

CULTIVATING READINESS: TRAINING A CLASSICAL BALLET DANCER  
FOR CONTEMPORARY DANCE MOVEMENT

by

Kristina Windom  
A Thesis  
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*The most practical way of navigating in the sea of art is to float with the tide. But if such a course offers you little challenge, and you wish to choose your own...you can boldly set your course against the tide.*

-Mikhail Fokine

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CULTIVATING READINESS: TRAINING A CLASSICAL BALLET DANCER FOR CONTEMPORARY DANCE MOVEMENT**

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The goal of this thesis is to answer this question: “How do classical ballet companies sustain themselves in a twenty-first century society that is attracted to diverse and innovative ideas?” As a teacher of both classical and contemporary ballet, graduate student, and administrator at a classical ballet school, I bring a distinct perspective to this topic. I have noticed that ballet companies around the world are presenting a spectrum of different productions within any given season. Some of these works are new and perhaps world-premieres added to their repertory by sought-after choreographers. The decision to present such a wide range of movement is usually motivated by a desire to appeal to audiences seeking diverse, non-classical styles as well as typical, traditional story-ballets. More importantly, the shift in repertory also raises questions about the transformation of organizations as they attempt to revolutionize and stay relevant. In my research, I focus on what choreographers today need from dancers and how these dance-makers and this

new repertory are influencing changes in pedagogy. I also examine how young dancers can build reliable classical ballet technique in concert with a curiosity about movement and expression, namely an ability to perform contemporary ballet by artists such as Alonzo King and Crystal Pite. As a result of my research, I have produced a plan that allows the classical ballet student to successfully move to become an employable ballet dancer. This plan creates more confidence in young professionals, preparing them to access the range and versatility of today's movement. The design and implementation of my ballet curricula also safeguards and improves dancers' health and well-being in these changing times.

## **PART I: MOVEMENT ADJUSTS TO CULTURE**

### Movers and Shakers of Classical Ballet

Principles that guide contemporary movement styles are successful juxtapositions of shapes, lines, and musicality. Counterpoints of movement can be the best showcase of innovative dance architecture. Forward-thinking choreographers through the timeline of dance have presented a common theme when trying to break out of the predictable presentation of movement. This is partly achieved by weaving a curiosity through the physical work that leaves the audience yearning to discover and experience more. In this process, it is up to the choreographer to present the dancer with these figurative challenges, yet a range of technical ability is needed for the dancer to search for the truth.

Dancers and choreographers then and now, who have experimented with the technical boundaries of classical ballet, tend to present unusual and challenging movement, daring their audiences to think past the boundaries. The foundation of classical ballet provides a trusted source in which to move from but this can also stifle creativity in terms of forward-thinking movement. The teachings of classical ballet can be analogous to 5<sup>th</sup> century Latin language: dominant at one time and a strong derivative with the ability to influence and create new forms. Although old Italic Latin language is not commonly heard in the world we live in today, we sense that new forms and styles of communication are created from this base. It is through growth and inspiration that today,

and throughout history, we have watched these outliers in dance carve new shapes, lines, and ideas to change our cravings and expectations of how we view ballet.

Agents of change, with a vision of challenging the conservative lines and rules of ballet provoke their public to define a new method of ballet. Dancers and choreographers may possess favorable tools that allow them to wander into the kinetic playground but strict adherence to process and technical approach must govern for the sake of health and aesthetic. Dance visionaries throughout time and today have taken sizeable risks trying to shift public perception of classical and contemporary ballet. Their responsibility in presenting this risk must be heavily weighed when creating this information on their dancers. Are the dancers ready to take this on as well?

Choreographers like Marius Petipa and Mikhail Fokine found inspiration in the cultures of distant lands. For his ballet *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, made in 1862, Petipa included an "exotic Egyptian setting," that Jennifer Homans (2010) describes as inspired by the building of the Suez Canal (267). Petipa was fascinated by extravagant displays and *The Pharaoh's Daughter* included a cast of approximately 400 dancers. His productions incorporated costumes, details, and folk dances borrowed from regions and time periods far from 19th century Russia. Fokine was similarly interested in expanding ballet's aesthetics and created a range of steps and movement vocabularies. Deborah Jowitt explains in her book, *Time and the Dancing Image* (1988), that Fokine's mission was to "reform ballet." Jowitt adds that Fokine was criticized by members of the ballet world for his questioning of traditions and his disregard for "proper" schooling (152). Both Fokine and Petipa made significant statements by abandoning what was the norm or

the expected style during particular historical moments. Their risk-taking paved the way for future choreographers to chart innovative paths.

Vaslav Nijinsky, a classically trained dancer and choreographer in the early 1900's, paved the way for others to purposely create similarly uncomfortable and somewhat uncoordinated movements. *Le Sacre du Printemps*, choreographed by Nijinsky for Ballet Russes in 1913, purposefully went against the grain of long, sweeping classical steps. Set to the complicated rhythms of Stravinsky's score, the avant-garde style of steps mirrored the musical energy with challenging movement from "a vanguard modernist" (Jarvinen 6). In the end, *Le Sacre du Printemps* defined a changing moment for classical ballet equating it to a contemporary style (Homans 310).

Another notable Nijinsky creation in 1912 was *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, with music by Debussy after Stéphane Mallarmé's 1865 poem. Described as a "serious attempt to invent a new language of movement," Nijinsky's anti-bravura style and shift away from classical poses toward movement itself was a threat to the dancers. "Dancers hated the movement, which was angular, two-dimensional, and frieze-like, with abrupt and taut movement requiring immense muscular discipline" (Homans 308). Nijinsky brought innovation and change into the creation process, showcasing the versatility within a company of dancers. Perhaps Nijinsky's qualities as a dancer on stage preceded his choreographic ability, rendering him "a man without equal" (Jarvinen 19).

American born choreographer, William Forsythe, is also a pioneer reaching inside of a classical language to showcase the inspiring diversity of movement within his dancers. Forsythe changed the face of dance by challenging the balances and typical

upright alignment of ballerinas in pointe shoes. It is reported by Pulitzer winning publication, *The Guardian*, that Forsythe's first ballet created for the Paris Opera Ballet in 1987, *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated*, was a work that "changed ballet forever" (Crompton 2015). William Forsythe categorizes his own movement as a "framing" of organization and steps (Kaiser 1998). It is clear when you watch his early works that the new spatial relationships hold a truth in his creation of dance and the transitions of shapes in space formalize his approach. Watching Forsythe's choreographies can sometimes explain images in their complete distortion. It represents order within the juxtapositions of these images and a clear understanding of why the upright teachings of classical ballet technique must be challenged. His dancers showcase an exaggeration of line and we then understand the possibilities he set to create within this dynamic. Maurice Causey, principal dancer with Frankfurt Ballet for eight years, confirms, "Billy choreographs jumping between his own language and classical ballet terms to further define the temperament of the phrase" (personal interview. December 18, 2014).

Bolshoi trained Alexei Ratmansky, one of the prominent choreographers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, uses contemporary movement as a contrast to classical ballet shapes and ideas. He generally creates his works on high-level ballet companies, reinforcing range of similarities and differences through physicality and risk. Recently, Ratmansky staged his interpretation of Marius Petipa's 1890 ballet classic, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Ratmansky uncovers a ballet technique during this time period that represents the dancer/choreographer collaboration and a connection to what audiences wanted. Ratmansky's version exposes and interestingly displays the athletic qualities and abilities

of today's dancer while performing the movement and technique common to the time of the original *Sleeping Beauty* creation. It reveals the evolution of the dancer's body and mind, bringing controversy to this masterpiece.

American Ballet Theater principal dancer, Paloma Herrera, upon selecting her final retirement performance made it known that she did not want to "go out with this version" of *Sleeping Beauty*. She did not see this particular rendition of the production well representing her tenure with ABT, thus creating more public debate about Ratmansky and his findings. The interesting point Ratmansky makes in this adaptation of a classic is precisely what Herrera gets caught up in. There is a strange and unexpected beauty about watching conservative movement on progressive, forward-thinking bodies.

Today, his choreographic works represent a new movement process that vividly shows the relationship between creator and dancer. Eccentric épaulement, off-balance pointe work, and unconventional partnering are ways in which Ratmansky pushes to innovate.

### Snapshot of a Culture

Art can capture a snapshot of the world we live in and dance and music have the power to set a particular tone. Vaslav Nijinsky's movement alone pushed boundaries but his decision to collaborate with Igor Stravinsky's, *Le Sacre du Printemps* score was an obvious statement of change. Stravinsky's primitive sound along with Nijinsky's signature references to the contradictory movement of classical ballet make an interesting account of dance history; clearly aligned with adaptation and a decision to change. Ratmansky too created his own dance notation to highlight the "then and the now" of

ballet answering our questions about where classical ballet might be headed. It is the responsibility of the dancer to justly represent the choreographic vision of this change.

Today's contemporary dance choreographers are developing movement based on a new language hoping to produce and clarify their own style. Nijinsky, with a progressive attempt, would challenge the classical ballet vocabulary when choreographing for ballet dancers, referring to jumps as "goat leaps" (Homans 309). This intent was to emphasize his non-classical style and communicate alternative references (obvious influences of European and American modern dance) to the dancers engaged in his creation. "One must wait a long time before the public becomes accustomed to our language," says Stravinsky when referring to his collaboration with Nijinsky (Homans 312). Perhaps they were setting the foundation for abstract performance art and today this is a preferred method in contemporary ballet.

The training of current classical ballet dancers also explains a culture of what we expect from a performer. The dancer of today is being trained with the same elite abilities as an athlete and is also being asked to take risks under stressful conditions. A choreographer or director may ask the dancer to abandon the norm to elicit a new language or direction of movement for the sake of originality. Dancers, trained to please, are eager to be a part of this elusive process of pushing boundaries. Initiation of movement in contemporary dance work may not require the same stringent approach as classical technique; therefore, training in both methodologies must be examined and so must the crossover. The movement these professional dancers are performing for their audiences are not the same every night, which is the true dynamic of progressive

movement. It is true that most major ballet companies are looking for classically trained dancers to hire and this may be non-negotiable, yet choreographers are looking beyond that fundamental to represent their vision.

### What are current choreographers looking for in a dancer?

Movement can identify the self but also examine commonality between all involved in the process. The bond between the dancer and choreographer is interesting and may take many rehearsals to cultivate a collective, collaborative relationship, or none at all. The authenticity a choreographer searches for in a dancer may be attained by trust: trusting that the dancer is sincere and curious. A choreographer that chooses to work with the same dancer (or set of dancers) is a testament to the relationship. It verifies that the dancer is listening and absorbing the history of their connection. The collaborative effort between dancer and choreographer has been described by many professionals as exhausting, invigorating, and life-changing. As in any personal and/or professional relationship, this bond takes much work and both parties must be willing to accept changes for a greater progression.

It is sometimes easier for a dancer to watch and copy movement presented to them by the choreographer, but the process becomes more complicated when the dancer may be asked to interpret or add to the information given to them. This process involves creativity, logic, chance, and humility. The classical dance curriculum is presented so formally that there are very few ways to incorporate one's own personality and self through movement. An adequate platform would be through épaulement, unique representation of the steps, and through musicality.

Functional characteristics of strength and flexibility that are required for classical ballet are also needed structures for contemporary dance, as this allows the dancer to move and make decisions with confidence. If a student learns to trust their ability they can focus more on making a greater contribution to the production as a whole. Confidence in technical ability can be the deciding factor that springboards the student's readiness and makes them a quick "sell" to the choreographer or director. This age and experience I am speaking about is also a component of executing contemporary work and the new professional and/or student must navigate this effectively.

Former dancer, choreographer, teacher, and Editor-At-Large of *Dance Magazine*, Wendy Perron, asks successful choreographers what they are looking for in a dancer for her *Dance Magazine: Dance Media* series. Crystal Pite is a former dancer in both Ballet British Columbia and William Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt, and now is a successful choreographer with her own dance company, Kidd Pivot. She has created original works for a long list of ballet companies that employ diversely trained dancers, such as National Ballet of Canada, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Sadler's Wells Theater, and Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet. Pite looks for dancers that are "intelligent and courageous and are self-directed". Self-direction is a result of self-assurance. Pite has expectations that the dancers she chooses to work with be of a certain technical ability, which is why she prefers to work with particular ballet companies. "To be able to let go of your ideas," says Pite, is the goal of the choreographic process (Perron 2012). Classical training brings a different type of poise to a dancer but the self-direction Pite is in search of is a dancer

that creates his or her own movement choices. This is not a requisite item in any classical ballet curriculum.

Perron also asks the same question to Stanton Welch, choreographer and director of the classical ballet company, Houston Ballet. His reply is similar in nature to Pite's, stating that he is looking for dancers who take risks and are open to a collaboration (Perron 2014).

When I interviewed Septime Webre, Artistic Director of the Washington Ballet, he talked specifically of a "Factor X" category when hiring, "This is a special quality that can be developed and eventually appreciated by the audience." Webre has recently been in the spotlight for creating one of the most diverse companies under the classical/contemporary label. He explains, "It's that extra quality which an artist can bring to their work which transcends technique and creates art that moves people" (personal interview. August 15, 2015).

I ask myself if this is a tangible quality a dance educator can pass on to a student? If so, at what age is a reasonable introduction to properly nurture this through dance pedagogy?

Alonzo King explains that "fear must be eradicated" in early classical training. He says that typically ballet training is about replicating, and this is not an honest indicator as to what may truly reside within the student. "How can the one thing they may offer us with distinction be tempered?" (personal interview. January 24, 2015). King looks to the dancers to bring their experience to his movement. But if time is a primary factor in experience, how do teachers prepare students to access this when the opportunity presents

itself? As an educator, the reality is to prepare a student to get closer to this ideal of collaboration. There is less risk involved with a good strategy in place. A good strategy has the ability to track progress and make changes when necessary.

### The Employable Dancer

Capability in executing classical ballet technique is one important fundamental when landing a professional job in a ballet company. Dancers auditioning for some of the top ballet companies believe that technique is the end goal, but many directors will tell you it is merely a platform from which to jump. The keen sense of relaying life experiences through movement is what many contemporary choreographers are going for when trying to connect with their dancers. Directors are also sensitive to this when hiring a community of dancers. A majority of dancers are often not considered when casting contemporary work, because of their inexperience or reluctance to communicate fully through the body. In a young dancer, there must be a layer of groundwork set that initiates a strong curiosity to move. Curriculum is merely a guide, so it is a teacher's duty to support, manage, and successfully guide this curiosity through particular training stages of the young dancer's education process. Informing and supervising students about their movement options later generates a more interesting relationship for those who create on them. Discovering the process and responsibility of creating movement with curiosity and passion is ideally a structure that students need to be guided through; not teaching to an example of perfection that cannot be attained.

Training a classical dancer begins at a young age and this is mostly to pattern kinesthetic response. As dance instructors, we are being asked to produce young dancers

with a strong classical foundation but also with the ability to work on a larger scope. Specifically, this means catering to a distinct movement quality in the student that may set them apart. Look at the scene in a ballet studio during rehearsal when the choreographer singles out the neophyte and asks them to “interpret” the given sequence. Confidence in the material with a degree of curious engagement should present itself to the task at hand. Every choreographer works differently but fundamentally they are looking for an open-minded dancer ready to explore and play, even if that means failing.

The liberation of movement, musicality, and best of all, the ability to take risks to upset the perceived goal is an outcome young dancers may not get with the rigor of classical ballet training. A dancer works and repeats until she/he gets the same result; a scientific approach to technique. The basis and beauty of movement today is taking a closer look at any given variable outcome, such as Crystal Pite’s, “self direction” and Alonzo King’s “eradication of fear”. These are the processes we need to examine as we send our young dancers out in search of movement that best represents their goals.

## **PART II: THE CLASSICAL MINDSET**

### What the Professionals Are Saying

The most confident students trust their abilities when being called upon. This confidence translates into a desirable quality that choreographers are looking for. Teachers are essential in helping to build confidence in students and this can be achieved by giving students access to the best tools: training, experience, and opportunity.

Let us take a closer look at dance pedagogy as we look into this progression of pinpointing what is needed to help classical ballet students understand what inspires today's dance architect. A long-term objective approach is the mission of the classical ballet curriculum. Based on planning and organization, classical ballet lessons provide sequential patterns for specific goals in a given timeframe. A beneficial side effect in training a classical dancer is the attention to detail in the step or steps being executed. It is what William Forsythe calls, "the joy of the evidence". Assurance in the understanding of the step is almost as important as the execution of the particular step or sequence of steps. Forsythe, in explaining his approach when working declares, "I give the dancers only my thinking, but not the results" (Kuchelmeister et al. 13).

This is precisely the reason why this quality bodes well for choreographers interested in a dancer's reflex during implementation rather than the end result of positions. One of the many outcomes of a classical ballet approach is to produce solid

execution with little risk involved. Alternatively, if we do not enforce an interest about taking chances while exploring movement, we will stop producing movers who inspire. Risk does not have to be presented or defined as rogue or experimental, as this presents itself as “right” or “wrong” to the students. Framing it as an “approach” will help the classically inclined move away from categorizing it as black or white.

I interviewed four professional ballet dancers, past and present. They share very similar answers when commenting about their overall training. Unanimously, they answered that they felt their classical ballet training adequately prepared them for the professional world both technically and artistically. This result I predicted, as professionals are respectful and somewhat protective toward their own training and teachers.

Diana Albrecht, recently promoted second soloist with Boston Ballet, comments, “You never stop learning.” She explains that it is the responsibility of the dancer to research and understand the choreographer’s vision. Albrecht also added that during her first few years in a company she was surprised at how much time was spent on the collaboration process between dancer and choreographer.

Movement becomes the dialogue as the choreographer begins working with dancers in the studio. This process can be a collective task or not; each creator has a different approach. Some choreographers are very clear about the guidelines on how they interact and work with others in the dance studio. They may thrive in a collaborative working environment with the dancers when asking for movement input or it may confuse their stream of creativity. More information is not always the best answer as it

may present other challenges and Albrecht mentions this when asked what movement she learns more easily -classical or contemporary. “Sometimes more opportunity can create confusion for the dancer,” noting that many contemporary choreographers show steps and then ask dancers to copy and “reply” back in their own movement interpretation (personal interview. July 15, 2015). This way of working can go in many different directions depending on the working relationship between the artists. Most choreographers enjoy working with dancers that understand their movement quality and production level.

Albrecht’s answers reveal a myopic mindset with regards to a classical dancer’s way of tackling contemporary work. To repeat steps every day using the same classical vocabulary breeds familiarity and predictability. This is the intended outcome of classical ballet and it is why dancers think of themselves as athletes: to ensure a predictable outcome.

Twenty-year old Albert Gordon, first year corps de ballet member of the Boston Ballet, feels strongly that his classical training adequately prepared him to move non-classically. Although he does not have the experience working directly with contemporary choreographers in the creation process, he did mention that most choreographers base the names of the stylistic steps on or around classical vocabulary (personal interview. June 18, 2015).

Katherine Monogue, another young dancer in her third year dancing with Oregon Ballet Theater, speaks of the timeframe when choreographers use classical vocabulary. “Only after the material is transferred to us and when we are in ‘cleaning’ mode, is the

more proper dance vocabulary prominently used, otherwise non-classical descriptions are used” (personal interview. July 20, 2015).

Meredith Dincolo, who trained in classical ballet, majored in dance at the University of Notre Dame and danced professionally with contemporary companies in the United States such as Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, and France’s Lyon Opera Ballet, speaks openly about her transition from student to professional. “I had a lot of catching up to do while in a contemporary ballet company, as I did not formally study alternative ways to move, such as Horton or Cunningham techniques”. When asked about her own readiness in regards to the collaboration process between choreographer and dancer, she states, “I was never asked for input as a student so this method came as a surprise to me.” Dincolo admits that her lack of experience then stifled what could have been a very valuable, life-changing process for a young dancer (personal interview. August 11, 2015).

### The Comfort Zone

It is apparent in more mature dancers that the choreographic process of “do as I do” is not about copying the information, but interpreting it back to the creator in a shared but individual language. This method is easier when dancer and choreographer have worked together previously. Either way, there is a comfort in movement being played back that seems organic and cohesive when predicting movement and transitions. The evidence of this playback produces a cohesive, more efficient process when dancer and choreographer have a history of working together.

Merce Cunningham, trendsetter and pioneer of mixing art mediums, was a prominent and influential choreographer for five decades. His collaborations with other artists from the 1940's until his death in 2009 provided radical and groundbreaking ideas. His avant-garde creations influenced generations of dance makers interested in working on a multi-disciplinary level. He was one of the first to introduce and pair technology with live dance performance. Cunningham proclaims, "The personality of the steps is adding human mannerisms, and realizing identity through the act of dancing" (Multimedia: Merce Cunningham A Lifetime of Dance, 2000). Cunningham's words bring to question the shaping of identity through classical ballet curricula or vice versa. It is the syllabus that may guide the student to find their identity but the choices may be limited.

"The syllabus does not teach" says my teaching mentor and director of The Washington School of Ballet, Kee Juan Han. "It is the way the information is presented to the students that is important". It is up to the educators, who inform and enforce, to prioritize and introduce the use of individuality. When the student is mature enough to recognize and access pathways of creativity, those choices can be properly guided. Timing is paramount and this window of opportunity to extract creative energies while continuing to perfect technique must be presented at the most crucial interval of development.

### Thesis Choreography Experience

My thesis choreography presentation, *Troika*, utilized the talent of three dancers: two females and one male from The Washington School of Ballet (TWSB). I had

intended to use dance majors from the School of Dance at George Mason University (GMU), but was unable to due to time constraints and lack of studio space. Fortunately, I found a compromise that used both groups to provide me with more data for this thesis and it resulted in a stronger overall argument. These two separate casts, GMU students and the TWSB students, had very different ways of working. I will present these findings later in this chapter after explaining the working process with each cast of dancers.

The TWSB students I secured were upper level, pre-professionals accustomed to working with different teachers and resident choreographers. My original idea for a ten-minute piece of choreography was a pas de deux; a dance for two. I intended on revealing a relationship with tension and neutrality through movement with off-center balances and unconventional pointe work for the female. Envisioning my goal of stringent but slightly uncomfortable movement changed the way I needed the dancers to relate, so I decided to go with three performers instead of two.

In the beginning, only portions of the movement were clear to me. More specific were the transitions and relationship connections between the dancers. I also had an initial idea of having one female on pointe and one in flat ballet slippers. When I choreographed sections with all three of them dancing together I realized one dancer on pointe and one dancer off pointe looked like a mistake, or worse, when it came to performance time, would appear as a last minute injury. I decided to keep both ladies in pointe shoes because I wanted a strong common bond between the two. I felt more reliant on their technical strengths but that was not my original intention.

Before going into the studio, I had decided I was going to give each TWSB dancer some time to help me create. I would place parameters on this task, but in the end, I wanted to understand how they intended to communicate their strengths. Mostly due to culture, the respective personalities of the TWSB students were extremely different but predictable. Predictable, because being one of their primary classical ballet teachers, I knew their work habits well. I did manage to keep an open mind and waited for a deeper creativity to emerge; but unfortunately, nothing spontaneous and truly noteworthy happened in our ten weeks together. I can safely assume that their lack of experience prevented them from asking certain questions and exploring risk and other more adventurous processes.

During the choreographic process, it took me two weeks to complete less than five minutes of movement. I was panicking. I began in the studio choreographing the solo due to dancer availability. I had a particular movement in mind for this dancer but I also knew that I wanted a stand-alone solo to use for other purposes, which I will explain later. Choreographing the pas de deux of *Troika* was more difficult because I had to separate myself from those successful masterpieces that inspire me, like sections from Crystal Pite and Christopher Wheeldon ballets. I have seen so much contemporary dance these last ten years I was afraid I would unconsciously copy phrases that had had an impact on me, only to realize that surrendering to inspiration is not a bad option.

In my experience as a professional dancer in the studio working with choreographers in original movement, they tend to bring a clear vision of a theme step and this turns in to a sequence we see again or many times within the piece. It also helps

to build further within the framework when the choreographer can see the dancers working within this theme. It would either work or perhaps it would not, so I began with this process. I was hoping the dancers would find it useful to contribute their own movement to the process. I finally did find independence while in the studio and came upon a style that felt comfortable. It also helped that when I finally heard the beautiful original music supplied to me by Arsen Sumbatyan, the dialogue became more clear.

I approached musician and colleague, Arsen Sumbatyan, about composing original music for my thesis piece. He was excited, as this would be his first collaboration with a dance choreographer. In the early stages, we both were looking toward one another for more information and, perhaps, inspiration. I began choreographing the female solo without music, as Arsen was unsure of the style of music I wanted. He asked for samples, so I chose to send him small clips of successful choreographer/composer collaborators such as William Forsythe/Tomas Willems, and Alonzo King/Pharoah Sanders. Arsen also asked me to videotape the solo so he could allow the movement to guide his musical discovery. For a novice choreographer like myself, this “chicken-or-the-egg” scenario did not work in my favor. I began, with much difficulty, choreographing without music. One week later he delivered the surprising, beautiful, and airy sound for the female solo.

Our first few meetings about this collaboration were to communicate the feel and expectation of this ten-minute piece of choreography. Arsen was looking for a narrative, but I did not want him to get hung up on a story. Perhaps I was set on a particular process with the dancers from which I did not want to deviate. The only literal translation I had about my piece was naming it *Troika*, which holds various meanings, one being

translated from the Russian language as a three-horse carriage. The political meaning defines a trio of power and this trifecta is what ultimately shaped the form as three dancers and not two. I liked my process of linking these various meanings, as it inspired me to truly define the relationships between each dancer. I also named this piece of choreography to pay respect to Arsen, as he very much misses his Russian homeland and this respect and homage comes out in his work.

The training backgrounds of the three dancers from TWSB that I chose for this piece are similar. The dancers, at that time, were all under eighteen years old and had trained in classical ballet for more than ten years. Their current pre-professional dance program at The Washington School of Ballet has them working up to twenty-five hours per week with three of those hours per week dedicated to either contemporary or character dance class. At this level they are expected to adapt to various movement styles with ease and ability, and all three of them do nicely.

Interestingly enough, I found that what these dancers easily picked up on in *Troika* were the classical steps hidden within the contemporary dance work. However, it took them numerous weeks before they found comfort in the steps to drop their heads and flex their thoracic spines. I gave gender-neutral steps to all three dancers. Even though I had the female dancers on pointe, the push-pull relationship between the three was clear and unified. The pointe work was unusual, asking the two female dancers to crawl on their pointes in a low, hips to heels, position, like a crab walking across the sand. One female dancer, being five feet two inches, and the other, almost six feet, had difficulty

executing this crouching step. After much deliberation and exploration, we successfully found a technical approach that worked for their respective body frames.

The male dancer was very receptive to the movement. I could tell his Chinese dance training exposed him to interdisciplinary methods and techniques. His movement was uninhibited and he displayed ease when jumping between classical and a more undefined style of moving. I did not have to direct his overall quality, as it was natural and mature. I also felt in him a sense of liberation when connecting sequences and steps because his body response was so calm and accessible. I wanted to explore this reaction more because working with him brought a very interesting, creative piece out of me. I found myself using his movement quality as an image for guiding my choreography.

During my process with the dancers I noticed that the conservative nature of classical training had an arresting effect on the imagery I presented to them. For example, during the pas de deux section, the female dancer was asked to drop her upper body into her partner's arms and reveal to the audience the burden of this weight. This instruction was never fully realized. If dancers cannot remove themselves from the conventional track of classical correctness in order to explore beauty in the dynamic of opposition this can create a bigger problem. The foundation of contemporary movement asks the dancer to abandon certain ideas and images, so as to start with a clean slate. One does not have to surrender the rigor and discipline associated with classical ballet, but rather, enforce it upon the possibility of other options.

During the choreographic process I used classical vocabulary with very unique descriptions such as "slide lunge" or "opposition passé" to further explain and

communicate the steps. When I asked my dancers to improvise and give me eight counts of steps the resulting shapes were mostly classical. I could tell they did not want to present to me something out of their comfort zone. I later asked one of the female dancers to create a sequence of steps that got her to the floor and up again. It took her about three rehearsals to present this task to me and when I asked her about her experience of this process she revealed, “I did not want it to feel or look ugly”.

Historically, classical ballet was a reaction to a search for proper training and etiquette within the European Renaissance court. What started out as ceremonial events for Louis XIV and his courtiers later became performance art for the masses. The codification of classical ballet, in its earliest form, happened in Versailles, France, during the middle of the seventeenth century. Throughout the years, dance pedagogy has been refined within different styles, but what remains is the simplicity of line and beauty of movement. Students are trained to respect the splendor of both positions and transitions between steps. Today, and through time, teachers associate words and phrases like “beauty”, “grace”, and “elegance” when referring to the physical execution of dance. It is not uncommon to hear students refer or see them cue their own beautiful images in terms of execution. “Feeling ugly” refers to a difference in what they are taught in terms of implementation. Instructors of classical ballet engrain the expectation of visual and emotional beauty when executing classical ballet. If a student is being asked to perform the step against this expectation and/or experience, this may be confusing. The maturity level of a student cannot always dictate whether a step is beautiful or not; only that it is not how their body is trained to perform that particular step or sequence of steps.

We revisit the process of the high-level classical ballet student repeating steps and sequences to produce the same result both visually and biomechanically. They work until it matches the image in their mind or the physical shapes they have made before. What they do not factor in is the value in achieving the goal and that the outcome is a fundamental of contemporary work. Their classical mindset is to produce an end result that mirrors their training to achieve the final position of movement: with predictability.

As a teacher of both university students and those in a professional training school, I have the unique experience of instructing students with various dance backgrounds. Most university students come from a classical ballet foundation but have more exposure to other dance styles, which tend to make them more open to other movement experiences. Students in a professional training program at a school have less time for other dance forms, as their niche is the classical ballet training itself. Most likely, a prestigious ballet studio will stay within the classical footprint, offering upper level students more variety within the classical syllabus. This may include partnering classes, character dance, and the occasional modern dance or contemporary movement class within their training week.

The research I generated by using this alternative cast of dancers from the School of Dance at George Mason University was valuable in helping me establish a deeper hypothesis in terms of student abilities. For the sake of time, I chose to teach the solo from *Troika* as a duet to my 2015 spring semester class of dance majors. I gave them the same parameters as were given to the Washington School of Ballet dancers: the freedom to change particular sequences of musical phrasing and to also improvise falling to the

floor and getting back up in the given counts of music. I also gave the GMU students the option to perform the duet showcasing their creative choices in terms of how they relate to another dancing body in space. As a result, the Mason students had more interesting and creative musical ranges and were successfully weaving together multiple dance techniques. The more they rehearsed, the more inspired and comfortable they became. I gave them ten minutes of class time (roughly one hour in total) to rehearse and present the duet as their final exam. During this rehearsal period, they did not appear to be struggling with the process and or with the improvisation. They learned the material quickly and the questions they asked had a different content than those of TWSB dancers. The GMU dancers wanted to know more about music and timing and this seemed to inspire their movement quality, rather than being guided by a physical feeling. I also noticed that with the George Mason dancers, the layers of their work changed and took on new shapes the longer they watched one another. In the end, they presented confident work with little rehearsal and feedback from me. This is a beneficial attribute that bodes well for students looking to advance into the professional field in dance.

### An Open Mindset

I journaled my choreographic process in both video and written format. I notated that the three student dancers of TWSB rarely asked me questions or talked during the process of choreographing and rehearsing. In addition, I noticed that when I asked them to help me come up with movement, it was not completely welcomed. They felt more comfortable developing their own choices after time to think. It is rare for the classically trained dancer to engage in dialogue during class or while being coached. It is a one-way

process in the studio: the coach or teacher discusses and the student listens. As in most disciplines, the onus of progression and success is personal, forcing the student to rely on their problem solving skills. There is a healthy dose of self-evaluation that dancers learn in the classroom and this creates a responsibility of independent learning. Sometimes this type of scrutiny can prevent students from taking risks for the sake of learning and discovery. If we know that contemporary dance relishes in the development of exploring choices in movement and execution, how can we expect classically trained dancers to jump from one mindset to another and produce quick results?

Both veteran and novice company dancers agree that it is true that generally contemporary choreographers are asking dancers to contribute to the development process when creating a work. Albrecht explains that dancers perfect the repetition of steps in classical ballet, but what choreographers are looking for is the humanity in the step. Referring back to Cunningham's "realizing identity through the act of dancing" many ballet dancers can only be realized if their character has a story and the dancer is coached to achieve this identity. The role of coaching steps is to determine or predict an outcome and this leaves little or no room for discovery. Yet, when faced with an unpredictable outcome, the dancer must think fast and keep an open mind. This rule does not effect the dancer's ability to quickly pick up steps when working with a choreographer. On the contrary, it allows the dancer the versatility to present new options for input and this mindset is appealing to directors and choreographers.

### **PART III: OTHER OPTIONS**

For fifteen years I have been involved in the elite training of classical ballet dancers, both in a professional training school and for university dance majors. While both groups of students have similar training pedigree, they mature very differently.

The university dance student may have been fully or partially exposed to different forms of classical ballet training during their years of education. I believe that this type of student has less to lose in terms of developmental stigma. Let me be clear. In my professional observation, neither group of students is better off than the other during the training stages. I make the statement that what classical ballet teachers must prepare the student to do, for college or for the professional dance track, is to help them assemble a toolbox of skills for particular desired outcomes.

This broad recommendation of “other options” will be put into more detail in my recommendations section but I do want to touch on why these other possibilities must be integrated into a dance curriculum. The argument from the classical ballet school director is that there are limited hours to train. Unless one is enrolled in a conservatory and receives academic education symbiotic with dance education, there are not enough hours in the week to prepare a workable curriculum that stresses this versatile classical dancer.

The limited hours of training for students of a professional classical ballet school such as The Washington School of Ballet are hard pressed to recommend or offer other

styles outside of the ballet footprint. The upper level curriculum (ages thirteen and older) at TWSB incorporates flamenco and contemporary dance into the study, but the only supplemental style added to the lower level program is jazz and character/folk dance.

While emphasizing high-level technique, teachers of classical ballet must also present perspective to a student as an option for personal growth. More specifically, teachers should stress the importance of a balanced dance education by incorporating other directives into the classical foundation. Classical ballet technique continues to provide fertile groundwork for other movement styles but to assume that it is the only style is unwise. The intense focus on technical execution during all developmental stages of classical ballet curricula should remain a fundamental tool that the student trusts. However, a stubborn and biased classical mindset may hinder the creative options associated with professional readiness the student will need to get them to that next phase.

## **PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS**

The slightest shift in culture can be recorded in an artistic result. Any effect, whether social or political may cause an influential ripple in the art world. Shift, in terms of ballet productions, may be instigated or inspired through the choice of choreography, new dancers or artistic staff. This shift may also generate a change in venue, audience demographic, and funding or patronage. Ballet companies, when planning their production calendar, must give due diligence and consider their current repertory with serious alignment to the overall financial health of the organization. A company that operates with a ten-million-dollar budget or a one-hundred-thousand-dollar budget is smart to consider the current sociological changes and tastes within their community. The choice to add diverse movement into a mostly classical ballet repertory is a risk, especially when dealing with patrons that are subscribers or long-time supporters. This move may be motivated by the chance to sustain, renew, and innovate the organization, but the true result is how the community accepts this proposal.

Ballet companies and dance choreographers from ten years ago have different considerations than they do today. Today's ballet companies are not merely looking for young talent to employ, but towards adaptable and diverse energies to make up their workforce. Students who easily adjust to company life, physically and emotionally, manage to use this platform of adaptability to further their dance careers. Professional

dancers will use classwork as a trusted and healthy foundation for movement, but most importantly, will engage this classical technique to explore movement of non-classical vocabulary.

Ballet companies that suddenly add more contemporary or modern dance to their programming may alienate existing long-term donors but may gain new, younger supporters, conceivably ready to break down cultural stereotypes concerning classical ballet. It may take many seasons for a ballet company to incorporate new repertory without disturbance of resourcing and I am not only speaking of a financial forecast but something more personal: the investment of company dancers. The training and retention of dancers is one major transition of change that must be aligned with this vision.

Employee changeover in any business is a stress on company time and money. Dancer talent and ability should be taken into consideration when a ballet company is setting repertory for the upcoming seasons. In order to set repertory, artistic and administrative leaders of the company must look at the talent at hand and ask if the given talent matches the expectation of the forecasted season of production. It is preferable that an organization develop a company of professional dancers with wide skill sets of technique and movement because it is difficult to hire supplemental dancers per production (mostly for monetary reasons). This is why it is important for directors and choreographers to wisely manage their investment in the dancer talent. The positive lasting effects align for both parties. Dancers are given job security and the opportunity to successfully represent the mission of the ballet company through movement and the company is organized and cohesive.

In order to acquire the proper venue for particular productions, leadership at a given dance company must contract and set repertory for at least three seasons out. Companies and choreographers are interested in training dancers that represent the climate within their professional company culture, but may have less patience in terms of understanding their kinetic maturity level and gaps in training for this criteria. For example, contemporary choreographers with a very precise vision (and usually little time to set their work in the studio) seek out dancers who can work with a variety of movement options. Young dancers new to professional life are limited when it comes to experiences with other movement styles and this is due to the constraints of their classical training. Some classically trained dancers are curious about alternative ways to move but perhaps are not skilled at how to approach these options.

Training a classical dancer is a long-term obligation. Agrippina Vaganova based her popular classical ballet technique on an eight level progression ensuring the student is ready for graduation by eighteen years of age. Vaganova, one of the most influential teachers of classical ballet, studied dance as a young woman with French, Italian, Danish, and Russian ballet masters. Her method fused many of the best qualities of each technical style, churning out more professional dancers to date than any other classical ballet method. Today, this classical ballet pedagogy is the most accessed around the world and it continues to realize great success, transforming students into professional dancers.

There is no other way to develop a classical or contemporary ballet dancer without guidance within the classical framework. Currently, there are no successful programs in serious ballet training institutes like The Washington School of Ballet that

bring attention to this need of producing graduates able to respond maturely to progressive company culture with a variety of contemporary choreography. A classical ballet company that only presents historic and new classical ballets does not exist today, so why are we still training our dancers on this trajectory? Cultural change is apparent, as represented by the diverse audience demographic. Worldwide distribution is making dance of all styles more accessible; therefore, accepting and integrating more forms of hybrid movement. This signifies the need to include a broader scope of training opportunities to produce curious students of dance ready for today's movement needs.

The recommendations I make in this section will never veer away from honoring a strong classical ballet foundation because this is a necessary layer to build from. I added specific detail (in the upper levels only) to the “sample alternative sequence” as the child develops strongly into each training foundation. Enforcing a supplementary movement option is paramount in developing not only their curiosity to explore how these styles connect, but also helps to acquire necessary critical thinking skills when learning choreography, or later, are choreographing themselves.

The Pre-Elementary Division years, from ages two to six years, include basic positions of the body, arms, and head, and learning classical vocabulary. The addition of free play (early onset of improvisation) in the Pre-Elementary curriculum will develop simple somatic awareness. Adding dance science (such as somatic training) is important for educators to communicate to the student the importance of biomechanics. Understanding the mechanical principles of motion allows the student to develop and enhance their full capabilities in terms of movement technique. It is important to

introduce simple somatic work in the early developmental years because students will access this function throughout their training. Additionally, a strong foundation in somatics will reduce the risk for injury in their journey of training towards a possible career in dance.

In the upper divisions, when the student is strong enough physically and mentally to focus on the coordination of classical ballet steps with music, we add more intricate movement studies to their training. Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced Divisions focus on recognizing the difference between upright, proper classical alignment and alternatives that may distort or compromise this alignment. In the highest training division, the sample alternative recommendations like Irene Dowd's somatic/imagery training with emphasis on initiation of movement source, and the improvisational technique of Ohad Naharin's Gaga language, will allow the student the opportunity to build a strong creative foundation when engaging in the collaborative process.

**Pre-Elementary Division -Two to six years old:** When I questioned some of the most successful, diverse dancers about their early training more than half credit their fearlessness to tumbling as a child. What we observe on any given playground are great opportunities for young children to hone motor development skills and expand their critical thinking. This basic necessity also allows the young child to explore and interact with others within the environment. Children at play test kinetic sensibilities while reinforcing developmental brain/body awareness.

When young bodies are moving in space, it is important to introduce and guide productive neurological patterns for healthy transfer of energy through particular joints.

The importance of guiding this age-appropriate material is outlined by Dr. Krasnow and Wildmerding (2009): a general model of exploration in rhythm, space, balance, and locomotion should precede formal training in the vernacular of ballet or any codified technique. This approach would make early dance training process-driven as opposed to product-driven. It is likely that if general locomotor skills are the focus of early dance training, specific complex skills would be more easily learned as the dance matures.

Sophisticated motor patterns for young students in a movement class requires an instructor to have good working knowledge on how to produce effective and efficient ways to develop this skill properly. Children do not have to fully understand somatic and/or sensory systems, but as educators, we creatively guide the knowledge that gives them images to remember, recognize, and employ.

Training in the pre-academic stages will have a strong focus on musicality and coordination while acquiring strength and flexibility with the introduction of simple classical vocabulary. As recorded above by Drs. Krasnow and Wilmerding, we learn that the student is too young and not yet emotionally ready for the rigor of the discipline. Combining common locomotion skills within the discipline of classical ballet, teachers set a foundation for the student to integrate more complicated motor skills associated with the rigor of the discipline. Rigors such as postural control and balance are important to establish, but children do not develop this understanding and integration until after age seven. It is imperative that ballet teachers understand at what developmental stage to introduce these age-appropriate motor behaviors.

In the Pre-Elementary Division, some ballet terminology may find its way into the dance studio for young dancers between the ages of two and six, but the focus is on strengthening the body and exploring biomechanics for kinesthetic potential.

*Recommendations:* Forty-five minutes per week –coordination of everyday steps such as jumping, skipping, hopping to music while learning rhythms. Exploration of movement through creation (choreography), improvisation, while moving independently, and as a group. Providing images that children of the pre-elementary division can relate and recognize is recommended. Closer to five or six years of age, floor work is recommended to locate, understand, and work directly from the power of their center or frequently referred to in dance as “core”. This area is specifically located at the middle of their pelvis: the sacrum.

**Elementary Division -Seven to twelve years old:** This crucial age sets the foundation for acquiring proper alignment and strength to execute steps and make classical shapes. The focus remains Vaganova-based and the principles of this style stress the full use of the body in every movement being performed. Agrippina Vaganova was noted in *The Fourth Russian Edition of Basic Principles of Classical Ballet*, to be “inspired by artistic innovation” and “an unhesitant introduction to all new movement into her lessons in order to prepare the aspiring artists and young students for working in contemporary productions” (Chistyakova xiii). Her incorporation and the correct balance of repetition and fresh movement was key when setting this groundwork.

The first few years of classical ballet curricula includes floor exercises based around hip and spine flexibility and stabilization. Ten to fifteen minutes of floor work at

the beginning of each class prepares the body to work in unison for proper alignment during execution. The study of simple foot and head positions is emphasized in the elementary series. The importance of coordinating music with movement is stressed in accordance with breath to compliment lines and transitions. A limited scope of épaulement is introduced to instill neurodevelopment (habits in the body). Repetitive exercises in this elementary division develop stability, coordination, and strength.

*Recommendations:* It is important to continue with tumbling and gymnastics in the first few years of this division. Tumbling allows the student to feel comfortable with their chin tucked into their chest and furthers the understanding of how to get up and down from the floor. If taught early enough, the student may show signs of a more exploratory approach when they do learn contemporary work in the intermediate division. By teaching a low-pressure, fearless method of transitions between steps, students may take more chances and use risk as an outlet of creative choice. Instruction should allow creative play at the end of each class to highlight improvisation and musical choices. Pre-pointe exercises with props when needed (example: with both hands on the barre, student places a tennis ball between feet in parallel position, slowly rising up and down on the balls of the feet with three quarters of the foot off of the floor; and the use of small-sized marbles to pick up with the toes, under the ball of the foot, strengthening primary and secondary muscles associated with pointe work). Ten year olds begin an introduction to elementary exercises in somatic training. It also incorporates Pilates, a fitness system created by Joseph Pilates in 1918, with a principal focus on controlling movement through full-body integration and Gyrokinesis, a methodology that develops functional strength and joint articulation.

Introducing these mindful movement practices at this age will help target spine stability with the aid and coordination of specific core muscles. Students will learn proper cues to engage healthy patterns. Alternative training in addition to classical ballet training: one time per month for one half hour as we do not want to deviate too much from the importance of learning the basic positions at this age.

Sample alternative sequences:

*Pilates:* Articulation of spine in supine position: slow roll up and down with knees bent - feet on floor; Scissors (alternating leg switches –body on the mat, hands slightly under hips for lower back support). Rolling Like a Ball (from sitting, rolling in a ball onto your mid-back and rocking back to sitting); Swimming (on stomach to target internal, external abdominals and erector spinae muscles).

*Gyrokinesis:* Understanding circular range of motion while stabilizing core. Exercises include The Twist –sitting cross-legged and twisting rib cage, shoulders and head right than left stabilizing your pelvis; The Wave –undulation of spine in standing, sitting, or on all fours; Knee-to-Forehead Series (on all fours), and Side Arches (standing up).

*Somatic:* Irene Dowd’s “Freeing Feet” exercise: move each toe separately, offering resistance for an extra strengthening opportunity; learn and understand the mechanics of the cue “tripod of the foot”: articulation of the forefoot, midfoot, and rearfoot for understanding the foot’s role while executing jumps and (for the females) pointe work.

**Intermediate Division- Thirteen to sixteen years old:** The vocabulary and steps become more difficult when the student begins working the épaulement of the upper body in coordination with the hip placement, leg lines, and foot placement of the lower

body. At thirteen years old, the body is much stronger for handling the pace and amount of the work. This division introduces more intricate and complex pointe work for the female student and varied tempos in batterie. Classes in other styles of dance such as folk, African, modern, or jazz at this age are most likely offered in professional training schools one or two times per week.

*Recommendations:* Floor work may continue before each class yet I recommend a more detailed understanding of how to strengthen intrinsic foot muscles to provide more powerful jumps and a healthy approach to more complicated pointe work. Additional focus should be given to off balance pointe work and rapid shifts of weight in allegro combinations. Classes in alternative dance styles such as flamenco, modern (diversity in offered styles –Horton, Cunningham, and Limon), contemporary, choreography, improvisation, and music appreciation offered up to three times per week. Somatic work must be included two times per month one hour each.

#### Sample alternative sequences

*Pilates:* continue with spine articulation and strengthening (see above) lifting the upper body off the floor for Scissors; Teaser –in supine, simultaneously lifting upper body and legs to meet on a “V” diagonal -five sets.

*Gyrokinesis:* coordinating core stability using a spiral system -exercises includes The Twist, Forward Leg Pumps (scissors or bicycle), Side Circles (sitting on mat with arms propped behind your shoulders –both legs move together from left to right utilizing rectus abdominis, internal and external oblique).

*Somatic:* Continue with Dowd’s “Foot Freeing” exercises adding “inch-worm”-heel toward ball of foot keeping toes long and uncurled then lengthening toes away from heel, continue this inching forward. Reverse. Teaching Dowd’s Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Patterning (PNF) exercises for proper transfer of energy through joints as a way to increase range of motion. PNF patterns can be performed in hip, shoulder, and torso targets.

*Modern/Contemporary:* Offer Horton technique one time per week that strengthens and stretches in ways that compliment their classical training. One time per week for one hour of Horton technique with a certified teacher in hopes to produce coordination and Horton’s signature movement progression. Horton’s “fortifications” and “preludes” are meant to target strength and artistry, producing the goal of versatility. This type of contemporary movement opens the eyes and mind of the classical ballet student to current, forward thinking decisions. Introducing contemporary dance in this division is a proper gateway for the intensity and complexity expected in the next division.

*Improvisation:* Learning contact improvisation as a way to improve skills for falling, rolling, counterbalance, and the intricacies of momentum.

**Advanced Division -Seventeen years and older:** By showcasing advanced technical grounding, superior body coordination and a musical mastery, the student can focus on and continue to develop the skills to become a professional. Through sound technical proficiency, the advanced student may be freed up to work on an artistic level; this means realizing physical articulation through musical phrasing and relationship. In this phase of the student’s training, they should be applying their knowledge of dance science and

alternatively be exposed to many different forms of classical and non-classical dance and movement styles.

*Recommendations:* Floor work that specifically targets strength and coordination should continue on the student's own time, therefore more time can be spent on technique and the exploration of movement. The advanced dancer should continue with a curiosity in exploring somatic work as this may lead to discovering new initiations of movement.

When options open, problem solving sets in, and this characteristic is one of the building blocks of working directly with choreographers and directors. In addition to fifteen hours per week for classical technique (pointe, men's class, pas de deux), I recommend an additional four hours per week of alternative movement seminars and/or workshops that allow the student to break into a new range. Workshops in specific improvisation styles, such as Ohad Naharin's Gaga language, are necessary alternatives for training both the individual and a community of dancers to promote self-awareness. Naharin's Gaga language is designed to provoke movement in a way that often escapes the confines of classical ballet and modern technique. Understanding when to engage this system and how to employ it will be the goal of the advanced classical ballet student. Other seminars and workshops should include contemporary partnering (explorations of improvisation), repertory, and directed choreography. Students that are directed to explore choreography in non-traditional, creative ways can cultivate new freedoms and senses that may help define the students' own movement curiosities and/or capabilities.

Sample alternative sequences

*Pilates and Gyrokinesis:* classes and/or workshops will be as needed. Students should use these exercises as a pre-warm up for barre or on their own time.

*Somatic:* Specific Irene Dowd exercises that target spine/trunk stabilization and articulations of the hands, feet, and head. Dowd repertory recommendations: Horizons, Volutes, and Spirals. These choreographies are taught to help guide the reaction and quality of the student/dancer's biomechanical initiation of movement choices. Continue with PNF patterning, introducing upper body range of motion and stability due to the complication of partnering.

*Modern/Contemporary:* three hours per week of technique classes; repertory classes to provide the opportunity to work with a resident choreographer or a visiting guest artist/choreographer.

*Contemporary Pas de Deux:* one hour per week offering each student the chance to investigate classical ballet lines off balance, compromising alignment and center of balance to explore greater ranges of motion. Students may formulate efficient and creative working relationships that bring added value to choreographers interested in the collaboration process.

*Improvisation:* Continue various contact improvisational techniques, with specific focus on more complicated Gaga movement (as explained above), led by master teachers. In terms of improvisation, this specific, multi-dimensional style tasks the student to create connective awareness and discover alternative options of interaction and communication. Gaga language, as explained by Naharin, is a way to “change our movement habits by finding new ones. We go beyond our familiar limits” (<http://gagapeople.com/english/>).

*Directed Choreography*: offering the student the chance to be either a dancer and/or choreographer in the creation process. Experienced instructors that introduce the relationship between movement composition and basic music theory guide these exercises. The student will have the opportunity to create or dance in solo or ensemble work. They will have access to the tools to create or be part of the creation process as they learn the components of building choreography. All phases of this design will be given feedback by instructors, peers, and other possible sources of analysis.

## V: CONCLUSION

It was in 1820 when Danish born August Bournonville, questioned French renegade, Jean-George Noverre's classical ballet technique. Bournonville grew up with the teachings of his father, a pupil of the great ballet master, Noverre, respecting the discipline of pure, classical lines, away from the "vulgarity" of the Italian style. Alternatively, he observed that current classical ballet technique should not restrain the elements of the style but help to maintain and bring forward the new athleticism and thrill. Not only did he speak up against his famous father's teachings of Eurocentric classicism, but he also created a new era of artistic excellence, specifically calling back the virtue of the male *danseur*, lost in the French Romantic years. August Bournonville's curiosity in finding new language for his generation of dancers helped pave my investigations into what is missing in today's classical ballet pedagogy.

Eight years as a student of The Washington School of Ballet provided me with a safe, confident way of moving and executing steps. I was one of the top students in my class, with a professional contract waiting for me even before graduation. In my first year in a professional ballet company, The Washington Ballet, I had the opportunity to work with visionary and resident choreographer, Choo San Goh. I consider myself fortunate to have been trained by Mary Day and the instructors under her tutelage, but in hindsight,

that strict classical upbringing became an obstacle that I did not address and work through until my career was almost over.

As a young professional, when I was asked to express myself “outside of the box” I instantly thought this meant to abandon a piece of my training. Dancers repeat exercises ad nauseam to predict a particular muscle memory response to secure and inform their ballet technique. When Mr. Goh asked me to “stop thinking and just do”, I knew he meant to move without fear but I did not have the tools to execute this. Had I learned that I could vary results without constraint or mildly disassociate myself from particular pieces of the given structure, I would have had a different approach in this career trajectory. I might have enjoyed performing and the whole choreographic process more but I did not investigate this option until I met a man named Alonzo King. That being said, I am now obligated to send this message to ballet students in a very crucial time of their training.

A few years ago, I was sitting in the audience at the Center for the Arts in Fairfax, Virginia, watching a performance by the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet Company. I had heard a lot about this progressive, new company with its diverse repertory, so my expectation about seeing the dancers and watching them move in contemporary choreography was elevated. Days after that performance, I continued to think about the style, the choreography, and the dancers, wondering if there was a way to neatly categorize this show. The movement was interesting but not forward thinking and yet the dancers were physical, fearless, and noteworthy. What I remember most about that night was how many times I referenced the program. I was curious about the training of each

company member and wondered if their background prepared them properly for this type of movement. To no surprise I discovered that in reading the dancers' biographies the majority had strict classical ballet training, which supports my statement that contemporary movement attracts dancers with classical backgrounds. Branching out into contemporary movement is obviously a matter of choice, but clearly creating this as an option for students is our duty.

The one piece on the Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet program I found most fascinating was not because the style of movement was pleasing to me, but because this particular contemporary dance choreography had so many women dancing on pointe. This is not surprising, but I took notice in how the dancers presented the piece using the pointe shoe medium. There was a sense of discomfort or perhaps, a lack of confidence in their pointe technique that had a direct effect on the overall performance quality. As an instructor of classical ballet I am extremely particular about how pointe work is presented and executed, as too many choreographers use pointe shoes as a prop and not as a skill to showcase. The answer as to why contemporary choreographers choose to use pointe shoes as opposed to ballet slippers or bare feet must present itself in the material.

My inspiration to examine the training methods of current classical ballet students in professional ballet schools and universities evolved during my early research as did my purpose to unearth the specific question of whether or not classical ballet pedagogy truly is the proper foundation to support alternative movement styles. Classical ballet curriculum can prepare the student for classical ballet and contemporary work, but some additional movement methodologies should be instituted to achieve this. My philosophy

in this paper supports this theory by introducing fundamental techniques in various stages of dance development. It is imperative that the student be exposed (in gradual amounts) to other forms of dance and philosophy during the development of classical ballet technique. This would maximize their ability to effectively and seamlessly incorporate contemporary movement that choreographers and audiences seek in today's repertory. Failure to do so can limit the student's capacity to problem solve during choreographic sessions.

"Have you ever encountered Gaga or other types of improvisational work?" was one of the ten questions I asked my professional dancer subjects for this paper. One dancer's reply justified my push to create this opportunity to each student so they may see Gaga as a movement language option and not an artist on their iTunes playlist.

In this process of presenting a realistic, updated curriculum for classical ballet institutes, I have had uncomfortable conversations with some of my teachers and mentors. "If you add to the syllabus what are you taking away?" is something I have heard numerous times from my colleagues. What I uncover in this paper is that the most important practicalities need updating to stay current and flexible with the culture of change.

Accessibility and the creation of new movement styles also has the ability to shape an established foundation such as classical ballet technique. What I am responding to is the possibility that these influences present sufficient evidence to call for updated language and a new approach in classical dance pedagogy. The strongest defense must be made when suggesting any change of curriculum because we would not see results of

such modifications until years ahead. What I would like to offer is the assurance of protecting the classical ballet foundation, and it is only from this foundation that other forms may continue to find influence and inspiration. Yet, in order to protect it we must first define how that foundation is maintained and then delineate how other dance and philosophical techniques are incorporated with it. This would then allow today's choreographers and dancers to create and achieve the movement that reflects their community and their times. It is not too late to use this centuries-old classical ballet technique as a guide and as Mikhail Fokine suggests, "float with the tide". But he also leads us to "boldly set your course against the tide" when up for the challenge.

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

Kristina Windom was born on February 26, 1969 in Washington, DC and is an American Citizen. She graduated from Albert Einstein High School, in Kensington, Maryland, and from the prestigious Washington School of Ballet, in Washington, DC in 1987. She danced professionally with The Washington Ballet, The Cleveland Ballet, Lines Ballet, and with the Washington Opera. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Business Management from the University of Phoenix. She is currently a full-time instructor and Head of Faculty at The Washington Ballet, and an adjunct professor at the George Mason University School of Dance.