the memoirs of Gelsey Kirkland (1986) and Suzanne Farrell (1990), with their opposing conclusions based on similar circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Among my respondents, family support and self-image issues that preceded or accompanied involvement in ballet emerged as major factors when it came to interpreting ballet experiences. Interestingly, it was not always easy to predict which circumstances would lead to which result. Sometimes, amateur dancers who felt they failed at ballet as children became adults with opposing views. The woman who had become a psychologist remembered childhood ballet classes fondly, though her ample body type might easily have left her feeling inadequate; another woman from a privileged background had a noticeable limp from a childhood infirmity and was humiliated in ballet class as she dragged across the floor with a more impaired girl. It was as if she had failed at being a woman, she said, but the humiliation faded over the years, and she later became a fan of attending ballet. Looking back, she thought that what stayed with her most about ballet was not the failure but the way you could be powerful in performance, even though she had not been able to do that herself in the ballet world. She did, however, point out that performance skills became integral to both of her subsequent careers—acting and law.

## **Bipolarism and Ballerinas Reconsidered**

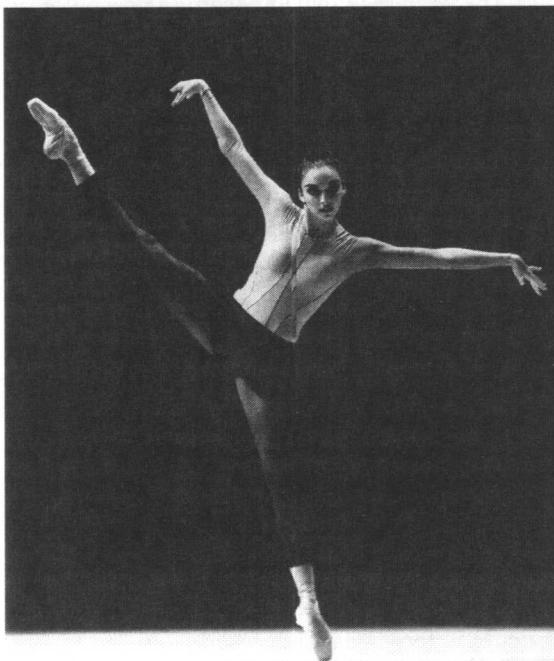
It is possible that the chronicling and analysis of interpretations of the ballerina progress slowly because dancers and audience members have not yet participated in the discourse fully and a gulf between academic analyses and reported experiences has not yet been bridged often enough. Or possibly because the dichotomy of the ballerina presents the thorny challenge that most dichotomies do. It is tempting to see her as an “either/or” proposition—that her strength is either masked or evident, that she is either frilly or

powerful, that she is either in charge or swooning in someone's arms. I have danced around these balletically bipolar elements in my writing on *The Nutcracker*, suggesting that, for instance, Clara and the Sugar Plum Fairy both embody sugary notions of feminine grace and also become powerful role models for the women who pursue those roles, as well as those who see them. I have often suspected that stereotypes of "Nutcracker world" make this point hard to see, in that no one really expects the "Christmas treat" ballet to embody deeper meanings. I have also suspected, from comments and book reviews, that my analysis, couched in the Land of the Sweets, is sometimes hard for others to absorb. In a similar way, the ballerina might have trouble claiming she's as strong as a steelworker when she is wrapped in satin and tulle like a Christmas package. This is part of the ballerina's core "image problem." She, like *The Nutcracker*, has a lightweight reputation that's hard to erase and easy to dismiss on a surface level. How can she be *this* when she is already *that*? But maybe she can. Maybe she can be *both* as strong as a channel swimmer, as Daly (1987) would put it, *and* as graceful as a hummingbird. Maybe women *do* represent themselves onstage, in their many incarnations, dressed at least part of the time like a Christmas package.

Daly seems to amend her previous condemnation of the ballerina in her 1992 essay "Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze" (reprinted in Daly 2002). Although the subject is Duncan, the analysis perhaps offers the ballerina more scope as well. Instead of focusing on static poses and their iconic interpretation

slanted toward disenfranchisement, as her previous analysis of the Balanchine ballerina often did, Daly takes into account the fluid process of dancing itself. She uses Kristeva's notion that meaning does not arise "as the final product of codes" but emerges as "a process of communication whose complexity and subtlety exceeds any simple transfer of information" (Daly 2002, 308). Acknowledging that Duncan's performance was "a kinesthetic experience in which the spectators actively participated" and that she became "a subject-in-process" (318), Daly seems to allow a space for viewers to make meaning actively when watching the ballerina as well. This approach seems to undergird the sense of enfranchisement I found that so many women had when it came to ballet and the meaning-making process.

Figure 4. Dominique Dumais in the second detail (1991). Photo by David Street. Used with permission. Courtesy of the National Ballet of Canada Archives.



Ballet is a world in which change comes slowly, and its procedures have only recently undergone much contemporary analysis. Feminist cries for the abolition of ballet perhaps have died down, but too many times the ballerina still seems a prisoner of past interpretations.

### Returning to Ballet Gifts

Returning to the gift of a tutu for Iris, my three-year-old godchild, I hoped at the time that she would have fun with it and also, perhaps, want to become familiar with an art form that meant so much to me. I hoped she would have the right to choose ballet or not, that its stereotypes of evil abuse as well as its overly romantic aspects would not deter her. Would she discover that the ballerina's ultrafeminine style was a trap, unrelated to the realities of women's lives? Or would she find power in using her body in extravagant, liberating ways, as Mary Russo imagines for the female performers

who both conform to and break through expected behaviors"?<sup>23</sup> Would ballet technique lead her to embody both machine-like power and delicate grace and claim an affinity with Donna Haraway's brave new cyborg? Would she, as Haraway said, learn to hold together two incompatible things because both are necessary and both are true?<sup>24</sup>

I ended my first version of this article at a conference with an optimistic turn of phrase meant to aid in countering prevailing stereotypes. Maybe, I said, when the rhetoric of ballet and women is seen in new contexts, people will not look at girls who do ballet and say, "Oh, how sweet, how cute"; they will instead say something like, "She knows what she wants, and she's not afraid to stand on her toes to get it." Talking to Iris twelve years later, I realized she had discovered that for herself, without much agonizing over contradictions. When she had first received the tutu, it joined her Barbies and her building blocks, but she rejected ballet classes as "too proper," imagining boredom and stern corrections at the barre (I believe this could be because of a videotape I gave her, an adaptation of *Ballet Shoes* in which there is a stern Russian teacher who might have seemed scary). Then, one day when she was eight and I brought ballet to center stage in her life by visiting, she struck an arabesque pose and asked me if she were doing it correctly. Careful with my



Figure 5. Dominique Dumais in *Serenade* (1990). Photo by David Street. Used with permission. Courtesy of the National Ballet of Canada Archives.

critique, because I knew her to resist being told what to do, I pointed out that the leg, technically, should be behind her, not to the side. She got an earnest look on her face, corrected the position, and looked particularly swan-like doing it. I had hope. After that, she was striking all sorts of poses and getting excited when I said she had “a good line.” Then, it was a hop, skip, and glissade to gazing longingly at photographs of dancers and asking how long it would take to get a pair of pointe shoes. She convinced her mother to take her to ballet and for a while thought she might audition for the National Ballet School of Canada.

By the age of about twelve, Iris decided she had too many interests to keep up a serious level of dancing, but she stayed with it a while longer, until she won her pointe shoes and found out what it was like to consider satin and tulle as tools—voluptuously deceptive but rewarding pink tools that she masterfully learned to use. What did the experience do for her? At fifteen, she says ballet was great because there were such clear milestones to reach and such satisfaction when you reached them. And no, she did not think of it as a ultrafeminine thing to do, that was just the “role-playing part of it.” When she thought of ballerina roles, it seemed there were as many strong ones as those where you were delicate as a flower. But after she thought about it, she said she knew what I meant when I asked if other people thought it was a “girly” thing to do because sometimes people were surprised when she said she studied ballet. She guessed it was because she also liked rock music and seemed somehow stronger than “the girly type.”

When I was a girl obsessed with ballet, no one bothered to encourage, discourage, or analyze the reasons; it was just something girls did. Later, it seemed I had been lucky to find a Trojan horse of a “feminine” activity to bolster my independence in the conformist 1950s and early 1960s. I doubt if anyone suspected that ballet might help me discover aspects of power, art, dedication, and spiritual resonance. For me and other women I have met in my research, ballet symbolized resistance and independence, not least because claiming the Sugar Plum Fairy as a liberated role model seems a radical thing to do. Times do change, but when the ballerina is relegated to an old-guard, status-quo position today just because of her first impression, I wonder if the only changes are in the nature and arguments of those who misunderstand her.

Despite her history of stereotyping and attacks against her, the ballerina continues to evolve, embracing both her conventionally “feminine” side *and* her steely “macho” physique and resolve—embracing the conflict and finding a transcendent power in doing so. Today’s ballet women even occasionally *appear* as tough as they are—in the choreography of William Forsythe and Alonzo King, for instance, or when a dance writer notes that when Gillian Murphy dances the lead role in a new *Cinderella*, “Her steps are as sharp and crisp as any man’s” and that Murphy “exudes a strong sense of self and of self-containment.”<sup>25</sup> We might have seen these qualities in forceful dancers like Gelsey Kirkland years ago, even as her “backstage” revelations shed a different light on her life. Today, even the oft-neglected health of the ballerina is starting to be tended to, as draconian training procedures are increasingly being interrogated and revised.<sup>26</sup> Ever so slowly, women dancers have started to embrace their futures more positively, becoming choreographers,

attending university while dancing, and continuing to invest even their princesses with no-nonsense force and exactitude.

It is even possible that the liberation of the ballerina, and the acceptance of her dual nature, will open a conceptual space for understanding the maverick males in ballet, who have their own set of stereotypes to deal with.<sup>27</sup> And ballet itself will be discovered to have a more wide-ranging embrace of life, both inside and outside the regal atmospheres of opera houses. Ballet was once a folk dance, I remind students who are knee-deep in the gilded salons of Louis XIV or the imperial cultural palaces of St. Petersburg. Now ballet is an exacting art form that lots of folks will continue to affect, using whatever tools they find viable, including, of course, tulle.

## Notes

1. The term “embracing the conflict” in the title comes directly from the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who uses it to describe one aspect of Africanist aesthetics. For an elaboration of this concept, see Dixon Gottschild 1995, 103–6; and 1996, 13–14. “In a broad sense,” she says, “the Africanist aesthetic can be understood as a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites” (1995, 13). The term “ballerina” here refers to the coalescing of the ballerina image that occurred at the Paris Opera around the time of *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841). To some extent, that figure in a wafting tulle skirt, shoulder-baring bodice, and pointe shoes still dominates the popular and specialist imaginations, though there are variants that are less romantic in nature. Ballet is always evolving, so a definition-like paragraph will help define the way the words “ballet” and “ballerina” were used in my research and in this article.

The ballet I focus on here, briefly defined, is the classical form that developed first in European courts and has evolved in large theaters and training institutions in Europe and North America, and increasingly in other parts of the world as well. When it comes to male and female roles, the hallmarks of this world can often be described in fairly definitive terms because ballet is so clear when it comes to the following aspects: men are strong and flashy, women more delicate and refined; men are lifters, women are lifted; men wear tights and trousers, women are always in skirts and tutus; men stand behind, women in front; men offer a hand, women take the hand. The ballerina I refer to here is graceful, controlled, and regal, whether she is a princess, swan, or ordinary maiden; her job is often to await rescue and dance happily when her prince comes along. In my interviews, the words “ballet” and “classical ballet” tended to be recognized as the form that contains story ballet masterworks such as the nineteenth-century Tchaikovsky classics *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, as well as traditional versions of *Romeo and Juliet* or the story ballets of Ashton and MacMillan made in a similar tradition in the twentieth century. I include in this definition plotless works such as Fokine’s *Les Sylphides* or any number of other compositions that tend to be identified as classical or romantic ballet, as well as the neoclassical work represented by Balanchine because it retains much of the atmosphere and gender differentiations of the past. I consider less, for the moment, more recent experiments with the form, such as the work of William Forsythe and Alonzo King, or crossovers between ballet, modern, and other kinds of dance.

2. The attack on ballet and the ballerina first arose in popular feminist books such as Susan Brownmiller’s 1984 *Femininity*, for instance, in which she says that ballet is one of the “hymns to femininity” (17–19), requiring painful, unnatural procedures and finding its idealized pinnacle in the gender-unequal *pas de deux* (182–83). More scholarly critiques of the ballerina followed and are discussed below (see note 7). While the debate over ballet in the feminist perspective is

ongoing, “feminist writers have placed ballet in general on the negative side of the representations-of-women continuum (Thomas 2003, 165). Sociologist Helen Thomas and I often refer to the same sources and arguments regarding aspects of ballet practice and performance, and I find her overview of these sources instructive in its attempt to sketch the field and the major theoretical strains within it (158–76).

3. Cohen Bull (then called Cynthia Novack) said: “The anthropological commonplace that dance and life are inextricably related gets easily applied to the people of Bali or Ghana or Morocco; it applies as well to the people who perpetuate ballet. Only through understanding something about those relationships can we understand ballet’s cultural power” (Bull 1993, 46–47). Though literature in this regard is still sparse, one ethnographic study “behind-the-scenes” of a ballet company has come from Helena Wulff in *Ballet Across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of Dancers* (1998); and, more wide-ranging theoretically, in Thomas 2003.

4. The core group of respondents who are the focus of this article were part of my 1992 master’s thesis research at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, directed by ethnomusicologist Beverly Diamond, to whom I am eternally indebted for leading me into my “field” with attention to fieldwork precedents and operations. The initial project involved ten respondents who sat for formal interviews of about two to three hours. A set of guiding questions (see Appendix) structured the interviews, but I was also somewhat “respondent driven” in terms of letting conversations go where my interviewees wanted them to. Transcripts of these interviews were submitted to the respondents and further conversations occurred, sometimes revising or extending the original interview. A literature review at that time included many feminist and gender-oriented writings, both scholarly and popular, the most notable of which appear here, although the many ballerina biographies and autobiographies of notable dancers of the twentieth century I read at the time do not (I can say I had read virtually all of them published in English at the time; a partial list is found in the bibliography of Fisher 1998). My current revisiting of that research project inevitably incorporates knowledge gained in further interviews I did during doctoral work at the University of California, Riverside (from 1994 to 1997). In 1994 I did a small fieldwork project exploring the reasons adult women take ballet classes, which involved participant observation (taking and watching adult ballet classes at a local conservatory-type studio) as well as one-on-one interviews. For a more detailed description of the interviewing methodology, see Fisher 1994. I include here as well aspects of my fieldwork and dissertation research on *The Nutcracker* in sociocultural perspective, which was directed by Nancy Lee Ruyter and Sally Ness. During the major period of this research (1995–98), I engaged in participant observation, with interviewing a prominent feature, in several locations, the most notable being in Toronto with the National Ballet of Canada and in Leesburg, Virginia, with the Loudoun Ballet (see Fisher 1998 and 2003 for more details about this work). At that time, I also developed research methodology I called “introspective interviewing,” for which many respondents took home my “guiding questions” and a tape recorder to record their thoughts and observations in their own time (see Fisher 1998, 61–70, for more about that aspect). A literature survey included, again, both scholarly and popular writing, especially in the areas of feminist ethnography, ritual studies, hermeneutics, Christmas studies, children’s ballet literature, and articles relating to dance and *The Nutcracker* from popular magazines, newspapers, movies, and television. I thank my Yale University Press editor, Harry Haskell, as well as dance scholar Lynn Garafola for help in making that document a book that covered approximately the same ground as the dissertation without the abundance of specialist language.

5. Ethnographers who are closely related to the cultures they investigate, anthropologist James Clifford has emphasized, are uniquely poised to do this work since “it probably requires cultural insiders to recognize adequately the subtle ruses of individuality, where outsiders see only typical behavior” (Clifford 1978, 53).

6. For instance, I refer to ballet environments in which weight loss is still dictated with no regard for growing bodies or the potential for eating disorders. I have seen evidence that these

environments exist all over the world, though perhaps never so blatantly as in the former Soviet Union and in Asia, where “weigh-ins” and explicit demands for weight loss still enjoy wide popularity. Other negative aspects of the ballet world commonly include prejudices against dark skin tones, various body types, and exploitation of dancers who are too intimidated to unionize or take advantage of union rules, to mention just a few.

7. Attacks on ballet have often relied on psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches, sometimes utilizing the so-called male gaze theoretical apparatus, especially as it first emerged in film studies. The work of Michel Foucault, especially his “Docile Bodies,” has also been invoked in terms of its relationship to the disciplinary protocols of ballet training. Critiques making use of one or several of these theoretical influences include the following examples: Daly, both 1987 and 1987/88; Alderson 1987; Goldberg 1987/88; English 1980; Foster 1996; Lansley 1977; and Innes 1988. Those that tend toward the re-reading of the ballerina in a positive light include McMahon 1985; Savage-King 1985; and (pertaining to portrayals in literature) McRobbie 1991. Most recently, dance historian Sally Banes, in her book *Women Dancing: Female Bodies on Stage* (1998), has gone beyond some of the narrow-casting approaches of previous feminist ballet critics and given contextual depth to the idea of ballerina agency in her interpretation of ballet heroines such as the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*; Swanilda in *Coppelia*, and Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*. For a thoughtful preliminary ethnographic consideration of both positive and negative aspects of the ballerina, see Cohen Bull, 1993. My own incorporation and furthering of some of these themes is found in my doctoral dissertation (1998, especially sec. 1 of chap. 5) and in my book (2003, see esp. chap. 4 and the index entries for “Clara” and “Sugar Plum Fairy”).

8. I summarize much of the argument Daly made then (1987/88), although her later writing on Isadora Duncan (1992) seems to contradict conclusions made in earlier years. Even so, I have heard that Daly’s early condemnations of ballet are taught as “gospel” in some university classrooms.

9. In her title Daly uses the metaphors of “hummingbird” and “channel swimmer” in her description of the bipolar requirements for ballerinas. She uses dance analysis of a section of Balanchine’s *Four Temperaments* to illustrate her points.

10. See especially Goldberg (1987/88) and Savage-King (1985). Indictments of ballet training also appear in a category I call “ballet confessionals” in the realm of popularly read and viewed ballet material. It includes ballet memoirs, the most notorious of which was Gelsey Kirkland’s 1986 *Dancing on My Grave* (Kirkland was a talented but ill-fated dancer who told stories of drug addiction, botched plastic surgery, and self-starvation, all of which she blamed on the pressures of the ballet world). In my experience, the outlines of Kirkland’s story are still fairly well known, perhaps aided by a segment done by the popular television show *60 Minutes* (CBS) that same year. It was filled with tabloid-like simplifications, like the narrator’s discovery that there is “an ugly truth behind the beauty of the ballet world, that dancers are conditioned to be passive and silent, even about the brutal truth in the ballet studio.” More “behind the scenes” information is contained in several books about the ballet world, such as *Winter Season*, New York City Ballet dancer Toni Bentley’s (1982) diary-like memoir of the trials and tribulations of a frustrated corps member; Joan Brady’s *The Unmaking of a Dancer: An Unconventional Life* (1982), in which she struggled with fluctuating self-esteem as it related to her painful on-again, off-again love affair with ballet; and Scottish journalist Una Flett’s memoir of her short ballet career in Europe, after which she offers the following conclusion: “Enslave the body in certain ways of obedience, and mind and spirit will follow suit” (Flett 1981, 74). In my dissertation, I also point to ballet documentaries and popularly distributed “reality” photographs of tattered shoes and tights as part of the general awareness that the ballet world is a tough one.

11. Banes is interested in the way the Sugar Plum Fairy and other nineteenth-century ballet heroines fit into “the complex range of representations” of women in Western theatrical dance of the last century and a half (1). For her, the Sugar Plum Fairy, dancing happily with her roman-

tic cavalier, was a retrograde image when *The Nutcracker* premiered in St. Petersburg, given the fact that Russian feminists were struggling to achieve advances in education and employment (61). In its 1892 context, then, Banes sees the ballet as an attempt to restore “the dream—or the fantasy—that marriage will be sweet, smooth, and all-fulfilling for women” (61). Still, a certain amount of “autonomy and power” are “written into” the *pas de deux* choreography of ballets such as *The Nutcracker* (she speaks of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* as well), she says, rejecting, as I do, the “homogenizing and essentializing” view that women in classical ballet *pas de deux* are manipulated and dominated in ways that prevent them from exerting any independence (62). Banes performs a “close reading” of the character of Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, factoring in plot points as well as choreographic strategies, noting in particular the ways in which Aurora asserts her independence—not only by rejecting suitors but by displaying high extensions, unsupported turns, moments of commanding balance, and an energetic mastery of physical skills (56–59). Aurora is, Banes says, a character who is “the perfect aristocratic woman” in terms of her regal bearing, her femininity, and her grace; but she also possesses an “ability to command space and to display precision, strength, balance, and control—in short, authority” (59).

12. McRobbie, 189–219. McRobbie looks at several of the same popular culture sources that I consider in my *Nutcracker* dissertation and book, namely Noel Streitfeild’s *Ballet Shoes* and the popular 1980s movie *Flashdance*, in which ballet holds a place of high esteem and represents a particular kind of achievement.

13. I have taken the opportunity, in the wake of my *Nutcracker* book, to elaborate on aspects of female empowerment and Clara as a role model in an essay on the editorial pages of the *Los Angeles Times* (December 24, 2003), as well as in a few public lectures.

14. The “male gaze” concept, born of psychoanalytic theory and articulated by film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan, has been the subject of much debate since first mooted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In brief, the performer on screen is seen as “feminized” and consumed by the “male gaze” of the observer through the lens of the camera. Both male and female characters on stage or screen might possess or be recipients of the male gaze, although feminist analyses concentrate on ways in which women are particularly affected. Daly has described the male dancer onstage as the “active principle,” whereas the woman is “the bearer and object of male desire” (1987/88, 57). But when such “imported” concepts are used, there is a danger of ignoring the particular history and circumstances of the ballet stage performance. Even in the arena of film and especially television studies, the primacy of the all-consuming male gaze has been much debated in recent years.

15. For Susan Foster, for instance, “the dance” is not an entity that comes into existence as the viewer creates it; it is a textual entity that has “an ability to require that we attend to it in a specific way” (1986, 243). In this scheme, the viewer is an abstract concept, similar to the “ideal spectator” posited by some literary theorists—Foster’s term is “hypothetical viewer”—a spectator who is “created out of a particular interaction with a set of choreographic conventions” (243).

16. Steven Mailloux defines rhetorical hermeneutics as a focus on “how specific interpretive practices function within sociopolitical contexts of persuasion” (1990, 52). My theoretical approach grew more from American reader-response criticism than its earlier incarnation as German reception theory, in which liberating ideas regarding interpretation tended to revert to singularly restrictive modes of operation. I was also greatly influenced by perspectives on “new ethnography” by Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and Michael M. J. Fischer, as well as feminist ethnography from a number of sources, notably Dorinne Kondo’s *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (1990), and the resistant reading tactics of Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). Crucial to me in terms of the dance world were the works of and conversations with Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull (formerly Novack), whose mentoring and graceful intertwining of autobiography as fieldwork and participant observation (1993) helped me conceptualize my own field. A fuller description of influences that

contributed to my participant-oriented approach, especially discussions of the rhetorical hermeneutics of Steven Mailloux, as well as the work of Victor Turner (1977) on ritual and John MacAloon (1984) on neoliminal ramified performance types, can be found in my dissertation (1998) and, to some degree, in the book that followed (2003), which is written in a more accessible style.

17. See note 4 concerning interview details and a list of “guiding questions” in the Appendix.

18. The one respondent I had expected might have had a very different experience in terms of encountering prejudice in the ballet world was a dark-skinned African American dancer who had just joined the corps de ballet of a major ballet company. I chose her with the idea that she might reflect the concerns of many women who did not conform to the pale-skinned image that still prevails in the ballet world. At the time we spoke, she was still hopeful that she would progress smoothly through the ranks of a predominantly white major ballet company. In this sense, because she had the body type and enough talent to begin a professional ballet career successfully and did not talk about any difficulties that related to race (though there may have been some), it did not become a focus of this study. I offer this note to record that while she had a positive attitude toward the ballet world at the time, her experience later changed, and she considered more seriously the fact that racially tinged decision making might have limited her career.

19. Oral historian Kristina Minister calls a similar approach “mutual self-disclosure” (1991, 36); and two feminist anthropologists, Valerie Matsumoto and Patricia Zavella, refer to their way of “sharing” as a reassuring, demystifying part of their interview process (Matsumoto 1996, 162–65; Zavella 1996, 146). The process of conversational exchange could be a tricky one, I feared, since suggesting an attitude toward the ballet might have influenced the way my respondents chose to speak about their own experiences, but the number of times interviewees disagreed with what I said seemed to suggest that the strategy helped the flow of ideas rather than dictating them.

20. Dance anthropologist Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull (1993) said that as she grew up in a white, lower-middle-class, Midwestern American town, she knew that ballet was “a bit rarified” (36) and was performed for “a white audience of social status” (37). “For my family,” she said, “ballet was a means of giving ‘culture’ to granddaughters of immigrants” (36).

21. A discussion of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community,” as well as an elaboration of the range of “*Nutcracker* experiences” indicated briefly here, can be found in Fisher 1998 and 2003.

22. I refer to Gelsey Kirkland’s memoir *Dancing on My Grave* (1986) and Suzanne Farrell’s *Holding onto the Air* (1990), in which the vastly different outlooks and experiences each had while dancing with the New York City Ballet are described. Figuring out what elements of circumstance and character led to the shape of each career would surely be an interesting and perhaps impossible endeavor.

23. In several essays exploring what she calls “the female grotesque,” Russo (1994) considers the ways in which female performers are contained within and/or exceed societal norms. Though ballerinas are not discussed (and in many ways are the opposite of “grotesque,” as Russo uses it), a comparison can be made between aspects of the ballerina and aspects of the nineteenth-century actresses and circus performers Russo discusses. By using the histrionic acting style of the day, Russo suggests, women who were performing in Romantic melodramas, for instance, offered audiences the “spectacle” of a woman taking up more space than she was permitted in most social situations of the time (68). These actresses may have been appearing in performances directed by men for men, Russo says (as were ballerinas of the time), but “they used their bodies in public in extravagant ways that could only have provoked wonder and ambivalence in the female viewer, as such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences” (68). Likewise, Russo describes female circus fliers and acrobats as figures who physically challenged normative female movement style: “The representation of femininity as an effortless mobility implies enormous control, changeability and strength” (44). I suggest that

today the ballerina's movements may still have something of the "extravagant" about them for most audience members—and for the dancers themselves. For instance, my respondents during *Nutcracker* research spoke of the pleasures of ballet and of feeling "free" and in control at the same time—flying through the air, spinning across the stage. Audience members appreciated the power moves of male dancers, but they also often pointed out the women's impressive steps, noting the way that they stretched limbs high into space or "ate up the stage" with swift turns, such as the series of pirouettes performed by the Sugar Plum Fairy at the end of her variation.

24. I borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway's famous cyborg essay, her science-fiction envisioning of a woman who is equipped to survive the postmodern age because she can hold "incompatible things together because both are necessary and true" (1985, 173–74). In my view, the demonization of the ballerina can profit from a new openness to nonbinary logic.

25. This excerpt is from an article by Apollinaire Scherr about Murphy's role in James Kudelka's *Cinderella* (danced by American Ballet Theatre) in the June 4, 2006, New York City paper *Newsday*. Kudelka's version, Scherr says, has "a feminist twist," in that the heroine becomes a sort of "dancer-choreographer" who is seen inventing steps for herself, not assuming "the usual feminine postures of elusiveness, mystery, coquettishness or reckless abandon." The glass slipper has become a pointe shoe, "so when the prince searches the globe for the matching shoe, he's looking for a woman not just with pretty feet, but with a special skill." Scherr emphasizes Murphy's offstage independent, spirited nature, comparing it to that of her character's.

26. My faith that this is occurring is based largely on what I know about increased interaction between the dance world and health care practitioners, biomechanical experts, and others who affect long-term pedagogical problems ballet inherited largely from nineteenth-century traditions. The process of promoting a "healthy dancer" is slow, but there are signs it is occurring. The 1999 "Not Just Any Body" conference, held at the National Ballet School (NBS) of Canada in association with The Hague, is one example of this trend (a publication of the same name followed in 2001). Mavis Staines, director of NBS, has for many years introduced healthful new measures, both physical and psychological, to the elite training program there.

27. Although my subject here is the relationship of women to ballet, I do not preclude the relevance of some of these themes to men, who have a different set of issues when it comes to masculine/feminine dichotomies in the ballet world (see Fisher 2007). At the moment of editing this article, I am co-editing a book (with Anthony Shay) on the topic of dance and masculinity.

## Appendix

This opening statement and these guiding questions were developed for interviews conducted in 1992 in Toronto, Ontario, and in New York City, New York. These guiding questions were developed with ethnomusicologist Beverly Diamond, who directed this fieldwork project at York University. I tended to cluster them to cue me visually as I conducted an interview and often did not follow them or ask them directly as written unless there was a natural pause in the conversation. In my subsequent research projects (see note 4), many of the same kinds of questions surfaced, either tailored to ask about why adult women took ballet or as part of my interviews about *Nutcracker* experiences. See Fisher 1998, chap. 1, for details about theory and methodology for the latter project.

### Opening Statement

This statement was always read at the beginning of the interview:

The information I'm looking for is about your relationship to ballet and its effects on your life. It can include talking about ballet classes (the way you relate or related to technique and

atmosphere of the class), books you may have read, performances, images, and ideas about ballet and dancers. I'm going to ask you to reflect on the effects ballet has had on your life in whatever ways you perceive it to have happened.

What we talk about will be determined by what mattered or matters to you about ballet, about your relationship to ballet. What I would like to hear is what you feel strongest about, what you remember and relate to in your life, in whatever way you want to express it.

I have some questions that we may use to guide the conversation. They were suggested largely by my own experiences and sometimes by the experiences described in books by other women.

### Guiding Questions

- Have you, or do you, give much thought to your relationship to ballet, how it might have affected you?
- What are the things that come to mind?
- What's your history with ballet?
- Classes? What kind, where, how long, why?
- Performances that have had an impact?
- Books? Films about ballet?
- Images, pictures, dolls, costumes, jewelry, other memorabilia?
- How would you describe your experience taking ballet classes?
- Do you remember what it felt like to dance? (or, What does it feel like now?)
- Were you aware of the attitudes of people around you to your taking ballet? (mother, father, siblings, friends, boyfriends?)
- Did those ballet classes affect your life then or later? The way you felt about yourself, your body, your identity? Your posture? Your attitude about femininity?
- Were you given images about how to act by your teacher?
- Do you have any ideas about pain in relation to ballet?
- Do you recall your feelings about success or failure?
- Do you think they affected the way you approached a challenge elsewhere?
- Did you walk differently outside ballet class due to its influence?
- Complete this sentence: If I hadn't ever taken ballet . . .
- Some dancers say that as children and adults, ballet offered refuge and order from chaos in the rest of their lives. Has this ever occurred to you?
- Did you encounter images of the ballerina?
- What were they like? Describe her. Why do you remember her? What did she mean to you?
- How did you see the image of the ballerina in relation to yourself? (Were there other women in your life who gave you the same or similar messages?)
- What did "going to the ballet" mean to you? Then? And now?
- Did you see *The Turning Point* or *The Red Shoes*? Other films or television shows about ballet?

### Pointe Shoes

At some time during the interview, I brought out a slightly used pair of pink pointe shoes. I either asked, "What do these make you think of?" or just listened to the comments they occasioned.

### Photograph

Usually, toward the end of the interview, I brought out a ballet company brochure with photos of ballerinas on it and asked what these images brought to mind. I used a 1991–92 season ad-

vertisement from the National Ballet of Canada. It had various classical images on its pages and a photograph of a *Swan Lake* arabesque featured prominently.

### Questions about Family Background, Education, and Profession

These questions were usually asked after the interview.

Age

Location of upbringing

Familial information and roots ("How would you describe your family?")

Education

Profession

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