

Under-**researched** reflections on classical & contemporary ballet

Pizza ponder, 7/2/25

My qualifications

- Considered no career paths outside of professional ballet before age 17
 - One of my two personality traits
- Have attended ~5 lectures on ballet history over the course of that time (supplemented in this presentation by wikipedia)
- Trauma.



History

- Origins during the renaissance in Italy; brought to France by Catherine de Medici
- Developed into a performance art form under Louis XIV during the 17th century
 - Studies under Pierre Beauchamp (who formalizes basic positions and a notation system)
 - Performances are primarily by men



History

- Considered a “serious” art form (on par with the opera) in the 18th century, spreading throughout Europe
- Transition to a predominantly female art form in the 19th century (romantic period)
 - Experimentation with pointe work (e.g.. Marie Taglioni)
 - Romantic era “ballet blanc” - *La Sylphide* (1832), *Giselle* (1841)



History

- Forefront of the art form moves to Russia after ~1850
 - HUGE classical ballets from Marius Petipa - La Bayadère (1877), The Nutcracker (1892), The Sleeping Beauty (1890), Swan Lake (1895)



Structure of Classical Ballets

- Plot vs “white acts”
- Principal / Soloists / Corps de ballet



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- Pas de [X], “variations”



Structure of Classical Ballets

- Plot vs “white acts”
- Principal / Soloists / Corps de ballet
- “talent show” acts (not an official term)
 - e.g. most of Swan Lake act III, Nutcracker act II, Sleeping Beauty act III
 - Problematic orientalism



History

- Back to ballet in Russia
 - Establishment of the “Vaganova method” (mid-1930s)



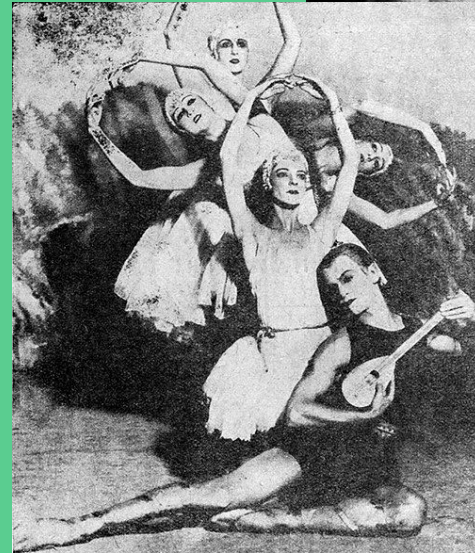
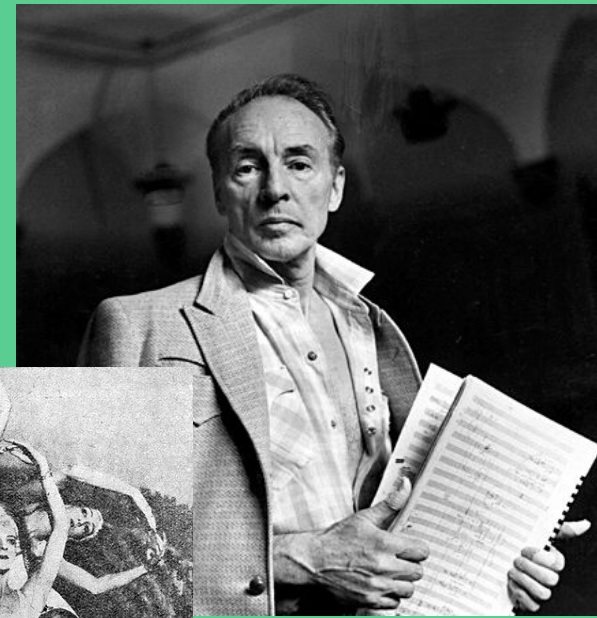
History

- Ballet Russes (1909–1929)
 - Stravinsky - Firebird (1910), Rite of Spring (1913)
- Later “Soviet” works
 - Romeo & Juliet (1935), Cinderella (1945)



History

- George Balanchine
 - Begins choreographing for the Ballet Russes in 1924
 - 🌞 Apollo (1928) - first notable work; influence from American jazz artists.
 - Attention to musicality
 - Weird to women!
- Moves to New York and founds the School of American Ballet (SAB) in 1934, New York City Ballet in 1948.
 - i.e., responsible for bringing the forefront of ballet to the US



some balanchine ballets i think you should watch



Neoclassical works may have some sense of narrative, but tend not to have defined plots;



Exact pas de deux+/talent show style blocks no longer present

Note on performance rights

Other neoclassical/contemporary work

- Jerome Robbins



- William Forsythe



- Crystal Pite



Ballet as a career (US bias)

Typically dancing 15-20 hrs/week during high school

Summer Intensives* _____ ~REU equivalent

Traineeship* _____ ~grad school equivalent

Apprenticeship / 2nd company* _____ ~postdoc equivalent

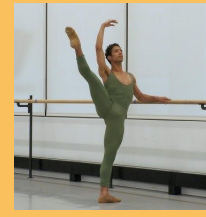
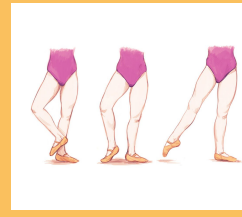
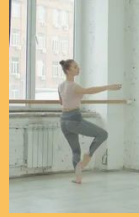
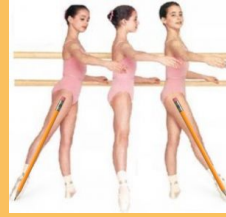
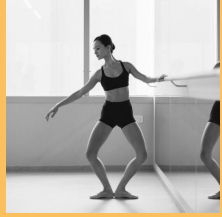
Joining a professional company

- Corps → soloist → principal; would say “soloist” is ~tenure equivalent
- A dancer with a “long” career prob retires in their ~late 30s

Ballet as a career (US bias) cont

- Highest caliber US companies:
 - More Balanchine-leaning: New York City Ballet, Miami City Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Boston Ballet
 - More classical-leaning: American Ballet Theater, San Francisco Ballet, Houston Ballet, The Washington Ballet
- Next “tier” (i.e., still in the top 50 largest companies)
 - Dance Theater of Harlem, Joffrey Ballet, Philadelphia Ballet, Ballet West, Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, Kansas City Ballet, Cincinnati Ballet, BalletMet (<-- blatantly displaying Ohio bias)
 - (many others)
- Notable Contemporary Companies
 - Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Alonzo King LINES, Smuin Contemporary ballet

Structure of a Ballet class



Cultural comments

- Balanchine did not invent misogyny but...
- people are weirdly culty about him! despite his faults!
 - I have met two women who danced at NYCB under his leadership. They were both super weird about it.
 - (@ my high school self)
- Ballet as a culture is as toxic/problematic as you think it is.



Cultural comments (attempting to and on a hopeful note)



conclusion

- Come take ballet class with me