

# Paula T. Kelso, “Behind the Curtain: The Body, Control, and Ballet”

Many young girls and their parents are attracted to the ballet because of the applauding audiences, the lights, the sequins and feathers, the colorful, elaborate tutus, and satin pointe shoes. Where else can a young girl dream of becoming a princess, a swan, a dancing snowflake or flower, a sugarplum, or lilac fairy? Where else can she be a character right out of a fairy tale like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty? Where else can she be rescued by and collapse into the arms of her handsome prince? Ballet is the magical world where these dreams can come true. Young girls and women can be all of these things, characters that symbolize femininity in a society that teaches young girls to be and want everything pink and pretty. However, in the shadows of the spotlight lurks an abusive world of eating disorders, verbal harassment, fierce competition, and injured, fatigued, and malnourished dancers. This world of fantasy is just that: fantasy and make-believe.

## The Problem

Body image is defined as the way in which people see themselves in the mirror every day: the values, judgments, and ideas that they attach to their appearance. Benn and Walters (2001) argue that these judgments and ideas come from being socialized into particular ways of thinking, mainly from society’s ideas of what beauty is, shown especially in the current media and consumer culture (p. 140). The average person is inundated with 3,000 advertisements daily (Kilbourne, 2002). In these advertisements, women are shown in little clothing and in stereotypical roles. These women are not real (Kilbourne, 2002). They have been altered by computer airbrushing, retouching, and enhancing, and in many cases, several women are used to portray the same model (Kilbourne, 2002). The cultural idea of what is beautiful has changed over the years. In the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe, who wore a size 16 at one point in her career, was considered the epitome of sexiness and beauty (Jhally, 1995). Contrast this with more recent examples such as Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston from the

Why ballet appeals to young girls and their parents:  
•..... immediate cause, wish fulfillment;  
remote cause, social pressure

In addition to causes, Kelso plans to analyze effects, particularly negative ones

Kelso examines advertising and the media as  
•..... immediate causes of how a culture defines physical beauty

television show *Friends*, who are considered beautiful. They wear a size 2 (Jhally, 1995). While models and celebrities have become thinner, the average woman is heavier today. This makes an even larger difference between the real and the ideal.

Like the rest of society, dancers' appearances have also changed over the years. In the 1930s and 1940s, ballerinas were considered thin at the time but, as can be seen in photographs (see Figure 1), looked very healthy (Gordon, 1983). Since dancers have generally been slimmer than ideal, these dancers' becoming even thinner for today's ideal is a problem (see Figure 2). As one renowned ballet teacher said it: "It is a reflection of society, everything has become more streamlined" (Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 146).

In order to understand the pressures that dancers face to be thin, it is necessary to explore the ideas behind the practice of ballet. Women who become dancers are not exempt from cultural expectations that tell them in order to be successful and beautiful, they must also be very thin. They live with the same pressures as the rest of society, however, they also have to deal with the risk of

.....

Gives historical perspective: as ideals of female beauty changed over the years, so did the physical appearance of ballerinas

.....

Examines specific practices of modern ballet that encourage dancers to be thin



Figure 1. Then: Female dancers in 1930 had thicker legs and rounder bodies.



Figure 2. Now: Ballerinas typically have thinner legs and flatter bodies.

unemployment if they gain any amount of weight or their bodies do not look a certain way (Gordon, 1983). In a career where education is discouraged because of the time it would take away from a dancer's most successful years, many professional dancers are not attending college and in some cases are even dropping out of high school (Gordon, 1983). These dancers are putting all of their resources into their body and its appearance. If a dancer does gain weight, develops an eating disorder, or becomes injured, she is left out of work with relatively few choices for the future. Most professional companies have "appearance clauses" in their contracts, which usually state that if the dancer gains any noticeable amount of weight, she is eligible to lose her position in the company (Gordon, 1983; Saint Louis Ballet, 1993). These clauses also state that tattoos, piercings, and changing hair color are not permitted (Gordon, 1983). Haircuts are discouraged, and usually only allowed with the permission of the director.

Almost everyone credits George Balanchine, the renowned dancer, teacher, and choreographer, with the current aesthetic of ballet in the West, referred to by most as the "Balanchine body," or

..... ARGUES that the main cause of the anorexic look among ballerinas is a particular choreographer

the “anorexic look” (Gordon, 1983). He has promoted the skeletal look by his costume requirements and his hiring practices, as well as the treatment of his dancers (Gordon, 1983). The ballet aesthetic currently consists of long limbs, and a skeletal frame, which accentuates the collarbones and length of the neck, as well as absence of breasts and hips (Benn & Walters, 2001; Gordon, 1983; Kirkland, 1986). Balanchine was known to throw out comments to his dancers, such as: “eat nothing” and “must see the bones” (Kirkland, 1986, p. 56).

If Balanchine has created this aesthetic, other choreographers have followed and adopted it as the norm. Mikhail Baryshnikov, star dancer and former director of American Ballet Theatre, did not tolerate any body type but the Balanchine one (Gordon, 1983). During rehearsal and without any warning, he fired a corps de ballet member because she was too “fat” in his opinion (Gordon, 1983, p. 150). He said that he “couldn’t stand to see her onstage anymore” (Gordon, 1983, p. 150). Fortunately, management intervened and the dancer was rehired. However, Baryshnikov and the rest of his management were known to have had meetings with their dancers in order to emphasize the importance of weight loss (Gordon, 1983). Obviously, dancers need to be fit and trim in order to be successful in their occupation, and no one should argue that staying fit is not helpful in order to see a dancer’s body line; however, it is the extreme skeletal goal that is cause for so much concern.

It is not uncommon for a dancer to walk into what she thinks will be her daily ballet class and find a scale set up in the center of the dance studio instead (Gordon, 1983). These weigh-ins are arranged ahead of time and kept secret from the dancers. A director from American Ballet Theatre explained that warning the dancers would defeat the purpose. As one former dancer put it: “A forewarned dancer is a forestarved dancer” (Gordon, 1983, p. 43). Not only are the dancers’ weights recorded but many times are read aloud to the entire class. Even the youngest dancers, at one pre-professional academy, at age eleven “gasped in horror” as the teacher read their weights aloud at 50 to 60 pounds (Gordon, 1983, p. 43). Public humiliation is not uncommon in the ballet world

Argues that other choreographers and directors are contributing causes

(Benn & Walters, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). Directors and teachers are known to make hateful comments and even resort to name-calling in some cases (Gordon, 1983). One director told one of his dancers to “drop the weight in three weeks. I don’t care how you do it” (Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 145). When she did in fact drop the weight by basically not eating, she was rewarded with a role in the performance that the company was rehearsing. Dancers learn at an early age that rewards and punishments are based upon weight. If a dancer loses weight, she is praised and rewarded with a role in a ballet. If she does not, she is punished by not being cast at all (Gordon, 1983). It seems that directors and teachers perceive how thin a dancer becomes as a sign of dedication to the art and is often times rewarded (Benn & Walters, 2001). Suzanne Gordon (1983) accompanied several members of an elite advanced pre-professional academy to a professional audition. She witnessed hundreds of dancers asked to walk across the floor of the studio, where many of them were then asked to leave. After fifteen or more years of professional training, these dancers were not allowed to even audition. Apparently, they did not have the right “look.” This practice is used by most professional companies across the United States (Gordon, 1983).

.....

Analyzes how losing weight leads immediately to desirable roles and more remotely to the perception that a dancer is dedicated to her art

Directors and company managers are not the only ones who put pressure on dancers to stay thin. Ballet critics often refer to body sizes when writing reviews of a performance (Benn & Walters, 2001). This can be a nightmare for a dancer, particularly if a negative body shape statement is printed next to her name for anyone to read in the morning paper. For example, two critics wrote reviews after seeing a company perform a Balanchine Ballet (a ballet in which the dancers wear nothing but tights and leotards). One said he witnessed, “an awful lot of wobbling bottoms on display” and the other claimed that this particular company had “rejected the starved-greyhound look in ballerinas—but now things have gone too far the other way. Bonnard legs and Ingres bottoms are all very well, but not on stage, and particularly not in Balanchine” (Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 149). These reviews were taken to heart by the company directors, who threatened to fire members of the corps de

.....

Identifies another contributing cause of the anorexic look

ballet if they did not lose the weight fast. So they did, by not eating (Benn & Walters, 2001).

According to research conducted by Benn and Walters (2001), dancers studied were found to only consume 700 to 900 calories per day. Many of the subjects were consuming less than 700. Surveys conducted in the United States, China, Russia, and Western Europe by Hamilton (1998) found that female dancers' weights were 10 to 15 percent below the ideal weight for their height. According to the American Psychiatric Association's official criteria for anorexia nervosa, the number one factor for diagnosis is if the person's weight is more than 15 percent below the ideal weight for height. This is dangerously close to most dancers! Another factor for diagnosing anorexia nervosa is if the person has developed amenorrhea, that is, if they have missed three consecutive menstrual cycles (Hamilton, 1998). According to Suzanne Gordon's research (1983), many dancers have ceased menstruating or have many cycle irregularities. Once someone stops menstruating, she may lose 4 percent of her bone mass annually for the next three to four years (Hamilton, 1998). This causes another set of problems: injury and osteoporosis. If dancers are not consuming enough calories, many times they are nutritionally deficient, which Hamilton (1998) supports in her arguments. If dancers are malnourished and continue to heavily exert themselves through dance, stress fractures, a common injury among dancers, are unavoidable (Gordon, 1983; Hamilton, 1998). Also, osteoporosis is common. One dancer took a bone density test and at 21 years old found she had the bones of a 70 year old (Hamilton, 1998). Dancers are not receiving crucial health and nutrition information, and they may not realize the harm they are inflicting on their bodies until it is too late. Benn and Walters (2001) found that only 18% of current dancers had received proper nutritional education.

Many people believe the myth that female dancers must be skeletal because of the male dancers who have to partner and lift them. This is simply not true. Gordon (1983) interviewed several professional male dancers, who said that they preferred to partner

.....  
Identifies the main effect of the preceding causes

.....  
Discuss negative effects caused by an inadequate diet

.....  
Disproves a common misperception about cause and effect: ballerinas must be thin for male dancers to lift them

heavier dancers rather than dancers who fit the “anorexic look.” Patrick Bissell, a well-renowned dancer, says that “it’s not easy to partner very thin dancers . . . they scream out all of a sudden because you pick them up . . . it makes you very tentative about how you touch them” (Gordon, 1983, p. 151). Another famous dancer, Jeff Gribler, agrees. He says that “It’s easy to bruise a woman when you partner anyway, and if she seems too frail, you don’t want to grip too hard. It can be really painful for her to be partnered” (Gordon, 1983, p. 152). Vane Vest, another dancer, says “these anorexic ballerinas—I can’t bear to touch them . . . you partner a woman and lift her at the waist and you want to touch something. These skinny ballerinas, it’s awful . . . how can you do a *pas de deux* with one of those girls?” (Gordon, 1983, p. 152). Gordon found in her research that ballerinas in Europe and elsewhere weigh more than North American ballerinas, yet male dancers do not seem to have a problem partnering them (Gordon, 1983).

Another myth is that this unhealthy “Balanchine body” is the only body capable of the technical feats that ballet requires. People also believe that if dancers were not this thin, audiences would not come to the ballet. However some of the most famous and successful companies are located in Europe and elsewhere. European companies, even with dancers who are not emaciated, are very successful. Gordon (1983) found that in European companies, particularly the Royal Swedish Ballet, dancers look somewhat different. She noticed older dancers in their late thirties and forties, and also that dancers were not nearly as thin as American dancers (Gordon, 1983). These dancers were definitely thin, but they looked healthy. They had breasts, hips, and curves, and actually looked womanly. During a gala performance for American Ballet Theatre, Gordon sat next to a New York ballet critic. When guest artist Zhandra Rodriguez from Ballet de Caracas, Venezuela, came on stage, Gordon immediately noticed that she had visible breasts. When she mentioned this to the critic, the critic retorted, “she can’t be an American” (Gordon, 1983, p. 151).

...

•..... Attacks another common misperception: ballerinas must be thin to attract audiences

## Analyses: Two Theories about the World of Ballet

### Subculture Theory

Many wonder why dancers and their parents continue to take part in the ballet world after learning about some of its negative aspects. Subculture theory can explain why dancers continue to dance, even in the face of major internal and external obstacles and criticism. Subculture theory has mainly been used to explain deviance and crime in the past; however, it works well in analyzing ballet as a unique world of its own with different norms and values from the rest of society.

.....  
Uses subculture theory to examine the effects of belonging to a particular group

A subculture can be defined as a group of people who share a common identity through a unique set of characteristics common to the entire group, yet not entirely distinct from the rest of the society in which the group lives (Farley, 1998). The subculture is a part of the larger society, yet it has certain ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and values that set it apart in some way. Farley (1998) states that individuals with a common interest and occupation commonly form subcultures. Ballet is truly an entire world all to its own. It functions within society, but it is a distinct group that should be recognized as such. The world of ballet has its own ideas of what the body should look like that are more extreme than the rest of society; however, the current ballet aesthetic would not be popular if dancers lived in a culture that did not value extreme thinness. All ballet companies across the world value thinness; however, it seems that only North American companies, especially the United States, have this dangerous goal of skeletal thinness.

Dancers are raised in this subculture of ballet, many from as young as three years of age. They spend every night in this world among directors, teachers, and other students who help to normalize ballet's ideas and values, and they internalize these messages. Dancers rely on their teachers for support and guidance, but also for approval and selection of parts in ballets. This leads to a generalized fear instilled in the dancers.

...

Ideas of beauty and health are different in the ballet world than in the larger society. Many dancers believe themselves to be healthy because they form “their ideas of healthy and normal . . . according to the norms and values of the ballet world” (Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 142). Because dancers are surrounded by eating disorders, many believe themselves to be healthy because they do not deny themselves food completely and they do not binge and purge. Many dancers may look healthy enough, but in reality they are not. They would not be diagnosed as medically anorexic, but they are staying thin by means of “gentle starvation,” meaning not consuming enough calories and being nutritionally deficient (Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 142).

Another aspect of the ballet world, which helps to define its subculture, is the idea of control. There is an authoritarian power culture in the ballet world that forces conformity to harmful behaviors. Dancers have become accustomed to abusive treatment; it becomes a normal part of life in the subculture. Dancers’ acceptance of such treatment has been referred to as “silent conformity” for the “unquestioning, subservient way in which . . . [dancers accept] abuse and unreasonable behavior” (Stinson, 1998; cited by Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 140). This is one reason why ballet has been compared to a cult in some of the literature (Benn & Walters, 2001; Gordon, 1983; Smith, 1998). Directors and management have the power, and they exert it over the dancers, who must obey certain rules if they intend to continue dancing.

...

### Paradox Theory

In *Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies* (1991), Kathryn Morgan discusses four paradoxes inherent in the choice to undergo cosmetic surgery. The structure of her argument works well with the paradoxes inherent in the ballet world.

*Paradox One: Art?* Ballet is known as a performing art. Art implies a creative process through which the artist can express her

•..... Uses paradox theory to examine four unintended effects of a dancer’s devoting herself to modern ballet culture

innermost thoughts and feelings to an audience. Many dancers dance because they learn to express themselves through movement. However, all of ballet looks the same with cookie-cut out dancers expressing themselves in the same ways to the same music. There is no individual creativity to be explored here; only the creativity of the director is seen. The director's feelings are then described to the dancer and the dancer's job is to express that feeling to the audience. Creativity tends to be quashed in the classroom by focusing only on technique, which trains bodies to be a vehicle for someone else's creativity. Gelsey Kirkland (1986), a world-renowned ballerina, says in her autobiography that Balanchine had a "monopoly on taste and creative control" at New York City Ballet (p. 49). She also says that the dancers relied on him for "ideas and psychological motivation" (cited by Benn & Walters, 2001, p. 148). Michelle Benash, another dancer, says that "you have to lose your personality; your movement, your style are dictated to you" (Gordon, 1983, p. 112). A former New York City Ballet dancer puts it this way: Balanchine believed "that women should provide the inspiration that triggers men's creativity" (Gordon, 1983, p. 173). Dancers, then, merely become puppets for someone else's creativity and emotion.

.....  
First  
unintended  
effect

*Paradox Two: Control?* All dancers must have control over their bodies in order to master the technique required to perform professionally. Dancers start training young so that their hips will form a certain way in order to have the required "turn out." They also must spend years training their leg, feet, and abdomen muscles in order to jump, balance, and dance on pointe properly. These skills require intense years of training and hard work in order to establish the right strength. One would imagine that dancers would have plenty of control over their own bodies; however, management takes over this control by exerting power over the bodies' appearance. Having the right technique and strength is not nearly enough to dance professionally, one must also exhibit the right "look." This look, as discussed previously, is unhealthy and almost impossible to achieve.

.....  
Second  
unintended  
effect

*Paradox Three: The Wonders of the Human Form.* Ballet is supposed to showcase what the human body is capable of physically accomplishing. Audiences come to see ballet because of the feats that they will likely see at the performance. Amazing jumps, turns, and tricks are fan favorites. However, ballet is not showcasing what the human form can accomplish, it is merely showcasing what one, almost impossible, body type may be capable of executing. Dancers are supposed to make these feats look effortless, but it is doubtful that anyone leaving the theatre feels as if they could mimic these steps without the required body.

Third  
unintended  
effect

*Paradox Four: The Look.* Dancers are usually referred to as beautiful and graceful creatures, capable of accomplishing extraordinary feats on stage. Off stage, these dancers resemble broken young children. They oftentimes look emaciated and injured, collapsing offstage after performances or limping to their dressing rooms. Dancers are artists, but they are also athletes who train their bodies every day. Athletes are usually considered to be the epitome of the human form and very physically fit. One look backstage and these are not the thoughts that would come to mind of the dance world. Most dancers are very unhealthy physically and oftentimes emotionally as well.

Fourth  
unintended  
effect

### Conclusion

The dangerous aesthetic of the ballet world is an area that needs much more attention and further research. Artistic directors of companies do not like to discuss or acknowledge problems with the current ballet aesthetic, which can be seen in their reluctance to talk about these issues and the lack of available research on the topic. . . . Aside from a few current journal articles that discuss eating habits, no one has really attempted to see if the abusive world Gordon exposed in her book has changed at all since her research in the 1980s. *Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet* alerted us to the fact that ballet was not so lovely and magical backstage. . . . I can attest to experiencing all of the aspects of ballet, in my pre-professional

training and in my professional dancing, that Gordon showed. I also know from fellow dancers in the Midwest, New York, North Carolina, and San Francisco that their experiences are and have been very similar to what Gordon portrays in her book. There have . . . been recent examples in the media, which suggest that not much has changed since the 1980s. For example, the Boston Ballet ballerina who died at 22 due to complications from an eating disorder (Segal, 2002). Management had told the dancer that she was “chunky” and that she needed to lose weight before she developed anorexia (Segal, 2002). Another example occurred in San Francisco, where nine-year-old Fredrika Keefer was denied admission to San Francisco Ballet School because she was considered too short and chunky by administration. . . . A fictitious example can be seen in the [2000] movie *Center Stage*, where dancers at a highly competitive pre-professional school deal with eating disorders, weight issues, and competition. This film also addressed a director’s control of his company, albeit briefly and sentimentalized. . . . Further research is important to assess the current situation in the dance world and to see if the aesthetic and treatment of dancers has improved at all since the dance community and the public have been made aware of the dangers.

The health and sanity of dancers are being sacrificed for this art form. Until dancers, audiences, and management accept a new, healthier paradigm, dancers will continue to suffer. Segal (2001) articulates it best when he writes:

What we accept as the “tradition” of extreme thinness is arguably just a mid-to-late 20th century whim of the white ballet establishment. And it needs to stop, for the health of the art form and the women dedicated to it, before ballet training becomes a symbol, like Chinese foot binding, of a society’s cruel subjugation of women to a crippling, inhuman illusion. (p. 2)

Conclusion sums up Kelso's main point in analyzing the negative effects of the ultrathin aesthetic in modern ballet

## References

- Benn, T., & Walters, D. (2001). Between Scylla and Charybdis. Nutritional education versus body culture and the ballet aesthetic: The effects on the lives of female dancers. *Research in Dance Education*, 2(2), 139-154.
- Farley, J. (1998). *Sociology* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gordon, S. (1983). *Off balance: The real world of ballet*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Hamilton, L. (1998). *Advice for dancers: Emotional counsel and practical strategies*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jhally, S. (Producer). (1995). *Slim hopes: Advertising and the obsession with thinness* [Motion picture].
- Kilbourne, J. (2002, February). *The naked truth: Advertising's image of women*. Presentation to Principia College, Elsah, IL.
- Kirkland, G. (1986). *Dancing on my grave*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Morgan, K. P. (1991). Women and the knife: Cosmetic surgery and the colonization of women's bodies. In L. Richardson, V. Taylor, & N. Whittier (Eds.), *Feminist frontiers* (pp. 116-127). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Saint Louis Ballet. (1993). Employment contract. St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis Ballet.
- Segal, L. (2001, April 1). The shape of things to come. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com>
- Smith, C. (1998). On authoritarianism in the dance classroom. In S. B. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance, power, and difference* (pp. 123-146). Leeds, UK: Human Kinetics.
- Stinson, S. W. (1998). Seeking a feminist pedagogy for children's dance. In S. B. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance, power, and difference* (pp. 23-48). Leeds, UK: Human Kinetics.

Paula T. Kelso, "Behind the Curtain," copyright © 2003 Edwardsville Journal of Sociology is reprinted by permission from *Edwardsville Journal of Sociology* Volume 3.2. <http://siue.edu/sociology/sociology/EJS/>. Photo credits: William Davis/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; STOCK4B/Getty Images.