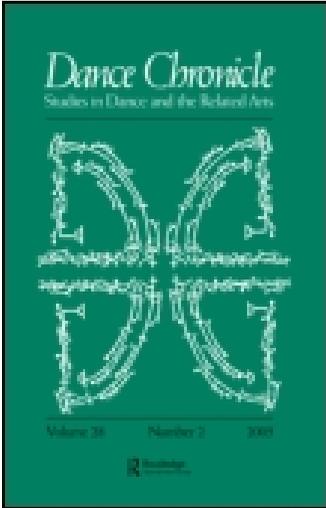


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## Where Are All the Women Choreographers in Ballet?

JOELLEN A. MEGLIN and LYNN MATLUCK BROOKS

And women artistic directors, we might add. Balanchine's words\* remind us that women fill the rank and file of ballet companies, and their technique and expressivity have contributed greatly to ballet's historical development. But have women achieved status equal to that of men, who, overwhelmingly, hold positions of artistic or administrative leadership? In the United States at least, the more prominent the ballet company and the greater its budget, the less likely it is to be run by a woman. Was this always so? Why is it so now? What is the status of women in ballet companies across the globe?

A cursory search, using the terms "women," "artistic directors," and "ballet," in the International Index for the Performing Arts database yields 104 articles, but few of these discuss women artistic directors in dance, while several talk about male directors strengthening the ensemble work of the women in the corps de ballet. One article in *Dance Magazine* considers the leadership style of five women who direct major dance companies: Karen Kain, artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada (outside the United States, we point out); Stoner Winslett, founding artistic director of the Richmond Ballet; Brenda Way, founder of the Oberlin Dance Collective; Liz Lerman, founding artistic director of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange; and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women.<sup>1</sup> But the last three companies are contemporary (modern or postmodern) dance companies, rather than ballet companies, and one might reasonably ask how major is the Richmond Ballet outside Virginia.

Another article, in *Dance Teacher Now*, in a regular column on regional dance, focuses on the contributions of two visionary ballet directors, Josephine Schwarz and Evelyn LeMone.<sup>2</sup> Schwarz ("Miss Jo") founded the Dayton Ballet Company, instigated the choreographic conferences of the regional ballet movement in the 1960s, and, as an activist on the dance panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, won funding for regional dance. LeMone founded the Pasadena Dance Theatre, an honor company

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\* "The principle of classical ballet is woman" were the exact words quoted by Flora Lewis in a special from Paris to the *New York Times* (October 6, 1976), "To Balanchine, Dance Is Woman and His Love."

in the Pacific Regional Ballet Association. In a third article, in *Dance/USA Journal*, Victoria Morgan, currently CEO as well as artistic director of the Cincinnati Ballet, discusses her career and choreography.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the enormous contribution of such women to the regional ballet movement and their grassroots development of large numbers of first-rate dancers, many women in ballet companies encounter the glass ceiling.

Among eight executive positions of six top-tier companies in the United States, only one is held by a woman. Peter Martins, ballet-master-in-chief, directs New York City Ballet; Kevin McKenzie is artistic director of American Ballet Theatre (Rachel S. Moore is executive director); Ashley C. Wheeler directs the Joffrey Ballet (Christopher Clinton Conway is executive director); Roy Kaiser directs the Pennsylvania Ballet; Helgi Tomasson directs the San Francisco Ballet (along with serving as principal choreographer), and Stanton Welch directs the Houston Ballet. It seems that even where women have served as grassroots founders and innovators, once the power and prestige of the established institutions come into play, men are perceived as the likely heirs.

A blog posted by Lea Marshall in *Dance Magazine* reports on a panel convened by the Richmond Ballet in 2010, "The Glass Slipper Ceiling."<sup>4</sup> Speakers included Winslett, Morgan, Celia Fushille (artistic director of Smuin Ballet), Dorothy Gunther Pugh (founder and artistic director of Ballet Memphis), Anna Kisselgoff (former dance critic of the *New York Times*), and Andrea Snyder (executive director of Dance/USA). Marshall states that, in the United States, all top-tier ballet companies are run by men and only four second-tier companies are run by women, all of whom appeared on the panel. She attributes to Kisselgoff the observation that, while women have served as founding directors of many important ballet companies, once the companies became institutionalized (and enshrined as important cultural establishments in a city), men were often placed in charge. Snyder notes that male ascendancy to positions of leadership in ballet companies in the 1980s coincided with the shift to corporate, business models of operation in the nonprofit sector. Meanwhile, the women ballet directors on the panel agree that, when they first assumed positions of leadership, they often encountered "boys' club" attitudes at conferences and professional meetings.

Neither the United Kingdom nor even modern dance is exempt from this sociopolitical dynamic. Reporting in *The Guardian* in 2009, Judith Mackrell noted "the dominance of modern dance by men. Of all the new pieces commissioned by the [Sadler's] Wells, none are by female choreographers; and while a few familiar names—Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, for instance—will appear on stage, the list of featured men far outnumbers the women."<sup>5</sup> Mackrell advises women to organize into collectives—"to return to the cultural politics of the 1970s"—in order to devise competitive marketing, administrative, and fundraising strategies in the aggressive corporate culture that has

moved into the arts. She also calls on arts organizations to program and to fund female artists with more equity.

Surveying the terrain from another angle, one discovers that a search of the *New York Times* historical database using the terms “women choreographers” and “ballet” yields a mere twenty-three articles—and a concise history of women’s lack of presence. There is, of course, the great Bronislava Nijinska, who appears four times: in a 1942 announcement of a choreographic premiere and a restaging set on the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (coincidentally, Agnes de Mille’s *Rodeo* premiered in the same season); in a 1972 obituary that acknowledges Nijinska’s stature and influence; in a 1983 article about a restaging of her 1924 ballet for Serge Diaghilev, *Les Biches*, on the Dance Theater of Harlem; and in a 1986 feature article on her legacy.<sup>6</sup> Two news items and one review detail the fact that in 1982 the Pennsylvania Ballet performed a program called “In Celebration of Women Choreographers” at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (prepared under the joint Barbara Weisberger–Benjamin Harkavy administration).<sup>7</sup> However, three of the choreographers presented, Senta Driver, Doris Humphrey, and Isadora Duncan (reconstructed by Annabelle Gamson) hailed from the modern dance world, and the fourth, Loyce Houlton (founder of the Minnesota Dance Theater), straddled both worlds.<sup>8</sup> A few articles from the 1980s mention women choreographers whose techniques and practices had roots in the early post-modern movement or European “dance theater”: Trisha Brown, Laura Dean, Lucinda Childs, Twyla Tharp, Elizabeth Streb, and Pina Bausch. (Maguy Marin, classically trained and a former dancer with Maurice Béjart’s Ballet of the 20th Century, is the exception.)<sup>9</sup>

Jump forward to 1994: an interview with three women choreographers featured in the New York City Ballet’s Diamond Project at the New York State Theater would seem promising, were it not for the fact that men choreographers outnumbered them by three to one. But the women had some thoughts on the matter of why so few women choreographed. Anna Laerkesen, a former dancer with the Royal Danish Ballet who went on to choreograph for the company, attributes it to girls’ upbringing, which stresses “the reproductive side more than the creative side”: “the emphasis on how you look and what your body can do has had a suppressing effect. It was in the air that you had to be a good girl, and being a good girl meant performing, not creating. Girls have just as much a creative side as boys, but it is not developed.”<sup>10</sup> (Might we infer from a recent study of authoritarian methods in training dancers and directing rehearsals that women in particular suffer from the demeaning treatment and implicit approbation of voiceless, docile bodies inherent in such disciplinary regimens?)<sup>11</sup> Lynne Taylor-Corbett agrees with Laerkesen that in Europe more women choreograph, and she suggests that in the United States, women have fewer role models. Miriam Mahdavian observes that in her rehearsals, the men are always trying out new steps, while the women stand still, waiting attentively. Is it a self-perpetuating state

of affairs that implicitly asserts who may envision the plan and who must implement it?

In 2010, Alastair Macaulay raised a number of provocative questions about contemporary ballet's ability to build narrative ballets that resonate with contemporary gender issues, such as equal rights, same-sex marriage, relaxing of rigidly prescribed gender roles, and fluidity in gender expression. While acknowledging the appearance of a few same-sex duets and some "sequences of male-female parallel-and-equal (unisexual) dancing," Macaulay suggests that bodily disciplines like pointe technique and partnering, unchallenged by cross-gender casting, perpetuate old hierarchies and codes. He asks, "How well equipped is this genre to speak to, or of, the world we know? Will the choreographers of the 21st century change the genre's ingredients so that it becomes less automatically sexist? Or will they change the dramas that flow from its heterosexual rituals? Most crucially: What future does ballet have as an art of modern expression?"<sup>12</sup> One cannot help but wonder whether one solution to the problem of dismantling ballet's entrenched gender roles may be to incorporate more women's voices into the artistic leadership of ballet companies. This might entail the added benefit of mitigating the "arrant man-handling" and ubiquitous rape scenes (with their messages of violence against women) in contemporary ballet.<sup>13</sup>

What might dance studies contribute to the debate on the status of women in ballet? Might creating a forum on this issue help women to enter into the fray? Thus it is that this special issue of *Dance Chronicle* devotes itself to women choreographers and artistic directors who found solutions to the dilemma of how to achieve prominence and leadership in the ballet world. Dance history scholarship, with its focus on the long view, can illuminate patterns of bias as well as strategies for circumventing them. To date, there is a paucity of research on women's contributions as choreographers and directors to the development of ballet, particularly in the United States. Agnes de Mille may be the exception that proves the rule; she is far better known for her stream of successes with the Broadway musical (e.g., *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *Brigadoon*) than for her ballets, three of which—*Rodeo*, *Fall River Legend*, and *Three Virgins and a Devil*—survive in the ballet repertory today.<sup>14</sup> One of our editors, Joellen A. Meglin, has written extensively about Ruth Page, and a few articles about Catherine Littlefield and Albertina Rasch have appeared, but much remains to be discovered and written about these women and many others, some of whose names have been mentioned in this essay.<sup>15</sup>

The women featured in this issue did not invent an entirely new art form, as did some of their contemporaries in modern dance. Instead, they chose to remain in the ballet realm; however, two of them remolded ballet's idioms and aesthetics, infusing them with new bodily practices and theories, borrowing in particular from American and European modern dance and African-American jazz.

Carrie Gaiser Casey's article, "The Ballet Corporealities of Anna Pavlova and Albertina Rasch," explores the innovations that these two ballet luminaries brought to the concert stage through their reconfigurations of ballet corporeality—understood as the connection between discourse and bodily practice, and ethos and aesthetic. Both women's ensemble choreography and powers of artistic directorship have been neglected in the literature. But Gaiser Casey intends to remedy that. Moreover, she discovers that Pavlova's sense of mission and spirit-filled qualities of movement accorded well with Progressive Era feminism based on public service, while Rasch's corporeality dovetailed with a valuing of personal freedom and visibility in the public sphere that could only have come into being after American women's successful campaign for suffrage.

Andrea Harris's article, "Gendered Discourses in American Ballet at Mid-Century: Ruth Page on the Periphery," focuses on discourses among prominent dance critics—John Martin, Edwin Denby, and Lincoln Kirstein—from the mid 1930s to mid-century, examining how modernism's paradigm of abstraction shifted from a metaphoric one based on Martin's principle of "metakinesis" (giving outer form to inner experience) to a neoclassical one elevating the intrinsic qualities of the medium: visible rhythms and overt kinetic spatial dynamism. The neoclassical paradigm took George Balanchine's essentially musical mode of choreography as its exemplar, while relegating Ruth Page's dramatic-narrative mode to the periphery. Considering two of Page and Bentley Stone's ballets from the late 1930s, *An American Pattern* and *Frankie and Johnny*, Harris argues that Page embedded her particular perspective as a woman in her work, contesting limited options for women in various strata of society.

Karen Eliot's "English in Flavor and Form: Mona Inglesby's Choreography for the International Ballet" considers Inglesby's heroic work, amid the physical hardships and ever-present dangers of World War II, in presenting ballet for the education, entertainment, and uplift of the English public. Following in the footsteps of such influential women as Marie Rambert and Ninette de Valois, who had choreographed ballets and led artistic enterprises in England, Inglesby's bold move to launch the International Ballet was a statement of faith. Like Inglesby, other women—Peggy van Praagh, Maude Lloyd, Pauline Grant, and Lydia Kyasht—led ballet companies at this particularly challenging juncture, inaugurating wartime England's ballet boom, supported by audiences across the nation. Inglesby not only directed the International Ballet, but also served as its leading ballerina as well as choreographer. Rather than seeking innovation, or embracing contemporary choreographic trends, Inglesby championed the classics in her own choreography and in her work with Nicolai Sergeyev, former *régisseur* of the Imperial Russian Ballet, creating "a repertory that was appealing, music that was beloved, and design and production values that leaned towards popular theater."

It is *Dance Chronicle's* policy to keep open forums on topics inaugurated through a special theme issue. Thus, we welcome further manuscript submissions, in this case, on questions of women's leadership in other genres of dance, as well as ballet, worldwide. Therefore, we restate our original questions to encompass a larger spectrum of dance genres:

- What preconceptions have affected women's abilities and educational development as choreographers, impresarios, and artistic directors of dance companies?
- Have boards of directors, administrators, dancers, critics, audiences, and/or historians discriminated, intentionally or not, against women's work as leaders in the dance world?
- How have women choreographers, impresarios, and/or directors in the past succeeded in scaling power structures in the dance world? What stories emerge from their efforts and achievements?
- Have there been important choreographies whose neglect may be attributed to the fact that women created them?
- Have different standards or criteria been applied to the reception of choreographies by women? *Should* new paradigms of analysis be applied to reflect women's perspectives and concerns?
- What role have mentorship and patronage, or the lack thereof, played in the development of women's (or men's) talents as leaders?
- How might the presence of women in leadership roles be improved as we move forward in the twenty-first century?

We hope that readers will enjoy our initial offerings on the special theme "*Ballet Is Woman*": *But Where Are All the Women Choreographers?* Beyond that, we invite you to broaden the discourse by submitting manuscripts, book reviews, and letters to the editors on topics related to this theme, as well as other provocative issues of our time.

## NOTES

1. Victoria Looseleaf, "A Female Force," *Dance Magazine*, vol. 85, no. 3 (March 2011): 26–28, 30, 32.

2. Barbara Crockett, "Regional Dance America: Our Regional Heritage," *Dance Teacher Now*, vol. 20, no. 6 (1998): 34, 36.

3. Victoria Morgan, "Deep Background: Theater and Dance Unite: A Voice Is Heard," *Dance/USA Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 10–11, 13.

4. Lea Marshall, "Ballet Is Woman? Not in the Artistic Director's Office," *Dance Magazine*, May 4, 2010, <http://www.dancemagazine.com/blogs/guest-blog/3349> (accessed December 7, 2011).

5. Judith Mackrell, "The ladies vanish," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2009, 24, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/may/13/dance-sadlers-wells-southbank?INTCMP=SRCH> (accessed December 7, 2011).

6. John Martin, "The Dance: Events Ahead," *New York Times*, September 27, 1942, X8; Anna Kisselgoff, "Bronislava Nijinska Is Dead at 81," *New York Times*, February 23, 1972, 44; Jennifer Dunning,

"Harlem Dancers and Diaghilev Days," *New York Times*, January 28, 1983, C3; Anna Kisselgoff, "Nijinska, in Her Time, Was a Ballet Avant-Gardist," *New York Times*, May 11, 1986, H9.

7. Jennifer Dunning, "Dance," *New York Times*, April 4, 1982, TG3; Anna Kisselgoff, "Ballet: Pennsylvanians Open Season," *New York Times*, April 7, 1982, C17.

8. Jennifer Dunning, "A Pennsylvanian Night of Dances by Women," *New York Times*, April 9, 1982, C4.

9. Jennifer Dunning, "The Emphasis Is on the Avant-Garde," *New York Times*, August 30, 1981, 72; Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance That Startles and Challenges Is Coming from Abroad," *New York Times*, October 13, 1985, H1.

10. Jennifer Dunning, "Making Ballets, Just the Way Men Do," *New York Times*, May 15, 1994, H8.

11. Robin Lakes, "The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals," *Arts Education Policy Review*, vol. 106, no. 5 (2005): 3–18; see also, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979), 135–69.

12. Alastair Macaulay, "For Ballet, Plots Thicken Or Just Stick?" *New York Times*, August 8, 2010, AR4.

13. Ibid.; see also, Alexandra Tomaloni, "Did Mrs. Harkness Win?" *DanceView*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2007): 19–25.

14. See Mindy Aloff, Preface, Agnes de Mille, *Leaps in the Dark: Art and the World*, ed. Mindy Aloff (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), xiii–xiv.

15. See, for example, Joellen A. Meglin, "Blurring the Boundaries of Genre, Gender, and Geopolitics: Ruth Page and Harald Kreutzberg's Transatlantic Collaboration in the 1930s," *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2009): 52–75; Ann Barzel, "A Portrait of Catherine and Dorothe Littlefield," in *Dancing Female: Lives and Issues of Women in Contemporary Dance*, ed. Sharon E. Friedler and Susan B. Glazer (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997): 23–44; Frank W. D. Ries, "Albertina Rasch: The Concert Career and the Concept of the American Ballet," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1984): 159–97.