

Spring 2021

## The Museum Form: Artists' Reflections on a Life in Dance

Katherine A. Skinner  
*Bard College*

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### Recommended Citation

Skinner, Katherine A., "The Museum Form: Artists' Reflections on a Life in Dance" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 347.

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The Museum Form: Artists' Reflections on a Life in Dance

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Katherine Skinner

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

# The Museum Form: Artists' Reflections on a Life in Dance



*Jean Churchill dances in the Boston Ballet Company.*

The Dancers.

**Jean Churchill**, Professor of Dance at Bard College and former member of the Boston Ballet. She left the classical ballet world in her early 20's to pursue modern dance.

**Christopher Croucher**, Bard alum and dancer with a ballet company in Massachusetts. He dances on pointe.

**Cat Curry**, Dancer trained in ballet, modern and jazz techniques.

**Wendy Jones**, Dance teacher at Lowell High School in San Francisco. She created a four-tier program and teaches beginning to advanced classes, as well as being the artistic director of the school's dance company.

**M.**, Professor of Dance Studies at a Bay Area university, and a classically trained dancer. She went through a reckoning with ballet at the end of high school and in her early college years, and was able to find her creative voice again through an intensive study of flamenco.

**Katie Roy**, Dancer, teacher and performer originally from Massachusetts. After college she moved to San Francisco to attend the Alonzo King Lines Ballet Training Program.

**Antonia Salathe**, Bard sophomore with a classical background, and particular interest in modern dance and choreography.

**Maria Simpson**, Director of the dance program at Bard and classically trained performer. She holds an MFA in Dance, and much of her work is centered around anatomy and musculoskeletal alignment.

**Isabella Spagnuolo**, Bard Junior and dancer with a particular emphasis on ballet. As a fun fact, she's been in every single piece I've choreographed at Bard, aside from the one time I had to make a solo due to Covid.

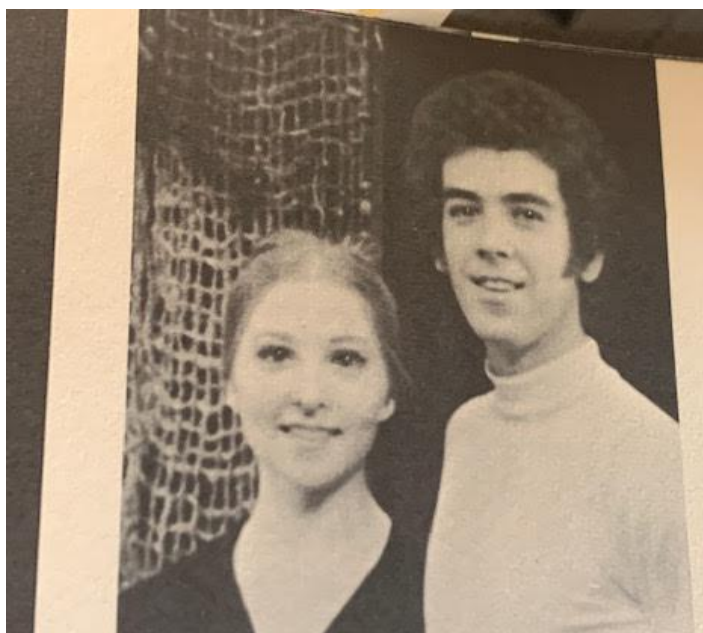
A young dancer walks into a ballet studio. She is surrounded by tradition; hair pulled back tightly above fresh faces, black leotards, pink tights, slender ankles that glide smoothly into petite soft canvas slippers. A grand piano sits in the corner, where an accompanist sits accompanied by a thick music binder, though they know every phrase, every count, every step by heart. The floors are a smooth, newly laid-down Marley, with the perfect bounce for jumping and the perfect absorption for landing. Barres are laid out along the walls, for honing technique, for bringing your leg up higher and higher with every class, for a constant striving to be *better*. Mirrors are set up in the front for learning, or for constant judgement, depending on how you choose to see it. Everything, and everyone, has a role to fill and a place to do it.

This young dancer has walked into the epitome of a dance studio, of a place so historical and yet so deeply ingrained in the minds of not only artists but of the public, that it is the first thing we jump to when we imagine the refining of dance technique and the creation of movement work. If we shift our minds from the simple aesthetic of this space, to the experience lived within it, what do we imagine? Years of sweat and strain and passion that lead the young artists to concert halls and Teen Vogue videos where the oversplits are taught to the general public?\* To company contracts and photo shoots? To bodily strain and physical therapy and Black Swan-esque stress? To perform gender in such a way that women are “soft” and men are strong? Or can it mean something more gentle, more loving, more of a much-needed creative outlet for a young person who just wants to *move*? The question is not simple, and the answers are even more convoluted.

The lived experience of dancers is something that is deeply personal and fascinating to me. For years I’ve been questioning the role of movement training, body image, and gender roles on how we grow up and into our creative practice. These are inquiries that have shaped all aspects of my life, from the studio to the stage to how I walk through the world. And since dance

has been such an integral part of my life from a young age, I find it somewhat hard to separate myself from these experiences and see them in an objective way. This tangled web of bodily expression in performance and life has formed a background for my personality in the world and on the stage, and leaves me with all these questions about how we got to these norms. And so for my senior project, I'm exploring the lives of dance artists and how their training, body image, and gender identity have shaped their creative expression, what it means for them as people, and if these ideals are being challenged today, how?

Throughout the past few months, I've been conducting conversations with dance artists from different places, of different identities, and within different movement styles. All of them bring a new perspective, and they are the reason this work can exist. And while they each have their own unique story to tell, I've been able to find common threads that both illuminate the questions I've asked and bring me closer to some answers. These are their stories.



*Jean Churchill and Walter Kaiser in rehearsal.*

## The Class.

This young dancer is, presumably, a student. She will have her feet placed, her head turned, her arms adjusted, her body rooted into and out of a movement tradition. She'll learn the steps and the counts and hopefully, she'll perform them. If all goes well, she'll grow and improve and become a proficient practitioner of the dance. Maybe she'll join a company. Maybe she'll make her own.

The class is the first step, the fundamental footing, of a Western traditional dance education. It is the heartbeat of a performer's practice, a daily ritual in both grounding and striving. Before my work with these dancers, I'd heard it described as a sacred space. Now I'm not so sure.

As we sat on a bench outside the dance studios of the Fisher Center at Bard, Antonia Salathe' dryly said, "Traditional ballet teachers don't know what mental health is."

This is a wide, broad statement, and it's weight sat with us for a few moments. I asked her to elaborate, and the stories that she shared were similarly heavy. Antonia described her training at the Cornish College Preparatory Program in Seattle, where her teachers were generally supportive and caring figures. But while the space was liberal, there was a culture of intensity that is all-too familiar in a traditional dance class setting. From the program's perspective it was "We want you to push yourself. Which was good in the sense that they didn't force our turnout or force us to do pointe, but it was bad in the sense that everyone is held to this standard of perfection, no matter what different things you were going through...I was terrified to make a mistake." I asked her what fostered this feeling of fear and uncertainty, and she described a strict dichotomy between the teachers and the students. "We were very much in this space where we could not question anything...We weren't allowed to question the way they were doing things," she explained. The instructor held, commanded, the studio, and the young dancers were to follow without any personal interjections or expressions of concern.

While many of the dancers had wonderful teachers who were very supportive, certain elements of Antonia's story were echoed by many of the other people I spoke to. The dance class, from their perspectives, bred a culture of personal fear, competition and general ill-ease.

Jean Churchill spoke extensively about her time in the Boston Ballet as both a student and a company member. She described a teacher who utilized certain tactics to create this power dynamic. "The ballet company," she stated, "...from the get-go, it was a very abusive place. And the way that she would humiliate- she would teach by humiliation, and bullying, and abusive techniques." These would involve a certain amount of body-shaming, of intense scrutiny, and of extensive comments on the personal lives of company members. One such dancer was particularly subjected to this after beginning a relationship with another company member. Jean described how they had been in a group rehearsal, and at some point the young woman was singled out, ridiculed for missing a step, and the teacher/rehearsal director said that if she had "gotten more sleep at night", maybe she would have performed it to her liking. This culture of intense scrutiny, as well as invasive and inappropriate personal remarks, was apparently a hallmark of both the classroom and rehearsal space.

Hearing these two perspectives, I was disappointed but not surprised. There is absolutely a stereotype attached to traditional Western dance education. The intense ballet teacher who yells and instills fear and shames. There's a root to it, there's a place it comes from and a place it exists. Having heard these two accounts, I was starting to get a glimpse into it.





*Jean Churchill and members of the Boston Ballet in "Giselle."*

M.<sup>1</sup>, a professor of dance studies and classically-trained ballet dancer, provided one of the most honest and heartbreaking accounts of her younger years in the studio. She studied intensively for most of her childhood and teenage years, and described a teacher-student relationship that was riddled with corrupt power dynamics, lack of personal autonomy, and no room to question. She stated,

“ I think the dominant thing that I remember from my years sort of age 8 to age 18 was such a meaningless enforced hierarchy. And my question would be now, directed toward my old teachers, is, why was it so important that everyone in that class knew exactly where they stood in relation to his or her peers at all times? Why did it matter? To me, right now, that is a mechanism of obsessive control. And it really put some harsh dividing lines between us as young people who should have been supportive of each other. You know, everyone talks about, you know, ballet's competitive spirit. But I'm interested in thinking about where

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<sup>1</sup> Initialed for confidentiality.

that comes from. It comes from, from...asking 7-year olds, 8-year olds, 9-year olds, to not come to stand in the front line for center unless you are asked to based on how you've performed in barre. So, I remember just, there's this constant like picking people out from the group to spotlight, or to denigrate, as the mood struck you...There was no lesson to be learned from that, is really what I remember. I knew that I wasn't the most talented in the room. And this constant emphasis on reiterating that, on reiterating the spectrum of sort of who's the best, and who's really struggling, and who's in the middle, it was...I think it destroyed any shred of confidence that I had in any of the gifts that I may have otherwise brought to that studio. Right, it doesn't make you trust yourself, it doesn't make you think that you have something to contribute. And it-what it does, I think at the end of the day, is it makes the teacher into this larger-than-life figure that must be worshiped, because they have all the knowledge and all the control and all the power. So that's really the main takeaway. Enforced, meaningless hierarchy.``

M.'s words were striking, and wholly exemplary of the rigid dichotomy, the intense critiquing, and the overall unhealthy environment of the dance class. M. and I continued our conversation, discussing what this environment meant for the personal and artistic development of young people. She stated, "...what do young brains do when faced with that kind of structure? What I saw, honestly, was- we start doing it to ourselves. We-we inflict more of it on ourselves..I feel that sort of obsessive meaningless rumination, I think that's one of the worst things that my ballet training has taught me, is that mindset."

What stood out to me most both from this, and from previous accounts, was the reckoning with the idea of why. What is the reasoning for this culture to exist in what should, at least on the surface, be a place to learn and grow? And if this is the unfortunate standard that has been set in dance education, what is there otherwise?

Wendy Jones is a dance teacher at a public high school in San Francisco. More specifically, the one I attended. She was my teacher from freshman to senior year, and is someone I consider to be critical in helping develop my interest in dance education and choreography. When I think about my training versus someone like M.'s, there are almost no similarities in the environments we experienced. And yet we both chose to pursue dance. Dance

pedagogy doesn't have to be harmful, unhealthy or reductive. The goal is the same: to teach someone a technique. The methods, however, are night and day.

Ms. Jones described her own early training, which was positive on the whole. Her late mother was a dance teacher, and quality arts education was something she was immersed in from a young age. Not just technical proficiency, but general well-being, was emphasized. This is something that she tries to bring into her own work as a teacher. "My goal is to get the dancer to dance as an individual and to understand their authenticity in themselves, and really find their unique voice," she said. Every semester, she asks each of her new students to fill out a questionnaire detailing their interest in the class, as well as some personal details, such as the music they're currently listening to or the cultural dances their families taught them. Ms. Jones said this is an important aspect of building a classroom community, as well as each dancer's own unique voice within their work. "Just getting them to answer those questions so they understand their specificity within themselves is important to the dance, to the movement."

The dance training that M. received was on the whole impersonal, unhealthy and ultimately, generally unproductive for her personal development outside of the studio. Luckily she left that world and still found her place in the arts at large. It is disheartening to hear this account, and makes me question where the dance community's real priorities lie. However, there are teachers out there who care about more than just the height of your arabesque or the depth of your turnout. They care about the person inside finding their way out through the dance. I wonder what it would mean for every aspiring young dancer to receive this training.



*Katie Roy and a partner dance a pas de deux.*

# The Body.

She is elegant and slender, not too tall, not too short. Her hips are as wide as her shoulders and her chest is modest, to be generous. Her curves lie only in her legs and feet. She is the epitome of a (female\*) ballet body, an image that lives in our minds whether invited or not. She is a standard and she is tough.

And she wasn't always this way. Ballet's roots lie in the Italian Renaissance of the 15th Century, and throughout its long and complicated journey to modernity, it went through courts and jesters and burlesque shows. (Jean Churchill aptly referred to the latter as "sex dancing.") The feminine ideal as we know her today has at times been curvy, full-figured, conventionally womanly. It was only in the 20th century, particularly influenced by George Balanchine's preference, that she came to be known as the thin, almost boyish figure that seems so ancient in ballet culture. In other words, the old prototype is a young woman.

Maria Simpson described the body ideal plainly. "When we're talking about body type we're really talking about female body type, 'cause no one ever- you never hear about men." Yes, one can take this with a grain of salt. Male dancers are expected to be muscular, toned and able to lift women. But if you were to compare the standards men must attain versus women, there is none other than one being possible and the other being, for the vast majority of the population, an illusion.

And yet it is one a dancer is still taught to strive for.

Let's imagine that our young dancer is now a little older. She has been honing her technique, stretching and strengthening and building a foundation for, hopefully, a career. And as she is coming into her own, she's seeing women with longer legs, or smaller waists, or

generally just with more of this ideal body that is so unjustly awash in ballet's conception of quality. What does this mean for her? What does it mean for any dancer?

This topic was particularly interesting and more so, particularly sensitive. The dancers I spoke with handled it as such. What I was left with was a complicated web of bodily expression, and this project can only scratch the surface. But as the work has developed I have become more convinced that breaking through a harmful norm begins with a conversation.

Maria Simpson grew up near Smith College in Massachusetts, and was immersed in classical training from a young age. When describing her earliest experiences of body image, she said it didn't necessarily seem like a negative experience at the time. "I guess when you're kind of experiencing a sort of traumatic-y thing," she stated, "you don't recognize it as that...It sets you up psychologically but you can't analyze it." While she didn't see it until later, this "traumatic-y thing" was years of body shaming, destructive practices, and the ultimate cultivation of unhealthy habits. She and her peers were routinely weighed, and she remembers that when the scale hit 100 pounds, it was incredibly stressful. (She was a young teenager at the time). It was during this period that she and her peers developed ways of reducing the number on the scale. "My friends and I, we had strategies. You know, some of us took measures that were short-term, but could make us...less heavy or weigh less for that moment." Maria described the girls purposefully restricting themselves until after their weighing, and then going to a grocery store down the street to eat. From there the question became: "so if the teacher walked in...who were we going to shove all our food to on the table?"

Maria continued to hear things like "the stage adds ten pounds", and at one point was asked to do jumps with weights, an experience she described as "humiliating." She recalls feeling insecure about her naturally muscular body type, because as she explained, "what was valued were these long limbs, these...thin little branches."

In this, there is nothing to be said for feminine strength, agility, or power.

Just “thin little branches.”



*Maria Simpson in her early dance years.*

This is just the beginning of the unhealthy and destructive behaviors that many of the dancers either witnessed or developed. Jean described how, from an early age, she had witnessed a family friend purposefully restricting herself, and this led to a notion that "...before even ballet, for me, to be on a diet was to be a grown up woman. To be dieting was part of what it meant to be a woman." Of course, it becomes a broader conversation from here. But this idea was placed in her mind at a developmental stage of her life, and her ballet training did nothing to remedy it.

She went on to describe moments with her teachers that reinforced this notion, stating "...one of the ways of being abusive was to say 'you're fat.' So you learn right away without being told 'oh, you should be thin' that being that was bad. And I remember, you know...thinking...if I were really really thin I would have to go to the hospital, and then they would know how serious I am about being a dancer. I remember having that thought...And that was before anorexia was even named."

Others echoed ideas of a certain body type "proving" that they were serious about their craft. M. spoke about how she and her peers formed a hierarchy based on their teachers' impressions of their bodies. "I remember that, in a twisted ballet way," she stated, "the students in my class who were not asked to lose weight felt really sad, because that meant the teacher did not believe that they were going anywhere...Because it meant that they had somehow failed, and it wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth it to try."

It goes without saying that this is unhealthy. Moreover, on a personal note, I find it deeply inappropriate for any adult to be so forthcoming with an opinion on a teenage girl's body. And it ultimately begs the question: If these young women are constantly striving to attain a certain ideal, and constantly being told their not, when does it actually become "enough"? In other words, what exactly does the "perfect" ballet body even look like to their superiors?



This is not a question I posed in my conversations. However, because of some of the very honest responses I was afforded, it was answered.

M. described how a friend had developed an eating disorder during their time dancing together, and ultimately had to seek medical treatment. As she continued to lose weight, it was unfortunately encouraged by her teacher. M. recalled one class in which the teacher went up to this young girl, put her hands on her back, and publicly stated, “doesn’t [she] look great?”

M. paused, and then said, “Some people talk about body image standards that are implied or sort of, that the language isn’t clear, that it is snuck in somehow, in between the lines. This was so blatant, this was the clear upholding of an anorexic body as the ideal in front of everyone.”

I hope that her friend got the support she needed, and deserved. Looking unhealthy, being unhealthy, and encouragement of unhealthy bodies are certainly not my ideal. I believe ballet can be so beautiful, but only when it is danced with strength, confidence, and nourishment, in every sense of the word. A dancer should be more than “thin little branches.”



*Maria Simpson in her college years.*

## The Identity.

Our young dancer slips into form-fitting leotards, thin tights, and slippers every day. And after a while, she'll be asked to put on pointe shoes, and thick stage makeup, and have a boy support her in lifts and turns and extensions. She will go from a girl to a woman.

Ballet, like many contemporary practices, follows a strict set of rules around gender roles and expectations. It can be argued that out in the world some of these are more “unspoken” or implied, but this is not the case in classical dance. The norms are rigid, defined, and so set in their ways that by the time young dancers get to a certain age, the genders are split and taught in separate classes.

This, more so maybe than any other topic discussed in this work, was almost so obvious that I foreshadowed the answers to my questions. And yes, I got many responses that were

expected. However, many of the dancers went deeper into how this dichotomy was set from a young age, and what it meant for their current practice as adults.

Jean spoke extensively about her experience with this structure, stating, "...it seemed like if you were going to go into this art form, you've already accepted these gendered rules..." She described how dance "puts the woman on the pedestal, but the man's in charge." Indeed, certain codified movements and dance expressions are absolutely exemplary of this power dynamic. M. described how she "always felt uncomfortable" with much of the ballet repertoire for this reason. Particularly, penche's and open-straddle-splits, a hallmark of many contemporary works. "First of all," she stated, "it's only women's bodies that are pried open facing the audience in that way. There's no correlation to what a man does on stage that exposes him in that level of vulnerability, there's just nothing..." Men are there to lift, support, and control, moving the woman in and out of revealing contortions, while they, and the audience, watch along. This idea had never crossed my mind, as I was so used to seeing it onstage, and at times including it in my own choreography.

Other dancers described a feeling of needing to portray a certain gender role. Isabella talked about how she was always told to "soften," while the boys had to be "higher, further, faster." What does it mean for ballet training to still be operating under these restrictive gender structures? And more specifically, for the dancer's identity and personal expressions?

Chris Croucher is a male-identifying dancer, and Bard alumnus, who dances en pointe. Our conversation was illuminating in many ways, as his is such a specific and unusual perspective in the dance field. He described how his work was always seen as inherently gender-nonconforming, despite his reservations. He stated, "When I was looking at doing pointe....there was a lot of a sense that if you're going to do this, then this is really an issue of gender. You're taking on gender roles. And I'm like, I don't want to take on gender roles, I just

want to dance pretty. Like, that's all I want to do." He also described that even in his most recent work, there is always a certain level of being held back because of the non-traditional nature of his practice. He's been working with a Massachusetts-based ballet company since 2013, which has been greatly supportive of him. However, there's still performance opportunities he knows he won't ever be afforded. "...everyone in the company knows that this is me, this is what I do....but because of the traditional nature of it, I know that they'll never ask me to perform a role en pointe, or they'll never choreograph a piece for me en pointe...It's been a struggle...I'll choreograph solos for myself, or pieces for myself, for the summer gala that has me en pointe, but otherwise....they're never going to have a piece for me to do that's going to require that." Chris's experience in this medium is always going to be at least somewhat shaped by gender expectations that have been constantly reinforced by dance institutions for years. Women dance en pointe, and men are there to enhance them, manipulate them, to show them off. The question then becomes; Why should years of gender-based tradition dictate how this performer chooses to work within the form?

Further conversations illuminated the inherently conformist and rigidly-prescribed confines of the gender dynamics in dance training. Antonia experienced bouts of tendinitis beginning at an early age, and this, along with other circumstances, led her to a decision to discontinue pointe work. While she was happy with the decision and well-supported by her teachers and peers, Antonia also described how it led to a limiting of the work she could take on. She states, "It was respected that you could be a really good ballet dancer and not do pointe, but it was still very limiting in terms of what parts I could get, just because of the way the pieces, especially the Nutcracker were structured." While she was surrounded by a somewhat contemporary take on the ballet practice (i.e. being supported in her decision to not do pointe work), she was constantly held back in performance because of the nature of the form.

When you contrast Antonia's experience with Chris's, an illuminating contrast develops. Both are classically trained dancers, who have a passion for ballet. However, Chris wants to pursue dancing en pointe, and feels it is the truest way for him to express himself. Antonia on the other hand, chose to not go that route for multiple reasons, and is happy with her decision. Both of them know who they are and what they want, and neither of them has necessarily been told not to do it. However, the way the ballet world is structured, and the way choreography is made within it, puts limitations on their performance opportunities and therefore, their ability to express themselves fully. We can see how years of gender dichotomies have shaped their artistic experiences.

When I look at many of my other conversations with the dancers, this tangled web of gender in dance training becomes more complex, and ultimately more constrictive. On the whole, those I talked to mention an early notion of a status-quo, of a dichotomy between girls and boys that was set, carried out, and rarely questioned. Ms. Jones expressed how her earliest impression was it was "just the girls thing to do," and when a boy entered the studio "it was like, a really big deal." Maria eloquently summed up the aesthetic she sought to cultivate from her primary dance training: "I definitely was part of a culture where the feminine dancer was what we were trying to cultivate, like the ideal. The ideal which is really, we know now, is a white female, tiny head, long legs...illusion."

Illusion indeed. We are not all the same, our bodies and our minds are different, and there seems to be no room for this past a certain point. If we could strip away the costumes, and the sets, and the dynamics that have boxed so many of us in for so long, I am curious what kind of artistic expression we could find.

## The Future.

Jean Churchill once referred to ballet as “a museum form.” Throughout this process, I have found more and more evidence to support that. It is an art form that is both alive, it’s on concert stages and increasingly on digital platforms; rehearsal spaces and classrooms, but it isn’t necessarily moving forward. Many of my conversations show this. We are stuck in a collective display, and it can seem as though there is no change in sight.

I ended each conversation with a simple question: what are your dreams for the future of dance?

Each answer was poignant and unique, and told it’s own story.

**Jean Churchill:** “I think if every city had a modern dance company, or two, then some would be non-binary, and some would be people in wheelchairs, or veterans who are doing work because they have an experimental choreographer who wants to work with veterans.”

**Chris Croucher:** “I don’t want to take on gender roles, I just want to dance pretty. Like, that’s all I want to do.”

**Cat Curry:** “Seeing dance and movement, as...it’s sort of a personal thing, as opposed to like, something to be performed in a corps or an audience.”

**Wendy Jones:** “There needs to be a time when there’s a mix. It can’t just be ‘oh, there’s a male one, there’s a female one. I don’t really know what to call technique anymore.”

**M.:** “Transformations in pedagogy will go hand-in-hand with evolving our conception of who the ideal dancer is and what he or she looks like....Show me any of our biggest, most famous companies budging one inch in the ideal body types that they support as part of their corps, and you will see a change in the kind of person that wants to enter into a ballet class in the first place.”

**Antonia Salathe’:** “I don’t feel like I should have to be pretending to be something else when I’m dancing...I feel like there is room to express what you’re feeling and how you identify when you’re dancing....I don’t feel like there should be one way to be this ballet dancer...”

**Maria Simpson:** Of course I hope that everyone feels like they have access- access to dance, of all kinds. I mean that’s a key, that’s a key part. Part of the whole exclusive allusion of ballet has to do with the fact that it’s not accessible to everyone. The problem lies in the communication, in the oral part of the tradition. It’s not ballet that’s the problem, it’s not even *Giselle*.”

**Isabella Spagnuolo:** “I think the incredible athletic achievement of being a ballet dancer sort of affords you agency as a woman... You could do *Sleeping Beauty* with no costumes and no nothing and the choreography is still, you know, beautiful and important and iconic and worth preserving within the ballet repertoire....the story is an excuse to do the ballet basically.”

I love dancing. And though they all might have different experiences, notions, fears and dreams surrounding it, I believe these dancers do too. Many expressed the idea of letting the art form, and their expression of it, speak for itself. To me, this is a beautiful and unexplored notion. These conversations are only the beginning of a broader, intense untangling of what ballet can be.

We have followed this hypothetical young dancer through her early years of training, inspired by a young love of dance, into her years as a hopeful performer. She has lived and breathed the art form, and it exists in every corner of her life. Her experiences on the stage form a backdrop for her experiences as a person. And as we have seen, this can mean many different things, some of which can be beautiful, some of which can be detrimental. She, and the rest of the dance world, are ready for something new.

Flash forward to 2121. Her granddaughter is stepping into her first dance class. And, yet again, she is surrounded by tradition, but things aren't what they used to be. Hair is styled however it may be, and it sits on top of many excited, energetic young faces. People are wearing leggings, or tights, or pants or skirts. Men wear pointe shoes, women wear nothing on their feet, however they may choose. A grand piano sits in the corner, as the music vibrates through the room, filling it with a sense of presence and joy. The floors are a smooth, newly laid-down Marley, with the perfect bounce for jumping and the perfect absorption for landing. Barres are laid out along the walls, for honing technique, for challenging yourself, for a constant striving not to be better but to be *strong*. Mirrors are set up in the front for learning, for loving

yourself, for seeing the work you are doing and celebrating it. Everything, and everyone, has a role to fill and a place to do it.

She shrugs off her dance bag, filled with the usual bobby pins and hair spray, tennis balls for rolling aching muscles, a copy of *Dance Magazine* whose pages have been worn from being tossed around. The cover displays a new kind of dance company; performers of various body types and movement styles, all coming together to share in their art. She finds it inspiring to think that dance can mean so much to so many people, just as it does to her, and this feeling is a drive. She takes out her items and gets herself ready for class.

And the class itself is a different place. She will never be told she is too fat. She will never be told she is too masculine. She will never be told she is too short or too tall. No adult will ever lay their hands on her body and comment on how “great” it looks in front of everyone, while she starves alone. There is no “special” upper echelon of students that are sent to the front for center, based on their performance in barre. They are not simply bodies in motion, they are people dancing.

Maybe this new young girl will grow up to be a professional. Maybe she won't. But her memories of her training, and her subsequent years in the studio, won't have to be a place of fear, intimidation, competition or sadness. She can learn and thrive in a place that is focused on building her up, not tearing her down. Her “thin little branches” can turn into strong, powerful limbs that will guide her body and mind through life. This is my dream.





*Isabella Spagnuolo as a young dancer in class, and later onstage.*

After all of these conversations, it can feel disheartening to think that many people are sent away from an art form I love so much. It was hard to not let each discussion feel like an old heartbreak expressed by a new voice. There is so much beauty in ballet, but the connotations that go with it can be quite the opposite. These dancers showed sadness and struggle, but they also showed love, future, and possibility.

Ballet is a museum form indeed. But maybe, if we can continue to observe it, to inspect it, to keep on dancing and defying and rethinking what kind structure we're living in, it can find a new display.

