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Dominique Jones February 27, 2024

Motherhood at the Barre: Navigating Pregnancy and Beyond in Ballet

by

Dominique Jones

Mara Mandradjieff
Adviser

Dance and Movement Studies

Mara Mandradjieff
Adviser

Lori Teague
Committee Member

Chris Eagle
Committee Member

Caitlin Hargraves
Committee Member

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Abstract
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Building on previous research of ballet and feminist scholars, this thesis explores the cultural expectations of mothers, both in broader Western society and within ballet culture. In establishing the expectations of mothers in ballet, my research articulates the ways the institution of ballet refuses to accommodate motherhood, including a lack of maternity leave, breastfeeding accommodations, and childcare. I analyze the social media presence of pregnant and mothering ballet dancers in the USA and UK to demonstrate how their virtual self-presentations directly and indirectly reveal ballet culture's distain towards pregnancy/motherhood and argue that the idealized ballet body is one of the most prominent driving forces behind their experiences. My thesis aims to address these barriers that limit the success of mothers in ballet to encourage their removal and spark a greater appreciation for motherhood in the ballet world.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks to Dr. Mara Mandradjieff, who has guided me through my thesis and has been a mentor to me for the past four years. In addition, I thank my committee members, Lori Teague, Dr. Chris Eagle, and Caitlin Hargraves, who have supported me through this project. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to all dancing mothers, from the past, present, and future.

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INTRODUCTION

The biological basis of motherhood begins when a fertilized egg implants into the uterus, and for nine-months, builds and develops until it takes form as a full-term baby. Nine months of dynamic biological changes in the womb culminate into the birth of a genetically unique organism; one that has never crossed paths with anyone on this earth before. But when do women perceive a shift in their role toward mother? Perhaps the genesis of motherhood is when a positive sign appears on a pregnancy test. Maybe motherhood begins as the rush of oxytocin engulfs a woman when she hears the piercing cries of her baby during labor. Maybe the catalyst is the skin to skin, kangaroo-like connection that is formed as the baby lays its head on her chest for the first time. Or it could be at the first of many firsts; the first laugh, first smile, or first steps that the mother witnesses. Regardless of when motherhood begins, the position comes with a specific set of rules and regulations that govern the actions of mothers and how others perceive them.

Like most young girls in the United States, the role of being a mother and taking care of others was introduced to me in infancy. For as long as I can remember, I've always had baby dolls, toy kitchens, easy bake ovens, and all other kinds of pink assorted playthings that slowly conditioned me into a nurturing young woman and a hopeful mother in the future. Now as an adult, it seems that thinking about motherhood occupies most of my time. In college, I have spent years conducting research with a lab that explores pregnancy and motherhood in black women, analyzing how becoming a mother impacts their already high stress and depression levels. I have also dedicated time trying to understand the unique connection between a mother and their baby, and how babies physiologically react to being cared for by their mom. This interest in motherhood predictably culminates in my hope of pursuing obstetrics and gynecology

as a career. My deepest passion is in understanding women, their physiology, and their experiences as they navigate their health throughout their lives. Becoming a mother is a complex, yet fulfilling experience, but conflicting attitudes and assumptions about the correct way to mother negatively impacts women and detracts from the experience of pregnancy and raising a child.

My particular interest in the relationship between motherhood and ballet began at age twelve when I was living life as an academy student at a professional ballet company. Not only did I have access to attentive teachers and expansive studios to further my training, but I also had within arm's reach, the professional ballet company; a group of thirty dancers, men and women, who had mastered the art form and were being paid to perform. For a while, all I ever wanted to be was a professional ballerina. One year, my favorite dancer announced her pregnancy, and I was ecstatic. "What a joy!" I thought. My happiness was interrupted by the whispers of the adults in the halls. The consensus was that the dancer's retirement announcement was imminent. The certainty for which people believed that there was no other choice but retirement was confusing to me. Of course, she would have to take a maternity leave to recuperate and bond with her new baby, but why was it so expected that she would never return to the studio, never slip on her pointe shoes, and never perform again? Despite my confusion, the whispers in the halls were right, as the dancer announced that the season would be her last. From then on, I have been curious about the factors that dictate the decisions to continue dancing or to head toward retirement after giving birth in the ballet world. To evaluate how ballet dancers deal with motherhood in their careers, a fundamental understanding of the function that mothers play in Western society is necessary. Ballet dancers experience forces from the culture of the art form,

but also from general societal expectations; the customs of each interact with the other and influence dancers' decisions on how to behave during pregnancy and throughout motherhood.

The phenomenon of social media plays a significant role in how pregnant dancers perceive and market themselves to the public. Social media sites, like Instagram and TikTok, allow users to disseminate pictures and videos of notable life moments to their friends, families, and fans. What started as a space for sharing impromptu moments or beautiful scenery has turned into perfectly curated "feeds" that often follow an aesthetic or trend influenced by a user's followers and activities on the site. Social media is unique because it allows users to get a glimpse of what they believe is the authentic moments of someone's private life; however, the poster constructs their online presence to paint their lives in a more favorable view than their actual lived experience. The ballet world is not immune to the varied motivations behind posting photos and videos for followers. Beautifully shot pictures and videos of fantastic tricks and turns may give the perception that a particular dancer is extraordinary, but real life experiences with that dancer may not measure up to how they seem online.[1] Regarding pregnant dancers, their social media personas are often incredibly positive and garner overwhelmingly supportive reactions from followers. I'm curious about the ways dancers publicly construct their pregnancy experiences and careers for their followers in comparison to the harsh world of ballet that I argue, negatively influences a pregnant ballerina's relationship to her body and to motherhood.

In Western society, accepting the role as mother inundates women with conflicting expectations, which are heightened if those women also work as ballet dancers. Both Western and ballet culture enforce different ideals of motherhood that when experienced by women, complicate relationships with their bodies, themselves, and their babies. To introduce my thoughts on professional ballet dancers, I will explore the cultural expectations of motherhood in

broader society. Following general motherhood, I will evaluate parental expectations of the ballet world to illustrate where Western and balletic ideals diverge and connect to facilitate understanding of how they affect the mothers that occupy their spaces. The strength that the stereotypical ballerina body has on the culture of this specific form of dance also impacts how a dancer decides whether to have a baby. If she does become pregnant, the culture around the body shapes the way that she sees and markets herself to the public. Using social media posts from pregnant and mothering professional ballet dancers, I will show that ballet traditions and understanding of the body negatively impacts the dancers' relationships to their own bodies and strongly influences the types of activities dancers participate in as they emerge into motherhood. My hope is that this paper reveals the combinations of hardships that pregnant women experience in ballet, and how the interacting barriers guide them to make specific decisions as it pertains to their body and involvement in the dance world. By acknowledging areas of improvement, ballet companies would have the tools to take steps to provide proper support for their pregnant dancers and appreciate the wisdom and artistry that is born out of motherhood.

Methodology

This project examines the complexities of becoming a mother and sustaining a career as a ballet dancer. Most apparent to me are the cultural practices in the ballet world that exclude mothers from participating and maintaining their success as ballet dancers. This research is important because it clearly identifies ballet's specific cultural practices that act as barriers for the growing population of dancers who become pregnant and mothers during their careers. By acknowledging the negative actions of ballet companies, the opportunity for reflection and change arises. Through this research, I hope to bring awareness and encourage ballet companies

to change their attitudes and value the wisdom and artistry that motherhood can provide to the field.

This research study is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the rules and requirements that mothers must adhere to in Western society?
    a. How do expectations of mothers who are professional ballet dancers resemble and differ from traditional Western expectations?
2. Which structures within the ballet world implement barriers for mothers and pregnant women to continue in their career?
3. How do social media representations of ballet mothers and pregnant women reveal internal attitudes of identity and motivations?
4. How does the cultural understanding of the ballet body shape female dancers' relationships to themselves?
    a. How does the ballet body influence the actions that dancers take throughout their pregnancy and postpartum periods?
    b. How are these actions seen through social media?
5. What steps can the ballet world take to create a better environment for mothers within the field?

In considering my research questions, I conducted a literature review in chapter one and built my argument surrounding the culture of motherhood from scholars like sociologist Sharon Hays and feminist scholar Katherine Gieve. In establishing cultural expectations, I also consulted scientific articles from researchers like Michelle Berger and Judy Jou, and medical professionals like Dr. Claire McCarthy. These writers helped to illustrate the lived experiences of mothers and pregnant women in Western society. I also found information from organizations like the Centers

for Disease Control, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the World Health Organization to highlight statistics on women's health behaviors and experiences throughout pregnancy and motherhood. The second section of chapter one outlines how the career of the ballet dancer interacts with motherhood expectations, and consults popular press articles and written interviews with people in the ballet world that have either experienced firsthand the struggles of being a mother, or have perpetuated the culture onto other women. In my analysis of the ballet body in chapter two, I build upon the work of feminist scholar Susan Bordo and philosopher Michel Foucault, as well as dance researchers like Angela Pickard and Ali Duffy. In establishing the physiologic changes that occur during pregnancy, I reference organizations like The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Pregnancy Association, Cleveland Clinic, and Mayo Clinic.

In collecting social media artifacts to analyze, I first sought out the Instagram accounts of famous dancing mothers that I knew personally or had followed in the past. These accounts included dancers like Ingrid Silva, Maria Kochetkova, Gracie Holway, and Ashley Bouder. All these dancers are well-known for publicly documenting their journeys of pregnancy and motherhood, and reside in the United States and the United Kingdom. I also used the search engine feature on Instagram and TikTok to identify posts with specific hashtags, such as #pregnancy, #pregnantballerina, #ballerinamom, and #dancingmom. Finally, I followed social media accounts built on supporting dancing mothers, such as @dancersandmotherhood and organizations like Dance Mama to find content and articles surrounding pregnant dancers. Upon compiling social media posts, I created an Excel spreadsheet that separated the posts based on the social media site and medium (photo or video). I also took note of the content of captions made by the poster, and the amount of likes and comments from other social media users. For

each post collected I described the post in words, taking note of the position and location of the dancer, her facial expressions and body language, and what I anticipated the post's effect was on the public. Throughout this thesis, I incorporate relevant social media posts that illustrate cultural beliefs and actions that ballet dancers hold throughout their pregnancy and into motherhood. In my hopes to convey the value that mothers bring to ballet, I will first break down the cultural rules that impact their behavior.

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[1] Theresa Ruth Howard, "Is Instagram Changing the Dance World's Value System?" *Dance Magazine*, July 15, 2018, https://www.dancemagazine.com/social-media-and-dance/.

CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF PERFECT MOTHERHOOD: EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY IN AND OUT OF THE BALLET STUDIO

In this chapter, I argue that becoming a mother requires women to follow a hoard of contradictory rules to best prepare children for the adult world and garner the title of "good" mother. Especially in Western society, the myriad of expectations placed on mothers are impossible to adhere to, which naturally ushers in feelings of guilt and inadequacies. After establishing the modes of "intensive mothering" that control women in broader Western culture, I will analyze historical texts, interviews, and social media posts to demonstrate how the institution of ballet reinforces traditional views of motherhood, while requiring women to follow additional rules.

Cultural Expectations of Motherhood in the West

A mother's role is not unfamiliar to me or any other inhabitant of this Western world. Based on generations of patriarchy, family, religion, and media, we have been socialized to expect specific traits out of mothers. Archetypes broadcast on TV range from the overbearing helicopter mom, a supermom that can and will do it all, a "Tiger" mom, a mother who blurs the line between parent and best friend, and all the way back around to a loving and caring mom. These examples illustrate a woman who is overwhelmingly devoted to her children and the lives they lead. In many of the children shows, sitcoms, and the growing presence of mommy bloggers on social media, the construction of a mother who depends on her children for her own identity is common and expected.

Definitions of motherhood and explanations of its cultural standing in Western society have helped theorists explain the important function that mothers play. In her book, *The Cultural*

Contradictions of Motherhood, sociologist Sharon Hays outlines in great detail the role that mothers play in contemporary childrearing and how motherhood has evolved from the time of the Puritans to the present. Motherhood transformed from a period of insensitivity toward children—because the likelihood they would die was much greater than the chance they would live a full life—to the all-consuming version we know today, where mothers bend over backwards to engage, teach, entertain, and protect their children. Here, Hays introduces the pertinent idea of "intensive mothering," which "requires mothers to spend an enormous amount of time and energy on their children, based on the assumption that mothers are the ones who should prioritize their child's needs over their own."[1] A woman's entire identity is thought to be transformed by her children. Perhaps this may happen inadvertently, but when it is required of mothers, it proceeds to become a function of patriarchal oppression. Like feminist scholar Katherine Gieve writes, motherhood "has been used to enclose women with their children in the shrinking domestic domain and to put both practical and psychological impediments in the way of women's participation in the world of work and politics."[2] Requiring "intensive motherhood" over all other forms of parenting limits women in their ability to influence or change their communities. Interestingly, motherhood also relies on the efforts of other women to function at its fullest form. In the example of a mother named Rachel, Hays reveals that the person Rachel confides in about childcare most is not her husband, but her close female friend, confirming the claim later in the book that the rearing of children is shared amongst a community of women.[3] This reality of motherhood boxes women into a section of society where they cannot actively participate in any task outside of their children.

The assumption that women should give all their energy to their children directly opposes the reality of working mothers. It seems impossible and unreasonable for them to fit inside the

framework of "intensive motherhood" while still allocating time to their careers. Within a study of women who are involved in the workforce "all participants… felt [pressure] to place their role as a mother at the center of their being and to primarily identify themselves as being a mother. Their stories emphasize the societal idea that a mother should undertake paid work for less time than they conduct their mothering duties."[4] Mothers clearly feel at odds with their working reality and the cultural expectations imposed upon them. Furthermore, it is unreasonable to require all women to spend less time at work given that most families within the United States rely on a dual income to survive. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, "dual-income households have been a majority for at least the last two decades… ranging from 52-58 percent."[5] Working mothers unfairly experience conflicting expectations despite their necessity to the economy. Regardless of their importance, there are still people who stress that "women should want to have children, they should prioritize mothering over their employment, and that they cannot hope for both careers and babies."[6]

A working mom also diverges from traditional assumptions when she is forced to make complicated decisions on how to feed her baby. Both society and the medical community have concluded that breastfeeding should be used over formula feeding. In alignment with the idea of the "good" mother, gender studies scholar Joan Wolf says that "mothers' primary occupation is to predict and prevent all less-than-optimal social, emotional, cognitive, and physical outcomes."[7] Breastfeeding then becomes the primary occupation of women, as it is taught as one of the most important preventative measures a mother can take for her infant child. The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a baby's life; it has become the gold standard that is taught in healthcare systems, prenatal classes, and the media.[8] It is recommended for good reason, as breastfeeding is known to have a host of benefits

like strengthening bonding between mother and child, protection against infection, and increased nutrition, yet making it possible for all women to engage in this practice has been on the backburner of governmental and workplace policies.[9] Since women are depended on to mitigate risk and prevent less-than-optimal outcomes, "breastfeeding can be perceived as the ultimate means of controlling health risks for infants," which makes breastfeeding a direct avenue for Western society to determine a woman's standing as a good mother.[10]

Despite the research on the benefits of breastfeeding, there are barriers that stop women from participating. For working women, the act of continually breastfeeding is daunting and often ignored by employers and the U.S. government alike. Breastfeeding itself is a long and involved process that follows the mother outside of when she is actively feeding her child. Based on Centers for Disease Control research, for their first days of life babies can eat every one to three hours, and it often takes twenty to thirty minutes to feed each time. As babies grow, their need to eat goes to every two to four hours, and they'll eat eight to twelve hours a day.[11] This intensive feeding schedule has the potential to put strain on a mother's employment experience, as she must negotiate stringent company regulations that do not account for nursing her baby. Many businesses have no regulations in place to accommodate actively breastfeeding female employees, which communicates that they place a low value on women in the workplace. As researcher Naomi Bromberg Bar-Yam explains in her article about nursing mothers at work, "corporate lactation support indicates to employees that the company understands and values the importance of their roles as mothers and that they, as people, cannot be separated into 'workers' and 'mothers'."[12] Without providing adequate space, time, and support for women it becomes clear that their presence is not essential. Women may not be able to directly breastfeed their babies at work, but they may need the space to pump. As time goes on, the buildup of milk

within the breast becomes so painful that expressing the breast milk through a pump is needed.[13] Without the appropriate companywide infrastructure, women are again faced with another hurdle, encapsulating the difficulties that society places on new mothers.

Additionally, some women experience physical barriers that make breastfeeding near impossible to accomplish. Though breastfeeding is often treated as a natural, easy, and enjoyable task, many women face extreme difficulty in performing at a level to fully satisfy their children.[14] In a study that researched breastfeeding habits, researchers found that "70.3% of new mothers experienced breastfeeding difficulties, reporting cracked nipples, perception of insufficient amount of milk, pain, and fatigue."[15] Despite hearing echoes of phrases like "breast is best" from healthcare professionals and peers, these women have difficulties in producing milk. Should these women be lumped into the category of unfit mothers because of their nonadherence to societal expectations of good motherhood? Dr. Claire McCarthy of Harvard Medical School disagrees and says in a Harvard Health blog post that villainizing formula usage ignores the reasons that women cannot breastfeed, shames them, and encourages reduced breastfeeding habits in the future. For her, "there are many other ways besides breastfeeding to help babies grow and be healthy."[16] Regardless, women still feel a strong pressure to breastfeed and use it as a measure of their progress toward being a good mother.[17]

The contradicting rules that women are expected to adhere to fosters emotional and mental health issues that are unfortunately common for mothers. Occupational therapist Michelle Berger's study interviewed several working mothers and highlighted the following shared experience: "a woman often cannot contend with the expectations imposed on her as a mother; whatever she does is perceived as insufficient or is criticized by society."[18] Women who give their life and their bodies to develop and nurture the next generation are left vulnerable to

judgment and disapproval for reentering the workforce, despite its value for the economy or its intrinsic importance to the mother herself. Continued ridicule about the perceived state of her being a "good" or "bad" mother leads to the negative mental health outcomes prevalent among caretakers. Feminist scholar Katherine Gieve notes that guilt is a common response to decision making for mothers.[19] Guilt of making the wrong choice and failing to be a "good" mother impacted the women in the Berger study as they were constantly confronted with the question of whether working four days a week caused them to be bad mothers.[20] Working is not the only facet of motherhood that causes mental health challenges; the decision to breastfeed or not certainly does as well. As mentioned previously, breastfeeding is positioned as the most moral or correct method of feeding a newborn baby. And yet, mothers face barriers in making that choice for themselves and their family, whether it be an inability to produce enough milk, pain during breastfeeding, or not being provided with compassion and understanding. Every decision seems to come at a detriment to her or her baby, leading to the predictable result of negative mental health.

Trouble processing and experiencing emotions does not just occur after pregnancy; the well-documented mental health struggles of women acutely experiencing pregnancy has also been a prominent research topic. Counselor Katherine Wardi-Zonna opens her paper about art therapy with the notion of the myth of pregnancy. This "largely idealized view, positions the expectant mother as emotionally happy and well… it is further presumed that pregnancy and impending motherhood will give her life greater purpose and significance.'[21] In their paper evaluating depression during pregnancy Madeleine Becker, Tal Weinberger, Ann Chandy and Sarah Schmukler write that "depression is a common complication of pregnancy and the postpartum period. Up to 70 % of women report symptoms of depression during pregnancy, and

10–16 % fulfill criteria for major depressive disorder."[22] The prevalence of depression contradicts the idea that "joyfulness and elation" are the only feelings felt by women during pregnancy. The reasons for these rates of depression are varied and extensive. Wardi-Zonna points to expectations of the pregnant body and the medicalization of birth. Both Berger and Gieve indicate that guilt may play a role. Gieve goes a step further to highlight the subsequent loss of autonomy that accompanies motherhood, which she experienced after the birth of her children. She says that "one of the most notable characteristics of conception, childbirth and the bringing up of children is the lack of control… A small baby will have irreducible needs: you may well have no control over its sleeping, waking, eating and crying. An older child may suddenly become ill and your opportunity to organize your life is taken away."[23] A surrendering of autonomy dissolves a woman's ability to make decisions for herself, leading to feelings of guilt and depression. Overall, the situation of mothers in Western society can often produce environments that harbor unhealthy mental and emotional states.

A large influence over the positive outcomes surrounding increased maternal mental and physical health, breastfeeding, readiness, and support, is maternity leave, which is a rarity in the United States. The U.S. is one of the only industrialized countries in the world that does not provide paid parental leave for its citizens. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), passed in 1993, ensured twelve weeks of protected time for employees; however, the requirements to qualify for this act excludes about 40% of the American workforce.[24] An even smaller number of businesses provide paid leave. Essentially, most women experience an extreme lack of support for their transition to motherhood in their career fields. Whatever amount of unpaid protected time they are given, "one in four new mothers return to work within two weeks of giving birth because, financially, they have no choice."[25] The disruption of uninterrupted bonding and

healing time for new families has been shown to cause mental, emotional, and physical health problems for women. One study found that paid maternity leave was associated with "lower likelihood of maternal and infant re-hospitalization and maternal mental health care use," which is also associated with a decrease in maternal and infant mortality.[26] Another study found that those who went without leave faced depressive symptoms and marital and self-esteem problems.[27] Because of the United States' shameful parental leave policies, women on this side of the globe experience unique barriers in having a successful pregnancy, labor, and launch into motherhood.

Motherhood itself is rewarding, but Western standards make it tremendously difficult for a woman to enjoy and feel confident in her ability to achieve her version of success. A hidden curriculum of rules governs society's view on what constitutes a good mother, even when those rules are unable to coexist with the actual realities that are presented to pregnant women. Employment of both parents is necessary to support the family, but mothers are criticized for spending their time split between work and family. Breastfeeding is expected without concern for the myriad of reasons that a mother would be unable to accomplish the task. Mental health issues that plague motherhood are swept under the rug in an effort to keep the façade that all aspects of motherhood are joyful and natural, that if a new mother does not experience the same happiness that has become synonymous to motherhood, then she isn't fit to hold the title of caregiver. The public recognizes how important it is for mothers to rest and be cared for, yet the United States does not provide standardized maternity care for any women, leaving the decision up to companies that can get away with offering deplorable packages of unpaid time, which seems like a punishment for women who perform a needed task that keeps the world afloat. The

politics of motherhood is exhausting, and women are forced to navigate each contradicting detail as they try to experience the joy of becoming a mother.

No more is this exhaustion felt than amongst professional ballet dancers who make the decision to go through pregnancy and motherhood. The ballet profession, like many performing arts, requires devotion to an extent that cannot accommodate when dancers encounter motherhood. Female dancers face all the challenges that most working mothers face; however, aesthetic art forms place even more constraints on when, where, and how mothers can exist within their companies. In the next section, I will look at dance history texts, news articles, and social media posts to reveal how ballet—as both an experienced career and media-constructed concept for public consumption—reinforces and simultaneously expels traditional forms of motherhood.

Ballet and its Expectations of Mothers

The role of motherhood in ballet is complicated, and the population of mothers in the field has increased, which is starkly different from the amount that existed when the art form was first created. The value that is placed on mothers is best encapsulated by a quote from professional dancer and founder of the Royal Ballet, Ninette de Valois, who said, "You're pregnant darling, goodbye!" in response to her female dancers and their newfound status of motherhood.[28] Outside of being the people that pay studio tuition fees, perfectly pin up their daughters' ballet buns, and crowd around the studio door to peek at their children during class, a mother's role in the performing arts seems nonexistent. This makes the topic of pregnancy an uncomfortable conversation within Western ballet companies.

Though kept relatively quiet nowadays, there are public instances of ballet companies removing dancers from their artist roster soon after pregnancy or birth. In keeping with the

Valois tradition, The Royal Ballet has in the past offered voluntary redundancy to dancers, which was taken by five ballerinas one season, most of whom were mothers.[29] A voluntary redundancy describes the situation that occurs "when an employer asks a member of staff to agree to terminate their contract, in return for a financial incentive."[30] Some of the women looked on the termination positively as it allowed them to spend more time with their children; yet, the act of offering a contract to mothers shows a demonstrated control over who is allowed to be pregnant or a mother, and how many can be represented within the studio. In the spring of 2023, Karin Vandraiss's article "Beside the Pointe: How PNB Navigates Parenthood and Ballet" details a similar story in the United States, when ballerina Leah Merchant was let go from The Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) company at 37-weeks pregnant and posted about her experience on social media.[31] Upon her termination, Merchant quotes Martha Graham saying, "A dancer dies twice—once when they stop dancing, and the first death is more painful."[32] Her fear of becoming a mother was exacerbated by a loss of identity during the onset of the global pandemic. These examples represent individual instances of termination (whose causes have been contested on whether they were solely because of motherhood); however, they hint at the cultural history of ostracizing women in ballet who become pregnant.

George Balanchine, father of American ballet, claimed that "Any woman can become a mother, but not every woman can become a ballerina," illustrating the strong cultural belief that motherhood and ballet are mutually exclusive.[33] To have a successful career in ballet, women were expected to ignore any hope or want for a family. A baby, in theory, would take too much time away from their craft and would demonstrate a lack of respect and dedication for their art and even their artistic directors. This disrespect felt by, often male, performance directors on behalf of women exercising their right to start a family is well-documented, especially with

Balanchine. Francia Russell, who was a dancer in New York City Ballet said that "she knew that the pairing of dancing and family life was looked upon as not just foolishness, but treason. Balanchine was very upset with me for marrying Kent [fellow company member Kent Stowell]—and for having a baby."[34] Loyalty to a figure besides the artistic director was seen as a direct threat to the relationship between creator and muse, teacher and student—the paternalism in the ballet world that makes women beholden to their director. A more recent example would be that of Sarah Orza, a mother and former professional ballet dancer with PNB. Upon returning to the studio after maternity leave "she was taken aback when Boal [Peter Boal, former dancer with New York City Ballet, who trained under Balanchine, and current artistic director for PNB] questioned her commitment to the company. Yes, she had struggled, torn about leaving Lola. But she showed up every day and did her work as she always had."[35] Despite receiving similar effort from Orza, her artistic director still questioned whether her new position of being a mom took away from her commitment to the company. She too experienced the harsh effect of paternalism in the ballet world.

Going further back into ballet history, one finds another shocking instance of paternalism and anger toward pregnancy through the story of Bronislava Nijinska, a revolutionary dancer and choreographer during the mid-twentieth century. While Nijinska danced for Serge Pavlovich Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, she was essentially pulled out of her position when her brother (and choreographer) Nijinsky discovered she was pregnant. According to ballet historian Lynn Garafola, "the news enraged Nijinsky. He threatened her husband with physical violence and screamed that Nijinska was sabotaging his work."[36] Nijinsky was enraged and perceived her pregnancy as defiance against him, so much so, that he removed Nijinska from performance roles she added to and developed as much as he did. This cruelty "seemed to be punishing her

female body—because it was weaker than his, couldn't do what his could do, because it was different from his, biologically and culturally, because it defied him in his hour of greatest need."[37] His behavior exemplifies the common paternalistic understanding in the ballet world, that the female dancer must be beholden to her director or choreographer over everyone else in her life.

Another way paternalism functions to discourage women from becoming mothers in ballet is by assuming that dancers are too fragile and uninformed about the appropriate choices to make for their bodies. Directors must make that decision for them. Pregnant dancers are rarely seen on stage, in part because their bodies are the direct opposite of what is deemed aesthetically pleasing, but also because choreographers and directors view pregnant people as too vulnerable. In her new book *Dancing Motherhood*, dance scholar Ali Duffy writes:

> The perceptions that a pregnancy is inherently dangerous and that a pregnant woman cannot be trusted to make healthy, safe decisions for her body are propagated in US culture and are reinforced in many dance spaces. Pregnant dancers are often presented with warnings of risk by artistic directors and teachers who, while possibly well-intentioned, dismiss a woman's autonomy and ability to be publicly present in dance.[38]

The display of pregnancy on stage has been thought to disrupt movement because "pregnant women are constructed as private, reserved, respectful, and certainly less physically active than dancers. Media has taught us to coddle pregnant women, care for them, be sensitive about their condition, and guard them in order to guard the child."[39] Modern dancer and choreographer Jane Comfort experienced this heightened concern during her dance piece, *For A Spider Woman*, when men gasped and were taken with concern for her baby during her dance performance.[40] If the modern dance space, which is known for being more fluid than ballet, views pregnant

dancers as hazardous, it can be expected that ballet inflates the same fear of pregnancy ten-fold. The stark difference in treatment that ballet dancers experience from before pregnancy to after can be perceived as infantilizing for women, playing a part in the creation of an environment that is generally unsupportive of pregnancy and motherhood.

Another facet of the ballet culture that is intolerant of mothers is the reality that dancers continuously have trouble with breastfeeding their new children. Professional ballet companies often lack the support structures that are necessary in ensuring that their pregnant dancers have the greatest opportunity to breastfeed if they so choose, including the length of the maternity leave, the number of hours they work, prenatal and postpartum education and support, and proximity of the baby to the workplace.[41] These factors are always in flux for ballet dancers, and companies in and out of ballet have historically not made breastfeeding a priority for their employees. Proper breastfeeding and pumping provisions are just recently being implemented and only because specific dancers are tired of their concerns falling on deaf ears. Sarah Orza established policies toward breastfeeding and pumping that would help other mothers who found themselves in a similar position to her. At the time of her daughter's birth, PNB had a space for breastfeeding mothers in an office, but nothing in their policies outlined pumping. Because of this, Sarah often found herself in a closet pumping during *grande allegro* combinations in her ballet class, which she felt resulted in a subsequent weakness in that area of her technique. Running home to breastfeed in the middle of the workday and pumping in dressing rooms became her second full-time job, so Orza became a leader in advocating for mothers within PNB's structure.[42] Still, companies not acknowledging the needs of their parent employees has led to more retirements and career changes than structural change. Dance scholar Angela Pickard found that "72% of parents and carers… were considering leaving their profession" as artists

because of the lack of acceptance of children and no flexibility in the working environment as it relates to breastfeeding and childrearing.[43] Appropriate practices regarding breastfeeding or pumping are hard to come by in the ballet world, which ultimately discourage the existence of mothers within its studios.

The mental health challenges that dancing mothers experience is akin to that of other working mothers; however, there are some added pressures of the time constraints that define the ballet work environment. Overwhelmingly, pregnant ballet dancers endure stress and anxiety surrounding the security of their positions in their companies. The ballet world is oversaturated with female dancers, and with the small number of spots available, vacancies are opportunities that allow dancers to perform new roles and impress directors and audiences alike. Companies need people on stage when they need them on stage, creating an environment where any time spent out of the studio—like doctors' appointments, breastfeeding, childcare, maternity leave, or just time to rest as a pregnant person—throws the idea of unemployment to the forefront for many women. Ingrid Silva, a professional dancer with The Dance Theatre of Harlem, felt anxiety during her pregnancy because her future with the company and her own ability was uncertain. Would she physically be able to come back; would she even be invited back?[44] Dancer Margot Hallac expresses her fears in an Instagram video of her dancing during months one through seven of her pregnancy. In her caption she writes, "As an adult ballet dancer, I'm constantly plagued with the fear that my best days are behind me and I won't be able to bounce back."[45] Additionally, many moms feel guilty about the difference between the time they need to spend in rehearsals, at performances, and in class compared to the time that they want to spend at home with their baby. Dancer Jamie Wright expresses this guilt when she says, "I traveled a lot—hard core touring on big stages. I missed my daughter's dance concert while on tour. She said to me,

'You're the only mom who travels'."[46] The expectation to constantly perform and give 100% of time to an unforgiving art form like ballet pushes mothers, who are often the primary caregivers, into a tough position that is never really addressed within the ranks of ballet companies, leaving women to feel anxiety and guilt over their situation.

Yet, despite the barriers that persist for mothers in ballet, many women express so much joy and transformation after having a child and assert that becoming a mother has even added to their artistry and choreography. Modern dancers are in tune with this idea of a deepened artistry that is born from pregnancy. In reflecting on her career, modern dancer Jane Comfort says, "Hardly anyone in my community had children. I wanted to make a statement to other women that I could continue…and it would make my art much richer."[47] Becoming a mother was not seen as a detriment or in opposition of her current job. For Comfort, it deepened her art, unlocking elements that could only be achieved through the experiential process of birth and motherhood. Despite the differences between modern dance and ballet, movers of the latter also express a development of artistry born from motherhood. Sarah Orza advocates for this idea of artistic revelations from pregnancy when she says, "For Giselle or [Swan Lake's] Odette, I had access to more depth of emotion than ever before."[48] Similarly, dancer Lynn Peterson found that pregnancy inspired a new confidence in herself and in her body because the birthing process gave her a new appreciation of the power that she had within.[49] In an Instagram post, Ingrid Silva captions a photo of her in front of a grey background in a pigeon pose, where one of her arms is curved behind her, palm facing up to the ceiling, and the other is circled underneath her pregnant stomach. She says, "Having a baby live in you is one of the most profound definitions of art in human form."[50] The act of pregnancy itself is art, and experiencing it as women can unlock unique levels of artistry that impact dance careers. The process of motherhood strengthens the

connection with the body and opens new possibilities for movement and meaning. Proper attention, support, and grace needs to be afforded to mothers by the ballet world because without it, the cycle of guilt, overextension, and burnout will inevitably persist.

Conclusion

The values of motherhood that predominate both broader Western society and the subculture of ballet enforces rules that are almost impossible to follow. The generalized popular culture expects that a woman's aspirations and interests should revolve around childrearing. If by exercising autonomy in parenting, a mother decides to not adhere to the rules, she is immediately criticized and questioned. Even though many of these standards contradict with real life experiences like working, women are still expected to be a "supermom" and do it all.

On the flip side, ballerinas are often discouraged from having children. The entirety of their being should be focused on artistic performance, and they should stay loyal to their rehearsal staff. When a ballet dancer does become pregnant and goes through the stages of motherhood, she may be subjected to consequences, which ultimately push her out of the art form. The ballet mother experiences so many barriers to having a successful family; she is pulled in different directions trying to follow both broader society norms and dance norms. Despite this tug-of-war, she retains hope, appreciation, and love for her children and values how motherhood may influence her movement development.

In the next chapter, I will explain how the efforts of maintaining the hope and appreciation for motherhood has the possibility of being diminished when the construction of the ballet body is introduced. The expectation that a ballerina's body will always represent the traditional balletic ideal creates problems with the ballet dancer's identity, especially if they are experiencing pregnancy and motherhood.

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CHAPTER II

THE BALLERINA BODY THROUGH PREGNANCY AND BEYOND

As explained in chapter one, "The Myth of Perfect Motherhood: Expectations vs. Reality in and Out of the Ballet Studio," working mothers face numerous challenges, and those within the ballet field must confront even more nuanced barriers. However, after researching ballet and gender studies scholarship and surveying social media sites that provide platforms for pregnant dancers to publicize pictures and videos detailing their pregnancies, there is one factor I believe dominantly shapes a ballet dancer's reality when pregnant: the idealized ballet body. The sylphlike body of ballet dancers has been described as "white and … young; they are very thin with small breasts and narrow hips; their legs are long and lean; their arms are long and slender; their torsos are short with a flat stomach and abdomen; their heads are small atop a long, slender neck."[1] Assumptions about the ballet body are embedded in dance culture—how instructors teach, how they give corrections, how dancers eat, discipline themselves, and view themselves day in and day out. The thin ideal does not just control dancers within the confines of the studio, it affects their behavior and decision making. Any decision that could result in weight gain, such as a dancer purposefully choosing to become pregnant, is regarded as ludicrous. Therefore, it becomes incredibly difficult for pregnant dancers to maneuver their new position as developing mothers with the physique that ballet requires.

In this chapter, I argue the tradition of thinness and its evolution in present-day ballet culture has negatively influenced how pregnant dancers understand their bodies and role in the ballet world. Ballet dancers' feelings about their bodies throughout pregnancy and motherhood are revealed through interviews and their social media presence, and I claim that these avenues of publicity uncover the damaging cultural expectations that lead to mothers being pushed out of

ballet. Before diving into specific examples, however, I will articulate my definition of the cultural construction of the idealized ballet body through feminist scholar Susan Bordo's work on body studies and eating disorders, as well as research by dance scholars such as Wendy Oliver, Angela Pickard, Jill Green, and Anna Aalten.

Controlling the Ballet Body Through Pain and Surveillance

In the pivotal book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo outlines how Western culture moves female lives toward an obsession with food, hunger, thinness, and control. Much of what she describes, particularly in part two of the book entitled "The Slender Body and Other Cultural Forms," easily applies to the intense relationship that female ballet dancers have with their bodies. Women are the gender most effected by anorexia and oppressed by, what feminist writer Kim Chernin calls, the "tyranny of slenderness."[2] In Western culture, women have bodies and *are* their bodies.[3] Exercising control over the body in accordance with society's demands provides a desirable aspect of power that is often lost due to womanhood itself. The anorectic obsession with slenderness culminates into what Bordo recognizes as a fear of "the Female," a figure that has culturally been aligned with insatiable lust and hunger. Female anorectics hold onto their adolescent and boy-like bodies, in part, because of their fear of reproduction, of becoming "round and fully developed" and eventually becoming "the Female."[4] Bordo uncovers the intense practices of control that facilitate the eradication of the body that is characteristic of anorectics, and I believe ballerinas as well. Though not all female ballet dancers are anorectics, the control and obsession with the body that defines the art form resembles Bordo's theories too closely to discount her relevance in conversations outlining the culture of ballet.

Despite the variation in ballet styles across the globe, female body expectations remain consistent, partly due to ballet's aesthetic requirement of "lightness."[5] Even in the 19th century, depictions of ballerinas like Italian dancer Fanny Cerrito broadcast dancers "floating in space like a wisp…suspended by the buoyancy of the air, she is not merely light, she is weightless."[6] The introduction of pointe shoes to the art form had the specific purpose of creating the illusion that ballerinas were gliding on clouds, ascending into the heavens, and producing "a sense of otherworldly weightlessness."[7] This weightlessness could only be paired with a slim and light body, devoid of fat and taut with muscle. Such body aesthetic traditions continued to be upheld by powerful figures in ballet companies throughout history. For example, George Balanchine is credited as enforcing the unique character of the American ballerina. His company dancers held onto his every word like he was God, and when he told them he "must see the bones" of their bodies and repeatedly said "eat less" and "eat nothing," dancers like Gelsey Kirkland were compelled to follow.[8] He made it known that his preference was "slim-hipped, and long-legged" women, which has become standard in most companies today.[9]

Dancers and pre-professional students push their bodies, even when experiencing pain or discomfort, to stay true to this dominant bodily ideal. In this way, a hallmark outlining ballet is the relationship of the female body toward pain. Pain is an expected and often welcome part of being a ballerina; being able to tolerate intense discomfort is taught from the start of training. The endurance of pain is only made possible because of a skewed relationship between the mind and the body. Dancers consciously distance themselves from their limbs and muscles. Instead of referring to their physical capabilities as joint mobility, flexibility, or hip rotation, bodies are referred to as "facility," likening the body to an inanimate machine. Separating oneself from the humanity of the body makes it possible to treat it in any way to achieve desired goals, often by

methods of pain.* By treating the body as a machine or an "absent body," as doctor and philosopher Drew Leder states, every signal of pain becomes a reason to push the device to its limits.[10] This ideal mimics Bordo's concept of the "alien body." Here she explains that those who are obsessed with their body and food will intentionally bifurcate the human experience into two realms: the bodily or material in one, and the mental and spiritual in the other.[11] When successful, "the body is experienced as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me."[12] Experiencing the body as separate from self leads to viewing the body as an enemy, something that can be defeated and conquered. Separating the body allows the opportunity of victory and freedom against bodily pleasures. All constructions of distancing the self from the body make inflicting pain on flesh possible, and in some cases, the necessary action to take.

Dancers also seek out pain to confirm to themselves that they are in control of their bodies. When writing about anorectics and the obsession with their bodies, Bordo says, "The frustrations of starvation, the rigors of the constant physical activity in which anorectics engage, the pain of the numerous physical complications of anorexia: these do not trouble the anorectic. Indeed, her ability to ignore them is further proof to her of her mastery of her body."[13] Anorectics savor the pain. To them it is a mark of achievement, just as it is in ballet culture. The masochism that structures ballet is evident in interviews that Angela Pickard conducted with young students. One dancer says, "At the end of the class or performance if I've felt the pain but it hasn't bothered me then I feel so good and I get goose bumps. It's sort of fun really and I want the feeling again and again."[14] To them, ignoring the aches and pains presents the opportunity for

* There are many tools that ballet dancers use to improve their flexibility and strength that, as a side effect, produce a great deal of pain. Foot stretchers are wooden planks with grooves for the curvature of the feet, and during its use, dancers force their feet to point at ranges they are physically incapable of reaching themselves. Stretching bands are used to open the legs into various split positions at ranges that are not possible for most people to maintain. Both methods of stretching produce a lot of pain and can induce injuries.

real artistry and freedom, providing the euphoric feeling that keeps them hooked on ballet. Furthermore, rewards are given to those who exhibit a "high pain tolerance and effective management of emotion in the form of resilience."[15] Instead of encouraging dancers to take care of their physical and emotional needs, the culture of ballet expects a resilient interior and exterior resulting in injuries or a disregard of physical health. Referring to extreme discomfort as "good pain" or "nice hurt" further confuses movers about whether their pain is legitimate.[16]

The overall discomfort of ballet would be in vain if it did not result in a body that would guarantee success. Teachers, who are frequently former professional dancers, often use techniques of pain to correct students and shape their bodies into the ballet ideal to help them achieve success. It is up to them to keep ballet exclusive to petite and lean dancers. Teachers themselves may hold extreme biases against anyone over the weight limit for what they deem as the best body. A teacher laughed to Pickard while saying, "Because ballet is one of the very highest art forms, you cannot attain the levels that are needed basically if you're fat."[17] Their misguided beliefs about whether fat people can balance or perfect common steps impact the ways they teach their students. Some teachers will tell students, "We want the weight dropped for next week."[18] They'll place emphasis on the female body to relieve the stress of others, like encouraging female dancers to stay thin as to not make the *pas de deux* rehearsals difficult for their male partners. Some resort to humiliation through food-based corrections like telling dancers to "stay off the milkshakes" in front of colleagues and peers.[19] In totality, teachers have a vested interest in keeping ballet exclusive and thin. If ballet stays within its tradition, its high art standards will lead to even more exclusivity, and the teachers will become more valuable to the lucky students able to be pushed and molded into stardom.

Along with external values from teachers, dancers are also known to have an immense amount of self-discipline due to the extreme surveillance of their bodies in and out of the studio. A traditional ballet class contains an instructor watching the dancers at every angle. A wall to wall, floor to ceiling mirror, makes it so every dancer is always within sight of themselves and the teacher. When the instructor isn't watching the dancer, the mirror is always giving her a direct representation of the imperfections her body makes as it moves. Dance scholar Jill Green claims that the mirror is a primary vessel for self-surveillance.[20] Cognizant of the expectations for the perfect ballet body, every single day for multiple hours at a time, the dancer is positioned in front of a mirror that takes in every inch of her bodies and reveals, in so many ways, how she fails to fit into the imagined ideal. Her body (and self) becomes docile; malleable and able to be transformed, but only through extreme control and surveillance. The formation of docile bodies is not an accident. Bordo writes,

> Preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness are not abnormal. Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, ensuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms.[21]

Becoming docile creates a culture where students are forced to scrutinize over their bodies, leading to heavily regulated food intake and discipline. The result is a system of personal control that takes place well outside of the studio. For example, feelings of violation over control exercised by ballet teachers did not prevent students in Green's study from implementing that same discipline over themselves while weight and strength training at the gym. Students began to feel power by maintaining their bodies through excessive movement and disordered eating

practices. They'd subject themselves to particularly abusive teaching styles to gain the reward of perfectly shaped bodies. Ultimately, ballet's panopticon "creates a culture of silence rather than of creativity and action where students constantly observe, judge, and correct themselves."[22] In this line of thought, dancers are pushed to embody an imaginary figure at the cost of their creativity and artistry.

Jill Green builds upon Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian who established theories on social control and power, to lay the groundwork for understanding how ballet dancers' expectations of discipline for themselves grows to surpass their instructors. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault uses the structure of the panopticon to reveal how figures in power shift surveillance onto their subjects. Within the panopticon, an individual is always seen and isolated from their peers, "hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[23] By creating an environment where an individual is aware of their exposure to omnipotent beings, they will discipline themselves and become the bearers of the burden of surveillance. Foucault writes that "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."[24] The actual enforcement of rules and production of punishment almost disappears from the hands of those who created them in the first place. Instead, the person who finds him or herself entangled within the panopticon will be the punisher, keeping themselves and anyone else around them in line with the rules. The environment of ballet is like a panopticon, leading to the excessive control and policing of the body from dancers onto themselves.

Flat Stomachs and Ballet Success

Dancers' perception of their actual and ideal self is impacted by the broader culture of ballet, how teachers relay information to them, and how the environment of the class forces them to constantly critique their bodies and their movement. Interviews conducted by Pickard unearth the inner attitudes of adolescent dancers as they move through their intense training trying to achieve the status of principal dancer. Her results are illuminating as they display the impact that the internalization of the culture has on the psyche of movers and the ways this later affects beliefs surrounding the pregnant body in ballet. For instance, a sixteen-year-old student says, "There is no way you can be a ballet dancer, boy or girl, if you are fat. You can't even be chubby—no way. There should be no big, chunky bits, no wobbly bits. Everything has to be lean and light but also muscles must be tight and strong… I dread getting a tummy [to] appear when I'm older."[25] Any "extra" fat or muscle is completely incompatible with success in the eyes of this mover. Similarly, a seventeen-year-old student says, "We're all thin here but I do find myself checking out how flat the tummies are and we all know if someone starts putting on weight or if their tummy is bulging."[26] Among this study, there is an emphasis on the stomach being a marker of weight gain, which immediately excludes a population of people from participating in ballet. The control to sustain this physique is akin to the control that dancers exercise in front of their mirrors every day. With Western notions of fat being synonymous to laziness and being undisciplined, dancers support an extreme level of restraint to stay thin, so that they may never be associated with the former.[27]

Not unlike the anorectic, ballet dancers are obsessed with the appearance of their stomachs because of its symbol of both fatness and reproductive capability. For anorectics, "the part of the obese anatomy most often targeted for vicious attack, and most despised by the obese

themselves, is the stomach, symbol of consumption."[28] For those who are hyper-focused on their body, a growing stomach signifies a degradation of will. Weight gain constitutes a person who is lazy, undetermined, and a failure toward achieving the goal of being the captain of one's body and soul. Ballet dancers share the same drive for control over the bulging stomach, as mentioned in Pickard's study, as it goes against everything they have trained for. Most relevant to my thesis, the growing stomach is also a marker of reproductive development and fertility. During puberty, "body fat increases by about 125 percent" and "an accumulation of fat on the hips that contributes to the normal female contour" begins to become apparent.[29] Adolescent dancers, under the pursuit of slimness, will try to stave off this natural occurrence. According to Dr. L.M. Vincent and his book *Competing with the Sylph*, which focuses on the disordered eating habits of young ballerinas in New York City, the absence or irregularity of menarche is relatively common and not seen as a problem among dancers. An absence of the menstrual cycle means that pregnancy and any other unregulated growth of the stomach is unlikely. The double result of maintaining the ballet physique and reducing the fat in the body to cause irregular menstruation, satisfies the control-oriented obsession that dancers have with their appearance, even if it is detrimental for their overall physical health and wellbeing.

One distinguishing characteristic that separates the ballet profession from others is that the body and how it looks aesthetically takes precedence over all other factors. Strength, agility, and the body's adherence to the ballet ideal are the deciding factors on whether a dancer secures a job. Dance scholar Wendy Oliver writes that "slimness is directly related not only to one's level of success within a company, but also to one's success within the national ballet job market."[30] On the same note, Vincent says, "From an early age; aspiring ballerinas will not be accepted into professional company schools if they are heavy or appear to have that tendency.

Similarly, heavy dancers will not be accepted into ballet companies, and those who become heavy will either shape up or ship out."[31] Maintenance of the ballet body seems to be one of the only methods of security in achieving a dream that so few accomplish.

To demonstrate the scarcity of positions in the ballet world, consider The Youth American Grand Prix (YAGP), a ballet competition where since 1999, over 200,000 students have competed or participated in workshops; however, there are only about 450 alumni who are currently dancing in professional companies.[32] This statistic only shows a sliver of the total number of ballet dancers who have trained all their lives, auditioned, but have not been able to secure a professional job. YAGP founder Larissa Saveliev says, "I have seen so many extremely talented dancers end up not having enough motivation and mental strength, not having the right body type, not getting into the right company at the right time or getting injured at the wrong moment. You need so many factors, and some of these are out of your hands."[33] Securing the right body type is taught as something that *is* within a dancer's control, and like Saveliev acknowledges, can be a deciding factor in whether a young dancer is hired. Therefore, attention to maintaining the body becomes a central tenant to ballet dancers striving to enter a company.

The Fight Between Pregnancy and the Ballet Ideal

Ballet dancers who become pregnant immediately inhabit a body that is unwelcome within the ballet world. Ballet culture puts so much emphasis on being at the peak of physical capability, which involves achieving a lean and muscular physique and being able to dance for an indefinite amount of time. As mentioned previously, any swelling of the stomach is believed to be incompatible with the demands and aesthetics of ballet. Young dancers dread the idea, and powerful figures strongly discourage practices that could result in any noticeable fat accumulation. Therefore, pregnancy guarantees a body that is the antithesis of the foundation

that ballet is built upon, putting talented dancers in positions where they could be ostracized from their social and cultural identity.

A ballet dancer's fear of being cast away from her career due to changes in her body is seen through the ways she engages with social media sites. Specifically, the videos and pictures uploaded on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok depict the intense discipline and surveillance that pregnant ballerinas have over their bodies, before and after labor. By analyzing various posts across both social media sites, I argue that the exercises pregnant dancers perform and the reasons for their consistent activity vary—including the joy received from or health benefits of exercise—yet ultimately, their persistent exercising ties back to the history and culture of the body in ballet and the need to remain "in shape" for and available to the field.

It is not unusual for professional dancers to continue to take ballet classes, attend rehearsals, and practice strength training like Pilates up until their due date. For example, The Royal Ballet soloist Elizabeth Harold trained up until the last week of her pregnancy, and Christina Aretis, another soloist with the same company, "did Pilates right up until her due date and even took part in a ballet class the day she went into labor."[34] Dancers may even perform while visibly pregnant. Sarah Orza was posted in photo on Instagram in 2019 that catches her on stage in a high relevé, outstretched arms in a 'V' shooting out to the sky, and leg raised to the side in a beautiful extension. Directly in the center of the screen is her pregnant belly, encased in a flowy green dress.[35] Pregnancy did little to stop Orza from performing. Ingrid Silva, a verified creator on Instagram, has an abundance of pictures and videos of her taking class and dancing while pregnant as well. One video depicts her alone in the studio carrying out a *rond de jambe* combination while several months pregnant.[36] Similarly, another Instagram video shows Maria Kochetkova 35-weeks pregnant and successfully achieving multiple *fouetté* turns at the barre

during a *rond de jambe* combination.[37] Continuing movement throughout pregnancy is not an anomaly in the dance world, but I am more interested in the motivations behind its prevalence.

A performer may choose to continue their normal level of exercise and movement through pregnancy to maintain their health. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists asserts that continuing regular exercise throughout pregnancy is safe and does not increase the risk of adverse events like miscarriage, low-birth weight, or preterm births. The doctors recommend about 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise per week; however, if the patient woman was active before pregnancy, she can continue that level of activity with OB/GYN approval.[38] Exercise during pregnancy can also benefit the mother and fetus through reduced back pain, decreased risk of gestational diabetes and C-section, strengthened heart and blood vessels, and may make it easier to lose weight during the postpartum period.[39] Because of the benefits of exercise during pregnancy, it is understandable and expected that pregnant dancers would uphold a consistent level of exercise during the nine-month period.

Dancers may also continue to take class and exercise throughout pregnancy because of their love for the practice of ballet. Most dancers and performers are intrinsically motivated to be artists and maintain their artistry through times of change. The somatic practice of dance strengthens the connection between the mind and the body and can become akin to a practice like yoga, a movement ritual that provides healing and strength for the participant. In talking about the exercises she did while pregnant, Ingrid Silva says, “It’s important for me to learn how to work with the body that I have now and embrace that this body is powerful and did so much and will do so much, but I need to take care of it and know and treat it as my temple.”[40] She acknowledges the change in her body, but continues to work and dance because the movement

helps her appreciate and embrace her body as it develops. This continued practice of dance and grace for the body is seen on her Instagram page as well. One video shows her practicing a full barre at nineteen weeks pregnant, which is routinely a minimum of seven combinations, in both flat ballet shoes and in pointe shoes. She says in her caption, "My everyday journey, this was the day I gave up on leotards. And that's ok, we should wear whatever feels comfortable and makes you happy."[41] Through dance, she continues to be kind to herself and her body, adapting the uniform to benefit her needs during pregnancy. Participating in exercise to embrace the uniqueness and power of the body instead of the sole purpose of losing weight indicates that movement is necessary to the dancer's wellbeing.

Although motivations of health benefits and joy are sound, the most important and underlying reason that explains why dancers continue to move during pregnancy is the pressure to show their usefulness and competence to the ballet profession, which includes the ideal body. There have been countless moments throughout my life where I've scrolled through Instagram or TikTok and have been captured by an impressive video of a pregnant person dancing with perfect technique and agility. Ashley Bouder, principal dancer with New York City Ballet, has gone viral several times with her 2016 *fouetté* turn video series that displayed her feverishly spinning on pointe throughout her third trimester, and up to four days before she had her baby.[42] On TikTok, a video of a pregnant ballet dancer named Mel Boniface garnered over 150,000 views, showing how impressed users are by *pirouettes* and pointe work while pregnant.[43] The comments to those and similar videos encapsulate my feelings of wonderment. Hearts, stars, and clapping emojis fill the comment sections and an overall tone of amazement and awe at the conceived impossibility of the task to dance while pregnant. I share that amazement; however, I

consistently find myself wondering why. What factors compel this show of training throughout pregnancy?

In part, demonstrating to artistic staff that the dancer is still able to perform at the technical level required to maintain a position in the company is a motivating factor. Ballet remains an incredibly competitive field, with the top ranked companies maintaining a range of 20-90 employed dancers, while there are 36,000 current students in ballet academies who hope to be a professional one day.[44] The revolving door of dancers leaving and being replaced is constant, providing more of an incentive for a pregnant woman to continue to dance, in fear of losing her job when someone inevitably fills the empty space on stage while she is on maternity leave.

Social media posts that depict pregnant dancers practicing strength training and dancing in the studio broadcast their loyalty to ballet standards and dedication for continued success in the art form. Built upon a culture of perfection, precision, and control, it is unrealistic to believe that pregnant dancers are unaffected by its influence. Up until this point in their careers, ballet dancers have been confronted with body standards that if broken, resulted in professional criticism and exclusion.[45] They have been taught that the appeal of ballet "is the sense that performers have superhuman bodies that are stronger, more flexible, more graceful, and thinner than viewers might ever hope to be."[46] Pregnancy and its unescapable manifestation contradicts this appeal. Realizations of this contradiction push the dancer to be consistent with her exercise and make posts that demonstrate she still embodies the superhuman aspect of ballet expectations, making up for her lack of thinness. The results of this need are posts like the video of principal dancer Iana Salenko practicing Pilates in her third trimester. Her caption proclaims the helpfulness of Pilates in her journey through pregnancy, with #makebodystronger tagged;

however, she also tagged #shape, indicating her need to stay in shape to maintain her career.[47] Another video of Lisset Enriquez, former dancer with BalletMet, doing an extension combination at the barre with the caption, “Trying to stay in shape after being pregnant for 7 months” shows that the need to stay moving, strong, and balletic is paramount to identity and job security.[48]

Less acknowledged in posts surrounding dancing and pregnancy are the common symptoms of pregnancy that make it difficult to attempt physical exercise. Intense physiologic changes transform the body into something new, causing a host of disagreeable side effects. During pregnancy, the woman’s respiratory rate increases, and the entire cardiovascular system readjusts to increase blood volume and cardiac output. The gastrointestinal system completely changes as the fetus pushes internal organs into new spaces to make room for it to grow from the pelvis into the ribcage. Breasts change, the hormonal endocrine system readjusts, and the musculoskeletal system has to realign to maintain balance.[49] Physiological changes like these produce common symptoms such as increased urination, fatigue, nausea, heartburn, aches and pain, swelling of the feet and ankles, and shortness of breath.[50] An increase of the hormone relaxin, which enhances flexibility to prepare the birth canal for expansion can also cause excessive stress on ligaments and tendons.[51] Ballet dancers are not immune to these shifts in body placement and composition. The internal or external push to continue to participate in dance well into pregnancy is negative if it forces dancers to disregard how their body is feeling for the sole purpose of proving their worth to the field. What happens to the women who cannot continue to dance during pregnancy, whether it be because of the host of symptoms noted above or a desire to take time away from ballet? Are they cast aside because they are out of sight? Are they viewed as less dedicated than their pregnant dancing counterparts? These hypothetical

questions serve as a way to further control dancers and keep their actions in accordance with what choreographers or artistic directors might demand, even if it is the direct opposite of their wants for their pregnancies.

Snapping Back to Ballet

Furthermore, after pregnancy, the dancer must navigate her new body and figure out how to "bounce back" to who she was before, which isn't always possible. "Bounce back" or "snap back" culture is a pervasive norm and Western expectation that pushes women to "snap back into the bodies and behaviors they had before getting pregnant."[52] Completely disregarding the complications that can occur because of pregnancy—such as pelvic organ prolapse (when the organs of the pelvis become weak or loose),[53] diastasis recti (when abdominal muscles separate),[54] C-section, perineal tears (tears around the vagina),[55] or pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure and damage to organs)[56]—women are still expected to return to their pre-baby weights with ease. Even without any serious complications, pregnancy causes the uterus to expand from the size of a fist to that of a watermelon. The placenta, like a scab, peels off the inside of the uterus leaving a large wound. It takes a minimum of six weeks to heal that wound and for the uterus to return to its original lemon-like size, but healing can and often does take more time.[57]

Exposure to women in their postpartum periods in the media also serves as a function to keep other women beholden to the value of thinness. Celebrities like Katie Holmes, Rihanna, Beyonce, and Victoria Beckham all have had their pregnancies and record "snap back" postpartum periods immortalized in the media, setting high bars for women all around the world.[58] The resources that many high-profile celebrities have, such as "personal trainers, chefs, and nannies," make it more possible for them to return to their pre-baby body than the average woman.[59] Examples in media and expectations from friends, family, and employers make it so

women are socialized to retake control and get their bodies "back," even if it is unhealthy, unsafe, or unrealistic to do so.

Nowhere is "snap back" culture more fully realized than in dance and the performing arts, where artists experience extreme pressure to return to the stage as soon as possible. Instagram account @balletmoods is dedicated to posting relatable memes for dancers to enjoy, and one of their recent posts highlights the experiences of dancers when they try to resist "snap back" culture and request a maternity leave to heal their bodies. In a three photo slideshow post about companies denying maternity leave with no regard for the pregnant dancer's health, users flood the comment section supporting the post, saying "It's funny, 'cause it's sad…" and "Best I can do is no [maternity leave] and then also not provide any support when you return to work…and then I'll throw in some body shaming as an extra."[60] After pregnancy, the dancer is left with a body that is unlike the one she is used to, yet most ballet companies do not grant their dancers maternity leave. If she is granted a leave, she has a minimum of six weeks to transform her body back into what the artistic staff expects of a ballerina. Any evidence of motherhood must quickly be removed and out of sight for the comfortability of onlookers. Some women will find that they return or approach their pre-baby weight about six to twelve months after pregnancy.[61] The timeline for ballet dancers seems to be much more accelerated, as seen with the ironic balletmoods post and the corroborative comments. Elizabeth Harrod spent three of her six-month maternity leave (an unusually long maternity leave because she lives in the UK) doing Pilates and taking classes. Julie Diana, principal with Pennsylvania Ballet, gave herself six weeks with no exercise and gained her abdominal control back after six to eight months of constant work. Christine Winkler, a principal dancer with Atlanta Ballet, was performing on stage four months after having her baby.[62] Sarah Orza started getting back into movement around week six

of postpartum, was back dancing in rehearsals after about three and a half months, and performed four months after giving birth.[63] In ballet, there is a need and expectation that pregnant dancers become superwomen, always keeping the bodies in shape and zooming through the post-partum period back into their "old" selves to perform at a speed unlike non-dancing mothers. The result becomes a culture that places undue pressure and stress on pregnant people rather than support and encouragement.

Conclusion

This discussion on the ballet body and how it interacts with the lives of pregnant dancers reveals that the current ballet culture cannot truly accommodate motherhood and does not support mothers in a way that is necessary to provide for their continued success in the art form. Ballet has produced generations of dancers, teachers, and critics that value aesthetics above everything else. The persistent aesthetic of the slim, lean, and, perhaps as of late, slightly muscular dancer leaves little space for most people. It even subjects those who have been successful in the art form to obsess over their need to stand out and retain their positions in their companies. Motherhood and pregnancy bring these issues about the ballet body to light. A woman, who has successfully maintained the required level of thinness for ballet, suddenly shifts to the other end of the body spectrum during her pregnancy. This drastic change, coupled with ballet expectations, may unfairly push her to maintain a physique that is incompatible with developing motherhood. In the worst cases, support for a healing and healthy pregnancy is replaced with support to lose all the weight and return to a profitable body that is pleasing to directors and audience members. The outward perception of pregnancy shown through social media certainly depicts the strength, perseverance, and love new mothers have for ballet and their babies; however, hidden underneath is the pull to conform back to the bodies they've

known and the bodies that are expected of them. If the culture of the ballet body does not begin to change to value the temporary and permanent fluctuations of weight and ability that naturally occurs over time, ballet will continue to hail as the art form that refuses to accommodate the beauty of new life and motherhood.

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CONCLUSION

Ballet Mothers and the Rules They Live By

As my research has shown, societal expectations of "good" mothers has dictated the ways pregnant women shape their behavior as future parents. Upon interacting with friends, family, and media, pregnant women are pulled into varying directions, all of which proclaim to be the path that will guarantee their roles as good mothers. Picking one path over the other comes with great scrutiny, and pregnant women realize they are caught in a trap of contradictions placed on their minds and bodies. Traditional expectations that women must stay home and raise children are consistently abandoned because of the increasing cost of living in the United States. In addition, women today can choose to pursue their passions through employment. On the other hand, women are often pushed to return to work, even when they don't feel ready because of the lack of standardized maternity leave policies in the United States, with most full-time positions offering twelve weeks of unpaid leave, and other positions offering less than that. The choice to return to work is made for them. Even though in some instances, society encourages women to return to work, attitudes and policies also discourage them from rejoining the workforce. If they return, they aren't given adequate time and space to pump. The provision of childcare is often out of the question, forcing new parents to rely on other family members or pay an exorbitant amount of money, on average $16,000 per year, for their children to be taken care of during the workday.[1] Whether women choose to stay home to spend more time with their children and save on childcare, or return to work to support themselves and their family, the conflicting attitudes that outsiders have about their decisions makes motherhood more difficult than necessary, and often brings mental health challenges.

Ballet mothers face a unique situation because they are held under the constraints of normal Western expectations of mothers, while also balancing rules that are specific to their aesthetic profession. For instance, ballet dancers are expected to maintain a strong loyalty to their teachers and their company. In evaluating the American creator of this tradition, George Balanchine, journalist Gia Kourlas writes that "Ballet requires — no, demands — devotion. But what is the price of that devotion, especially for women? …its price is physical and mental abuse, eating disorders, bloody toes, suffering, pain and blind subservience to patriarchal leaders."[2] As I have established with examples like ballet dancer Nijinska, devotion to the craft and the art form supersedes any desire to have children or relationships outside of the studio. Should a ballet dancer get pregnant and have children, she is seen as not being serious enough to "make it" in the field. Her subsequent removal from ballet is welcomed, as it makes room for more determined dancers to climb the ranks. The expected loyalty that permeates the culture of ballet creates an environment that is unsupportive of mothers and pregnant dancers, and it serves as another factor that pushes them out of the art form.

Chapter two of my thesis also articulated that ballerina mothers are special because they must negotiate the aesthetic look of their bodies while bringing new life into the world. As their bodies grow and create a suitable environment for their babies, they suddenly emerge in a figure that goes against the ballet world's requirements. Like Ali Duffy says, "women in dance are more prone to disordered eating and exercising than men because the narrative of the ideal body in dance is ubiquitous and this ideal is not achievable for most healthy adult women."[3] To advance and be rewarded in ballet, dancers have to subscribe to extreme practices of control to sustain a body composition that is thinner and leaner than most athletes. The ritualistic practice of keeping their body weight at an "acceptable" number inevitably carries over into how a dancer

treats her body during pregnancy and the postpartum period. The result of these rigid ballet expectations is shown through the pregnant dancers who have a distorted relationship with their body.

As my research has shown, the challenges with the coexistence of the ideal ballet body and pregnancy resonate in how dancers portray themselves on social media during their pregnancies. When pregnant dancers post on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok, they often display themselves exercising or dancing at high levels of intensity. In the face of pregnancy related symptoms like nausea, heartburn, and fatigue, they are achieving the impossible. Their social media presence reveals that they are hyper-aware of their status as pregnant women and are doing everything in their power to prove to the public and artistic staff around the country that they are still assets. Within this line of thought, their intense levels of exercise should, in turn, make up for the fact that they do not presently subscribe to the traditional ballet ideal. The expectation of persistent thinness creates a situation where mothers are constantly worried about staying as small as possible and "snapping back" quickly, instead of being content with their body and exploring the birth of artistry that comes with motherhood.

Artistry and Motherhood Go Hand in Hand

Pregnancy can change an artist, often for the better as she experiences complex emotions that forever alter her perception of life. Mothers who gave birth in different environments, some at home and others in hospitals, have recounted the range of emotions they experienced during their labor. Women in a midwifery study felt excitement and anticipation, calmness and confidence, intensity, overwhelmed and a loss of autonomy, tiredness, and the power of the birthing experience.[4] The influx of emotions stimulates a change in outlook and, consequently for dancers, artistry. These changes impact how they approach their movement practice and

bring new subject matter to explore in choreography and performance. Take Julie Tobiason, principal dancer with PNB who gave birth to her son during her career: Her director worried about her returning to the company, but upon seeing her dance again, said "Julie did come back, and she's a better dancer now. She was always cute, but now she's warmer, more interesting."[5] Growing communities encourage mothers to access this artistry and appreciation for newfound motherhood; one of which is the Instagram account @dancersandmotherhood, founded by dancing mothers who want to see positive change in the industry. The account shares posts from women all around the world who professionally dance in ballet technique and have gone through pregnancy and motherhood. Several videos on their account detail the joys of motherhood and how becoming a mother makes them better and more competent movers. One of their posts, from dancer Sriba Kwadjovie says, "Needless to say, it's not easy balancing, dance, work, and home life and yet since having a child, I feel the most creative I've ever been."[6]

Individual and collective groups of professional ballet dancing mothers have also taken to social media sites to be a refuge of support for mothers in the field, recognizing the need for community and sharing the beauty that comes from motherhood. One such ballet dancer is Gracie Holway, who frequently posts tender videos of her dancing with her daughter strapped to her chest or of her teaching her daughter new ballet steps. In one video, Gracie is performing an *adagio* combination, all with her daughter Ocean strapped to the front of her body, quietly experiencing each movement.[7] Gracie's smile is ear to ear at several moments throughout the video. Another is of Gracie and her daughter in the ballet studio, leaping and running around together.[8] Dance has become an activity where the two can connect and experience happiness together. The videos are always filled with laughter and smiles, demonstrating the joy that being

a mother in the dance world has on her. A similar style of video is seen with Ingrid Silva, as she practices a *plié* combination with her daughter Laura held onto her chest.[9]

In addition to individual instances of motherhood in ballet, a collective online group of dancers who support motherhood was established by Lucy McCrudden, the founder of the Dance Mama organization. Her Instagram account is dedicated to Dance Mama, which through social media presence, research, and resources, encourages pregnant women and mothers in the movement arts to continue with their journey and integrate motherhood into their dance careers. Dance Mama recognizes that motherhood brings a newfound excitement to the field and should be celebrated and encouraged. The organization consistently shares photos and videos of pregnant dancers and dancing mothers with their children achieving success and happiness within the ballet field.[10] This online support of motherhood is essential for the encouragement of mothers in ballet because the lack of support in ballet settings illustrated in chapter one has the unfortunate goal of pushing mothers out of the art form.

Shifts to Accommodate Motherhood

Structural changes such as maternity leave, childcare, and breastfeeding accommodations must be implemented in ballet companies to reflect the value that pregnancy and motherhood bring to the dance studio. An extended and paid maternity leave would allow mothers the appropriate space to recover from their births, which are long, arduous, painful, and can completely change the physiology of the human body. An intentional leave of absence that can be taken without repercussions would encourage women to bond with their babies and safely bring their bodies back to movement. Additionally, “The single most cited way that organizations in dance could better support working mothers in it, is for them to make free or affordable childcare widely available during various hours of the days, evenings, and

weekends—hours required of people in dance professions."[11] The hours that dancers are expected to work varies according to the season and timing of performances. If the company is producing *The Nutcracker*, it is reasonable to assume that most dancers will be on call every day from the afternoon to the late evening. These hours do not allow for affordable childcare in normal circumstances, which pushes mothers to sacrifice a portion of their already low salary or leave the field altogether. Companies providing affordable childcare would encourage mothers to stay involved and committed to ballet and would also make dancers feel more valued. Finally, understanding and accommodations towards breastfeeding are necessary in providing postpartum mothers opportunities to continue dancing at the level they wish. Implementing breaks before and after class or rehearsal would not only give mothers the opportunity to pump or feed their children, but it would be beneficial for all other dancers in the company to rest and recuperate.

Cultural changes are also necessary in creating a supportive environment for ballet mothers and pregnant women, and the first cultural change must be a restructured understanding of the ideal body. Ali Duffy's research study on dancing mothers interviewed participants that said, "ballet companies are the least welcoming to pregnant people, mothers, and children because of longstanding norms of decorum and etiquette and a pervasive culture that upholds overwork and requires a specific body type."[12] Chapter two of my research revealed that if the strict understanding of the ballet body persists, the deplorable treatment of pregnant dancers, mothers, and dancers who go through a change in their body composition will also continue. Talented dancers will be pushed out of ballet before their time, and their contributions to the dance world will be lost. Breaking down the expectation for the extremely thin ballet body would also allow dancers to focus on improving their stamina and technique at their own pace after pregnancy, instead of the accelerated speed that is witnessed through ballet dancers' social media

presence. Finally, dismantling the ballet body will allow dancers to feel more joy and excitement about entering the next phase of their life as mothers, rather than rushing to shrink their bodies to an unrealistic figure.

The second cultural shift must be the dismantling of paternalism and the expectation that dancers can only be dedicated to their art and not their other relationships. Today, powerful artists in the dance world still believe that any commitments outside of ballet indicate that the dancer isn't committed to their craft as a mover. This belief is untrue, and hurts all dancers, but especially the women who become pregnant and take on motherhood. This attitude produces guilt, as they are forced to choose between two things they love, dance and their baby. Viewing passion for art as all-encompassing refuses to acknowledge the real possibility of balancing ballet with other responsibilities. Being involved in other activities and building relationships outside of ballet deepens dancers' creativity and artistry. Their life experiences diversify their quality of movement, and they are able to access emotions that bring so much more to their dancing.

The third shift must be to recognize the value of women and mothers outside of their money-making capacity. True respect comes with providing proper care and accommodations through times of change. A ballet dancer spends her entire life training in the studio. She gives up her teen years and, traditionally, her education just to achieve a spot in a company, an opportunity that most dancers only dream about. For women especially, they maintain harsh body standards, even if it becomes negative for their mental and emotional health. If they have achieved a lifetime of success in the industry of ballet, their subsequent pregnancies should not negate their importance to the field. Outside of perhaps being a principal and favorite dancer of the audience, the dancer is a person, with hopes and dreams beyond ballet that she has the right

to try and achieve. Her relevance to the profession does not end with the announcement of her pregnancy. Her maternity leave may cause physical absence, but her work in the ballet world is far from over. The bravery that comes from approaching pregnancy and motherhood as a ballerina encourages a social change that makes way for more mothers in the art form and produces both acceptance and a desire for the stories of motherhood to be represented on stage. Motherhood enhances ballet, and it is up to the companies and culture of ballet to change to accommodate their presence.

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