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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE PROCESS OF STAGE AESTHETIZATION IN BALLET. ABOUT THE
`AMBIGUOUS BODY`**

ABSTRACT

Coordinator:

Professor Sorin-Ion CRIŞAN

PhD candidate:

Alina-Denisa BADEA

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BALLET: BETWEEN MOVING AND RESEARCH

Heading on the road of research into the art of dance is, except the passion and the effort to understand much of the studied area, an intellectual exercise to befriend the specialized literature which, together with the ability of the researcher to support the proposed view, will finally have to prove consistency, relevance and collaboration of the gathered ideas.

For a graduate of *Choreography*, the exercise of talking or writing about dance differs radically from the dance itself, not infrequently the artist requiring a third party to throw a beam of light over the chaos of creation. I do not believe that the role of the writer in the field of dance has to be one of a scholastic nature, detailing series of attributes that the body manages to express by itself, but rather to add an intellectual experience for the creator and receiver of dance.

Creation and research in the field of dance should be entwined, the first materializing the ontological artistic act, and that the second enriching the experience of the first through interpretation, explaining the context that emanated the artist and his act. How much *science* we have when we write about ballet depends equally on how we view the ballet and the way we perceive science. Science, in general, plays the role of a *holder and distributor* of truth, forgetting perhaps that, in order to have scientific rigour, the statement is always called into doubt. Let us remember Karl Popper (1976) who states that a scientific theory can not be confirmed or validated by simple observational evidence, nor can we admit the truth of such theories. Popper's position on scientific theories is that we can never be completely sure of the truth of a theory. The solution for the researcher is a permanent questioning about the validity of the proposed theory and a provisional attitude towards it.

In the performing arts, the concept of *interim* is even more justified, the perishability of the show being its very first nature. In this case, what happens between the beginning and end of the ballet performance can be summarized in words as *moving bodies*, phrase which can hide the chaos of the creation. This *chaos* can be taken by itself, or, as is the case of the present

research, we may propose and test a functional structure that, to keep up with the character of dance and the specifics of ballet, must find a balance between technical and poetic elements, clarity and ambiguity, the prosaic and the metaphor, history and aspiration.

Invoking absolute clarity in art domains that breath the air of subjectivity may seem inappropriate as it denies the equivocal nature of art, transforming what the art of dance has to offer through bodily ambiguity in a mandatory enrolling in precise structures. Analysing a similar case, the processes of creation in the art of acting, Eugenio Barba (2003) highlights the lack of process understanding for critics:

Critics, teatrologists, theorists, even philosophers such as Hegel and Sarte, tried to interpret the creative processes of the actors on the assumption that they know what they mean. In reality, they were blinded by their spectator ethnocentrism. They often imagined a misleading journey that was only the subsequent projection of the effects of actors in the minds of their viewers. They were based on assumptions, on fragmentary evidence, on spectators' impressions. They tried to make science based on the observation of a result, without knowing its complementary aspect: the logic of the process. They were speaking and writing about an imaginary process as a scientific description based on empirical data. [...] This form of ignorance, cunning and solemn, consists in the claim of analysing the theatrical behaviour with criteria that have proved useful in other fields of research. (Barba, 2003, 76)

At the same time, there is the reverse: letting artistic creation outside interpretation and inclusion in certain structures would ruin a possible intellectual exercise based on the performance or the artistic phenomenon, but other than the performance, a sum of ideas maybe as vivid and fertile as the stage materialization.

The rigour required by the art of classical dance is just the preamble to a continuous exercise of subordination of the ballet dancer's body, which becomes subordinated to physical, social and aesthetic criteria. According to these criteria, the art of ballet, characterized by a well-studied and mingled technique over time, forces the limits of the biological body. How should this body be build and modified to be apt for stage representation?

This research aims to analyse the transformation phases of the ballet dancer's body, from a "profane body", passing through the phase of training and reaching the "body of stage expression". The thesis proposes that in this process, beyond the "profane body", the trained body and the "body of stage expression", there is another necessary phase with specific characteristics, a crucible ready to include elements related to the emotional, poetic and metaphorical side of this art, an "ambiguous body" which encompasses the attributes of both sexes.

In ballet, the "profane body" of the dancer does not simply turn into an "expression body". In fact, to get to the "body of stage expression", the dancer has to learn in years of preparation the technique of the dance style and then, in collaboration with the choreographer, to give life to characters in narrative ballet performances or to metamorphose states and forms in abstract ballet performances. The proposed "ambiguous body" justifies its denomination by the necessity of an equivocal area in ballet, an area of blur that absorbs the intimate experiences of the dancers, approach the myth by incorporating attributes of male and female.

The "ambiguous body" is rather an invisible body. By mixing of material and immaterial elements, the "ambiguous body" retains its unclear nature, positioning itself at the intersection of material (the dancer transforms into the stage construct using his/ her own body) and immaterial (the pretended metamorphosis may keep an illusion with mythical references for the spectator).

To support the proposed direction, the thesis will address a vast, eclectic literature, overlapping theories of performing arts, technique of classical dance, history of ballet and elements of mythology, linking these materials to photographic and audiovisual recordings in the area. The paper also includes a case study during the *Teacher Training Programme* that I followed at the *Royal Ballet School* in Britain in 2016, where I focused my attention on the pedagogical aspects of classical dance and on the possibilities of the students in order to polish a proper expression beyond the standardized training. The work also includes a visual demonstration of the proposed body aesthetification process in ballet in a trans-historical view, as well as comparative analysis of visual testimonies of body modification in classical dance.

THE PROCESS OF STAGE AESTHETIZATION IN BALLET

The current thesis operates with the "profane body," proposing a biological body, civil, untrained in classical dance technique, as the first aspect of the route that has to reach the stage expression phase. Once inside this route, the "profane body" is defined by its biological nature favourable to ballet by innate skills and abilities, that will contribute to building the future "body of expression".

Unlike a body that has no intention of following the aesthetization route in ballet, the proposed "profane body" has the necessary data for practising classical dance inscribed, identified by testing the innate physical attributes as flexible joints, expansion, opening in *en-dehors* etc. These attributes identified in the "profane body" do not guarantee a future career in ballet, but define a starting point in the selection of the suitable student for practising this art form.

The "profane body", as initial stance in the route of body aesthetization in ballet, is an untrained body, without an assumed artistic intention. Attracted by the art of classical dance, the "profane body" prepares its renunciation of random daily expression, in exchange for the assimilation of a formal movement.

The specific training of classical dance leads to the assertion of the inextricably mixture of genres, creating a largely uniform body by applying the same technique of physical training for both boys and girls. Classical dance creates a recognizable body while impregnating the "profane body" with new attributes and forms of expression. The "profane body" transforms over time in a trained body, to later reach the "body of stage expression".

Understanding the internal mechanism of ballet, supported by long and rigid training, offers possible versions to explain the transformations of the body, leading perhaps to a more lucid judgement on the form that determines the classical dancer's body. Description of specific inherent training in the art of classical dance will clarify the issues that lead to stating a mixture of genres and will constitute an early stage in shaping what would later be defined as the "ambiguous body."

The "body of stage expression " is defined in this thesis as a body that has travelled the route from the "profane body" to the " trained body" and who carries now a scenic identity, subject to the reception of the public and recorded in history and testimonies.

We can consider that the "identity" of the "body of stage expression" fully encompasses the identity of the creators of the show, in order to be transmitted to the receiver. If for Peter Brook (2008, 11), a man watching another crossing the empty stage configures a minimal theatrical act, the "body of stage expression" is born in the triad: dancer - creator of the show/ choreographer - receiver because, at least for the ballet, the "trained body" of the interpreter will be shaped by the choreographer before its exposure to the receiver.

It would seem easy to say that a dancer is "technical", but this interpretation leads to a dead end, that of separation of technique and experience, establishing the idea that a body could become entirely "mechanically". However, when an interpretation is too "technical", small spurting of the emotion and of the *non-technique* which may have not been targeted in a consistent manner should be sought in the interpretation. Thinking of Piaget and Inhelder (2005), we can say that no body is doomed just to the techniques without its emotional charge, as no body is composed entirely of "pure emotion" and may not be standardized to at the technical level.

Therefore, the thesis proposes the separation of the body rather than on technical criteria, which, of course, differ mainly according to school workouts, but on stages of evolution, from the "profane body", through the trained body and to the "body of stage expression".

The dancer's body needs to overcome certain biological attributes, including attributes of gender, in order to transcend its daily existence, but also to have a trained body based on his own visceral, to reach ambiguity, illusion, poetry and mystery of the scenic creation. Ambiguity in art has become commonplace in the critical judgement, versatility and multi-semantics being appropriate characterization of human activities catalogued as art. Invoking emotions, metaphors, sensitive and poetic areas departs the artistic creation of an unequivocal sense.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis assumes that the evolution of the ballet dancer on stage is not only the result of a training process which ends with artistic expression, but an entire route of body aesthetization in ballet can be defined. The proposed route starts from a "profane body", docile and untrained, but with preconditions favouring this form of art, which gives up its sovereignty of crude and natural movement, in order to enter the route that will lead to stage expression.

Assuming, through exercise, the movement vocabulary of the classical dance, the "profane body", transformed in a trained body, encompasses attributes that are associated with both sexes, male and female, regardless the biological sex of the dancer, which helps the body to transcend its materiality and to have a glimpse to a haunting poetic body with androgynous valences. This will define an "ambiguous body", which finds its *raison d'être* for the dancer in order to express itself beyond technique.

To understand the need for an "ambiguous body" and the inseparable mixture of biological genders, it is necessary to have a historical, technical and poetical view of the art of ballet. Over time, the collective judgements were founded on the basis of the appropriate representation of "masculine" and "feminine" in the aesthetic discourse in the art of classical dance, omitting aspects as the route of the dancer becoming an artist-performer, invested with the power to seduce and to metamorphose into a body beyond gender attributes. This metamorphosis is not limited to representations of male / female, but has the power to merge them by setting a "body of stage expression" not enrolled in one gender.

The body of the ballet dancer can be seen in a dichotomous manner, being both an expression of strength and vulnerability. If strength lies in the ability to support movements of self and partners, along with resistance to injury, vulnerability translates within the limits of corporeality, and on the pressures and transformations the body has to face during this

process. Trying to defy the laws of physics, to impose forced anatomical movements by *en-dehors* or by raising in pointe, become some conditions for ballet virtuosity.

Doing a brief overview of the history of ballet, it can be seen that the dancer earned the status of an autonomous artist with difficulty. The ballerina continued to manifest herself in a strongly patriarchal society up to the twentieth century. Poor social conditions imposed docile obedience to a series of oppressions and aggressions from sponsors or patrons.

In the pre-revolutionary France at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the establishment of professional ballet schools created the possibility of affirmation for young people from different social strata. The tired, frail and often starving bodies had to undergo training with additional sexual abuses of directors. Being a dancer at this time was a test of physical and mental endurance. Constrained by poor economic conditions, the body of the ballerina is often subject to artistic and sexual exploitation. For most girls coming from poor families, arriving in Paris to dance was the hope for ensuring a decent living for themselves and their families.

The ballerina of the romantic period becomes more than ever the icon of this form of art, embodying an ideal of feminine grace and weightlessness moving. Often described as a supernatural presence, as a representation of a translucent object meant to defy reality, ballerinas of that time gave life to fantastic characters like Giselle, Cupid, *La Sylphide*, or became images of butterflies, maenad, fairies, witches, elves, gods of water, fire etc. Lithographs of famous ballerinas of the nineteenth century, Maria Taglioni, Fanny Esler, Emilia Bigottini, Carlota Grissi, encounter a refined and well-studied poignet, together with the rise in *releve* becoming indicators of force and virtuosity.

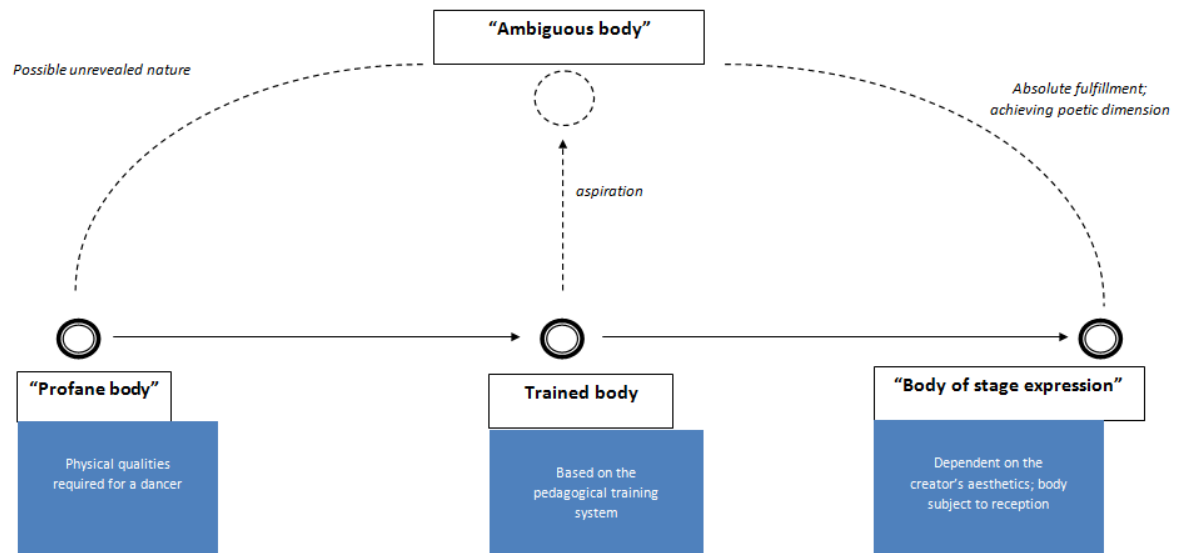
In the contemporary context of classical dance, the separation of genders is still present in certain performances, occurring on one side as the ballet continues to keep its romantic image of the ethereal ballerina as a symbol of femininity, continuing the tradition of the weightlessness and grace, and on the other hand because of the pan-historical focus on the experience of the female dance rather than the male's.

When the ballet began to crystallize as an autonomous art form, artistic search was focused on its own means of expression, generating a genuine creative force manifested by the development of new movements outside the precepts of gender. This autonomy in ballet art should not be understood as a total detachment from theatre, music and other styles of dance, but as an awareness of its own means of expression contained in the feedstock of dance.

The mixture of genders is inherently a pre-existing condition of the art of ballet, even if history has tilted the 'balance' of attention more towards one sex or the other. Representing beauty in classical dance is the answer to what once separated into genders male and female dancer. Today we can define a new body encompassing the attributes of both sexes, designed to meet contemporary aesthetics of the classical dance.

Contemporary ballet is an expression of the renewed aesthetic percepts of classical dance, keeping largely the technical movement style, but recognizing the status of interpreter - creator, not just the interpreter as a tool for implementing a libretto or a choreographic vision. The new wave of the contemporary ballet wishes to renew classical dance from the inside, without a radical departure from the matrix of style (as did the forerunners of modern dance), superimposing techniques and language of movement over technique acquired in the schools of classical ballet. More so this new wave of contemporary ballet is not stuck in images tributary to obsolete forms, but tries a mixture of genders where ballerina borrows features from the male interpreter and vice-versa, in order to reconfigure a new expressive body. Paradoxically, although the dancer will materialize the new creation with its own biological body, during the performance this body will try to depart from itself, by itself, glimpsing to an illusory "unclear" and "ambiguous" body that seems a force of nature, an abstract form in motion, or a mythical entity with androgynous valences.

As it can be seen in the diagram below, the thesis proposes a horizontal process of body aesthetification in ballet, from an untrained "profane body" (attracted by the lure of academic dance), followed by a trained body that reinforces and improves the vocabulary of movement (with differences in style between various schools of professional ballet) and a "body of stage expression" which, beyond technique, becomes permeable around the area of performing arts.



The "body of expression stage" is not just a trained body which defines a spatial-temporal expression in accordance with the rules established by the spectacle, but includes also a memory of the body, the dancer communicating through style with its predecessors. We affirm this in a context of an art form that keep a matrix of style, despite its historical augmentation with new techniques.

A tripartite vision of the process of body aesthetification in ballet (from a "profane body" – a trained body – and a "body of stage expression") is incomplete insofar as the technical requirements to get into the world of professional ballet are becoming increasingly high, which seems to standardize the dancer and to subdue him/ her to the choreographic vision, diluting its creative nature. Thus, the differentiation between personalities of artistic ballet can be operated, of course, based on a record of performance, but if you just stay at the level of an "accounting" technical execution, the poetic experience of the dancer and the spectator is ruined, depriving the dancer of the ontological dimension of his/ her art.

The aesthetification of the body in ballet is dependent on the historical periods in which this art form is manifested, but retains a recognizable style matrix, a vocabulary of movement that reaches its turn to be reshaped.

In Plato's conception, beauty corresponds to absolute measure, harmony and proportion, superimposing wisdom and virtue. Plato proposes harmonizing the beauty content with the utilitarian appearance in reality. In the dialogue *Symposium* (*Banchetul* in Romanian), Plato (Platon, 2008) exposes the idealistic theory of beauty which goes through four stages: physical beauty, moral beauty, the beauty of knowledge and finally the absolute beauty in itself. This is the kind of absolute beauty "which lives forever" and "towards which all our endeavours are heading" (Platon, 2008, 136).

The "ambiguous body" becomes a necessary construct in the process of body aesthetification in ballet, because it can assimilate intimate elements, subtleties and poetic valences, as well as mythical meanings. Once legitimizing such a ghostly structure as the "ambiguous body" with its origins in the myth and in a poetic expression and interpretation, this unclear body gets to reverberate over the entire route of aesthetization in ballet.

Thus, for the "profane body", the "ambiguous body" may be its unrevealed nature. Not every "profane body" has the necessary data to become the body of a dancer, but if the necessary physical skills exist, the "ambiguous body" will shape the future artistic fulfilment of the "profane body". For the trained body, the "ambiguous body" is a benchmark in the implementation of movements, the lost androgynous skills embedded in a unitary structure that tends to overcome the inherent biological limitations. For the "body of stage expression", the "ambiguous body" is an absolute fulfilment. The "body of stage expression" has perfected its technique, has included the elements proposed by the choreographer, has added artistic individuality, emotions, feelings and a poetic area, fulfilling through the "ambiguous body" an ontological dimension: it has recreated itself, by itself.

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