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March 28, 2025

Labor Without Employment: The Rise of American Ballet Trainee Programs,
2000-2025

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the reasons for the growth of ballet trainee programs in the United States from 2000-2025 and examines the relationship between skilled labor and compensation in ballet companies. I posit that instead of hiring more dancers, small companies exploit trainees by allowing them to perform unpaid labor in the company under the guise of “education” while paying thousands of dollars in tuition to the company-affiliated school. While dancers in previous generations joined companies in their late teen years, trainee programs are delaying dancers’ entry into the profession and extending the time in which they must rely on outside sources of income to support themselves. I detail the history of ballet’s birth in the courts of Europe to contextualize how the American economic context fundamentally shaped the development of ballet in the nation and explain why trainee programs are a uniquely American phenomenon. I then turn to analyze the funding patterns for the arts in the second half of the twentieth century to explain the impacts of the reduction in funding for the National Endowment of the Arts Dance Program in the mid 1990s. I argue that trainee programs emerged in the wake of the continuous financial struggles faced by American ballet companies during an era of neoliberal reform and a lack of robust federal funding enjoyed by European and Russian ballet companies. Relying heavily on fifteen original oral history interviews that I conducted, I examine how trainee programs can expand a company’s artistic abilities at little to no cost, how the system endangers young dancers, and perform a case study of one ballet company to examine whether it could function without its trainees. I argue that trainee programs constitute labor without employment, wherein trainees perform the same function as company members but do not enjoy the benefits and protections of employment. I conclude that companies’ financial reliance on free labor provided by trainee programs is an unstable system that hinges on young dancers’ compliance with their own exploitation and question how the system can change.

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Introduction: Pulling Back the Curtain

On February 9th, 2023, the Kennedy Center audience was dazzled by a display of *fouettes* and footwork in the Washington Ballet's *Swan Lake*, which marked the company's triumphant return to the stage after the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Underneath the makeup, sets, and costumes, patrons would be surprised to learn that several dancers on that stage were paying to perform. The company, having endured constant financial uncertainty over the years, used "students" from its Trainee Program to supplement the company's ranks. Despite the appearance of ease, the ballet on stage was held together by jet glue and free labor.

American ballet in the twenty-first century has witnessed a new trend in the shape of trainee programs. Trainee programs effectively add two or three years to a dancer's pre-professional studies after they have already completed a decade of training. They function by telling young dancers that they are not ready to be professionals because they lack the experience of working in a company. In previous generations, dancers regularly joined ballet companies between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, sometimes before graduating high school. Today, dancers who have graduated from high school are virtually forced to join trainee programs if they want to pursue a professional career. Trainee programs offer dancers the opportunity to perform in main stage productions with the associated company, with two major caveats: trainees usually pay tuition and are rarely paid for their labor. If dancers in the late twentieth century began their professional careers as teenagers, why are dancers today told they are not ready and that they must work in companies for free to gain experience before they are even considered for professional contracts? This thesis examines the emergence of trainee programs in the American ballet training and professional landscape guided by three key questions. When did ballet trainee

¹ Sarah L. Kaufman, "'Swan Lake' Is a Feather in Washington's Cap," *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2632897330/97C46F0DF39D4079PQ/20?sourcetype=Newspapers>.

programs emerge? Why were they created? And what effect do they have on young dancers and the ballet companies that employ them? Though they have fundamentally reshaped ballet's present and future possibilities, trainee programs have not previously attracted scholarly attention.

Literature Review & Methods

Despite the years of training and sacrifice that ballet dancers undertake for the sake of their art, the labor of ballet is often overlooked. A large segment of historical scholarship on ballet deals with specific dancers, choreographers, companies, and aesthetics.² Much of the contemporary work on ballet centers race and gender, generating necessary conversations about addressing the historically rooted inequities of ballet.³ My work builds upon existent scholarship and uses labor as a framework to make sense of the explosion of trainee programs at ballet companies across the country, grounded by contemporary studies of employment. While a breadth of scholarship has studied ballet as an art form, little research has probed ballet as a form of labor in a commercial marketplace, let alone ballet's intersection with racialized and gendered forms of exploitable labor. One key exception is the edited collection *The Politics of Unpaid*

² Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jennifer Fisher, "Nutcracker" *Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Roland John Wiley, *The Life and Ballets of Lev Ivanov: Choreographer of The Nutcracker and Swan Lake* (Oxford [England]: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1997); Bernard Taper, *Balanchine, a Biography* (New York, N.Y.: Times Books, 1984).

³ Adesola Akinleye, *(Re:)Claiming Ballet*, [New edition]. (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2021); Nyama McCarthy-Brown, "Dancing in the Margins: Experiences of African American Ballerinas," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2012): 385–408; Andrea Harris, "Gendered Discourses in American Ballet at Mid-Century: Ruth Page on the Periphery," *Dance Chronicle* 35, no. 1 (2012): 30–53; Jennifer Fisher, "Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse," *Dance Research Journal* 39, no. 1 (2007): 2–24; Gabrielle Salvatto, "Dancing While Black: 8 Pros on How Ballet Can Work Toward Racial Equity," *Dance Magazine*, September 2, 2021, <https://dancemagazine.com/black-dancers-ballet/>; Jennifer Heimlich, "Is It Time to Rethink 'Men's' Class?," *Dance Magazine*, December 17, 2018, <https://dancemagazine.com/gender-identity-ballet/>.

*Labour: How the Study of Unpaid Labour Can Help Address Inequality in Precarious Work.*⁴

Markieta Domecka and Valeria Pulignano's *The Politics of Unpaid Labour* engages with disparate types of labor to answer the questions of why individuals engage in unpaid labor and how the characteristics of their fields motivate their work. Biographical interviews and audio work diaries from workers in three distinct industries—creative dance (ballet), residential care, and online platform work—reveal that unpaid labor is a “core feature of the political economy of work in contemporary Europe,” not a “residual effect, observable only at the peripheries of economic activities.”⁵ Domecka and Pulignano conclude that in underresourced industries, workers fear the stigma and punishment for failure to subscribe to the norms of the “ideal worker,” and thus believe that unpaid labor is a “necessary sacrifice,” in their fields.⁶

Domecka and Pulignano's study of creative dance in Sweden and the Netherlands diverges from my research in their focus on the unpaid labor of freelance ballet dancers rather than of semi-professional students, but their findings are instructive. Domecka and Pulignano contend that young people, “especially women, enter creative dance not for financial gain but for the sake of art,” a sentiment that drives the “ideal dancer” phenomenon.⁷ While I propose that ballet companies systematically use trainees as unpaid labor under the guise of education, Domecka and Pugliano reveal that freelance dancers are not compensated for labor (taking extra classes to stay in shape, traveling to performance venues, preparing costumes, doing their own makeup, and helping with stage cleaning) that supports the final iteration of the work for which

⁴ Valeria Pulignano and Markieta Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour: How the Study of Unpaid Labour Can Help Address Inequality in Precarious Work*, ed. Valeria Pulignano and Markieta Domecka (Oxford University Press, 2025).

⁵ Valeria Pulignano and Markieta Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour: How the Study of Unpaid Labour Can Help Address Inequality in Precarious Work*, ed. Valeria Pulignano and Markieta Domecka (Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198888130.002.0003>, 234.

⁶ Pulignano and Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour*, 234.

⁷ Pulignano and Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour*, 10.

they are paid—performance.⁸ Unsurprisingly, workers that perform unpaid labor often lack crucial employment protections and can suffer damage to their health and personal lives.

Domecka and Pulignano posit that “survival in creative dance relies heavily on having access to financial and social resources provided by family support,” causing the industry to become “class-based” with access governed by privilege.⁹ The resources available to an individual who performs unpaid labor dictate the precarity of their working conditions. My thesis contributes to the emerging scholarship on unpaid labor and the economics of ballet, offering a historical framing, as well as a focus on the United States.

An early examination of labor in American ballet comes from Ronald Charles Federico’s sociology dissertation, “Ballet as an Occupation.” Published in 1968, the dissertation provides a comprehensive study of the labor of ballet dancers, guided by sociological labor theory. Its epigraph offers insight into the mentality of a ballet dancer, which explains why ballet dancers enter a profession characterized by high demands and low returns:

They have to do it because they want to, because they are not paid well, and often they don't know why they do it. Ballet dancers have this insane drive... You can't recommend or not recommend it, it is in the person... After a while it becomes too much and they stop. How long it takes depends on how much they love to dance. You see, it's like a disease.¹⁰

His study of what drives occupational choice reveals that ballet dancers are not motivated by financial remuneration, as most dancers actually experience downward financial mobility when comparing their income to that of their parents. He analyzes this motivation of dancers as an occupational issue in ballet, arguing that passion can blind emerging professionals to certain occupational realities. Because those entering the profession are young, and motivated by an

⁸ Pulignano and Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour*, 88.

⁹ Pulignano and Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour*, 10.

¹⁰ Ronald Charles Federico, “BALLET AS AN OCCUPATION - ProQuest” (Ph.D., Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University, 1968), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/302337546/48936061B3DE425APQ/5?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>, vi.

innate passion, more established dancers cannot “successfully bargain for any type of objective reward, since if they are unwilling to accept low pay and poor working conditions, there are many others who will”—others being newer, younger dancers.¹¹ Federico’s extensive research helps to explain ballet trainees’ willing participation in an exploitative system.

In order to historically contextualize and analyze ballet company financing, funding for the arts, and the development of ballet in America, this thesis draws on scholarship from various disciplines. Sarah Wilbur’s *Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts*, for example, provides an in-depth history of the National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program. Her theory that “institutions motivate movement” guides her work as she explores how the NEA has fundamentally shaped the type of dance produced in the United States from the “dance boom” in 1965 through the NEA’s neoliberal turn in the late 1990s to 2016.¹² Wilbur makes clear the devastating effects of the reduction of NEA funding for dance in the mid 1990s, which I examine as one root of ballet companies’ financial struggles in the early 2000s that led to the establishment of trainee programs.

In *Shapes of American Ballet: Training and Teachers Before Balanchine*, Jessica Zeller addresses what she views as a gap in the literature on early American ballet training. I draw on Zeller’s work to establish the economic context in which ballet developed in the United States, and build upon her thesis of ballet as a commodity in the American context to explain why trainee programs emerged in the United States and not at European and Russian ballet companies and schools that enjoy robust government subsidy.¹³ Zeller establishes that ballet in the first few

¹¹ Federico, “Ballet as an Occupation,” 77-78.

¹² Sarah Wilbur, *Funding Bodies : Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts*, 1st ed. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2021), xiii.

¹³ Jessica Zeller, “Ballet in America: Coming of Age in a Market Economy,” in *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training before Balanchine*, ed. Jessica Zeller (Oxford University Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190296681.003.0004>, 59-73..

decades of the twentieth century privileged wealth over talent—trainee programs perpetuate the “pay to play” phenomenon on which ballet in America was founded.

Another crucial text that supports my research is Melissa Klapper’s *Ballet Class: An American History*, a social history of ballet class in America. Klapper traces ballet’s evolution from the courts of Europe to its birth as an American art form that has risen to a position of ubiquity in American popular culture. In my research, I engage most heavily with Klapper’s discussions of Americans’ introduction to ballet, ballet class’s association with the middle and upper classes due its cost-prohibitive nature, and the development of regional ballet (out of which trainee programs would grow).¹⁴ Klapper’s explanation of regional ballet companies as composed of “semi-professional”¹⁵ students who performed for no little to no pay contextualizes the unpaid labor of ballet trainees in the last stages of their training.

The interdisciplinary scholarship that informs my research contributes to my novel work which offers a contemporary labor history of American ballet informed by dancers’ lived experiences. I engage with sociology, economics, dance studies, history, legal studies, and labor studies. My wide-ranging source base includes newspaper and magazine articles as well as tax returns, reports on arts funding and arts participation, ballet school enrollment data, ballet company union agreements, legal doctrines, and social media posts. A large portion of my primary source research comes from original oral histories that I co-created with the project’s participants. I conducted fifteen oral history interviews with former dancers, ballet trainees, dance educators, and leaders in the field to understand the system from a variety of perspectives. My interviewees included Robert La Fosse, former Principal dancer with both American Ballet

¹⁴ Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballet Class : An American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-24.

¹⁵ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 22.

Theatre and New York City Ballet, Xiomara Reyes, former Principal with American Ballet Theatre, and Tom West, Executive Director of the Atlanta Ballet.

Oral history refers to both conducting and processing interviews and analyzing their contents in scholarly writing.¹⁶ This thesis encompasses both processes. Oral history is integral to my research for three key reasons. First, trainee programs are under-researched and are virtually absent from scholarly literature. The information on trainee programs that exists largely comes from the programs' websites (which do not provide comprehensive information), articles from dance magazines, social media, and other online forums.¹⁷ Oral history uncovers stories that do not appear in any archive. Second, I aimed to use this thesis to amplify dancers' voices. Dancers are taught to be seen and not heard; I hope my work offers space where we can listen to and engage with their experiences, hopes and ideas. Lastly, ballet itself is an oral tradition—its knowledge is preserved and transferred through individual minds and bodies. Oral history, thus, is a critical tool necessary to fully appreciate this recent history. For these reasons, the work demanded this approach.

I argue for the importance of this research because I have seen firsthand the devastating effects of trainee programs on young dancers. It is important to offer a note on my author positionality here. As a former pre-professional ballet dancer, I devoted fifteen years of my life to the pursuit of a ballet career. My training was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was forced to reevaluate my future plans. I was faced with a reality that dancers today struggle with; I

¹⁶ The following texts helped me prepare to engage this method. Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, Second edition. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History : A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Even something as simple as the dates that the programs were founded do not usually appear on the programs' websites. Providing this information would undermine the goals of the programs. While directors are telling young artists that trainee programs are a requisite step in pre-professional training, if the website informs students that the program was founded in 2015, it begs the question: what was the norm prior to 2015?

would have to join a trainee program and embark on what could be a five-year journey before I secured a real company contract. As an author, my intimate experience with my subject material both enhances my work and raises important questions about the analysis present in the following pages. My unique understanding and awareness of ballet culture allowed me to connect emotionally with my oral history interviewees, and inherently understand their struggles, experiences and aspirations. At times, my lack of distance from the presented challenges in analyzing the exploitation of trainee programs. In the drafting process, I sometimes felt myself rationalizing certain exploitative practices from the mindset of a ballet student, rather than a scholar. To address this, I enacted a practice of reflexivity and worked closely with my advisors to address potential gaps or issues in the writing. These tensions are central to my research, and my awareness of them strengthens the work. Unlike the dancers whose stories animate the following pages, I chose not to take the trainee path.

Chapter Overview

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part I consists of two chapters that each explore the historical context that led to the creation of trainee programs. Chapter 1, “Making an American Ballerina,” traces the history of ballet from the courts of Europe to the proscenium stages of the United States. It outlines the key differences between European and Russian ballet and American Ballet in how the art form is funded, and how the financial structures governing the art form influence its construction and development. Chapter 2, “Dancing for Dollars,” pivots from the broader history of American ballet to the key economic factors that I argue drove the creation of trainee programs. This chapter contextualizes the budget cuts that hit the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1990s during the neoliberal restructuring of the political economy and the

effects of the cuts on ballet companies' finances.¹⁸ Part II is composed of two chapters. Chapter 3, "The Experience is the Pay: The Growth of Trainee Programs," explores the establishment of trainee programs, their intended missions, and their realities through the lived experiences of former ballet trainees. I develop the questions of what labor trainees perform, what their labor allows companies to do, the protections that trainees lack due to their non-employed status, and trainee outcomes. In Chapter 4, "Washington Ballet Trainees—Marginal or Essential," I analyze one company as a case study of the relationship between a trainee program and a ballet company. I argue in this chapter that trainees at The Washington Ballet are integral to the functioning of the company, at least in its classical repertoire, which serves to enhance the company's reputation and income through ticket sales and donations.

Trainee Programs becoming the norm in ballet have major implications for who can access a career in ballet. They also have implications for the financial health of companies that rely heavily on unpaid labor. While my research focuses on the labor of young dancers in the world of classical ballet, this work has connections to broader labor histories. My work asks its readers to reconsider the ways that institutions think about training and compensating young professionals in other spheres, such as internships and graduate student programs. If unpaid labor is the present of ballet company financing, its future is fully dependent on students' continued participation in their own exploitation. I propose that while trainee programs initially emerged to address funding shortages at small ballet companies, the idea has since spread to institutions across the country making the trainee concept ubiquitous in the ballet community today.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Chapter 3 of Wilbur's *Funding Bodies*, "Disinvesting in Dance: The NEA's Neoliberal Turn."

¹⁹ Over 30 of the top 50 ballet companies in the United States have trainee programs. See Appendix C.

Chapter 1: Making an American Ballerina

Ballet's history is extensive, but its North American life spans roughly a century. Ballet was imported to the United States, and for many decades, it retained a quality of foreignness. Part of ballet's struggle to grow on American soil was a lack of state subsidy that European and Russian companies enjoyed. American ballet companies' reliance on private support and tuition fundamentally shaped the training and professional environment. Through increased public and private investment and growing audiences for the arts, European ballet transformed into a distinctly American art form. As young companies gained financial stability, they were able to expand their operations and reach greater levels of artistic excellence, dispelling notions of American ballet as inferior to its European and Russian counterparts. A demand for American-born dancers to fill a growing number of American ballet companies led to the establishment of a broad network of ballet schools across the country. As ballet developed in the United States, the training system became increasingly codified, and several steps were added to the professional training track. While private and public funding would come to bolster American ballet, ballet companies' continued dependence on unearned revenue left them vulnerable to changes in the arts funding landscape.

The Seeds of American Ballet

While Americans were exposed to ballet in the early 1800s, the art form would not take hold for another century. Ballet came to the United States from abroad, and in many ways, it is distinctly un-American. Ballet's association with the aristocracy and its exclusive availability to the elite undercut American democratic ideals. Ballet's birth in the courts of the Italian



FIGURE 1: Reproduction of the costume worn by Louis XIV as Apollo in *Ballet Royal de la nuit* (1653), courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. This is the role that earned him the title of “Sun King.”²⁰

²⁰ David Walker, *Recreation of the Costume Worn by Louis XIV as Apollo*, 1969, Whole costume including headdress measured on mannequin, 1969, Victoria & Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Collection, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O105399/recreation-of-the-costume-worn-theatre-costume-walker-david/>.

Renaissance under Catherine de' Medici²¹ explains its “characteristic costliness” and its appeal to “the extravagant tastes of the wealthy.”²² It traveled to France in the seventeenth century where it flourished under Louis XIV, who not only starred in productions, but propelled the art form by establishing the first ballet school at the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661, which marked the beginning of ballet’s shift from the courts to the theater.²³ Ballet would later migrate to Russia, where it was brought “nearest yet to a fine art,” and training was formalized further with the creation of the Imperial Ballet School.²⁴ The first European ballet companies and their training institutions were funded by the government.²⁵ Because of this public investment, admission to affiliated ballet schools like the Imperial Ballet School²⁶ and the Paris Opera Ballet School has historically been highly competitive. At European schools, students aged eight or nine are accepted only after extensive evaluation to see if they have the physical ability to become a ballet dancer. Students in the schools are trained in the style of the company, while receiving traditional academic education, and graduate with adequate preparation to join the affiliated company.²⁷

Before ballet was institutionalized in the United States, Americans became acquainted with the art form through tours from abroad. Fanny Elssler’s early-nineteenth-century American tour sparked an interest in ballet throughout the country. Elssler, who rose to fame as one of the

²¹ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *The Encyclopedia of World Ballet* (Blue Ridge Summit, UNITED STATES: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2015),

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=2068347>, 18.

²² Karen Nelson, “THE EVOLUTION OF THE FINANCING OF BALLET COMPANIES IN THE UNITED STATES,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 7, no. 1 (June 1983): 44-45.

²³ Snodgrass, *The Encyclopedia of World Ballet*, 76.

²⁴ Alfred Edwin Johnson, *The Russian Ballet* (Constable, 1913), 6.

²⁵ Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballet Class : An American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 23.

²⁶ Later renamed for Agrippina Vaganova.

²⁷ Ellen Terry, *The Russian Ballet* (Indiannapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1913), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45299/45299-h/45299-h.htm>, 9.

greatest Romantic ballerinas and as a foil to Marie Taglioni,²⁸ toured the United States from 1840 to 1842. In his book on the sacralization of culture at the turn of the twentieth century, Lawrence Levine writes of Elssler:

Enthusiastic crowds mobbed her wherever she appeared... Young men detached the horses from her carriage and pulled it through the streets themselves. Shops peddled Fanny Elssler brand boots, garters, stockings, corsets, parasols, cigars, shoe polish, shaving soap, and champagne. Boats, horses, and children were named in her honor... On the days she performed in Washington, D.C., Congress had difficulty mustering a quorum.²⁹

While ballet enjoyed heightened popularity in the wake of Elssler's stardom, ballet was still perceived as "a hammy kind of culture which was danced on tiptoe by dainty men and women, [that] was enjoyed only by fancy people and was patronized heavily by kings and dukes who liked ballerinas for reasons other than their dancing."³⁰ The American ballet fad that welled in the wake of Elssler's tour was an "isolated [instance]" and the art form still "enjoyed only limited appeal in the U.S" in the nineteenth century.

Star-power would prove to be important in stimulating interest in ballet again in the early twentieth century with the arrival of Anna Pavlova. Pavlova, the Russian ballet star famed for her portrayal of the Dying Swan,³¹ made several tours to the United States between 1912 and 1924. Melissa Klapper, author of *Ballet Class: An American History*, credits Pavlova with "[cementing] ballet in American culture, setting off a national ballet craze that surpassed even

²⁸ Anna Kisselgoff, "DANCE VIEW; TAGLIONI AND ELSSLER WERE 19TH-CENTURY SUPERSTARS," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1984, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/06/arts/dance-view-taglioni-and-elssler-were-19th-century-superstars.html>.

²⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow-Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization 1986 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard university press, 1988), 108.

³⁰ "The Ballet," *Life*, March 20, 1944, <https://books.google.com/books?id=0kwEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA74&dq=ballet&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjsj6jq5vOLAxVoSDABHUJ0OLw4ChDoAXoECAGQAw#v=onepage&q=ballet&f=false>.

³¹ Adrienne L. McLean, *Dying Swans and Madmen: Ballet, the Body, and Narrative Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 27.

the enthusiasm surrounding Elssler decades earlier.”³² Though Pavlova’s tours raised the American consciousness of ballet, a LIFE magazine article from 1944 points out that her performances were “followed wherever she went by vaudeville parodies of dying swans,” which supposedly were “unashamedly enjoyed...more than the original.”³³ Despite parody, Pavlova expanded the American audience for ballet and inspired a new generation of practitioners. However, new American ballet students lacked opportunities for professional work.

Shaping Twentieth-Century American Ballet Training

The early twentieth century saw aspiring ballerinas but no American ballet companies. American novelist Willa Cather, writing in 1913, sketched the landscape of American ballet: “In America we have had no dancers because we have had no schools, and no public that knew good dancing from bad.”³⁴ Here, Cather cites three key issues facing ballet in America: a lack of good training, a dearth of dancers, and audiences without a discerning palate for ballet. Cather attributes the absence of quality training to a phenomenon of bad teaching. She writes, “America has long been the paradise of poor teachers. A man who can do nothing else in the world can teach pretty much anything—and make a living by it—in America.”³⁵ Dance studies scholar Jessica Zeller confirms the scarcity of quality ballet instruction, citing a 1928 *Dance Magazine* article that warns the public about a trend of ballet pupils “being made the victims of frauds,” unable to distinguish between legitimate teachers and amateurs looking to turn a profit.³⁶ Zeller

³² Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 13.

³³ “The Ballet,” *Life*, March 20, 1944.

³⁴ Willa Sibert Cather, “TRAINING FOR THE BALLET Making American Dancers,” *McClure’s Magazine*, October 1913.

³⁵ Cather, “TRAINING FOR THE BALLET,” *McClure’s Magazine*, October 1913.

³⁶ Jessica Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training Before Balanchine* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://academic.oup.com/book/2076/chapter-abstract/141992534?redirectedFrom=fulltext>, 85.

explains this phenomenon through the lens of the American economic context. Because ballet in America was not subsidized by the government, ballet class became a commodity available to anyone who could afford it. Ballet in America hinged on market pressures, privileging those with money over those with talent.³⁷

The “pay to play” phenomenon is still rampant in American ballet and contributes to a glaring lack of diversity in ballet. Between class fees, summer intensive courses, pointe shoes (a pair can cost \$120 and some dancers can “kill” a pair in just a week), and attire, raising a ballet dancer cost upwards of \$120,000 in 2015 according to FiveThirtyEight.³⁸ Ballet schools are in essence, businesses, and often are not in a position to deny students entry even if they lack talent. The 1987 *Dancer’s Survival Manual* outlines the training progression of a ballet student and contends that “the professional school, if it has an economic structure that permits total honesty, will reevaluate the student at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Many talents simply do not develop beyond this point, no matter how excellent the training.”³⁹ The manual highlights the connection between a school’s finances and its ability to be transparent with its students about their capacity for success in the professional world. The implication is that schools that are in greater need of financial support will take on any student and allow them to continue to pay to train, perhaps misleading them about the extent of their potential. In an oral history interview with me, Robert La Fosse explained how the issue of privileging money over talent remains central to the American training system:

We have a very funny system, I mean other big state schools like in Russia and France and England, they have a very different system... They look at you from a very early age and they decide whether or not you have the physicality to even train. So they weed out

³⁷ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 96.

³⁸ Abby Abrams, “Raising A Ballerina Will Cost You \$100,000,” FiveThirtyEight, August 20, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/high-price-of-ballet-diversity-misty-copeland/>.

³⁹ Marian Horosko and Judith R. F. Kupersmith, *The Dancer’s Survival Manual: Everything You Need to Know about Being a Dancer ... except How to Dance*, 1st ed (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 22.

[students]. We don't do that here because we need people to pay money to train. It's economics in this country.⁴⁰

Underlying La Fosse's comments is the idea that American ballet schools accept some students who will never become professionals (because they lack the requisite physical traits) in order to stay in business.⁴¹

Two issues that arose from the American economic context shaped ballet training in the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century. First, teachers could baselessly claim mastery and swindle naive students into paying for lessons. Second, because ballet training was not federally subsidized, American ballet students could rarely afford the standard ten years of training without earning any money. Young dancers in the first few decades of the twentieth century thus “[insisted] upon going out to make money out of their profession before they [had] properly learned it,” leading to American stages filled with amateurs.⁴² The financial “burden” of training and working in ballet was not an issue for “the dancers in the European and Russian government-run theaters, where they were hired as state employees, trained tuition-free, and granted pensions that would sustain them through retirement.”⁴³ The economic model of ballet in America was fundamentally different from that of its countries of origin. Ned Wayburn, author of *The Art of Stage Dancing* that outlined a new American ballet training model, insisted in 1925 that “American girls who are gifted with a talent for this superb form of graceful dancing will not consent to devote the best years of their lives to unproductive labor.”⁴⁴ He further affirmed that merely gaining a “critical teacher's approval” without “compensation of a financial nature, does

⁴⁰ Robert La Fosse, Oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

⁴¹ Excluding the well-funded School of American Ballet.

⁴² Jessica Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training Before Balanchine*, 71.

⁴³ Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet*, 71.

⁴⁴ Ned Wayburn, *The Art of Stage Dancing* (Ned Wayburn Studios of Stage Dancing, Inc., 1925), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27367/27367-h/27367-h.htm>, 87.

not appeal to any...young person who would make the best dancer.”⁴⁵ Ned Wayburn helped breed the amateur professional, as he advertised an expedited ballet curriculum in contrast with “the long years of excessive labor” characteristic of ballet training in “England, France, Italy, Russia, or anywhere else in the world.”⁴⁶ Americans would eventually come to understand that “excessive labor” is the only way to gain technical and artistic proficiency in ballet. Generations of pre-professional ballet dancers would embark on this decade-long journey in hopes of one day being paid to dance.

Professional performances showcasing poorly trained dancers drove the perception of American ballet as inferior to its European and Russian counterparts.⁴⁷ Zeller contends that ultimately, market pressures caused ballet to struggle to take root in America, “given the financial onus on the individual dancer” to support their own training. She proposes that American ballet might have developed more rapidly “if dancers had been offered state support rather than being exposed entirely to market forces.”⁴⁸ Maybe Ned Wayburn was correct to assume that aspiring dancers in the early twentieth century would not tolerate the “unproductive” labor that ballet training demands. However, he would be surprised to learn that a century later, young dancers would jump at the chance to work for free in professional ballet companies—while paying tuition no less! Just as the American economic context governed early training models, financial constraints on ballet companies would alter the ballet training and professional landscape in the twenty-first century. But first, let’s turn to look at the creation of the first American ballet companies to understand how they developed absent state subsidy.

⁴⁵ Wayburn, *The Art of Stage Dancing*, 123.

⁴⁶ Ned Wayburn, *The Art of Stage Dancing*, 133.

⁴⁷ Jessica Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training Before Balanchine*, 88.

⁴⁸ Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet*, 71.

Trailblazers: New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre

A lack of demand for ballet contributed to an unstable “cultural infrastructure” for ballet companies in which public funding for “native ballet” was absent.⁴⁹ The first companies established in the United States grew without public funding and relied heavily on private investment from a handful of wealthy white benefactors. The oldest three professional American ballet companies—New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre—are commonly regarded as the greatest ballet companies in the country and are responsible for creating fertile cultural centers for ballet in New York and California.⁵⁰ Their existence was driven by passionate individuals and wealthy patrons.

Wealthy Harvard graduate and “balletomane” Lincoln Kirstein brought George Balanchine from Paris to the East Coast to create and direct a ballet school and company to inaugurate American ballet.⁵¹ While Balanchine would experiment with iterations of a company in the thirties and forties, the School of American Ballet was founded in 1933 and has operated consistently ever since.⁵² In the fourteen years that preceded the founding of New York City Ballet (NYCB) in 1947, Balanchine’s companies included American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, and Ballet Society.⁵³ In the NYCB’s early years, “it was primarily Lincoln Kirstein’s personal fortune that kept the company going.”⁵⁴ In 1948, New York’s City Center offered the company both a home and crucial financial support.⁵⁵ In the 60s, funding from the Ford Foundation and

⁴⁹ Karen Nelson, “THE EVOLUTION OF THE FINANCING OF BALLET COMPANIES IN THE UNITED STATES,” 45.

⁵⁰ While Atlanta Ballet was founded in 1929, it was only incorporated as a professional company in 1967.

⁵¹ Phylliss Singer Jaffe, “A Company in Transition: An Analysis of the New York City Ballet Management and Funding 1964-1979.” (M.A., United States -- District of Columbia, American University, 1980), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/302965775/citation/8E7D0F49B0894226PQ/1, 1-2>.

⁵² Jaffe, “A Company in Transition,” 4.

⁵³ Jaffe, “A Company in Transition,” 7.

⁵⁴ Jaffe, “A Company in Transition,” 73.

⁵⁵ Jaffe, “A Company in Transition,” 11.

the National Endowment for the Arts would transform the company's financial and artistic operations.

Like NYCB, San Francisco Ballet (SFB) was established concurrently with a school in 1933, which would eventually produce dancers for the company. When William Christensen took the helm of the organization in 1937, he sought to turn the ballet into "a major company with an important affiliated ballet school."⁵⁶ Prior to 1942, the company was funded through its association with the San Francisco Opera. After the company broke from the opera, the school became "the anchor of the...enterprise, [its] source of steady income as well as of well-trained dancers for the company."⁵⁷ The company faced a series of financial struggles as fundraising campaigns fell flat despite strong artistic successes. By the early 50s, the company gained funding through the Ballet Guild, headed by Mrs. James Bodrero, but the company's finances continued to waver. Grants from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts in the 1960s lent the company financial stability and allowed it to flourish into one of the top three American ballet companies.

Lucia Chase was American Ballet Theatre's financial lifeline, as Kirstein was to NYCB. American Ballet Theatre (ABT), or Ballet Theatre as it was previously known, was established by Lucia Chase and Richard Pleasant with the goal of becoming "an American repertory company of as high a quality as the Paris-Russian ones."⁵⁸ On January 11, 1940, ABT gave its first performance at the Centre Theater at Rockefeller Center to a sold out house.⁵⁹ The company would establish an international reputation through incessant touring with a short season in New

⁵⁶ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ Debra Hickenlooper Sowell, "The Christensen Brothers: A Career Biography. (Volumes I and II)" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, New York University, 1990), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/303860563/abstract/C45EEB09E13E4A0EPQ/1>, 172-173.

⁵⁸ Edwin Denby, "The American Ballet," *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (1948): 640.

⁵⁹ Ninotchka D. Bennahum, "The Founding of American Ballet Theatre on the Eve of War, 1939–1944: Depression, Modernity and the Holocaust," *Choros International Dance Journal*, Spring 2017, 52.

York.⁶⁰ Absent government funding endemic to its “Paris-Russian” counterparts, private support was key to the survival of the company. Chase, referred to American ballet’s “fairy godmother,” was responsible for saving the company “time and again” from “economic collapse by her personal generosity, discreetly contributing amounts reckoned in the millions to keep the troupe afloat.”⁶¹ Unlike SFB and NYCB, ABT did not initially establish a school alongside the company, and it took several decades to coordinate one.⁶² In 1966, ABT became the very first recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant which would ease some financial strain on the company.

NYCB, SFB and ABT were among the “five or six dance companies” that the Rockefeller Foundation reported in the 60s that could “claim both a national reputation and a relatively stable institutional setup capable of surviving a crisis.”⁶³ Unprecedented philanthropic support from the Ford Foundation would give structure to the organizational “chaos” of the American dance world and help new ballet companies reach the heights of the big three.⁶⁴ The Foundation’s announcement of grants nearing eight million dollars in 1963 marked a transformation in the professionalization of ballet in the United States.⁶⁵ Wilson McNeil “Mac” Lowry made ballet a priority of the Foundation, recognizing ballet as an “underfinanced art

⁶⁰ Martha Ullman West, *Todd Bolender, Janet Reed, and the Making of American Ballet* (University Press of Florida, 2021), 126.

⁶¹ Snodgrass, *The Encyclopedia of World Ballet*, 6; Alan M. Kriegsman Washington Post Staff Writer, “ABT’s Guiding Light: Lucia Chase: Legacy Of a Dance Patron Chase,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), January 11, 1986, sec. Style THE ARTS TELEVISION COMICS.

⁶² The school would eventually become the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School in 2004. American Ballet Theatre. “Cynthia Harvey Named Artistic Director of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at American Ballet Theatre,” American Ballet Theatre, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.abt.org/cynthia-harvey-named-artistic-director-of-jacqueline-kennedy-onassis-school-at-american-ballet-theatre/>.

⁶³ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects : Rockefeller Panel Report on the Future of Theatre, Dance, Music in America* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1965), 43.

⁶⁴ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, 43.

⁶⁵ Allen Hughes, “Ford Fund Allots 7.7 Million to Ballet,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1963.

form”⁶⁶ requiring private philanthropic support to thrive despite “mounting interest of new audiences for ballet.”⁶⁷ Lowry invested in regional ballet companies in Philadelphia, Boston, Houston and Salt Lake City, which would eventually garner national reputations as the Pennsylvania Ballet, Boston Ballet, Houston Ballet and Ballet West.⁶⁸ The Ford Foundation grants helped to build a solid foundation for ballet not only by funding companies, but through financing ballet education. With the establishment of professional companies and support for the associated schools, the path to a ballet career became more clearly defined.

Generational Cohorts in Ballet: Making Teenage Professionals

While the student to professional track was murky in the early twentieth century with a lack of formal training institutions and a dearth of professional companies, the Euro-Russian ballet model eventually took hold in the US. Within this model, students would train for eight to ten years and join professional companies between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Almost twenty years after Ned Wayburn released his fast-tracked ballet method, the public was learning that there were no shortcuts in classical ballet. *LIFE Magazine* published an article in 1944 explaining, “You must start young and work long and hard to be a really first-class dancer.” After around eight years of training, by the time a dancer is sixteen, they are ready to “join a big time *corps de ballet* or one of many Broadway shows which are eagerly in the market for young dancers.”⁶⁹ The article notes that dancers of “any importance” performed principal roles by the

⁶⁶ Sarah Wilbur, *Funding Bodies : Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts*, 1st ed. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2021), 38.

⁶⁷ Hughes, “Ford Fund Allots 7.7 Million to Ballet,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1963.

⁶⁸ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, 45.

⁶⁹ “The Ballet,” *Life*, March 20, 1944, 84.



Would-be ballerinas practice jetés in the mirrored practice room of School of American Ballet in New York City. Girls

and boys enter the school when they are 8, usually graduate by the time they are 16. Then they are accomplished dancers,

ready to join a bigtime *corps de ballet* or one of many Broadway shows which are eagerly in market for young dancers.

YOU MUST START YOUNG AND WORK LONG AND HARD TO BE REALLY FIRST-CLASS DANCER

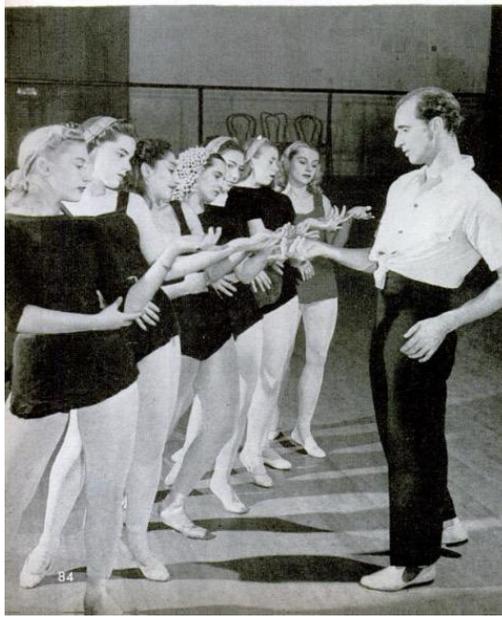
Having turned to America for audiences, the ballet is also turning to America for dancers. Of the Ballet Theatre's 55 dancers, 42 are U. S.-born. They study in schools where the training is just as rigorous and the dedication just as intense as it used to be in Europe.

Dedication to the art is all-important in ballet because a dancer gets comparatively little pay for very hard work. A ballet dancer's professional life starts in the teens and usually ends while dancer is still young.

Almost every ballerina of any importance is dancing leading roles by the age of 30. Only the best ones are still dancing much after 30.

One of these is Alicia Markova—born Lilian Alicia Marks in England—who, at 33, is considered the best of living ballerinas. Like all good ballerinas, she never stops working and studying (*see opposite page*). For all her greatness Markova gets only \$350 a week, which is considered fabulously high pay for a ballet dancer.

Graceful hands are as important as agile legs and are sometimes harder to achieve. Choreographer Antony Tudor teaches Ballet Theatre girls the art of gentle hand gesture.



The five positions are first thing the student learns. They are positions of feet on which all ballet steps are based. They are shown in order below, starting with the first position at the left, to fifth at right.



FIGURE 2: LIFE Magazine article tells Americans about the need to start young and train hard to become a professional ballet dancer. Photos feature students at SAB and dancers at ABT.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ "The Ballet," *Life*, March 20, 1944, 84.

age of twenty, while most dancers retired at age thirty, indicating an average career of fifteen years. Ballet was a business filled with young professionals and young retirees.

Dancers in the 70s, 80s and 90s commonly received their first company contract as teenagers. “When you were twenty and you didn't have a job, you were over the hill,” recalled Robert La Fosse. After training at SAB, in 1977 La Fosse joined ABT at 17 where he was immediately “rushed off to Canada to film Mikhail Baryshnikov's *Nutcracker*.”⁷¹ Like La Fosse, Elizabeth Ferrell trained at SAB. At 19, she was spotted by Mikhail Baryshnikov—then Artistic Director of ABT—who invited her to join the company in 1985.⁷² Like La Fosse and Ferrell, Xiomara Reyes began her professional career before age 20. Reyes joined the Cuban National Ballet in 1990 at age 17. These dancers would all go on to have successful careers at prestigious companies across the country, despite their early entry into the profession. They all noted that is not the standard practice today: “I got a corps de ballet contract at sixteen,” Elizabeth Gaither said. “It’s just a different world now.”⁷³

Though this cohort of dancers who entered the profession between the 1970s and 1990s was not required to endure years of unpaid labor before getting to dance professionally, joining a ballet company as a teenager has its own baggage. The first word that Elizabeth Gaither used to describe the transition from student to professional was “scary.”⁷⁴ Gaither, who joined Houston Ballet in 1990, was given soloist roles from the moment she stepped into the company. Her swift success added to the stresses of her entry to professional life as she contended with jealous colleagues and complicated social dynamics on top of her dancing duties. Gaither’s transition to the company threw her into a state of limbo as she worked alongside adults who lived with

⁷¹ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

⁷² Elizabeth Ferrell, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁷³ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

spouses and children, while she herself was still a child. In fact, she didn't even have her driver's license when she started working, recalling how "some of the dancers were driving [her] to work" and "taking [her] to go get groceries."⁷⁵ Her age also caused her to struggle with taking on mature roles in ballets. While she was supposed to be acting passionately in love with her partner in a romantic *pas de deux*, she "[couldn't] even look the guy in the eye." She says she "knew nothing" about real life; all she knew was ballet.⁷⁶ Gaither likely could have benefitted from an extra year or two to mature and adapt to professional life before assuming the full duties of a company dancer.

Regional Ballet Takes Off

Alongside the development of elite professional ballet companies in the United States, ballet cropped up in the form of schools and semi-professional companies in cities across the country. Frequent exposure to ballet among American communities through tours from European stars like Pavlova and American companies including Balanchine's troupes and Ballet Theatre stirred an appetite for ballet and fueled the development of the regional ballet movement. The Atlanta Civic Ballet, founded by Dorothy Alexander in 1929, was the first regional ballet company in America.⁷⁷ Several regional companies followed, and by 1948 there were seventy regional ballet companies in the country, several of which received financial support from the Ford Foundation. Sometimes, these companies often had roots in a ballet school that preceded the incorporation of the company, but in other cases the company was responsible for the formation of an affiliated school. The companies were "non-profit, non-touring groups of semi-

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁷⁷ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 22.

professional and non-professional students who gave community performances,” with members taking classes at a local studio, rehearsing for short periods, and earning little money for their labor.⁷⁸ As regional ballet expanded, American ballet became decentralized. Dancers and audiences no longer had to travel to the coastal foci of ballet for quality ballet training and dancing. In 1956, Atlanta Ballet sponsored the first regional ballet festival, allowing “companies from the same geographic area the chance to come together for recitals, master classes, and workshops.”⁷⁹ The company covered all of the expenses,⁸⁰ raising funds through an expansion of memberships and donors.⁸¹ The regional ballet concept took off quickly and resulted in the founding of the National Association of Regional Ballet in 1963.⁸² Today, you would be “hard pressed to find a major American city without a professional ballet company, along with several training options.”⁸³

The Ford Foundation recognized high-level ballet training as a key to the professionalization of the art form, and it provided support for the foundation of ballet schools “adjacent” to regional ballet companies.⁸⁴ These school to company “pipelines” were key to “cultivating aspiring professional ballet artists” and “building appreciative ballet audiences.”⁸⁵ Elizabeth Gaither—former dancer with the Houston Ballet, ABT and the Washington Ballet—is a prime example of the school-to-company pipeline at work. Gaither grew up dancing at her mother’s studio in Miami, where she discovered her “photographic memory” for ballet. She took

⁷⁸ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 22.

⁷⁹ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 22.

⁸⁰ Except for transportation

⁸¹ “Another Atlanta First: Ballet Festival Here Scheduled For April,” *The Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1955.

⁸² Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 22.

⁸³ Nancy Wozny, “Pointe Spread: The Marvel of Regional Ballet,” *Jacob’s Pillow Dance Interactive* (blog), accessed March 11, 2025, <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/what-is-dance/pointe-spread-the-marvel-of-regional-ballet/>.

⁸⁴ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, 45; Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 38.

⁸⁵ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 38.

to dancing very quickly and was invited to join the inaugural class of dancers at the Harid Conservatory, a fully funded ballet training and secondary educational school in Boca Raton. Gaither later joined the Houston Ballet School where she was plucked from the top level of the academy by the director of the Houston Ballet after he saw her dance in the school's end of year performance. Gaither joined the company at 16 in 1990 and was quickly given soloist roles.⁸⁶ Today, young dancers who aspire to a professional career will often seek admission to ballet schools attached to professional companies as a way of gaining exposure to advance their careers.

Company-affiliated ballet schools supplied companies with a pool of future dancers and a steady source of income. The school-to-company pipeline provided a crucial cost sharing mechanism “for running concert productions through...class fees, one of dance’s most reliable sources of earned income.”⁸⁷ Ballet schools relieve some pressure from ballet companies that are constantly trying to raise money to cover basic costs. Today, it is virtually assumed that professional ballet companies have attached training institutions, many advertising their school as a pipeline to the company.⁸⁸ Companies’ tax returns will show that their schools are attached to the company under the same financial umbrella which facilitates the use of school tuition to support company expenses. New York City Ballet and the associated School of American Ballet are a notable exception to this rule: they are distinct financial entities, and thus, the school does not monetarily support the company.⁸⁹ The Ford Foundation’s investment in ballet schools signaled a shift away from earlier models like Ned Wayburn’s fast-tracked training, and helped

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁸⁷ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 38.

⁸⁸ The truth of these claims varies greatly depending on the company.

⁸⁹ It is thus not surprising that NYCB has no trainee program or second company. “The Largest Ballet & Classically Based Companies 2024,” Dance Data Project, July 2024, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/ddp-research/the-largest-ballet-and-classically-based-companies-2024/>.

build a pool of home-grown, technically and artistically proficient ballet dancers to fill a growing number of professional ballet companies.

Raising the Age of Entry: Second Companies and Trainee Programs

By the early 2000s, young ballet dancers commonly joined a junior company for a year or two prior to attaining a full professional contract. Second companies, sometimes called studio companies and junior companies, emerged slowly from the 1970s through the late 2010s. ABT and Boston Ballet set the trend in the 70s.⁹⁰ Second companies followed in the 90s at Milwaukee Ballet, Colorado Ballet, and Cincinnati Ballet, and later in the 2000s at Orlando Ballet, The Washington Ballet, Ballet West, and Houston Ballet.⁹¹ Younger second companies established in the 2010s include Richmond Ballet II, Tulsa Ballet II, Atlanta Ballet 2, and Kansas City Ballet II.⁹² All of these companies grew out of the regional ballet movement of the mid twentieth century.

These programs were initially conceived of as the last stage of training and professional development to prepare a young dancer to join a company. Today, second companies give

⁹⁰ "ABT STUDIO COMPANY TO BE RENAMED ABT II," *American Ballet Theatre*, November 8, 2007, <https://www.abt.org/abt-studio-company-to-be-renamed-abt-ii/>; Ernie Santosuosso, "This Jazzfest Is All in the Family," *Boston Globe (1960-)*, November 26, 1976.

⁹¹ Tom Strini, "Milwaukee Ballet Trainees Get Chance to 'stand out Front': [All Edition]," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 11, 1999, sec. Cue; "WHAT'S UP: [Rockies Edition]," *Denver Post (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*, October 24, 1996, sec. Living; Jerry Stein, "Audience Favorites Fill the Next Ballet Season," *The Cincinnati Post*, March 7, 1997; Sharon Tubbs, "Siblings Share Love of Ballet," *St. Petersburg Times*, June 20, 2008, sec. NORTH OF TAMPA; CITY TIMES; CLARE CROFT Special to The Washington Post, "At Its Corps, Washington Ballet Has Solid Support," *The Washington Post (1974-)*, March 28, 2004, sec. Arts; Anonymous, "Close Second," *Pointe* 5, no. 5 (November 2004): 20; Logograph, "Houston Ballet II," The Lyric Theatre, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.lyrictheatre.com/show/11365-houston-ballet-ii>.

⁹² "Listings (Posted 2013-01-25 02:37:13)," The Washington Post (Online) (Washington, D.C., United States: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 2013), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1272367763/citation/667D00BD81154EDBPQ/1>; Tulsa Ballet, "Tulsa Ballet II to Debut as Standalone Company with 'On Your Radar' Performances in September," August 4, 2013, <https://tulsaballet.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Tulsa-Ballet-II-to-debut-as-standalone-company.pdf>; Cynthia Bond Perry, "DANCE: Choreographers Explore Violence, Migration and Redemption," *The Atlanta Journal - Constitution*, August 20, 2017, sec. LIVING & ARTS; Anonymous, "News Flashes," *Dance Teacher* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, November 2013).

dancers the chance to work closely with the associated company while maintaining their own repertoire that allows the young dancers to dance principal roles that they would not get to perform in the lowest ranks of a company. Unlike training programs, second companies typically offer a small stipend to their dancers.⁹³ Still, early conversations around second companies drew attention to the labor issues involved in these programs. Alan Gordon of the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), which represents ballet dancers in companies across the country, voiced his concerns about pay in second companies: “The problem is that most ballet companies treat those dancers as students.”⁹⁴ AGMA “can only negotiate on behalf of dancers recognized as employees,” which second company members in the early 2000s were not.⁹⁵ Thus, the labor concerns of using semi-professionals in ballet dates back to the launch of second companies.

While dancers stepped into professional life at age seventeen or eighteen through the 1990s, second companies may have alleviated some of the stresses that accompanied entering a company at a very young age. Several of the former dancers quoted earlier in this chapter expressed the challenges they faced in joining the professional world as teens, which supports the need for a transition period between school and company life. Robert La Fosse believes he could have benefitted from an extra year or two to transition to professional life. “I was a skinny seventeen-year-old kid that needed another year or two,” he said. “Truth be told, I wish I had, you know, an extra year to get acclimated. But...I needed a job. I needed money, you know. I wouldn't have been able to afford it.”⁹⁶ La Fosse’s comments highlight the fact that second

⁹³ Steve Sucato, “The Skinny on Second Companies,” *Dance/USA*, August 20, 2016, <https://www.danceusa.org/ejournal/2016/08/20/skinny-second-companies>.

⁹⁴ Pointe Team, “The Second Invasion,” *Pointe (Online)* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, March 2007), <https://pointemagazine.com/the-second-invasion/#gsc.tab=0>.

⁹⁵ Pointe Team, “The Second Invasion,” *Pointe (Online)* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, March 2007), <https://pointemagazine.com/the-second-invasion/#gsc.tab=0>.

⁹⁶ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

companies often do not pay well and are a luxury that only some can afford. Elizabeth Gaither, quoted earlier in the chapter, struggled with being launched into adult life at 16. “That transition, it was hard. I had asked my mom to come and stay with me for a few months because I just knew it was going to be tough,” she explained.⁹⁷ Another dancer, Xiomara Reyes, had the unique experience of dancing in a youth company while she danced with the National Ballet of Cuba. The youth company allowed her to develop her artistry and work on lead roles that she would never have a chance to perform in the lowest ranks of the two-hundred person company.⁹⁸ Insights from these former professional dancers sketch the ways in which second companies could benefit emerging artists by giving them time to grow physically and emotionally, while also providing them the opportunity to grow artistically by dancing roles they would otherwise never perform as junior members of the company hierarchy.

While second companies were initially created to allow companies to tour to smaller venues, for companies to offer choreographers a low-risk space to create new work and for young dancers to gain professional experience in a small setting, ballet companies continued to create second companies to address financial concerns.⁹⁹ Today, second company dancers are commonly used to bolster the main company’s ranks (filling roles that otherwise would be danced by company members), while providing young dancers with the experience “to bridge the gap between student and professional.”¹⁰⁰ Mikko Nissinen, Artistic Director of Boston Ballet and former Principal with San Francisco Ballet, offers insight into the motivation behind the continuous formation of second companies. He is quoted in a 2016 article for *Dance/USA*

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

⁹⁸ Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

⁹⁹ Nelson, “The Evolution of Ballet Company Financing,” 57.

¹⁰⁰ Sucato, “The Skinny on Second Companies,” *Dance/USA*.

stating, “A long time ago ballet companies hired inexperienced young dancers and after a few years they became well-functioning company members,” says Nissinen. He goes on to explain,

Today financial resources are so tight that nobody can afford to do that anymore...everybody needs dancers who are ready to dance. When they come from a school, they naturally don't have professional experience and the likelihood they will survive in a company is less. If they go through a second company program, whether it is one year or two, they actually get all that experience and then when they join the company, they excel versus just get in.¹⁰¹

Nissinen points to a financial impetus for the creation of second companies in the twenty-first century, citing that companies cannot afford to allow dancers to find their footing in the company for a few years before they reach their full potential.

Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, trainee programs followed the establishment of second companies at regional companies and would serve to delay a dancer's professional career even further. Trainee programs are post-graduate training programs that allow dancers to gain professional experience through working with the affiliated company, while fine-tuning their technique in an academic setting. Dancers today are told that ten years of pre-professional training is not sufficient, nor is gaining professional experience in a second company. Instead, dancers who have graduated high school are funneled into trainee programs where they continue to pay tuition and perform without pay in company productions. This training and unpaid labor model is perpetuated by company directors who tell dancers they are not ready to join companies at age eighteen like the previous generation, and that they first need to garner professional experience. Today, dancers are joining companies at twenty-two or twenty-three, rather than seventeen or eighteen, which has significant implications given that most dancers retire by thirty-five barring injury.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Sucato, “The Skinny on Second Companies,” *Dance/USA*.

¹⁰² “BBC Radio 4 - Seriously..., Seriously... - Why Do Dancers Die Twice?,” BBC, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1fkwdll6ZscvQtHMz4HCYYr/why-do-dancers-die-twice>.

Trainee programs profess to “bridge the gap” between student and professional. While I do not doubt that these programs prepare students for professional life, I question why second companies could not sufficiently meet this task. There must be a different reason for the emergence of trainee programs that has nothing to do with the supposed “readiness” of emerging ballet artists. Facing constant financial struggle, it is unsurprising that a large segment of American ballet would come to rely on unpaid labor after a century of trying to equal the government-funded European and Russian ballet companies and schools. In the following chapter, I argue that historically small-budget regional companies developed trainee programs in order to gain financial stability through both tuition payments and free labor in the wake of a downturn in both private and public funding for the arts.

Chapter 2: Dancing for Dollars

Trainee programs offered ballet companies a partial solution to the immense financial stresses they were facing in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Trainee programs give companies a financial edge. In many cases, companies benefit through tuition as well as free labor. Ballet companies are no money-making scheme; they are nonprofits that are trying to make ends meet to preserve a centuries-old art form and share it with their communities. So how did ballet companies come under such financial pressure in the 2000s after enjoying a “dance boom” from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s? I argue that a sharp reduction in federal funding, followed by a decline in private philanthropy for the arts, the September 11th attacks, and the 2008 recession contributed to the emergence of trainee programs, as companies tried to fill a monetary gap to keep their dancers on stage.

The Tricky Task of Financing Ballet

The path towards stable funding for ballet has never been clearly defined. The essential challenge to financing ballet, and the performing arts generally, is that “there is an inevitable and growing gap between costs and earnings which must be filled through donations of one sort or another.”¹⁰³ Its economic structure is explained by its European origins and history of state subsidization. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1930, John Martin points out the economic obstacles to creating an American ballet. He points to a lack of government support as the core challenge to establishing ballet as an institution, asserting that “[organizing] a ballet as a private enterprise to pay for itself as it develops is to gamble rashly.”¹⁰⁴ Martin explains that ballet’s

¹⁰³ Karen Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies in the United States,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 7, no. 1 (June 1983): 46.

¹⁰⁴ John Martin, “THE DANCE: CREATING AN AMERICAN BALLET,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1930.

struggle to plant feet in America without federal backing is not surprising, as “history records no ballet which was not subsidized.”¹⁰⁵ From the high overhead costs of producing ballet¹⁰⁶ to the cost of “arduous years of preparation” to be ready for the stage, Martin could not imagine a future for American ballet “without endowment.”¹⁰⁷ This is to say that ballet has always been expensive, has never been lucrative, and has often thrived with strong government support.

Early trials in forming American ballet companies in the 1930s were instructive to future efforts to establish functional companies. The beginnings of American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet taught that “autonomy and steady backing by willing philanthropists were indispensable for an American company.”¹⁰⁸ Regular and reliable fundraising emerged as a priority for burgeoning companies. Central to ballet company financing is a balance between earned income from ticket sales and unearned income from private and public sources.¹⁰⁹ Several factors—including demand, competition, availability of government funds, costs of production, and attitudes of private donors towards supporting the arts—affect the “ideal” mix of funding sources for a company at any given moment.¹¹⁰ A company can adjust its financing through two avenues; it can make adjustments to its artistic side through changes in repertory or in employment contracts, or it can alter its management through increased marketing, cutting costs, and growing its donor base.¹¹¹

By 1983, Karen Nelson claimed that “major U.S. ballet companies have arrived at reasonably secure financial arrangements and have achieved a level of quality in their work

¹⁰⁵ Martin, “The Dance: Creating An American Ballet,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1930.

¹⁰⁶ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 53.

¹⁰⁷ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 53.

¹⁰⁸ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 47.

¹⁰⁹ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 47.

¹¹⁰ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 48.

¹¹¹ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 48.

which meets world standard,” tying financial security to artistic excellence.¹¹² This financial security of several companies depended on the evolution of the ballet financing from a primary reliance on “box office revenues to enjoyment of a diversified package of earned and unearned income.”¹¹³ Central to the diversification of funding was both private and public investment. A growing interest in ballet and a growing practice of philanthropy benefitting nonprofit organizations contributed to the stabilization of ballet companies’ unearned income.¹¹⁴ Growing support for ballet among individual donors and foundations was propelled by a changing perception of ballet as a “component of America’s high culture,” suitable for private investment.¹¹⁵ Ballet was legitimized as worthy of philanthropic support by a sizable investment from the Ford Foundation, which laid the groundwork for bolstered federal funding for dance in America through the National Endowment for the Arts. Investigating the landscape of federal funding for dance from 1965-2000 offers some insight as to why dancers today are being forced to delay their entry into professional life through dancing in trainee programs either prior to securing company contracts, or as a dead end to their professional aspirations.

The National Endowment for the Arts and the Dance Boom

Funding from the National Endowment for the Arts was integral to the creation of scores of dance companies across the country and in building a strong financial foundation for several ballet companies that are now esteemed institutions. The NEA was founded by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 “to nurture American creativity, to elevate the nation’s culture, and to sustain

¹¹² Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 60.

¹¹³ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 58.

¹¹⁴ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 46.

¹¹⁵ Nelson, “The Evolution of the Financing of Ballet Companies,” 48.

and preserve the country's many artistic traditions."¹¹⁶ The NEA provides grants to artists and arts organizations across the country to support disciplines including dance, theater, music, visual art, and literary art. In addition to awarding grants, the NEA publishes research on the state of the arts in the United States that informs its policies. The NEA emerged in the 1960s in the postwar period as Americans were accumulating wealth and obtaining higher levels of education.¹¹⁷ Its history provides crucial insight into social and cultural changes in the United States that manifested in altered funding patterns for the arts.

Financial support from the NEA was key in facilitating the "dance boom" of the 1960s-80s.¹¹⁸ The very first NEA grant was made to American Ballet Theatre in 1966 to the tune of \$100,000.¹¹⁹ Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and Alvin Ailey were recipients of the first round of grants as well.¹²⁰ The NEA provided American dance with an "infusion of support that was significant and timely" as the art form was "entering a creative and prolific period."¹²¹ Thus, the NEA fueled the fire of the "dance boom," but did not spark it. In 1972, \$2.3 million was granted in dance, including funding for American Ballet Theatre and Joffrey Ballet tours, Ballet West in Salt Lake City, and a number of smaller dance companies. The NEA did not support dance solely through grants to artists and companies; it expanded audiences through televised broadcasts of dance performances, supported companies by providing organizational help, and preserved the art form through notation, recording, and archival work.¹²² During the "dance boom" ballet enjoyed new popularity, in part due to the NEA-sponsored broadcasts

¹¹⁶ National Endowment for the Arts, Mark Bauerlein, and Ellen Grantham, eds., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History, 1965-2008* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 1.

¹¹⁷ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 39.

¹¹⁸ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 173.

¹¹⁹ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 19.

¹²⁰ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 19.

¹²¹ Angela Helen Graham, "The National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program, 1965-1971: A Social and Cultural History" (EdD, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University, 1995), 2.

¹²² Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 47, 175.

Dance in America and *Live From Lincoln Center*, which brought ballet to Americans across the country. Despite concerns to the contrary, televised performances served to increase attendance at live ballets.¹²³ A survey from the Joffrey Ballet found that 59% of its audience for the 1976 spring season were first time audience members and attended because they had enjoyed the televised Joffrey performance on *Dance in America* earlier that year.¹²⁴

Ballet enjoyed cultural relevance and visibility in the late 70s that it has not attained since. Its popularity in this period is illustrated by an advertisement in *Newsweek* from 1979 that depicts Yankee shortstop Bucky Dent posing with an American Ballet Theatre ballerina. The ad urges: “Bucky Dent loves the new national pastime, ballet. Join him as a Friend of American Ballet Theatre.”¹²⁵ The small text at the bottom of the page reads, “Watch American Ballet Theatre’s glorious full-length “Sleeping Beauty” May 2nd at 8pm on ‘Live From Lincoln Center’ on your local PBS channel. ‘Live From Lincoln Center’ is made possible by grants from Exxon Corporation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Arts.”¹²⁶ In 1979, Lynn Garafola claimed the dance boom had become a fact of American life. *People* magazine ran a “bio” of George Balanchine, *Turning Point* starring Mikhail Baryshnikov scored at the box office, and *Dance In America* topped the charts at PBS.¹²⁷ Robert La Fosse, who danced with American Ballet Theatre from 1977-1986

¹²³ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 46.

¹²⁴ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 293.

¹²⁵ “Advertisement,” *Newsweek*, May 7, 1979, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1894118851/382B0196834E41CFPQ/1?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Magazines>.

¹²⁶ “Advertisement,” *Newsweek*, May 7, 1979.

¹²⁷ Lynn Garafola, “STATE of the ART,” *In These Times* 4, no. 3 (November 1979): 23.



Bucky Dent — American League, Kristine Elliott — American Ballet Theatre

Bucky Dent loves the new national pastime, ballet. Join him as a Friend of American Ballet Theatre.

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I want to become a Friend of American Ballet Theatre and receive *On Point* magazine, plus the full-color poster of Bucky Dent and Kristine Elliott.

Enclosed is my gift of \$25.00

I just want the poster.

Enclosed is my gift of \$10.00

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All donations will be used to match a Challenge Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

A tax-deductible gift of \$25.00 makes you a Friend of American Ballet Theatre, just like Bucky Dent.

And it involves you in all kinds of special activities. You'll receive our publication, *On Point*, three times a year.

Also, advance season's programming and invitations to events

for Friends. And we'll send you our full-color poster of dancer Kristine Elliott with her friend Bucky. (For a gift of \$10.00 we'll send just the poster.)

Use the coupon. Make checks payable to Ballet Theatre Foundation. Or charge to Visa or Master Charge.

Be a real Friend. Do it now.

Watch American Ballet Theatre's glorious full-length "Sleeping Beauty" May 2nd at 8 pm on "Live From Lincoln Center" on your local PBS channel. "Live From Lincoln Center" is made possible by grants from Exxon Corporation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

FIGURE 3: Yankee shortstop Bucky Dent poses with ABT dancer Karen Elliott in a fundraising campaign for ABT.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ "Advertisement." *Newsweek*, May 07, 1979, 8.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1894118851/382B0196834E41CFPQ/1?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Magazines>.

recalled that while “there was a kind of ballet boom where a lot happened choreographically and...there was a lot of ballet that was presented on PBS.” He noted that the ballet stars contributed to a surge in interest in ballet: “The stars like at the time, it was Baryshnikov (Mikhail), Cynthia Gregory, Gelsey Kirkland – it was a different time.”¹²⁹ Ballet’s presence in popular culture was felt by a new generation of children through television. Suzanne Farrell of NYCB appeared in several episodes of *Sesame Street* in the late 70s and early 80s, and Rudolf Nureyev, Russian ballet star, guested in a 1978 episode of *The Muppet Show* where he danced as a ballerina pig in “Swine Lake.”¹³⁰

The “dance boom” is reflected not only in popular culture, but in the sheer growth of the number of dance companies across the country and the rise in audiences for ballet. The NEA built upon the grant infrastructure that the Ford Foundation laid in 1963 to provide the dance community with the financial support that it needed to flourish organizationally and artistically. In locating the “dance boom,” Leila Sussman highlights research from the Louis Harris polling organization that “put the percentage of Americans aged 18 years and older who attended at least one live dance performance in the years 1973, 1975 and 1980 at 9%, 16% and 25%.”¹³¹ That is “definitely a boom,” Sussman noted.¹³² Both audiences for dance and the number of American dance companies multiplied during this period. Just ten years from the NEA’s founding, the number of professional dance companies had grown from 37 to 157. By the NEA’s 25th anniversary, the country boasted over 400 professional dance companies. But would the enthusiasm for dance last to support these new companies? Writing for the *New York Times* in

¹²⁹ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

¹³⁰ Klapper, *Ballet Class*, 293.

¹³¹ Leila Sussmann, “Anatomy of the Dance Company Boom, 1958-1980,” *Dance Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (1984): 23.

¹³² Sussmann, “Anatomy of the Dance Company Boom,” 23.

1985, dance critic Anne Kesselgoff asked, “Has the dance boom run its course,” citing stalled audience growth, the death of George Balanchine, the retirement of ballet stars, and declining NEA support as potential causes for the discourse on the death of dance.¹³³ As the “dance boom” was winding down in the late 80s, debates over art’s place in American society were heating up.

NEA Under Attack: 1985-1996

Controversies over censorship and what constitutes legitimate art that emerged during the culture wars of the late 1980s animated congressional debates and fueled attacks on the NEA. A few NEA-sponsored art works garnered national attention, and in some cases, rage. “Piss Christ” was one such inflammatory work. Created by Andres Serrano, the photograph depicted a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine. Ostensibly intended as a “protest against the commercialization of sacred imagery,” it was received by some as an attack on their religion.¹³⁴ Reverend Donald Wildmon, “a balding, pink-faced father of four” from rural Mississippi and founder of the Christian fundamentalist lobbying organization, the American Family Association, launched a staunch anti-NEA campaign in April of 1989 with “Piss Christ” as his fuel.¹³⁵ He urged members of his organization to write to their representatives to complain about the photograph and the NEA’s support of it.¹³⁶ Wildmon’s cause was taken up by GOP senators Alfonse D’Amato and Jesse Helms, who attacked the artist and the NEA on the Senate

¹³³ Anna Kesselgoff, “DANCE VIEW; HAS THE DANCE BOOM RUN ITS COURSE,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1985, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/03/arts/dance-view-has-the-dance-boom-run-its-course.html>.

¹³⁴ Bruce Selcraig, “REVEREND WILDMON’S WAR ON THE ARTS,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/02/magazine/reverend-wildmons-war-on-the-arts.html>.

¹³⁵ Selcraig, “REVEREND WILDMON’S WAR ON THE ARTS,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1990.

¹³⁶ Peggy Phelan, “Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: ‘Money Talks,’” *TDR (1988-)* 34, no. 1 (October 1989): 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145999>.

floor in 1989. The former claimed Serrano was “not an artist at all,”¹³⁷ and the latter called him “a jerk.”¹³⁸ Not only did Helms and D’Amato take issue with Serrano as an artist, but they read his art as indicative of the NEA’s work more broadly. Helms complained that in funding art like Serrano’s the NEA was “assaulting the very fundamental basis of this country,”¹³⁹ while D’Amato called the NEA’s current operations a “distortion and an abortion” of the founding purposes of the agency.¹⁴⁰ At its core, the debate about the NEA hinged on “whether the nation should commit itself financially to development of its most cutting-edge art, whatever form it took,”¹⁴¹ and more simply, what constitutes “good” art, worthy of government dollars. Helms’s and D’Amato’s voices echoed throughout the party, as one Republican representative quoted in the *New York Times* in 1997 ignorantly claimed that he “does not believe that in an era of tight Federal dollars, basket weaving should have a top priority in Congress.”¹⁴² The debate gained traction, morphing into attacks on the existence of the agency itself, and would come to have treacherous implications for dance in America.

The Congressional debates over the NEA that emerged during the era of neoliberal reform, in which public spending was curtailed and increased privatization was encouraged, had the ultimate effect of gutting the agency’s budget.¹⁴³ While it was never eliminated—despite fervent Republican-led efforts to do just that—devastating budget cuts forced the NEA to entirely restructure its grant process. The House Committee on Appropriations reduced the

¹³⁷ Robin Pogrebin, “Inheriting Uneasy Truce Between Art And Politics,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/24/arts/inheriting-uneasy-truce-between-art-and-politics.html>.

¹³⁸ *User Clip: Senator Jesse Helms Complains about Obscene Art (1989)*, 1989, <https://www.c-span.org/clip/senate-proceeding/user-clip-senator-jesse-helms-complains-about-obscene-art-1989/5115986>.

¹³⁹ *User Clip: Senator Jesse Helms*, 1989.

¹⁴⁰ *User Clip: Alfonse D’Amato on Serrano, NEA*, 1989, <https://www.c-span.org/clip/senate-proceeding/user-clip-alfonse-damato-on-serrano-nea/4664561>.

¹⁴¹ Pogrebin, “Inheriting Uneasy Truce,” December 24, 2001.

¹⁴² Judith Miller, “Federal Arts Agency Slices Its Smaller Pie,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1997, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/10/arts/federal-arts-agency-slices-its-smaller-pie.html>.

¹⁴³ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 94; Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 92, 116.

agency's budget by 39 percent from 162 million to 99 million.¹⁴⁴ Jane Alexander (NEA Chair from 1993-1997) had been preparing for doomsday amid the frenzy in Congress. She was forced to implement a new granting structure in order to work within the constraints of a tiny budget and reduced operational capacity due to a major reduction in force within the agency.¹⁴⁵ The new granting structure allowed applicants to apply for grants within one of four thematic fields: Creation and Presentation, Education and Access, Heritage and Preservation, and Planning and Stabilization.¹⁴⁶ Whereas previously, arts companies competed with others in their same discipline for funding, by 1996, ballet companies were competing with operas and theaters for limited funds.¹⁴⁷ The new structure limited applications by prohibiting prospective grantees from applying for a grant in more than one category, which streamlined the review process for the agency's skeletal staff.¹⁴⁸ The budget cuts and new grant structure manifested in a steep decline in the number of grants conferred by the agency from 4,000 in 1995 to 1,100 in 1997.¹⁴⁹ By 1996, the "dance boom" was decidedly over, and a new period "of increasing obstacles to the pursuit of a professional life in dance" crystallized.¹⁵⁰

The NEA's support of dance as an institution instilled confidence in young artists who aspired to work in the field. A former NEA Dance Program staffer described how the agency's support for the artform made dance a viable career option:

There was a time when choosing a career in dance was not a completely ridiculous choice—it's always been kind of a crazy choice—but it wasn't completely ridiculous. There was a way that an artist could see to make work and choose that as a life...the

¹⁴⁴ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 118.

¹⁴⁵ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 170.

¹⁴⁶ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 172.

¹⁴⁷ Bauerlein, and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 120.

¹⁴⁸ Wilburn, *Funding Bodies*, 170-172.

¹⁴⁹ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 124.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas M. Smith, "Raising the Barre: The Geographic, Financial, and Economic Trends of Nonprofit Dance Companies.," Research Division Report (National Endowment for the Arts, August 2003), 3, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/raising-barre-geographic-financial-and-economic-trends-nonprofit-dance-companies>.

NEA Dance Program...created an infrastructure where there was a real track of how the creation of dance might happen...of touring networks, support for young choreographers, and support for the administrative structure of the company and touring through dance company grants. There was a path.¹⁵¹

And the NEA forged that path. Dance studies scholar Sarah Wilbur writes in *Funding Bodies* that by 1996, dance organizers had “grown dependent on the regular promise of federal support,” and sought federal grants for concert-dance making with “loyalty” and “regularity.”¹⁵² Wilbur asserts that this dependence on what was once a reliable funding source is critical to understanding how a new era at the NEA “[threw] the concert dance field into nothing short of an infrastructural crisis.”¹⁵³

By the turn of the century, ballet companies were facing financial challenges presented by a slashed NEA budget and declining audiences for ballet. The gutted budget had enormous effects on funding for dance from the late 1980s to the 2000s. In 1985, \$8,802,855 was doled out in dance grants¹⁵⁴ to support rehearsals, performances, tours, new choreography, repertoire expansions, and more.¹⁵⁵ By 1996, the landscape of federal funding for dance changed dramatically. The Dance Program’s financial allocation was cut in half after 1995.¹⁵⁶ A new budget was accompanied by a new director. Doug Sonntag, who had worked in the Dance Program for several years, stepped into the directorship role in 1996 where he would remain for the next twenty years.¹⁵⁷ Wilbur called Sonntag “an experienced bureaucrat who had weathered

¹⁵¹ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 180-181.

¹⁵² Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 180.

¹⁵³ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 164.

¹⁵⁴ Some recipients of these grants included American Ballet Theatre (\$500,000), Atlanta Ballet (\$28,400), Ballet West (\$125,000), Boston Ballet (\$75,000), Cleveland Ballet (\$113,700), Dance Theater of Harlem (\$320,000), Houston Ballet (\$20,000), Kansas City Ballet (\$17,000), Martha Graham (\$210,000), Milwaukee Ballet (\$43,200), New York City Ballet (\$150,000), Pacific Northwest Ballet (\$17,000), Pennsylvania Ballet (\$113,000), Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre (\$45,000), San Francisco Ballet (\$150,000), and The Washington Ballet (\$20,000).

¹⁵⁵ Office of Communications National Endowment for the Arts, “National Endowment for the Arts, 1985 Annual Report 20th Anniversary” (Washington, DC, March 1986), 10.

¹⁵⁶ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 180.

¹⁵⁷ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 180.

many changes at the agency prior to these particular cuts,” ready to face a new regime at the NEA alongside Jane Alexander. By 1996, the Dance Program was allocated only \$2.5 million, which caused the average organizational grant to be reduced by 35 percent.¹⁵⁸ Bella Lewitzky, modern dancer and choreographer, commented to the *Los Angeles Times* that the money spent by the Endowment “does not reflect the actual effect of the NEA on companies like my company. The money amount, about \$43,000, is about 6% of our budget, but for every dollar it spends, it levers for us close to \$15.”¹⁵⁹ A reduction in grant dollars from the NEA may not appear consequential, but the money represents a greater value through its leveraging power to stimulate private giving. By 2023, the NEA’s dance grants totaled \$4,770,000, which is roughly an 80 percent decrease in funding in about forty years.¹⁶⁰ In this time, ballet companies had to learn to rely more heavily on other sources of income.

Surviving NEA Cuts, Dwindling Private Dollars, and the Turn to Arts Education

While the 1990s saw a decline in federal funding for dance, companies’ finances were temporarily ameliorated by a rise in both ticket sales and contributed income from non-government entities. The NEA’s “Raising the Barre” report states that in 1987, ticket sales accounted for an average of 25.4 percent of dance company revenue, and by 1997, this value increased to 30 percent.¹⁶¹ From 1992-1997, the percentage of Americans who attended at least

¹⁵⁸ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 180.

¹⁵⁹ Judith Michaelson, “ARTS BUDGET CUTS TALK WORRISOME: [Home Edition],” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/292026670/2A42D03637AA459DPQ/3?accountid=10747>.

¹⁶⁰ When adjusted for inflation. National Endowment for the Arts, “Grant Announcement—FY 2023 Artistic Discipline/Field List,” May 2023; National Endowment for the Arts, “Grant Announcement—FY 2023 Artistic Discipline/Field List,” January 3, 2023.

¹⁶¹ Smith, “Raising the Barre,” 31.

one ballet in a given year rose from 4.7 percent¹⁶² to 5.8 percent.¹⁶³ This rise in ballet attendance likely accounts for ballet companies' increased reliance on earned income through ticket sales.¹⁶⁴ The report outlines a trend of increased contributions from non-government entities that follows an increase in ticket sales. This correlation is due to two factors: first, ballet-goers are often prompted to make a donation at the time they purchase tickets or are contacted later by the organization. Second, corporations are "more likely to award grants and advertise with companies that sell a lot of tickets."¹⁶⁵ The result is that ticket sales' impact on a company's revenue is compounded by this chain reaction.¹⁶⁶

Despite these short-lived increases in ballet attendance, the trend would reverse by 2002 and continue throughout the next two decades. The Survey for Public Participation in the Arts shows that attendance declined to 3.9 percent in 2002, 2.9 percent in 2008, and 2.7 percent in 2012.¹⁶⁷ By 2022, attendance plummeted to 2 percent, a record low rate of attendance.¹⁶⁸ These metrics represent a 65.5 percent decrease in attendance at ballet performances in the United States from 1997 to 2022.¹⁶⁹ This decline in attendance was surely felt by ballet companies that rely on ticket sales as a significant component of their annual revenue, which as previously

¹⁶² Jack Faucett Associates, "Arts Participation in America: 1982 - 1992," Research Division Report (National Endowment for the Arts, October 1993), 2, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/arts-participation-america-1982-1992>.

¹⁶³ Jack Faucett Associates, Inc., "1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," Research Division Report (National Endowment for the Arts, December 1998), 14.

¹⁶⁴ Smith, "Raising the Barre," 14.

¹⁶⁵ Smith, "Raising the Barre," 7.

¹⁶⁶ This will be important later. Trainees support companies' capacity to put on bigger classical productions that sell a lot of tickets which spurs other financial contributions. The report also notes that "ballet company name recognition and the staging of popular ballets such as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* helped sell tickets and garner donations." Popular classical ballets' ability to draw in large audiences will be important in evaluating trainee programs' effects on company finances.

¹⁶⁷ Bohne Silber and Tim Triplett, "A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–2012," Research Report (National Endowment for the Arts, January 2015), 7.

¹⁶⁸ National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis, "Arts Participation Patterns in 2022: Highlights from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," October 2023, 6.

¹⁶⁹ The depressed levels of attendance in 2022 could partially be due to the effects of COVID-19 on arts performances.

noted, increase a company's revenue through direct sales as well as through donations at or after the time of the sale. Declining attendance at the turn of the century reflects a change in how potential audience members chose to spend their time and money. The NEA was shifting its priorities as well.

When the NEA budget was cut in 1996, the agency had already been shifting its focus to arts education. While arts education is integral for building audiences for the arts, the turn to education served to further harm ballet companies' finances as more grant dollars were funneled from artistic creation to education. Arts education emerged as a concern for the NEA under Chairman Frank Hosdoll when NEA research indicated that "61 percent of American adults do not participate in most of the arts we support."¹⁷⁰ NEA Chair Bill Ivey, whose tenure began in 1998, cemented education as a core goal of the institution.¹⁷¹ In a 1999 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Bill Ivey described his goals for the NEA at a particularly difficult time for the agency. Speaking to how he would redefine the role of the organization, he claimed:

In its most basic sense, the NEA is the federal agency charged with helping bring the arts to the American people. In the past year, we've refined that role a bit. Our mission statement says that the NEA serves the public good by nurturing creativity, supporting community spirit and fostering appreciation of the excellence and diversity of our nation's artistic accomplishments. We've tried to place an emphasis on the public good, on citizen service and on using the arts to improve people's lives and communities. While that's always been a part of NEA's mission, I think it has a special resonance today as we focus our attention on young people, on education, access to the arts and the preservation of cultural heritage.¹⁷²

This redefinition of the agency's core mission was a necessary step towards rebuilding the agency's brand with the American public after a decade of controversy. Art for art's sake was a

¹⁷⁰ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 83-84.

¹⁷¹ Bauerlein and Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts*, 134.

¹⁷² Steve Proffitt, "LOS ANGELES TIMES INTERVIEW; William Ivey; Country Musician Promises End to an Arts Agency's Hard Times: [Home Edition]," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/421415387/4D13734BAB94B34PQ/7?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Newspapers>.

challenging proposition when some art that the NEA funded supposedly defamed Christianity and assaulted conservative sensibilities. Bill Ivey's goals for the organization represented a shift in how NEA leadership began to market the arts as a "tool to produce nonarts values and economic deliverables in a measure to protect the NEA's own institutional livelihood."¹⁷³

The dance community quickly understood that education had supplanted creation as a priority of the NEA. Several articles from the late 90s and early 2000s demonstrate the impact of this trend within government funding. Writing about Pittsburgh in 1996, Jim Urban claimed that small arts organizations were accepting "grants under the condition that the money will be used for education or to target specific groups."¹⁷⁴ An article in an Indianapolis journal from 1997 quotes a local arts administrator saying, "the NEA has focused grant giving on how you affect your community" and affirms that "any drop in funding is significant to a not-for-profit arts organization."¹⁷⁵ Speaking for the South Coast Repertory in 1998 an arts administrator commented, "We have found that education is a big priority with everyone."¹⁷⁶ An article for *The Washington Post* reported in 2000 that the NEA, "heeding the wishes of its congressional benefactors, is vigorously encouraging organizations that develop education programs or bring the arts into underserved communities" and cites that out of "nearly 800 grants announced today, more than half are going to outreach and arts education projects."¹⁷⁷ All of these authors support

¹⁷³ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 164.

¹⁷⁴ Jim Urban, "There's Only So Much Money," *Executive Report (Pittsburgh, PA)* 15, no. 2 (October 1996), <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/216295470/4D092AF8AB454820PQ/6?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Trade%20Journals>.

¹⁷⁵ Mason King, "Dropping NEA Grants Reflect Grim Picture," *Indianapolis Business Journal* 18, no. 14 (June 23, 1997), <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/220607903/4D092AF8AB454820PQ/7?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Trade%20Journals>.

¹⁷⁶ Christopher Trela, "Business of the Arts," *OC Metro*, January 29, 1998, <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/219627179/4D979A1379274DCFPQ/45?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Trade%20Journals>.

¹⁷⁷ Jacqueline Trescott, "NEA Grants Focus on Education," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/1831434479/6D1779CEFDE94D0EPQ/21?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers>.

the notion of education as a priority for the NEA. Reacting to this trend, a dance company manager expressed concern “that we’re going to be in a situation in five years where there is no concert dance.”¹⁷⁸ This demonstrates the tenor of the dance community approaching the new millennium. The same company manager described the shift to education and outreach as a “strike...at the heart of the creative process and what companies are all about.”¹⁷⁹ The issue is not that the government should not fund arts education, but funding for arts education should not come at the expense of funding for the arts itself.

Ballet companies were not only adversely affected by the retraction of government dollars; private giving soon followed the government’s lead away from the arts and towards education. When the federal government pulled support for the arts, there was an implied expectation that the private sector would fill the funding gap. A 1998 article for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* perfectly summarizes this sentiment: “House Speaker Newt Gingrich had it exactly right: The \$80 million needed to keep the NEA in business could be made up by the Walt Disney Co...If the elites want art, let them pay for it.”¹⁸⁰ Public-private “philanthropic leveraging” has been integral to the NEA grant structure for almost all of its programs since the agency’s founding, meaning that most NEA grants have to be matched in some proportion by private funds.¹⁸¹ In her master’s thesis written in 2000, Meghan McLyman cites a conversation with choreographer Lila York about the effects of reduced federal funding for the arts. York explained that NEA funding legitimated the worth of arts institutions and thus incited private

¹⁷⁸ Meghan Karleen McLyman, “Ballet Companies in the United States: Analysis of Partnerships, 1995–2000” (M.A., United States -- District of Columbia, American University, 2000), 18, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/237997451/abstract/B2BFCADA2AE44218PQ/1>.

¹⁷⁹ McLyman, “Ballet Companies in the United States,” 18.

¹⁸⁰ Dick Williams, “NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS Let Elite Do the Subsidizing,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 19, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/news/docview/247555508/4D979A1379274DCFPQ/55?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Newspapers>.

¹⁸¹ Wilbur, *Funding Bodies*, 5.

philanthropy: “When the government was in the arts, the foundations were in the arts and when the government pulled out so did the foundations. They shifted their priorities.”¹⁸² An NEA report confirms this relationship, noting that “an NEA grant may signal to other contributors, particularly foundations, that such a company is worthy of financial support.”¹⁸³

The shift away from the arts among foundations is clearly reflected in data collected by Grantmakers in the Arts (GIA), a national association of public and private arts and culture funders in the US. From 2001 to 2019, the proportion of foundation grant dollars by major fields to Arts & Culture decreased from 12 percent to 7 percent.¹⁸⁴ Within foundation support for Arts & Culture, about one-third of grant dollars usually goes to the performing arts.¹⁸⁵ In 2001, giving to dance represented 9.9% of grant dollars given to the performing arts, and only 8.5% in 2004.¹⁸⁶ Before the NEA budget cuts, NEA grant money made up 7.6 percent of the average dance company’s budget. After 1996, that number fell to 2.5 percent. When federal funding for the arts dipped, “charitable donations to the arts did not keep pace with allocations to other sectors such as health care and education.”¹⁸⁷ Even if private funds could fill the gap left by a lack of federal funding, a Grantmakers in the Arts report from 2017 cautions against a full reliance on the private sector, claims that since “corporations and foundations that fund the arts do not exist in all communities” government funds are “important, achieving wider geographic

¹⁸² McLyman, “Ballet Companies in the United States,” 14-15.

¹⁸³ Smith, “Raising the Barre,” 15.

¹⁸⁴ Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, “Arts Funding Snapshot 2001: Vital Signs” (Seattle, Washington: Grantmakers in the Arts, July 2003), 4, <https://www.giarts.org/arts-funding-snapshot-2001-vital-signs>; Reina Mukai et al., “Grantmakers in the Arts, Annual Arts Funding Snapshot 2022” (Bronx, NY: Grantmakers in the Arts, February 2022), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Reina Mukai et al., “Grantmakers in the Arts, Annual Arts Funding Snapshot 2022,” 4.

¹⁸⁶ Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, “Arts Funding Snapshot 2001,” 4; Loren Renz, Steven Lawrence, and Kelly Barsdate, “Arts Funding Snapshot 2004: Vital Signs,” *GIA Reader* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 41, <https://www.giarts.org/arts-funding-snapshot-2004-vital-signs>.

¹⁸⁷ Smith, “Raising the Barre,” 4.

access to cultural experiences as well as access across the income spectrum.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, an over reliance on private funding can have the dual effect of reducing overall funds for the arts (as private grants often trail government dollars), and undermining equity and access in the arts. By the turn of the twenty-first century, dance companies struggled in the face of diminished federal support, a philanthropic turn towards education and access, and a decline in Americans attending live arts events.

Crises of the New Millenium: 2000-2010

Two other major events contributed to arts organizations’ and artists’ financial struggles in the first decade of the twenty-first century: the September 11th attacks and the 2008 stock market crash. By the time of the September 11th attacks, the country was already in an economic downturn because of the dot-com bust, a stock market decline, and a looming recession. In a 2002 interview published by GIA, Susan Berresford (former director of the Ford Foundation) reflected on the effects of September 11th on the American arts community. She contended that a funding crisis in the arts tends to affect one or two funding streams for arts organizations. Berresford went on to explain that in the aftermath of the attacks, all five revenue streams—earned income, individual giving, foundation grants, corporate support, and government funding—were affected. Berresford claimed that “every state and every community has felt the impact, and especially hard hit, of course, were cultural institutions in New York City.”¹⁸⁹ The 2001 Arts Funding Snapshot published by GIA reported that in the wake of the economic downturn and the September 11th attacks, foundation giving for the arts decreased after 2001,

¹⁸⁸ Reina Mukai and Ryan Stubbs, “Arts Funding Snapshot: GIA’s Annual Research on Support for Arts and Culture,” *GIA Reader*, Ideas and Information on Arts and Culture, 28, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 11.

¹⁸⁹ Susan Berresford and Robert Lynch, “Reflections on September 11,” *GIA Reader* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2002), <https://www.giarts.org/article/reflections-september-11>.

and predicted that the trend would continue for the next few years.¹⁹⁰ The recession and the September 11th attacks threatened, for example, several of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's (PBT) funding streams. PBT's endowment earnings fell after the stock market crash, dampening its financial cushion. A decline in ticket sale revenue and shifts in funding priorities among donors in the aftermath of the attacks pushed the company into a near \$700,000 deficit. To support its economic recovery, PBT focused on increasing its endowment and looked for ways to bolster its revenue, including "increased school revenues."¹⁹¹ Similarly situated regional ballet companies likely faced struggles parallel to those experienced by PBT.

The 2008 recession presented a new obstacle to arts funding in the United States. Perhaps most illustrative of the financial burden facing ballet companies after 2008, New York City Ballet—the largest US ballet company by revenue and expenditure—laid off eleven *corp de ballet* (corps) dancers to cut costs amid the financial crisis in 2009.¹⁹² If NYCB, one of the best-funded ballet companies in the country, had to make these cuts, one can imagine how smaller companies fared. The *New York Times* covered the challenges facing ballet companies during The Nutcracker season in 2008. It presented three companies as causes for concern. The Cincinnati Ballet was forced to offer half-price tickets to the show after a lack of ticket sales caused a performance cancellation. In the same season, the Sacramento Ballet estimated that its ticket sales would be down by a third. Facing similar financial constraints, Texas Ballet Theater made the difficult choice to use taped music instead of a live orchestra. Even New York City Ballet, which mounts the most popular *Nutcracker* production in the country, saw a five percent

¹⁹⁰ Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, "Arts Funding Snapshot 2001: Vital Signs" (Seattle, Washington: Grantmakers in the Arts, July 2003), <https://www.giarts.org/arts-funding-snapshot-2001-vital-signs>.

¹⁹¹ Dan Martin, "Company Profile: The Pittsburgh Ballet: Maintaining the Mission During Turbulent Times," *International Journal of Arts Management* 5, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 64–73.

¹⁹² Per its website, NYCB now retains 52 corps dancers. Daniel Wakin, "New York City Ballet Cuts Jobs as Its Operating Deficit Widens - The New York Times," *New York Times*, February 20, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/arts/dance/21ball.html>.

decline in ticket sales. The ticket sales data and managerial choices made by ballet companies reflect the financial strain that the recession placed on performing arts companies.¹⁹³ The *Los Angeles Times* provided coverage of the effects of the recession on the arts in 2009:

The problems facing Las Vegas's cultural institutions are hardly unique. Numerous museums, theater and dance companies and other fine arts organizations across the country, including the Getty in Los Angeles and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, have suffered from declining ticket sales, shrinking endowments, staff reductions and steep drop-offs in donated money in recent months.¹⁹⁴

The article reported that the Nevada Ballet Theatre was struggling in the wake of the recession. Declining revenue from ticket sales, contributions, and tuition contributed to the decision to fire nine company dancers.¹⁹⁵ The recession-era arts sector even made headlines in the United Kingdom. *The Guardian* reported in 2010 that the United States played host to a growing number of "cultural casualties" including an opera house in Maryland, a theater in California, a museum in Nevada, and a dance company in New York. The article claimed that roughly ten percent of the country's arts organizations were under such financial pressure that they had made devastating cuts or were considering closing.¹⁹⁶ The recession was devastating for the arts in part because of a lack of government support for the arts. Because ballet companies are so reliant on ticket sales and private donations, and often lack large endowments, they are extremely

¹⁹³ Daniel Wakin, "In a Season of Economic Slump, Even 'The Nutcracker' Doesn't Beckon as Brightly," *New York Times*, December 19, 2008, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1933767306/BCDB92CDEDF54CB4PQ/6?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Newspapers>.

¹⁹⁴ Reed Johnson, "Vegas Rolls the Dice on Culture Again," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2009, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1964855036/562C1D7E1FC545ACPQ/11?accountid=10747&sourcetype=Newspapers>.

¹⁹⁵ The company today has twenty-five dancers including apprentices, so one can assume that nine dancers in 2009 represented a core component of the company. "Nevada Ballet," accessed March 17, 2025, <https://nevadaballet.org/about-us/our-company/>.

¹⁹⁶ Ed Pilkington, Lizzy Davies, and Henry McDonald, "Hard Times: How the Recession Is Affecting Arts Funding around the Globe," *The Guardian*, February 19, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/feb/19/arts-funding-global-recession>.

vulnerable to changes in the market. In the wake of a litany of financial obstacles, ballet companies had to find alternative solutions to keep their doors open.

Chapter 3: “The Experience is the Pay”: The Growth of Trainee Programs¹⁹⁷

“What happened to getting a job in a ballet company straight out of school? Why do we have so many in between steps now,” posed Shane Wuerthner to his followers on Instagram on February 17, 2025, as if he had been a fly on my wall.¹⁹⁸ The ballet coach and former dancer questioned, “Are we actually creating stronger, more prepared dancers? Or are we just pushing the goalpost further down the track, making it harder for dancers to start their careers?” He closed by asking, “At what point do we stop calling it “training” and start calling it exploitation?” Hundreds of current and former dancers, educators, and others in the field chimed in. “In 1987, I went from SAB to a full Corps contract with ABT. Many more steps now,” wrote Rosalie O’Connor, known in the industry for her dance photography. “At its core, it is a cheap dirty trick for companies to use extra dancers without paying said extra dancers,” asserted a stage manager from Tulsa. Megan Fairchild, Principal with NYCB, commented “It’s because companies make more money this way. It’s never been to prepare the dancers more, in my mind. How often do they even take these dancers, who often have to pay to be there.”¹⁹⁹ These are questions that young dancers today are all too familiar with, but they are being deceived as to why they are subjected to this new system.

The Trainee Track

In the early 2000s, trainee programs were not yet the known entity that they are today. The earliest traces of ballet trainees in newspaper archives appeared at Milwaukee Ballet in

¹⁹⁷ Jen Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe Magazine* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, September 2009).

¹⁹⁸ Shane Wuerthner, “How Many Steps Do We Really Need? What Happened to Getting a Job in a Ballet Company Straight out of School?,” Instagram, February 17, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGMHUBYTD9X/>.

¹⁹⁹ Wuerthner, “How Many Steps Do We Really Need?,” Instagram, February 17, 2025.

1998, Louisville Ballet in 2001, Orlando Ballet in 2005, and Cincinnati Ballet, Nashville Ballet, and Ballet Memphis in 2006.²⁰⁰ From these articles, it appears that the word “trainee” sometimes referred to a true program, and at other times, designated a rank within the company. A *Pointe Magazine* article from 2004 demonstrates the shifting meaning of the term. The article called Ballet West’s second company a “pre-professional trainee company” intended to “bridge the gap between education and professional life.” Today, a pre-professional program, a trainee program, and a second company are distinct. The characterization of the Ballet West II highlights how the trainee concept first manifested in the form of second companies.²⁰¹ The lack of a precise definition for the term demonstrates that while in the early 2000s, trainee programs had not yet been cemented as a core component of pre-professional ballet training, they would soon emerge as a solution to ballet companies’ financial crises in the aftermath of the loss of public and private funding and the 2008 recession.

Trainee programs are not a long-standing practice in ballet, which is ironic given that ballet is generally averse to change.²⁰² The extra years of post-graduate training that trainee programs represent might not seem consequential at first glance, but when taking into account the career progression of a ballet dancer, the effects of the programs come into better focus. Before entering trainee programs, ballet dancers generally complete at least ten years of training, often forgoing a social life, relationships, and even formal schooling.²⁰³ Dancers will spend two

²⁰⁰ Mary Carole McCauley, “FALL ARTS PREVIEW A Trainee Battles the Scales, a Member of the Corps Prepares for His First Big Part, and a Star Plans for the End of Her Career. Series: The Tempest \ STEP BY STEP \ (FIRST OF THREE PARTS): [All Edition],” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 1998, sec. Cue; Susan McDonald, “Young and in Love with the ARTS,” *Business First* 18, no. 17 (November 30, 2001): 29; Diane Hubbard Burns, “Orlando Ballet’s Cinderella Can Dance,” *Pointe* 6, no. 4 (September 2005): 76–77; David Lyman, “The Drive to Dance,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 3, 2006, sec. Features.

²⁰¹ Anonymous, “Close Second,” *Pointe* 5, no. 5 (November 2004): 20.

²⁰² Loyalty to tradition has often been cited as an excuse to continue to enforce outdated practices that undermine diversity, equity and inclusion.

²⁰³ Many pre-professional ballet students complete their studies online.

or even three years in a trainee program post high school, where they continue to pay tuition and begin to gain professional experience through working with the affiliated company. A dancer can invest an additional year or two in a second company before they can join a company as an apprentice, where they may still not make a living wage. It can therefore be five or six years after high school before dancers attain a real salaried position. In these post-graduate years, previous generations of dancers would already have been employed in companies, as insights from my interviewees have previously demonstrated. Because most ballet careers span only fifteen or twenty years, the impact of slashing five years off the time where a dancer is actually earning money cannot be overstated. While dancers waver between student and professional, they are forced to rely on an outside source of income, often parental support, to afford to live. Because participating in a trainee program never guarantees a student a job in the affiliated company (or any other company), young dancers can complete these programs without ever attaining a company contract, while companies continue to fill their classes with free expendable labor.

Ballet companies in the early 2000s obscured their use of unpaid labor by labeling trainees as students in “pre-professional programs,” a practice that would escalate in the following decade. Despite their participation in professional performances, ballet trainees in the early 2000s were not employed and thus received no salary for the companies they worked for. In a 2006 article for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, David Lyman explained that “trainees are part of a preprofessional program run by a professional company,” and that “being a company trainee is [generally] the first step in a professional career.”²⁰⁴ He contrasts traineeships with apprenticeships stating that while apprentices “have a contract giving them a regular weekly salary and a guaranteed number of weeks of employment, trainees usually have no set salary and

²⁰⁴ Lyman, “The Drive to Dance,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

are paid only when they perform.”²⁰⁵ Although trainees could not rely on their work for a steady income, Lyman suggests that trainees were usually paid per company performance. Trainees’ performance opportunities included community outreach programs and professional work with the company when the repertoire demanded a large number of corps dancers. Lyman affirmed that a trainee position was meant to be a “point of entry” to the professional world, not a “destination,” with companies limiting a trainee’s tenure to one or two years.²⁰⁶

In 2009, Jen Peters posed the question, “Are trainee programs a smart career move?” to her readers at *Pointe*, marking trainee programs’ entry into the collective consciousness of the American ballet world.²⁰⁷ In the article, Peters details how joining a trainee program could benefit dancers who feel they need an extra year of training before auditioning for companies, underscoring how participating in such a program was considered both a choice and temporary. Peters explains that trainee programs—like second companies—“bridge the gap” between student and professional, with one “major catch.”²⁰⁸ Trainees are “unsalaried” and pay tuition.²⁰⁹ If you had \$4,000 to spend (and today closer to \$7,000), you too could become a trainee! At the time, the most alluring aspect of joining a trainee program was “performing in [professional] main stage productions.”²¹⁰ The very feature of trainee programs that attracts students and that companies advertise to entice prospective trainees is the core problem with the system: dancers pay to work for free.

²⁰⁵ This marks a departure from more modern iterations of trainee programs wherein trainees are not paid for their participation in company work at all. Lyman, “The Drive to Dance,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

²⁰⁶ Lyman, “The Drive to Dance,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

²⁰⁷ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe*.”

²⁰⁸ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe*.

²⁰⁹ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe*.

²¹⁰ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe*.

Trainee programs surfaced in conversations about professional ballet training throughout the 2010s. *Pointe Magazine* published its first Trainee Program Guide in the Summer of 2013, which listed twenty trainee programs affiliated with companies in cities across the country.²¹¹ Fourteen of the programs were tuition-based, while only two offered a stipend or pay for company performances. By 2016, trainee programs had altered the training landscape. In her article “Semi-Pro Limbo: Breaking Into the Professional Ranks From a Second Company or Trainee Program Is Taking Longer Than Ever,” Candice Thompson explains that while in the past, one or two years as an apprentice often led to a company contract, today there are more “no-to low-paying rungs at the bottom of the ladder.”²¹² The “rungs” that precede a company contract (and company salary) include trainee programs, second companies, and apprenticeships. Trainee programs are often considered the highest level of the affiliated school, but trainees differ from students in that they rehearse and perform with the company when extra dancers are needed. In most cases, they are not paid for their work in company productions as they are still considered to be “in training,” paying roughly \$7,000 in tuition annually.²¹³ Second companies operate as miniature troupes with their own repertoire; some tour frequently while others engage in outreach work for the company. Second company dancers augment the company by regularly dancing *corps de ballet* roles in main stage productions, and are paid a stipend for their work, which varies widely. In 2015, a second company dancer stipend ranged from \$125 to \$700 per week.²¹⁴ Ballet companies frequently require new dancers to complete an apprenticeship prior to securing a full company contract. Apprentices perform all of the functions of a company dancer,

²¹¹ Maya Barad, “Trainee Program Guide,” *Pointe* 14, no. 3 (July 2013): 69–70.

²¹² Candice Thompson, “Semi-Pro Limbo: Breaking Into the Professional Ranks From a Second Company or Trainee Program Is Taking Longer Than Ever,” *Pointe (Online)* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, March 31, 2016), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2693884138/citation/E86880425A704B24PQ/6>.

²¹³ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs,” *Pointe*.

²¹⁴ Sucato, “The Skinny on Second Companies.”

but they are paid at a significantly discounted rate.²¹⁵ Because these programs are never required to offer jobs to their participants in exchange for years of free or cheap labor, young dancers can become “stuck in this netherworld” moving between “semi-professional” contracts and spending a large portion of their early career in the “minor leagues.”²¹⁶

By 2023, the conversation around trainee programs had shifted. “Pre-Professional Pipeline or Purgatory? Who do Apprentice and Trainee Programs Really Serve,” asked writers for *Dance Magazine*.²¹⁷ As ballet company leaders continue to perpetuate the idea that participating in a trainee program is an “invaluable internship to work in a professional company environment for a young dancer who has the ability but doesn’t have the experience yet,” the dance community is starting to question who stands to benefit most from these programs.²¹⁸ The article details the trainee program conundrum and advises students to extensively research potential programs: “Think of how you can use the system best—because they’re going to use you,” the authors caution.²¹⁹ While contemporary conversations are exposing the exploitation of trainees, young dancers continue to audition in droves for spots in these programs in hopes of one day being paid to dance.

Today, over thirty of the largest fifty American ballet companies have trainee programs.²²⁰ Despite a common label, no two trainee programs are exactly alike. The programs vary in several aspects including tuition schemes, involvement with the school, benefits like

²¹⁵ “No Holidays for San Francisco Ballet’s Labor Relations,” accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/music-news/no-holidays-san-francisco-ballets-labor-relations>.

²¹⁶ Thompson, “Semi-Pro Limbo,” *Pointe*.

²¹⁷ Kathryn Holmes and Nick Kepley, “Pre-Professional Pipeline—or Purgatory? Who Do Apprentice and Trainee Programs Really Serve?,” *Dance Magazine*, September 11, 2023, <https://dancemagazine.com/pre-professional-pipeline-or-purgatory/>.

²¹⁸ Peters, “The Truth About Trainee Programs.”

²¹⁹ Holmes and Kepley, “Pre-Professional Pipeline—or Purgatory?,” *Dance Magazine*.

²²⁰ Per the company’s websites listed here. “The Largest Ballet & Classically Based Companies 2024,” Dance Data Project, July 2024, <https://www.dancedataproject.com/ddp-research/the-largest-ballet-and-classically-based-companies-2024/>. See Appendix C.

access to physical therapy, work with the company, and pay for professional performances. They might even go by different names.²²¹ Mikko Nissinen of the Boston Ballet confirms the mutability of the terms trainee and second company: “What one company calls a second company, another calls something else. San Francisco Ballet apprentices are like our second company [Boston Ballet II]...It’s a little confusing.”²²² To deepen my understanding of these programs and their seeming contradictions, I conducted oral history interviews with ten dancers who participated in trainee programs at Boston Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Charlotte Ballet, Philadelphia Ballet, Texas Ballet Theater, and the Washington Ballet.

The Potential and Precarity of Trainee Programs

The 2003 report from the National Endowment of the Arts predicted that dance companies would navigate the recent economic recession “by cutting costs and implementing new measures to increase ticket sales and attract contributions.”²²³ Trainee programs can fulfill both of these functions. They allow companies to cut costs by using unpaid trainees in place of paid dancers and enable smaller companies to mount large classical ballets that reliably attract audiences. Increases in ticket sales driven by the presentation of popular ballets have been correlated with an increase in donations, which make up a crucial portion of a company’s revenue. The NEA report found that “for every \$1 a dance company earned in ticket sales, it received 14 cents in contributions.”²²⁴ In addition to tuition, trainee programs give small

²²¹ Graduate Program and Professional Division are used at different companies to refer to what is essentially a trainee program.

²²² Sucato, “The Skinny on Second Companies,” *Dance/USA*.

²²³ Smith, “Raising the Barre,” 37.

²²⁴ Smith, “Raising the Barre,” 15.

companies access to a large pool of dancers—that they otherwise could not afford to hire—necessary to present financially lucrative classical ballets.

“Selected Professional Division students may also have frequent opportunities to perform in Pacific Northwest Ballet productions throughout the year,” Pacific Northwest Ballet’s (PNB) Professional Division website advertises.²²⁵ The Professional Division (PD) is PNB’s version of a trainee program. The use of “opportunity” seems to suggest that performing in main stage productions is a privilege. Many other companies advertise trainees’ involvement in main stage productions in a similar manner. The language does not suggest that without trainees, the company could not perform certain essential ballets. For a company with a big reputation, PNB is fairly small with only 48 dancers.²²⁶ Of those 48, only 16 are pointe dancers in the corps de ballet.²²⁷ The company’s size is a barrier to its ability to mount classical ballets with a demand for a large number of women in the corps. Hayley, a PD student at PNB from 2022-2024, danced corps de ballet roles in several company productions including *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Coppelia*. PDs were integral to PNB’s *Swan Lake* in the 2023-2024 season. “I believe there are 24 swans, so they did not have a full group,” Hayley explained.²²⁸ She and six of her fellow PDs performed in every show to account for this shortage of dancers within the company. Because PNB is rather small and has no second company to bolster the main company’s ranks, Hayley explained “people joke that PDs are like PNB II.”²²⁹ Unlike second company dancers, though, PDs pay thousands of dollars in annual tuition.

²²⁵ “Professional Division | Classes & Programs | PNB School,” accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.pnb.org/pnb-school/classes/professional-division/>.

²²⁶ “Dancers,” Pacific Northwest Ballet, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.pnb.org/artists/>.

²²⁷ How PNB refers to dancers that perform “women’s” roles.

²²⁸ Hayley, oral history interview by author, October 22, 2024.

²²⁹ Hayley, oral history interview by author, October 22, 2024.

Not only does the Professional Division allow Pacific Northwest Ballet to present large classical works, but PD tuition also offers the company a reliable stream of revenue. Per PNB's tax returns, the company and the school are linked as one financial entity. PNB's 2024 audited statement confirms that "the Organization earns revenue primarily from performance ticket sales and from school tuition."²³⁰ PD tuition for the 2023-2024 year was \$12,540.²³¹ In the 2023-2024 school year, the program hosted 49 students, meaning that the company would have received roughly \$500,000 in PD tuition. While the company's Form 990 for FY 20224 has not yet been released, in FY 2023, school tuition provided the company with \$4,000,000, which accounted for roughly a third of the income generated by ticket sales.²³² In a departure from the practice at most companies, PDs were paid a small stipend ranging from 25 to 75 dollars per performance in recognition of their work. The stipend becomes almost negligible when accounting for hefty tuition bill. As Hayley's experience and the financial records demonstrate, the Professional Division is crucial to both of the company's main sources of income.

While trainees provide companies with a source of income and labor, they do not enjoy the benefits and protections of employment. As has been made clear, companies consider trainees to be students, and therefore, they are not salaried employees.²³³ Aside from a salary, trainees lack protections regarding health, safety, and well-being. Most major ballet company

²³⁰ Pacific Northwest Ballet, "PNB Report of Independent Auditors and Consolidated Financial Statements with Supplementary Information," June 30, 2024, 12, <https://www.pnb.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/PNB-Audited-Financial-Statements-FY24.pdf>.

²³¹ "Professional Division | Classes & Programs | PNB School."

²³² Pacific Northwest Ballet Association, "PNB Form 990 FY 2023," June 30, 2023, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/910897129/202401369349319850/full>.

²³³ At Pacific Northwest Ballet, Professional Division students are paid per company performance---this is not standard practice. Payment ranges from \$25-\$100. The payment is somewhat negligible when considering that students paid \$11,000 in tuition annually. Hayley, oral history interview by author, October 22, 2024.

dancers are unionized with the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA).²³⁴ The union negotiates dancers' contracts and ensures that the company complies with rules surrounding rehearsal schedules, compensation, rest time, health insurance, physical therapy, safe working conditions, and pointe shoe supply.²³⁵ Trainees who perform with the company are not protected by union provisions, leaving them open to exploitation. As trainees perform in demanding roles in company productions (such as companies' extensive *Nutcracker* runs),²³⁶ they can be exposed to the risk of injury. Without health insurance, they have no financial protection in the event of an injury that requires medical attention. Furthermore, trainees do not receive worker's compensation that a company member would receive in the event that they suffer from a serious injury.²³⁷ Alex, one of my interviewees, was dancing in *The Nutcracker* as a member of Texas Ballet Theater's Studio Training Company²³⁸ when she injured her foot: "It was during Snow, and I still had like two minutes left...It was crazy, but apparently no one noticed," she remarked.²³⁹ After suffering from an injury during the performance and dancing on her bad foot to finish rest of the choreography, Alex was "out for the second half of *Nutcracker*, and all of January and February."²⁴⁰ While the company made sure she went to a specific doctor and physical therapist, without worker's compensation or company health insurance, Alex was left to foot the bills herself.

²³⁴ Lauren Wingenroth, "The Early-Career-Dancer's Guide to Company Contracts," *Pointe (Online)* (New York, United States: Dance Media LLC, April 30, 2024), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3062742923/citation/5AB69A45F30E48BBPQ/1>.

²³⁵ Boston Ballet and American Guild of Musical Artists, "Boston Ballet-AGMA Collective Bargaining Agreement 2022-2025," July 1, 2022, <https://www.musicalartists.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/BostonBallet.2022-2025.pdf>.

²³⁶ Boston Ballet gave 41 shows in 2022. "Nutcracker Auditions," Boston Ballet, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.bostonballet.org/educations_old/nutcracker-auditions/.

²³⁷ American Guild of Musical Artists and Dancers of San Francisco Ballet, "Negotiations at San Francisco Ballet Are Not Going Well," Social Media, Instagram, November 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DC2cwAeSmDw/>.

²³⁸ Same rank as a trainee at other companies.

²³⁹ Alex, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

²⁴⁰ Alex, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

Aside from protections specific to dancers, employees in the United States are protected from discrimination and harassment in the workplace by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.²⁴¹ Because trainees are not employees, they do not benefit from these federal protections. Title VII’s coverage of discrimination on the basis of sex protects employees against sexual harassment. If a trainee experiences sexual harassment—which has been proven to be prevalent in the ballet world²⁴²—they have no mode of legal recourse as an employee.²⁴³ Alexandra Waterbury of the School of American Ballet sued the New York City Ballet for perpetuating a culture of abuse wherein her former boyfriend and NYCB Principal shared sexually explicit photos and videos of her with other Principal dancers and a company donor during their relationship. Because Waterbury was a student and not a company employee, she did not have the broad protections under civil rights laws that would have enabled her to bring a stronger case of liability on the part of the employer,²⁴⁴ with potential for attorney fees recovery and punitive damages.²⁴⁵ The lack of benefits and protections of trainees leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and makes their labor in companies precarious.

²⁴¹ “Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” US EEOC, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.eeoc.gov/statutes/title-vii-civil-rights-act-1964>.

²⁴² Kathleen McGuire, “Grooming and Sexual Abuse in Ballet: Why Dancers Are Especially Vulnerable,” *Pointe Magazine*, December 1, 2021, <https://pointemagazine.com/grooming-and-sexual-abuse-in-ballet/>; Rainesford Stauffer, “For Ballet’s Foremost #MeToo Accuser, a Second Act; A One-Time Elite Student at the School of American Ballet, Alexandra Waterbury—Plaintiff in New York City Ballet’s Ongoing Sexual Misconduct Lawsuit—Sets Her Sights on an Ivy League Degree and a Modeling Career. Still, She Warns Future Ballerinas of Dance’s Perils,” *WSJ: The Magazine from the Wall Street Journal* (New York, United States: Dow Jones & Company Inc., February 22, 2019), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2184589198/citation/3837D0912AB94237PQ/2>.

²⁴³ McGuire, “Grooming and Sexual Abuse in Ballet”; Stauffer, “For Ballet’s Foremost #MeToo Accuser, a Second Act; A One-Time Elite Student at the School of American Ballet, Alexandra Waterbury—Plaintiff in New York City Ballet’s Ongoing Sexual Misconduct Lawsuit—Sets Her Sights on an Ivy League Degree and a Modeling Career. Still, She Warns Future Ballerinas of Dance’s Perils.”; “Legal Issues: Internships,” National Association of Colleges and Employers, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.nacweb.org/public-policy-and-legal/legal-issues/773ba58e-6592-4384-a7b6-d191eca8144e>.

²⁴⁴ Julia Jacobs, “New York City Ballet Dropped From a Woman’s Photo-Sharing Lawsuit,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2020, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/arts/dance/new-york-city-ballet-lawsuit.html>.

²⁴⁵ “Remedies For Employment Discrimination,” US EEOC, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.eeoc.gov/remedies-employment-discrimination>.

The discussion of trainee labor might have reminded a reader of a different form of unpaid labor—unpaid internships, which are ubiquitous in US corporate culture. While internships and trainee programs are not mirror images, they are both defined by the same premise: labor without employment with the promise of professionalization opportunities. Parallel to the emergence of trainee programs, the practice of unpaid internships skyrocketed in the wake of the 2008 recession.²⁴⁶ In 2022, researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison estimated that at least “1 million interns in the U.S. are unpaid on an annual basis.”²⁴⁷ Like trainees, unpaid interns often perform work otherwise done by paid employees. Their labor is similarly written off as great experience to enhance their resumes. Unlike trainees, interns are sometimes considered to be employees entitled to compensation under the law. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of the US Department of Labor governs minimum wage and overtime regulations and applies to the use of interns at “for-profit” companies.

Under the FLSA, an intern is considered to be an employee and entitled to compensation if the employer is determined to be the primary beneficiary of the relationship.²⁴⁸ The Department of Labor outlines a seven factor test that has been used in the courts to evaluate the employment status of interns.²⁴⁹ The test “allows courts to examine the ‘economic reality’ of the

²⁴⁶ Philip Rothschild and Connor Rothschild, “The Unpaid Internship: Benefits, Drawbacks, and Legal Issues,” *Administrative Issues Journal Education Practice and Research* 10, no. 2 (2020): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.5929/2020.10.2.1>.

²⁴⁷ Center For Research on College-Workforce Transitions, “Unpaid Internships & Inequality: A Review of the Data and Recommendations for Research, Policy and Practice,” Policy Brief (University of Wisconsin-Madison, March 2022), https://ccwt.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/CCWT_Policy-Brief-2_Unpaid-Internships-and-Inequality-1.pdf.

²⁴⁸ “Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act,” DOL, January 2018, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/71-flsa-internships>.

²⁴⁹ The seven factors are as follows: 1) The extent to which the intern and the employer clearly understand that there is no expectation of compensation. Any promise of compensation, express or implied, suggests that the intern is an employee—and vice versa. 2) The extent to which the internship provides training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by educational institutions. 3) The extent to which the internship is tied to the intern’s formal education program by integrated coursework or the receipt of academic credit. 4) The extent to which the internship accommodates the intern’s academic commitments by corresponding to the academic calendar. 5) The extent to which the internship’s

intern-employer relationship to determine which party is the “primary beneficiary” of the relationship.”²⁵⁰ The seven factor “primary beneficiary test” emphasizes that the intern’s work should be primarily educational and that the work of interns should complement, rather than displace the work done by paid employees. No one factor is determinative of the intern’s employment status; the test is applied on a case-by-case basis. Though ballet companies are not necessarily subject to the FLSA due to an exemption that allows nonprofits to use unpaid volunteers,²⁵¹ the primary beneficiary test is still useful in conceptualizing labor performed by students that economically benefits the employer.²⁵² In many cases, trainee labor both displaces that of a paid employee and provides the company with significant economic benefits derived from expanding the company’s artistic capabilities. Applying a primary beneficiary analysis to the relationship between trainees and companies, I argue that the benefits to the company derived from the trainee relationship often outweigh the individual educational benefits afforded to trainees. With this framework, trainees can be considered employees entitled to compensation.

duration is limited to the period in which the internship provides the intern with beneficial learning. 6) The extent to which the intern’s work complements, rather than displaces, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern. 7) The extent to which the intern and the employer understand that the internship is conducted without entitlement to a paid job at the conclusion of the internship.

²⁵⁰ “Fact Sheet #71” Department of Labor.

²⁵¹ The footnote to the FLSA fact sheet: “The FLSA exempts certain people who volunteer to perform services for a state or local government agency or who volunteer for humanitarian purposes for non-profit food banks. WHD also recognizes an exception for individuals who volunteer their time, freely and without anticipation of compensation, for religious, charitable, civic, or humanitarian purposes to non-profit organizations. Unpaid internships for public sector and non-profit charitable organizations, where the intern volunteers without expectation of compensation, are generally permissible.” Despite the footnote, a recent article argues that there is no legal basis “for the DOL’s contention that unpaid internships at non-profit organizations are generally permissible.” Amanda M. Wilmsen, “A Fair Day’s Pay: The Fair Labor Standards Act,” *American Bar Association Journal of Labor & Employment Law*; *Chicago* 34, no. 1 (2019): 131–59.

²⁵² Ballet companies’ missions are not primarily religious, charitable, civic, or humanitarian. Though they are nonprofits, unpaid trainee labor may not fall under the volunteer exemption of the FLSA. In *Alamo Found’n v. Secy. of Labor*, 471 U.S. 290 (1985), volunteers at a religious nonprofit were found by the courts to be employees entitled to minimum wage and overtime as they supported the organization’s commercial activities. Trainees support ballet companies’ revenue through participation in commercial productions. A comprehensive legal analysis of this issue falls beyond the scope of this paper, though trainees’ status under the FLSA is a compelling avenue for further research. “*Alamo Found’n v. Secy. of Labor*, 471 U.S. 290 (1985),” Justia Law, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/471/290/>.

Despite the law, the practice of unpaid internships runs rampant and privileges wealthy students who can afford to work for free. Trainee programs have the same effect, but unlike internships, they might not really help students land a paying job.

Do Trainee Programs Lead to a Job?

As dancers subscribe to the idea that they need professional experience before getting their first job, paying a large sum to gain experience working with a company, they should have an advantage in the competitive job market. Trainee programs are purported to be a prerequisite to employment, but they may not actually lead to jobs. A trainee program never guarantees a dancer a job in any company. In Hayley's cohort at PNB, only four out of twenty dancers received apprentice contracts with the company.²⁵³ At Pennsylvania Ballet in 2020, only two dancers were promoted from the Trainee Program to the second company.²⁵⁴ Alex, one of my interviewees, completed three different trainee programs at Philadelphia Ballet, Charlotte Ballet, and Texas Ballet Theater (TBT), where she paid tuition and received no compensation for her work.²⁵⁵ Today, she dances as a Trainee with TBT, where she continues to work a part-time restaurant job to afford her rent.²⁵⁶ In fact, only two of the ten dancers I interviewed secured company contracts immediately upon completion of a trainee program.²⁵⁷ Three of my interviewees entered second companies after their trainee years, while one is in another trainee program where she still pays tuition. After devoting time, money, and labor to a company for several years, the outcomes are far from certain.

²⁵³ Hayley, oral history interview by author, October 22, 2024.

²⁵⁴ Alex, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

²⁵⁵ Alex, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

²⁵⁶ Trainee at TBT is a rank within the company that is one step below the apprentice level. Alex, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

²⁵⁷ Their contracts were not at the company associated with the trainee program they attended. Cole, oral history interview by author, October 21, 2024; Gianna, oral history interview by author, October 21, 2024.

Dancers-turned educators lament the effects of trainee programs on young artists. Through teaching and mentoring, Elizabeth Gaither, ballet mentor and former dancer with Houston Ballet, ABT, and The Washington Ballet, has seen students devote six or seven years to a company, only never to be hired. “This is a travesty to me,” she exclaimed. “And to keep someone on for those seven years...using their work, using them in the corps, using them...to input them where you need them, and then letting them go...How do you live with yourself?” she asked. Moreover, Gaither believes that trainee programs put too much “responsibility on the child themselves²⁵⁸...Like, well, if they're going to stay, then that's their choice. They're staying under a false narrative sometimes that there is hope for them [at the company].”²⁵⁹ “It just destroys me, and I see it all the time,” she said.²⁶⁰ Xiomara Reyes, who directed the Trainee Program at The Washington Ballet from 2016-2023, has perhaps the best insight into these programs. While she sees the benefits of trainee programs in that they offer students a place to continue to dance while they are trying to get a job in a very competitive market, they can have harmful effects on young dancers, “especially when they are there for like two, three, four years, you know, when it goes on and on and on.” She explained that the program “lost very talented dancers” that could not keep progressing through the narrow funnel to the company.²⁶¹ She recalled a former student of hers who spent “four years doing [the] complete repertory of the company, and still [was] not promoted to Studio Company.”²⁶² “It's heartbreaking, of course, and then...ballet starts being toxic,” she asserted.²⁶³

²⁵⁸ She says “‘child’ even at twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. You're still a child to me. Because I'm 50,” she told me in our interview.

²⁵⁹ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

²⁶¹ Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

²⁶² Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

²⁶³ Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

When we spoke in 2024, Robert La Fosse expressed his doubts about the entire concept of these programs: “What does the word trainee mean? Isn't that what we're doing from the age of five to seventeen? Is it just a fancy name for a stalling point...a way to get you to hang out?” he asked.²⁶⁴ La Fosse, who taught for several years at American Ballet Theatre’s training arm, the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, contended that as teachers, “we can tell at the age of seventeen what the talent level is. We kind of know...[whether] you' re definitely going to get into a professional company.” He argued that there is “no reason you can't go from a fully trained dancer at seventeen or eighteen, and...apprentice for a year with a stipend or some kind of living.”²⁶⁵ As an educator, he believed that “the system is broken.”²⁶⁶

The idea that trainees are not “ready” to join a company is completely undermined by a company’s use of trainees in professional performances. If a dancer is put on stage with a professional company, how can that company say that the trainee is not ready to be in the company? The concept is completely illogical. The narrative that companies are giving students great opportunities by “allowing” them to perform with the company is only valid to the extent that the companies do not *need* trainees in order to mount productions. I will now turn to examine one company as a case study to determine whether trainees are “lucky to be in the room,” or integral to company functioning.

²⁶⁴ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024

²⁶⁵ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

²⁶⁶ Robert La Fosse, oral history interview by author, October 8, 2024.

Chapter 4: Washington Ballet Trainees—Marginal or Essential?

This chapter examines The Washington Ballet as a case study to determine why the company established the Trainee Program and if the company requires the use of unpaid trainee labor to fulfill its artistic operations.²⁶⁷ I look at the history of the company from its roots in the 1940s as a school, to its incorporation as a professional company in 1976 and its eventual ascension to its place as the eleventh largest classical ballet company in the country.²⁶⁸ My theory that the Trainee Program was established in order to expand the company's ranks without hiring more dancers to allow it to present lucrative classical ballets is supported by (1) the company's consistent struggle to mount work with a small number of dancers, (2) the economic context in which the Trainee Program was founded, and (3) the company's concurrent stylistic shift. Looking specifically at the company's repertoire and use of Trainees from 2021-2023, I argue that Trainees were integral to the company's functioning and provided the company a crucial economic advantage through tuition payments and free labor.

Evolution of The Washington Ballet

Mary Day founded The Washington Ballet as a school in 1944, recognizing ballet's potential to invigorate the capital's cultural scene.²⁶⁹ Day's teaching excellence is evident in the dancers she produced, notably Kevin McKenzie who would later dance with and direct the American Ballet Theatre, and Amanda McKerrow, the first American to win the gold medal at

²⁶⁷ This work does not make any judgment about the value of the educational component of the Washington Ballet Trainee Program from 2019-2023 (I personally know the training to be phenomenal). I focus solely on the relationship between the Trainee Program and the company.

²⁶⁸ "The Largest Ballet & Classically Based Companies 2024," Dance Data Project, July 2024, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/ddp-research/the-largest-ballet-and-classically-based-companies-2024/>.

²⁶⁹ Virginia Johnson, "Mary Day Taught Steps for Living; Legacy of the Washington Ballet Founder: [FINAL Edition]," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2006, sec. STYLE.

the Moscow International Ballet Competition.²⁷⁰ Located just a few miles from the White House, is it no surprise that Caroline Kennedy and Chelsea Clinton are alumni of the school as well.²⁷¹ Day formally incorporated The Washington Ballet in 1976 as a nonprofit company with the intention of showcasing her students in a professional setting.²⁷² The company's leadership was assumed by esteemed choreographer Septime Webre in 1999. Webre took the company to new heights by increasing its operating budget by five hundred percent, enhancing the artistic quality of its work, and expanding the reach of its school.²⁷³ Julie Kent, former Principal with American Ballet Theatre assumed the role of Artistic Director in 2016, bringing Xiomara Reyes to direct the school. She sought to create a company with artists of the highest caliber and a robust classical repertoire.²⁷⁴ Today, the company regularly performs at the Kennedy Center and presents both classical full-length ballets and new works by established and emerging choreographers. Despite its big reputation, the company has always been surprisingly small.

Throughout its history, The Washington Ballet has grappled with one of the most difficult problems for any company: it was too small, as one critic explained, to “mount a traditional *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*.”²⁷⁵ *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* are both prominent works of the classical ballet canon and stand as benchmarks for the classicism of a company. In 1994, the company could not perform *Swan Lake* with twenty-two dancers because the ballet features many segments with heavy *corps de ballet* work where roughly twenty-four dancers perform together as an ensemble.

²⁷⁰ Leslie R. Meyers, “Baryshnikov to Keep City on Its Toes,” *Clarion-Ledger*, June 21, 1985.

²⁷¹ Johnson, “Mary Day Taught Steps for Living” *The Washington Post*.

²⁷² Anna Kisselgoff, “Two Very Different Troupes, One Shared Goal: Two Ballet Troupes,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1990, sec. Arts & Leisure.

²⁷³ “Septime Webre | The Washington Ballet,” accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.washingtonballet.org/people/septime-webre/>.

²⁷⁴ Marina Harss, “Taking Flight: Julie Kent at Washington Ballet,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2017, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/arts/dance/taking-flight-julie-kent-at-washington-ballet.html>.

²⁷⁵ Anne Sacks, “DANCE: [3 Edition],” *The Independent*, June 12, 1994, sec. The Critics Page, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/313177622/abstract/FF4A32E73C2547D6PQ/40>.

For context, these works are regularly presented by larger companies like San Francisco Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, which have 84 and 90 dancers respectively.²⁷⁶ Instead of presenting classical works, The Washington Ballet regularly commissioned new works which Anne Sacks—critic for *The Independent*—called “young and fresh.”²⁷⁷ In her description of The Washington Ballet, Sacks underlined a trend among small low-budget companies of commissioning new works and presenting mixed bills composed of several short ballets instead of full-length productions. New contemporary works allow a company that lacks “the customary life-support systems,” namely strong financial backing and a large roster, the ability to present work at a lower cost with fewer dancers.²⁷⁸

Facing the fallout of the 2008 recession, Septime Webre and his small troupe embarked on a journey into new classical territory. The Washington Ballet initially built its reputation on the contemporary leotard ballets of Goh Choo San,²⁷⁹ but after a decade as Artistic Director, Septime Webre began to mount full length ballets like *La Bayadère*, *La Sylphide*, and *Don Quixote*. This move came just as the company was reeling from a massive deficit. Tax returns from The Washington Ballet show that from 2007-2010, the company’s revenue declined from \$10,298,182 to \$6,982,792, with a deficit of over \$1,000,000 in 2010.²⁸⁰ A loss of nearly \$2,000,000 in federal grant money between 2008 and 2009 likely contributed to the deficit. As classical ballets have name recognition and typically sell better than mixed-repertory bills, Webre’s artistic choices may have been an attempt to rescue the company from financial distress.

²⁷⁶ “Dancers,” *San Francisco Ballet* (blog), accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.sfballet.org/the-company/artists/dancers/principals/>; “Dancers,” American Ballet Theatre, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.abt.org/the-company/dancers/>.

²⁷⁷ Sacks, “DANCE,” *The Independent*.

²⁷⁸ Sacks, “DANCE,” *The Independent*.

²⁷⁹ ANNA KISSELGOFF, “The Washington Ballet As It Changes Directions,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1990, sec. The Arts.

²⁸⁰ “Washington Ballet - Nonprofit Explorer - Tax Filings and Audits by Year,” ProPublica, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/520846173>.

Lisa Traiger explains in *Pointe Magazine* how the company was able to transition stylistically despite still having only 22 dancers.²⁸¹ The company learned to operate within its limited size, tackling classical ballets like *La Sylphide* in 2009 and *La Bayadère* in 2011, both of which demand a robust *corps de ballet*. Dancers vigilantly learned every ballet and prepared themselves to jump into a new role at a moment's notice if a colleague was unable to perform. She quotes Artistic Director Septime Webre in a profile for *Pointe Magazine* in 2010 who expressed, "because we're small, it's important that we have fun and feel like we're all in this together."²⁸² Having fun in the studio can only solve so much; Webre was known to address dancer shortages by using the Studio Company, Washington Ballet's second company,²⁸³ to fill out casts. He has even "invited guest dancers and...top-level students from the company's school" to dance in main stage productions.²⁸⁴ The practice of using students in professional performances was formalized through the creation of the Trainee Program.

The Washington Ballet's Trainee Program was founded in 2010, just after the recession and in the midst of the company's stylistic shift to ballet's blockbuster hits. In its first year, the program had 11 students.²⁸⁵ Having access to students as free labor allowed Septime Webre to fill the casts of large classical works without having to hire more dancers that the company could not afford. In 2015, just prior to the end of his tenure as Artistic Director, Webre directed the company's first ever *Swan Lake*.²⁸⁶ Nearly thirty years after Ann Sacks reported that the company was too small to present the work, the Trainee Program allowed the company to unlock

²⁸¹ Lisa Traiger, "Something Old, Something New," *Pointe* 11, no. 2 (May 2010): 68–69.

²⁸² Traiger, "Something Old, Something New."

²⁸³ Founded in 2004. Renuka Rayasam, "Washington, DC's Blossoming Ballet Scene," *Pointe* 9, no. 5 (November 2008): 24,26,28,68.

²⁸⁴ Traiger, "Something Old, Something New."

²⁸⁵ Enrollment data. See Appendix B.

²⁸⁶ Lisa Traiger, "History in the Making," *Pointe* 16, no. 2 (May 2015): 15.

this essential ballet. When Julie Kent joined the company in 2016, she continued to use the Trainee Program to fill out casts of large classical ballets in support of her “overall plan to reinvent the Washington Ballet as a bigger, better company—a national treasure, guided by a star, with the elite repertoire and dancers to rival the world's great ballet institutions.”²⁸⁷ She aimed to turn The Washington Ballet into a company on par with American Ballet Theatre, where she spent her career.²⁸⁸ With 26 dancers, as opposed to ABT’s 90, this was a lofty goal. Trainees would be essential in allowing Kent to reach her artistic goals.

Washington’s Trainee Program occupies a liminal space between the company and the school. The Trainee Program keeps its word about preparing dancers for professional careers, as Trainees regularly appear in company productions. What better preparation could there be for company life than performing the role of a company member? Trainees at Washington differ from fully-fledged company members in that they pay annual tuition, and they are not paid for their professional work. Given that Trainees are performing unpaid labor, how can we evaluate whether the company is graciously allowing Trainees the chance to dance historic ballets on a world class stage for the purpose of their education, or if the company actually requires Trainees to mount large classical productions? Are Trainees really not ready to be professionals, or is that a convenient position taken to write off free labor as great experience? Here, the experiences of former Washington Ballet Trainees are instructive.

Being In Between

²⁸⁷ Sarah L. Kaufman and Peggy McGlone, “Washington Ballet Is Struggling with Empty Seats and a \$3 Million Debt. What Will Turn It around?” *The Washington Post* (Online) (Washington, D.C., United States: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, October 22, 2018), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2124383544/citation/B6130BE0DC224DC5PQ/3>.

²⁸⁸ Sarah Kaufman and Peggy McGlone, “Ballet’s Artistic Director Moves in a Different Direction than Her Predecessor,” *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2153468909?sourcetype=Newspapers>.

At 2:15 pm, a pack of young women raced down Wisconsin Avenue. Their hair was pinned up in buns and French twists. Their foreheads glistened with sweat. Ribbons hung out of their bags. From inside the Starbucks on the corner, folks taking meetings and children enjoying their after-school treat caught a glimpse of the daily chaos of the almost-professional dancers of the Washington Ballet. Trainees at Washington perform double duty. They are members of the school, taking daily technique classes and rehearsing for school performances, but they are often called up by the company when extra dancers are needed. Due to a lack of communication between school and company leadership, sometimes Trainees get double-booked. Then, they frantically run the three blocks from the school's second facility to the main building as they are already late for company rehearsal.²⁸⁹

Being “in between” defines the Trainee experience at Washington Ballet. Before she was a Trainee with Washington, Cole was a student in the Professional Training Division.²⁹⁰ She described the main difference between being a student and being a Trainee as the intimacy of a dancer's work with the company. A typical daily schedule for Trainees was a technique class in the morning that lasted 90 minutes or two hours, followed by either a Pointe, Pas de Deux (partnering), or Variations class.²⁹¹ When Trainees were needed for a main stage ballet, Trainees would join company rehearsals in the afternoon. Cole explained that Trainees would spend the afternoon and evening going “back and forth from company rehearsals to school rehearsals, since [they] also had shows that were without the company and just with the training division.”²⁹²

Amaya J., Washington Trainee from 2022-2024, described how competing interests emerged as

²⁸⁹ Cole, oral history interview by author, October 21, 2024; Gianna, oral history interview by author, November 4, 2024.

²⁹⁰ Cole wished to be referred to by her last name.

²⁹¹ It is important to note that professional dancers take technique class everyday as the “training” in ballet never stops. Professional dancers continuously seek to refine and improve their technique. This practice makes the line between student and professional even more blurry.

²⁹² Cole, oral history interview by author, October 21, 2024.

Trainees moved between the company and the school. “It felt like we couldn't be completely rehearsing our school stuff because we had to go do things with the company,” she said. Trainees appear to have been pulled away from the educational portion of their program to fulfill the needs of the company.²⁹³ The formal education that Trainees receive costs over \$7,000 per year.²⁹⁴ While the company rehearsals tended to take precedence in the hierarchy of needs, Amaya felt compelled to prioritize the professional training program performances because she was technically “still in the school.”²⁹⁵ Trainees experienced a constant “tug of war,” in the “murky gray area” between student and professional.

The company’s pointe shoe policy offers further evidence of the “in-between” status of Trainees. It might surprise someone outside the world of ballet that companies subsidize the cost of pointe shoes. Students, however, are required to pay for their own pointe shoes as part of the cost of their education. A regular member of a company might run through 100 pairs of pointe shoes in one season.²⁹⁶ Per The Washington Ballet’s AGMA agreement, “At the beginning of the season, the EMPLOYER will provide all ARTISTS with five (5) pairs of pointe shoes. The EMPLOYER will then provide pointe shoes to all ARTISTS on an as-needed basis.”²⁹⁷ While the company provides its dancers with whatever number of shoes they require, Trainees are not so lucky. Gianna,²⁹⁸ a former Trainee with Washington and current dancer with Boulder Ballet, shared that Trainees received only two pairs of pointe shoes for the *Nutcracker* season. But two

²⁹³ Amaya J., oral history interview by author, November 16, 2024.

²⁹⁴ “School Year Programs,” The Washington Ballet, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.washingtonballet.org/school-year-programs/>.

²⁹⁵ Amaya J., oral history interview by author, November 16, 2024.

²⁹⁶ “The Point of Pointe Shoes,” Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://pbt.org/community/resources-audience-members/ballet-101/pointe-pointe-shoes/>.

²⁹⁷ The Washington Ballet and American Guild of Musical Artists, “COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT between AMERICAN GUILD OF MUSICAL ARTISTS and THE WASHINGTON BALLET,” August 1, 2022, <https://www.musicalartists.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WashingtonBallet.2022-2025.pdf>.

²⁹⁸ Gianna wished to be referred to by her first name.

pairs were never enough. With over forty performances, *The Nutcracker* is a particularly demanding production. Gianna typically needed at least ten pairs of shoes to complete a run of the show. “Good old jet glue probably saved me a good amount of shoes,” she explained, referring to a type of superglue that dancers use to revive their shoes once they have been worn out.²⁹⁹ During one *Nutcracker* season, Gianna performed in all 45 shows because the dancers in the other casts of her spot were injured and were potentially eligible for worker’s compensation. As they are hand-crafted, a pair of pointe shoes costs about \$120.³⁰⁰ On top of dancing for free, Trainees could pay nearly \$1,000 out of pocket for shoes that are a required piece of the costume to perform in *The Nutcracker*. “We were paying to be there,” Gianna affirmed.

Aside from the cost of pointe shoes, Trainees paid roughly \$7,000 in yearly tuition, which contributed to one of the company’s main sources of revenue. As is the case at many other companies, The Washington School of Ballet and The Washington Ballet are one financial entity. Accordingly, the company relies on student tuition as a large component of their earned income. In FY 2023, the company earned \$3,411,277 in tuition and \$5,085,550 in ticket sales.³⁰¹ Tuition accounted for a weighty 40 percent of the company's earned revenue. In challenging financial times, the company has looked to the school as a lifeline. In 2018, when the company was struggling with nearly 3,000,000 in debt, *The Washington Post* reported that “lower-level ballet classes have been added at the ballet's school.”³⁰² In 2021, when performances were halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, tuition brought in \$2,179,899 while ticket sales fell to

²⁹⁹ Gianna, oral history interview by author, November 4, 2024.

³⁰⁰ “Suffolk Pointe Shoes | Shop Online,” Suffolk Dance, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://suffolkdance.com/collections/pointe-shoes>.

³⁰¹ The Washington Ballet, “Washington Ballet Form 990 FY 2023,” 2023, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/520846173/202431359349309033/full>.

³⁰² Kaufman and McGlone, “Washington Ballet Is Struggling with Empty Seats and a \$3 Million Debt,” *The Washington Post*.

\$194,301³⁰³ down from \$4,442,832 prior to the pandemic.³⁰⁴ The school offers stability to the company when its other main source of revenue fluctuates with changes in demand or unusual circumstances such as those presented by the pandemic.

The Prevalence of Trainee Labor

The company has used Trainees in ways that do not immediately register as unpaid labor. Although I was never a Trainee at Washington (I was a Professional Training Program student in the level just below Trainee), I too experienced the company's use of students as free labor, but I did not know it at the time. On a chilly January day in 2020, my class and the Trainees were rehearsing *Swan Lake* for Artistic Director Julie Kent. It struck me as odd that Kent was having me dance one of the Big Swans in Act II, a role I would surely never dance in the company's production. Gianna explained that "Julie started choreographing [*Swan Lake*] on the Trainees and PTP...because we were available" when the company was "on layoff."³⁰⁵ *Swan Lake* was initially set to premier in March of 2020, which gave the company a small window of time to prepare for its debut. While a company will typically learn and rehearse a new ballet in a compressed amount of time, Kent got a head start by using students to develop her artistic plan when she did not have access to her dancers. My peers and I fulfilled a crucial role in Kent's process by allowing her to map out patterns and make choreographic choices while the company's payroll was paused.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ The Washington Ballet, "Washington Ballet Form 990 FY 2021," ProPublica, 2021, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/520846173/202201029349301010/full>.

³⁰⁴ The Washington Ballet, "Washington Ballet Form 990 FY 2019," 2019, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/520846173/202020879349301022/full>.

³⁰⁵ Gianna, oral history interview by author, November 4, 2024.

³⁰⁶ Maggie McNamara Mandal, "Leveraging Your Summer Layoff: How to Make Your Company's Postseason Hiatus Work For You," *Pointe Magazine*, June 6, 2019, <https://pointemagazine.com/leveraging-your-summer-layoff/>.

Trainees were not only used to stage company performances; from 2021-2023, Washington Ballet Trainees were cast in several company productions for which they were never paid. During Cole’s tenure at the company, Trainees performed with the company in classical works like *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Giselle*, as well as neoclassical Balanchine ballets, including *Serenade*, *Theme and Variations*, and *Concerto Barocco*.³⁰⁷ Annie,³⁰⁸ former Washington Trainee, confirmed that Trainees were frequently cast in company productions: “Eight to 10 out of 20, maybe half of the girls were kind of consistently used as first cast in company stuff depending on the performance.”³⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, Trainees were used to fill gaps in the corps of large ballets such as *Swan Lake*. Washington’s 2022 production required “18 Swans” which was more than the company could support on its own.³¹⁰ “Julie just needed a lot more girls. And usually, there would be two casts. So, she just needed more bodies,” Gianna explained.³¹¹ Across its five performances, an average of 7.7 out of 18 Swan corps spots in Acts II and IV were filled by Trainees.³¹² Megan Wefel, Trainee with Washington from 2023-2024, recalls dancing in “upwards of almost 50 shows” at Washington without being paid. “I’m not the biggest fan of that,” she admitted.³¹³ “I don’t blame them. I don’t think it was within Washington’s power to be able to pay us,” she said.³¹⁴ Insights from my interviewees demonstrate that the company often had an insufficient number of dancers to present ballets in its repertoire, proving the company’s reliance on free Trainee labor.

³⁰⁷ Cole, oral history interview by author, October 21, 2024.

³⁰⁸ Annie wished to be referred to by her first name.

³⁰⁹ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

³¹⁰ Gianna, oral history interview by author, November 4, 2024.

³¹¹ Gianna, oral history interview by author, November 4, 2024.

³¹² The company’s virtual program lists the casting for each show. It also lists the students who appear in the show under “Professional Training Division Students.” In one show, Trainees filled 22/36 Swan corps spots. “Swan Lake | February 9-13, 2022,” The Washington Ballet, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.washingtonballet.org/events/swan-lake/>.

³¹³ Megan Wefel, oral history interview by author, November 19, 2024.

³¹⁴ Megan Wefel, oral history interview by author, November 19, 2024.

While Trainees were used in *Swan Lake* and other large classical ballets due of a dearth of company dancers, on occasion, Trainees may have been favored over company dancers. Cole and Annie were cast in *Concerto Barocco*, a neoclassical work by Balanchine. The ballet has a cast of only eight corps women, so it seems that Cole and Annie were cast before company dancers, which could indicate a preference for certain Trainees over company dancers. The potential preference for Trainees has been recognized by the company dancers and their union. The Washington Ballet dancers' most recent AGMA contract limits the use of Trainees over company dancers: "The EMPLOYER will ensure that Company Dancers shall receive first consideration in the casting of all roles. Studio Company dancers and members of the Professional Training Division (PTD) shall not be cast in any mainstage production until all available Company Dancers are cast."³¹⁵ This provision indicates a recognition of the threat that free Trainee labor poses to dancers who are actually employed by the company. Cole and Annie's casting in a small ballet not characterized by a need for many dancers is further evidence that Trainees were, at times, the best the company could offer to their audiences.³¹⁶ Yet they were still considered to be students which rationalized their unpaid labor.

While the evidence clearly indicates that the company required Trainees to mount large productions and sometimes used them in smaller ballets because they valued their talent, it is crucial to assess the proportion of ballets per season that used Trainees. The insights from my oral history interviews combined with the company's lists of past seasons on its website enabled me to assess the proportion of productions in each season from 2019-2023 that engaged Trainees. In the 2018-19 season, the company presented four programs: *Company Masters*, *The*

³¹⁵ Trainees are formally a part of the PTD. The Washington Ballet and American Guild of Musical Artists, "COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT between AMERICAN GUILD OF MUSICAL ARTISTS and THE WASHINGTON BALLET."

³¹⁶ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

Nutcracker, *Sleeping Beauty*, and Three World Premieres. As Trainees performed in *The Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty*, they supported half of the company's season.³¹⁷ The 2019-20 and 2020-21 seasons were both affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus are not representative of how Trainees are generally used. In the 2021-22 season, the company presented two mixed bills that did not utilize Trainees, and two full-length ballets—*The Nutcracker* and *Giselle*—that did use Trainees. Here again, Trainees were used in half of the company's productions. The 2022-23 Season was composed of six different programs: a one night special performance of Balanchine at Wolf Trap (an outdoor venue in Northern Virginia), NEXTsteps, *The Nutcracker*, Balanchine!, *Aurora's Wedding* and *Theme and Variations*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Trainees danced in five out of six programs, absent only from the NEXTsteps production.³¹⁸ In the face of this evidence, it is undeniable that Trainees comprised a core and critical contingent of The Washington Ballet, at least from 2018-2023.³¹⁹

Trainee programs are perpetuated by the notion that trainees are not yet ready to be professional dancers, but this logic unravels when trainees are used consistently in company productions. When pressed on the issue of whether Trainees at Washington were treated differently from the company members in rehearsals, Gianna explained that Trainees did get more attention in regard to their technique. "We were pushed to really be just like the company girls and, yeah, point those toes in your sautés and all those things. I remember getting yelled at a lot," she said with a laugh. When I asked if she thought there was a technical difference between Trainees and company members, she said, "Honestly, I think they would take you out if you

³¹⁷ Gianna, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

³¹⁸ Amaya J., Oral History interview by author, November 16, 2024; Megan Wefel, oral history interview by author, November 19, 2024.

³¹⁹ "Washington Ballet Past Seasons," The Washington Ballet, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.washingtonballet.org/past-seasons/>.

weren't performing up to their par.” A dancer—Trainee or otherwise—would not be put on stage if they were not dancing at the level of the rest of the company. Cole shared that while Trainees were not “technically quite ready” to be professionals,

a lot of us were at a level where we would perform with the company, and we would look as good as the company would. A lot of us were very ready to jump into company life. And that's why we were used in so many productions.³²⁰

Technically “ready” by whose standards? When Trainees were used in company productions, the leadership must have believed that they were technically and artistically ready to represent the organization and perform the duties of a company member.³²¹ Xiomara Reyes, former Director of the Trainee Program, affirmed what Cole shared in her interview. Reyes explained that her Trainees were “ready to be professional dancers.”³²² She continued, “That's what we had at the end; we had all these dancers that basically did every *corps de ballet* role.”³²³ The fact that some Trainees danced every *corps de ballet* role in the company proves that they were indeed “ready” to be professionals, yet they were never promoted.

Ultimately, the goal for Trainees is to secure a professional ballet contract, yet other than training and professional performance experience, the company provided no material support to help them achieve this goal. The lack of assistance afforded to Trainees by the company in their job search is further evidence of their utility to the company. Annie, a former Trainee, expressed being frustrated with the lack of transparency among the company’s leadership over whether Trainees would have a future at Washington. She explained, “A lot of us requested meetings [with the Artistic Director]...but no one was granted meetings with her.”³²⁴ Trainees like Annie

³²⁰ Cole, October 21, 2024.

³²¹ Although she was not paid for her work, Cole said that her experience at Washington “definitely set me up to be where I am today” as a dancer with the Cleveland Ballet.

³²² Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

³²³ Xiomara Reyes, oral history interview by author, October 1, 2024.

³²⁴ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024

spent three years in the program, providing essential labor to the company, under the impression that they might have a future at The Washington Ballet. Eventually, the “veteran” Trainees “[received] one cryptic email that basically said we're not hiring you.”³²⁵ This email was a cowardly cop out for the company to use and discard the Trainees that they had grown to rely on. Annie explained that there was no support from the company in broader job search outside of Washington. She and other Trainees asked the Artistic Director for “nice recommendation letters, and they were very generic.”³²⁶ She admitted, “I don't think our work was completely appreciated, but such is life.”³²⁷ Elizabeth Gaither, in sharing her contempt for trainee programs leading dancers on, said that if she were in an Artistic Director at a company with a trainee program,

I'd be letting people go left and right if I knew we weren't going to hire them. And I would help them get to the right place. I would say, ‘Listen, I have this dancer. You know, we're just not hiring. We don't have the money to hire. But she's hard-working. Very talented. I see a lot of things that would fit in well with you guys. Are you interested, though?’ I would help them.³²⁸

If a trainee program was really intended to help launch students’ careers, one might expect that the company would make a concerted effort to help their trainees get jobs. However, if The Washington Ballet needed its Trainees in order to function, why would the director assist its Trainees in getting contracts outside of the company? Clearly the company did not want to help their trainees secure jobs at rival companies so that they would not lose their most reliable (and free) dancers.

Do the benefits afforded to the company outweigh those granted to the students? At The Washington Ballet, I argue yes. If trainees are essential to the functioning of the company, a

³²⁵ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

³²⁶ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

³²⁷ Annie, oral history interview by author, October 11, 2024.

³²⁸ Elizabeth Gaither, oral history interview by author, September 27, 2024.

hypothesis which their extensive involvement in company productions overwhelmingly supports, then the benefits the company gleans from gaining free labor and the ability to mount popular productions most certainly outweigh the individual benefits to a dancer's professional development. This is particularly true when the company makes no concerted effort to help their Trainees get jobs. Trainees work as hard as they do, paying tuition and performing for free, in hopes of getting a professional contract. Of the six dancers I interviewed from TWB, only one was eventually promoted to the main company.³²⁹ Two are dancing in professional companies, and two are dancing in second companies. If any of my interviewees had been lucky enough to rise in the ranks at Washington, they would have received a stipend as members of the Studio Company. In 2018, the Washington Ballet Studio Company dancers were paid only \$250 per week, compared to the main company's starting salary of \$950 for the same work.³³⁰ After laboring in the Trainee Program for at least two years, Trainees who are lucky enough to be promoted to the Studio Company will still not earn a living wage. As Trainees move on from The Washington Ballet, the program will usher in a new crop of wide-eyed dancers, and the cycle of exploitation will continue.³³¹

³²⁹ Notably, he was the only male trainee I interviewed.

³³⁰ Gilles Delellio, oral history interview by author, November 10, 2024.

³³¹ In 2023, Edwaard Liang was named Artistic Director of The Washington Ballet. The Trainee Program has also undergone some changes since 2023, with several levels now as opposed to one. It remains to be seen how the company will use its Trainees in the future.

Conclusion: A House of Cards

The unpaid labor of trainees in ballet companies is not “peripheral”—it undergirds ballet companies’ economic logic.³³² The cost to study ballet has always presented a barrier to goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Trainee programs exacerbate ballet’s exclusivity by privileging those who can rely on outside sources of financial support to continue to pay to train and work for free after graduating from high school. Those with the privilege to participate often comply with their own exploitation, motivated by an innate desire to dance and by ballet’s authoritarian pedagogical style that instills obedience in its practitioners. Companies with trainee programs are entirely reliant on this continued compliance. The barriers erected by trainee programs eventually pose challenges to companies seeking to hire diverse dancers who may be pushed out of the profession before they ever began. By further narrowing who can access ballet as a career, ballet poises itself to become less popular with the public. As communities see less diverse representation on stage, they will be less inclined to support companies, by donation or attendance, leading to further financial stress on ballet companies which could increase the use of unpaid trainee labor. But the practice of using trainees as free labor has implications beyond its effects on young artists struggling to break into the industry.

A company’s ability to use trainees in professional productions threatens the job security of the dancers actually employed by the company. In November of 2024, the Dancers of San Francisco Ballet and AGMA shared a joint post on Instagram explaining the status of their negotiations with the San Francisco Ballet (SFB) over a new collective bargaining agreement. “Negotiations at San Francisco Ballet are not going well,” the title slide read.³³³ The issues on the table included wage increases, increase in employed dancers to meet demands of the

³³² Pulignano and Domecka, *The Politics of Unpaid Labour*, 234.

³³³ American Guild of Musical Artists and Dancers of San Francisco Ballet, “Negotiations at San Francisco Ballet.”

repertoire, limits on the “use of unpaid student labor,” and health and safety protections in the wake of rising injury rates. They explain that dancers face rising injury rates due to an insufficient number of dancers in the company, an issue that management insists on addressing using unpaid student labor. They contend that SFB management retains the right to “fill up to 50% of corps de ballet roles with students instead of professional dancers,” a practice that “devalues” the work of the artists and “undermines the artistry” of “one of the most respected ballet companies in the world.”³³⁴ This comes at the second-largest ballet company in the country, with an endowment of over \$100,000,000, indicating that the use of unpaid labor is not limited to small regional companies.³³⁵ The Artists of SFB affirm that they “deserve a professional workplace that values professional standards – not one that relies on unpaid labor to cut costs.”³³⁶ Though they do not explicitly name the students in question, it can be assumed that they are referring to the company’s Trainee Program. The program’s website notes that Trainees “understudy and dance in many SF Ballet full-length productions.”³³⁷ While this note serves as a selling point for the program, it is precisely the unpaid labor to which that the company dancers object.

Based on my oral history interviews with students and on my understanding of the ballet mentality, students are not likely to take legal action to change these practices as has happened among unpaid interns and graduate students.³³⁸ The responsibility is therefore on the companies

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ SFB has an endowment of over \$100,000,000. Compare this to Washington Ballet’s \$310,000 endowment. Dance Data Project, “Endowments and Building Book Value Report 2024” (Dance Data Project, September 2024), <https://ddp-wordpress.storage.googleapis.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/30143415/Endowments-and-Building-Book-Value-Report-2024.pdf>.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ “Trainee Program,” San Francisco Ballet, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://www.sfballet.org/school-community/trainee-program/>.

³³⁸ Steven Greenhouse, “Interns, Unpaid by a Studio, File Suit,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2011, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/29/business/interns-file-suit-against-black-swan-producer.html>; “Graduate Students Are Workers: The Decades-Long Fight for Graduate Unions, and the Path Forward | Truthout,”

to take steps to correct the inequities presented by trainee programs. Based on both direct recommendations and analyses of the interviews I conducted, I suggest that companies follow these recommendations. If a company insists on operating a trainee program, it should be limited to one to two years. The program should be tuition-free with only select opportunities to dance with the company, like Boston Ballet’s Graduate Program.³³⁹ Trainee programs that already exist and cannot immediately make changes should make a concerted effort to help their trainees get jobs at other companies if they do not have the funds to hire their own trainees. If ballet companies cannot afford to hire dancers who are not fully ready to jump into professional life, their associated schools should implement curricula that more accurately reflect the skills needed to succeed in a company.³⁴⁰ Ballet companies that need more dancers to present the ballets they want to add to their repertoire should hire more dancers. If a company cannot afford to hire more dancers, it should invest in new works that fit the size of the company and adapt large ballets with alternate stagings to accommodate the company’s size. When a company needs to use students to supplement certain ballets, they should hire students with temporary contracts for the full rehearsal and performance period of the production.³⁴¹ And if trainee programs are indeed a financial crutch for ballet companies, companies should channel their energies into better arts management. Companies should take a page from Michael Kaiser—former Kennedy Center president dubbed the “turnaround king” for his monumental impact on the budgets of several arts organizations—and focus on fundraising and marketing.³⁴² One company is doing just that.

August 28, 2016, <https://truthout.org/articles/graduate-students-are-workers-the-decades-long-fight-for-graduate-unions-and-the-path-forward/>.

³³⁹ Anna Hughlett, oral history interview by author, October 18, 2024.

³⁴⁰ Corps de ballet work, artistry, and quickly picking up new choreography.

³⁴¹ This was the policy at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in 2005. Tillie [pseudonym], oral history interview by author, December 6, 2024.

³⁴² Steven Greenhouse, “Interns, Unpaid by a Studio, File Suit,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2011, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/29/business/interns-file-suit-against-black-swan-producer.html>.

“Atlanta Ballet Strikes Apprentice Program in Move Toward Pay Equity,” a 2022 *Pointe* headline read. Pay equity? Ballet? A seeming contradiction in terms, the article explained that decision to get rid of the apprentice level was spearheaded by Tom West, the company’s recently appointed Executive Director who brought with him nearly 25 years of arts management experience. Eager to learn more, I contacted West to gain insight into this landmark decision. West prefaced our conversation stating that his tenure at Atlanta Ballet marked the first time he was an Executive Director, and the first time he negotiated a union contract. When he was looking through the pay scale, he could not make sense of one line—the apprentice salary stood at less than 500 dollars per week. He questioned how the company could promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through its training programs, only to offer an entry-level position that did not provide a living wage. When West brought the issue to other leaders of the company, everyone agreed that the reduced salary for apprentices was illogical, including Artistic Director, Gennadi Nedvigin. Nedvigin, a former Principal with the San Francisco Ballet who had grown up with this practice, was “uncomfortable” with it but believed that he “[couldn’t] change it. This is how ballet works.”³⁴³ West, who worked under Michael Kaiser at the Kennedy Center for several years, brings an outside perspective to the professional ballet sphere. While Nedvigin could recognize the inequity posed by the apprentice salary, he did not believe there was a way to rectify the situation. West, as an outsider to the ballet world, was able to bring fresh eyes to this issue and take steps toward increasing equity in ballet. West affirmed, “It’s a very bright line: we can’t do this if we cannot support the artists at a livable wage. Then we shouldn’t exist.”³⁴⁴ To

³⁴³ Tom West, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024

³⁴⁴ Tom West, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024

support pay increases for its dancers, West is focusing on marketing and fundraising, driven by data-based decision-making.³⁴⁵

At their core, trainee programs are a symptom of American arts in crisis. If ballet companies in the United States were funded on par with their European and Russian counterparts, I am confident that trainee programs would not exist. I do not believe that the programs are fueled by malintent, but by economic necessity shaped by structural forces. As my interviewees shared, dancers now believe trainee programs to be a prerequisite to a job in ballet, even though many still struggle to attain a company contract upon completion of a program. It remains to be seen how arts companies will survive the current administration.³⁴⁶ I have no doubt that arts organizations will learn to adapt, as they have in the past, yet only time will tell if unpaid labor will continue to feature centrally in ballet companies' financial strategies. In the meantime, companies should take direction from Atlanta Ballet's Tom West and refuse to "balance the organization's budget on the back of the artists' budget."³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Tom West, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024

³⁴⁶ Sopan Deb, "Trump Proposes Eliminating the Arts and Humanities Endowments," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2017, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/arts/nea-neh-endowments-trump.html>.

³⁴⁷ Tom West, oral history interview by author, November 14, 2024.

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Appendix A

Oral History Interviewees

1. **Elizabeth Gaither:** Former dancer with Houston Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and The Washington Ballet.
2. **Elizabeth Ferrel:** Former dancer with American Ballet Theatre.
3. **Xiomara Reyes:** Former American Ballet Theatre Principal and former Director of the Professional Training Division at The Washington Ballet.
4. **Robert La Fosse:** Former Principal with American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet.
5. **Annie:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current student at UC Berkeley.
6. **Anna Hughlett:** Former Boston Ballet Post Grad dancer, current freelance choreographer.
7. **Cole:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current dancer with Cleveland Ballet.
8. **Hayley:** Former Professional Division student at Pacific Northwest Ballet, current Trainee with Rhode Island ballet.
9. **Gianna:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current dancer with Boulder Ballet.
10. **Gilles Delellio:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current dancer with The Washington Ballet.
11. **Alex:** Former Trainee with Philadelphia Ballet and Charlotte Ballet, former member of Texas Ballet Theater (TBT) Studio Training Company, current Trainee with TBT.
12. **Amaya J:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current dancer with Ballet Austin 2.
13. **Tom West:** Executive Director of Atlanta Ballet.
14. **Megan Wefel:** Former Washington Ballet Trainee, current dancer with Bayerisches Junior Ballett München of the Bayerisches Staatsballett.
15. **Tillie (pseudonym):** Former Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre Trainee and company dancer, former Atlanta Ballet dancer.

Appendix B

Washington School of Ballet Professional Training Division Enrollment

School Year	Total School Enrollment	Trainee Enrollment	PTPA Enrollment	PTPB Enrollment
2002-3	318	N/A	17	17
2003-4	359	N/A	14	19
2004-5	458	N/A	22	20
2005-6	462	N/A	22	19
2006-7	433	N/A	24	12
2007-8	432	N/A	9	11
2008-9	417	N/A	15	18
2009-10	510	N/A	16	20
2010-11	560	11	13	15
2011-12	632	9	6	13
2012-13	711	6	14	13
2013-14	724	13	15	13
2014-2015	730	18	12	11
2015-16	745	18	10	17
2016-17	806	16	16	18
2017-18	797	16	32	22
2018-19	900	17	32	19
2019-20	869	21	21	21
2020-21	834	19	12	28
2021-22	673	22	12	15
2022-23	752	20	14	13
2023-24	706	20	19	14
2024-25	734	19	18	13

Per the records of The Washington School of Ballet, shared with me by the School Manager.

Appendix C

Ballet Companies in the United States with Trainee Programs

“Largest 50” U.S. Ballet Companies (by expenditure):

1. New York City Ballet	17. Kansas City Ballet	34. Nevada Ballet Theatre
2. San Francisco Ballet	18. Ballet Hispanico	35. Oklahoma City Ballet
3. American Ballet Theatre	19. Ballet Arizona	36. Louisville Ballet
4. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater	20. Charlotte Ballet	37. Los Angeles Ballet
5. Boston Ballet	21. Ballet Austin	38. American Repertory Ballet
6. Houston Ballet	22. Texas Ballet Theater	39. L.A. Dance Project
7. Pacific Northwest Ballet	23. Oregon Ballet Theatre	40. Dallas Black Dance Theatre
8. Joffrey Ballet	24. The Sarasota Ballet	41. Ballet Memphis
9. Miami City Ballet	25. Nashville Ballet	42. Smuin Ballet
10. Philadelphia Ballet	26. Tulsa Ballet	43. Collage Dance Collective
11. The Washington Ballet	27. Orlando Ballet	44. Grand Rapids Ballet
12. Ballet West	28. Milwaukee Ballet	45. BalletX
13. Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre	29. BalletMet	46. Eugene Ballet
14. Atlanta Ballet	30. Carolina Ballet	47. Sacramento Ballet
15. Cincinnati Ballet	31. Dance Theatre of Harlem	48. The Alabama Ballet
16. Colorado Ballet	32. Alonzo King LINES Ballet	49. Ballet Idaho
	33. Richmond Ballet	50. Cleveland Ballet

The highlighted companies have trainee programs or have trainee positions in the company, per the companies’ websites. List derived from Dance Data Project; highlights are my own.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ “The Largest Ballet & Classically Based Companies 2024,” Dance Data Project, July 2024, <https://www.dancedataproject.com/ddp-research/the-largest-ballet-and-classically-based-companies-2024/>.