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Reflections: A Meditation on Ballet and Pain

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Reflections:
A Meditation on Ballet and Pain

by
Claire Madeline Silverman

Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

English Department
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

April 21, 2023

Advisor: Dr. Julietta Singh

I don't know how it started
Don't know how to stop it
Suddenly, I'm dancing
To imaginary music

Something's coming, so out of breath
I just kept spinning and I danced myself to death
Something's coming, so out of breath
I just kept spinning and I danced myself to death

—“Choreomania” by Florence + The Machine

Two Deaths

*“A dancer dies twice—once when
they stop dancing, and this
first death is more painful.”*

I have already died my first death.
Like Giselle, I was left at the alter,
jilted not by a man, but by my body.
Or was it ballet who broke my heart,
leaving me to join the wilis?

I.

The defining details of the character of Giselle are that she loves to dance even though she knows it could kill her (for she has a frail heart), and that she is in love with a peasant boy named Loys, though she knows her mother dislikes him. She is defiant, determined to follow her desires.

Giselle wasn't one of the ballets that stuck out to me when I was younger. I loved the Tchaikovsky ballets — *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker* — and later *Romeo and Juliet* (Macmillan's version) became my favorite. *Giselle* existed at my periphery. It's a short ballet, only two acts, and I saw it as too simple. A girl falls in love, gets heartbroken, dies. I didn't think there was much room for *Giselle* to be interesting, and the love story ends in her death. It didn't prompt the same emotional response I had from other ballets I had seen. Until I learned the ballet myself during my final year at ballet school.

Learning and dancing the choreography of a ballet allows the dancer to go inside. You get to look for the nuances, to find the spaces between the steps where you can create your own interpretation. You realize how a slight difference in an arm can change the meaning, can change the emotion or characterization of your role.

When I was a dancer at WBC, a youth ballet company, I loved diving into character roles, ones that had story. We only had the opportunities to perform one-act ballets, or a one act excerpt

of a longer ballet, with the exception of the three-act *Nutcracker* performances every December. The ballets we learned were sometimes lesser known, though I did have the opportunity to learn Act III of *The Sleeping Beauty* during my last year at the company. In the years before, I learned and performed in *Graduation Ball*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Tales of Vienna*, and *La Boutique Fantasque*.

The year before I was cast to dance in the annual gala, I understudied the corps for that year's ballet: *La Sylphide*. I was at every rehearsal, learning the choreography but also watching. Watching the corps dance together in unity, watching the soloists mime the story of infatuation and promises. That was my first exposure to dancing in the Romantic style born during the early 19th century. *La Sylphide* is now considered to be a Bournonville ballet, since it was he who preserved the French Romantic style in his teaching and choreography. The original production in Paris, however, was choreographed by Filippo Taglioni and starred his daughter, the iconic Marie Taglioni. Today, the ballet is a relic from the past, maybe, or perhaps a window, a bridge. Romantic ballet is affected, and the women dance with an ethereal quality. I loved rehearsing *La Sylphide*. Stepping in when someone was absent or injured, I would grasp the hand of my partner, different each time, and execute the steps, letting my body lean forward as I placed my foot down in the pas de cheval, letting my eyes follow my hand, kept my elbows soft, my torso slightly pitched forward. I let myself inhabit the style as much as possible.

The next time I was given the chance to learn Romantic choreography was when I was fourteen and cast as Carlotta Grisi in *Pas de Quatre* for WBC's annual Spring Gala. *Pas de*

Quatre, at that point, was my favorite ballet I had ever learned, perhaps it still is. It is a short ballet, a divertissement, choreographed by Jules Perrot with music by Cesare Funghi. It premiered in London on 12 July 1845 with the four greatest ballerinas of the time: Lucile Grahn, Carlotta Grisi, Fanny Cerito, and Marie Taglioni. When I was learning Grisi's role, I was taught that these four women had seen each other as competition, that they were divas and the solos had to be performed in age order (youngest to eldest) so as not to start any arguments or fights. Ballerinas can hold grudges when it comes to casting, when they feel overlooked, and broken glass in the pointe shoes is a sabotage tactic that has been used by more than one dancer. It is a competitive field, and a passionate one; I took this into account when dancing the role. I recall feeling the weight of dancing in a role created for such a celebrated ballerina, and I remember the thought crossing my mind more than once: "I hope I do Carlotta Grisi justice with my dancing." It sounds a bit silly now, but the choreography was not just steps to be learned and executed. *Pas de Quatre* was a historic moment that brought these great dancers together for only a few performances. Knowing that I was moving my body in the very same way, to the same music, that this specific woman in history had done before more over 150 years earlier made my heart lurch.

What struck me most about *Pas de Quatre*, what made me love the ballet so much, was the style. Thanks to Marie Taglioni, and the quirks of her own body, the development of ballet and dancing on pointe at the time was delicate yet powerful. When on pointe, the torso was slightly pitched forward, and the arms were much softer and more curved and bent than many positions in classical ballet since then. The movements had to be fluid, soft, but there were still

strong jumps and an urgency in the movement. It's so hard for me to put into language what is felt in the body. Nothing I write seems to come close to what I mean, and it all sounds juvenile and trivial. But it is a feeling that comes from some place deep within.

I say all this because it is from my love of *Pas de Quatre* that my love for *Giselle* grew. My early experiences learning the choreography of Romantic ballets planted the seed that would grow as I grew older, blossoming when I was seventeen and beginning to learn the second act of *Giselle*.

The first act of *Giselle* is full of life, as the village prepares for the harvest festival. I was taught bits and pieces from this act: the Peasant Pas de Deux, and group sections of *Giselle's* Friends. I liked dancing some of the choreography, but I am naturally a slower dancer, and the high energy and fast movements during Friends was not something I often looked forward to rehearsing. That's not to say the second act choreography isn't hard or tiring, on the contrary, but I like to be able to think when I dance, and see. Some of the choreography for the Friends of *Giselle* is so rushed, the head moving side to side so quickly, that my vision would blur and my only thought was to keep moving, whether my feet were pointed or not, whether I was reaching the correct position or not. In the choreography for the second act, your gaze must be calm and commanding, and you must have a powerful presence. There are moments of strong stillness. This is the character I most enjoyed inhabiting, the spirit creature who disdains men and, with her sisters, has the power over them.

Giselle Act II is a feat for any corps de ballet. The story is mostly carried out by the principal dancers, as Giselle, Albrecht, Myrtha, and Hilarion engage with each other, but it is the group, the corps, that supports all this. It can only be impressive if everyone dances together, working as one. During the entrance section, we are paired off, dancing in twos and holding each others hands as we step up to pointe. Holding each other's hands, lifting the other up, steadying her, making such she does not fall and she does the same for you. Later, during the iconic chugs in arabesque across the stage, we must keep in time together, moving at exactly the same time, our legs at the same height, even though our legs want to give out from under us. We share each other's pain, know exactly how the dancer in front, behind, and next to us feels, because it is what we feel. In the second act of *Giselle*, you don't need to put on a brave face, smile through pain so that it becomes invisible. No, in *Giselle* we are playing the part of weary, dead, vengeful spirits, and must look it too. It is a rare time when a dancer can show the hardship of ballet on her face (though she must not let that show of fatigue travel down throughout her body, or else she will not make it through till the curtain closes). Collective movement and feeling is what makes dancing in this corps so satisfying in the soul, the bodily feeling of movement around you, behind you, that even though you cannot see it, there are people moving with you, and out of the corner of your eye you see another dancer's arm, confirming not only that you are dancing in time together, but that you are *dancing together*.

Just as I had looked forward to the late night rehearsals while learning *Pas de Quatre*, I relished the winter rehearsals of *Giselle*, when we danced long after the sun went down. It was exhausting, but the very best kind, felt throughout every part of my body and heart. I wasn't

dancing the role of Giselle in the full rehearsals, though we all had the chance to learn the pas de deux from Act II during our Wednesday Pas de Deux class. I mainly rehearsed the demi-soloist roles of Moyna and Zulma. Every Wilis died a similar death to Giselle, jilted at the alter and dying before their wedding day from heartbreak, from the lack of fidelity of men. Now dead, they took their revenge on men, the justice they took for their deaths. I may not have had Giselle's story to dance, but I had my own.

There was one day in February when I had a particularly good day at the studio. Nothing specific or special, but there are some days where things just *click*. That afternoon, I was rehearsing Zulma's variation. My teacher gave me the direction "you're a spirit, you're a spirit, you're not really there!" as I stepped into the arabesque balance before the grande assamblé en tournant diagonal. In this moment, my landings from the jumps were clean and steady, my arabesque balances just a breathe longer than usual and completely filled up the music. Yes, I was dancing the character of a spirit, animated air, and yet, the wilis are about strength. These spirits of women are strong because they have each other, they have power as a group, and they are commanding, in control of the night. They "aren't really there" and yet, they are.

Giselle could be written off by a cynic as just an indulgence of camp, a story of a silly girl filled with spirits and melodrama. But that would be willful misunderstanding. It is more than a smoke machine and a dancer "rising from the dead" through a trap door (if the stage allows for such an entrance). *Giselle* is a series of paintings come to life, poetry of love and heartbreak embodied, music made physical. It is fleeting, ephemeral art.

When I was little, I had a book called *The Illustrated Book of Ballet Stories*, a collection of the plots of the classic story ballets. It came with a CD, an audiobook version with Dame Darcy Bussell, one of the leading ballerinas of the Royal Ballet in the 1990s, as the narrator. Every night I would fall asleep to the sound of her voice recounting the stories of *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, then *Giselle*, then *Coppelia*. Sandwiched between two stories I loved, I didn't pay much attention to *Giselle*. It is a two act ballet, not three acts like the others, and therefore shorter both as a story heard and a ballet danced. It wasn't one of the Tchaikovsky ballets, I didn't have a recording of the ballet on DVD, and I hadn't seen it live. The story is simple, with no faeries or weddings, and so it slipped my notice. Even when I did finally see a performance of it, with Natalia Osipova dancing the lead role with the Mikhailovsky Ballet when they came to New York, I wasn't stunned by the performance the way I had been when I had seen Evgenia Oboznenko as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* with American Ballet Theater. It's notable that Osipova was the one dancing that night because *Giselle* is the role she is known for. She is a great actress and has the most insane jumps, as if gravity doesn't apply to her. She jumps so high with such apparent ease, and stays in the air so long she seems to float. So it wasn't the choreography or story I paid that much attention to that night, it was Osipova's abilities. No, I didn't come to appreciate *Giselle* till I stepped into the ballet as a dancer. Now, that ballet lives in my body, and the memory of dancing the steps rises in me each time I think of the ballet or see it performed. Now that I've gone inside, I see the nuances, I look for the moments of ease or strain, I remember the ache of my legs and the joy I felt from it. Where before I only looked for the technique, I now see the emotions both portrayed and organically felt. For me at least, the point of a performance is to tug at the audience's heartstrings, to make them *feel*.

Last November when I was living in London, I went to see the Royal Ballet's production of *Giselle*. I went twice, the Monday and Wednesday of the same week, in order to see two different casts. The Monday performance because Marianela Nuñez was dancing the title role with Vadim Muntagirov as Albrecht, and Wednesday in order to finally see Yasmine Naghdi and Matthew Ball dance together. Nuñez is from Argentina, where my mother is from, and she has been a celebrated dancer at the Royal for the last twenty years. My mom and I love her dancing, as do many others, but it has always felt extra special that I share heritage with one of the greatest ballerinas of today. That Monday performance of *Giselle* was the first time I had gotten to see her live. Recordings only capture so much. They can get the image and sound of what is happening, but some of the feeling is lost in the translation from stage to screen. Ballet is ephemeral, fleeting, not fully capturable. Each dancer brings different nuances to their roles, and the difference between the two casts was almost startling. Matthew Ball's Albrecht was all youthful earnest and sincerity. He plays the character as one who really does want to shed his royal life, who is truly in love with Giselle and perhaps naïvely thinks he can get away with this double life. It was so different during the performance with Vadim Muntagirov, who is such a classical Russian dancer that he always looks regal and princely. Even when he is supposed to be a peasant, his posture and bearing is commanding and firm, yet gentle. His interpretation of Albrecht conveys the royalty above all else. These subtle differences in posture and facial expressions alone completely change how I feel about the Mad Scene, where Giselle dies of grief from Albrecht's lies. In Muntagirov's interpretation, Albrecht is kind of an asshole for playing with Giselle's feelings, seeming to know that he was always going to go back to Bathilde. In this

interpretation, Giselle was just a fling, a bit of fun before starting the next chapter of his life at court. For Matthew Ball's Albrecht, he is truly distraught after Giselle dies because his true love is gone, and he is the cause. Both men danced the exact same choreography, and yet their characters were wildly different. This is why I get so excited about live ballet, because it is going to be slightly different every time, a new experience. Each dancer has something they can offer the audience, something different to another dancer. Marianala Nuñez's Giselle while youthful, also seemed to have some control over her feelings, at least until the Mad Scene. One of the lovely aspects of Nuñez's dancing is that she prioritizes dancing with the music rather than impressing with technical feats. When she holds a balance, she almost seems to surprise herself with the extra moment of suspension. Yasmine Nagdhi's performance, perhaps because she has not spent as long with the role as Nuñez has, was more raw, and she carried Giselle's naivety from the first act into the second.

I have never named a ballet performance of my own when my mom asks me about the happiest moments of my life, as I've never in my life been satisfied by my performance. But now, looking back, the happiest I've ever been was in the ballet studio rehearsing the second act of *Giselle*. It wasn't a loud happiness, or a sudden one, but a contentedness hiding in the fatigue. The choreography of the ballet and words of my ballet director, my mentor, gave me that.

When I watch my videos of *Giselle* rehearsals, I almost don't recognize my body. I know it's me, and my body remembers what it felt like, but not what it felt like to look like that, to have that much energy. I look so sure of myself, so confident, happy even, I look like I know the

body I am in. I look like a dancer. And yet, I remember how much I didn't like that body at the time. I watch these videos now and can't believe I ever thought I was large back then. What I wouldn't give to have that body back, to be able to do with ease what that body could do. The energy of that body despite the relentless hours of exertion I put myself through, day in and day out, the fatigue and aches that used to have a clear cause, the pain that used to have a clear cause. I knew what I was doing and it was all I had ever known, all I had ever wanted to know. To anyone else, my body may not have changed so drastically, but to me it has, visually and physically. Even still, at that point the ligament in my left ankle had already been torn, and though I couldn't yet feel the severity of it, the damage to my knees had begun long before those rehearsals took place. Years of not using the correct muscles in my legs, compensating for a lack of natural turnout by forcing 180° turnout from my lower legs meant that my knees took the brunt of the strain instead of hips. When teachers used to tell me verbally to use my inner thigh muscles, I quite literally couldn't feel those muscles and therefore could not engage them. It wasn't until I was sixteen and a teacher physically showed me where those muscles were and held my legs till those muscles were shaking, were finally activating, that I understood what my teachers meant by "engage your inner thighs." But by sixteen I had already been training intensely for seven years and the damage to my knees had already been done. The cartilage in my knees was worn down from the years of unnatural strain and my kneecaps no longer tracked straight as they should, causing ligaments to move and roll over each other. I had begun to feel the consequences of my incorrect (and uncorrected) turnout when I was thirteen, but I ignored the pain, brushed it off as typical.

What happens when my scars are internal? Both literally, the scar tissue in my ankle, and mentally, the lingering traumas. I have a great anxiety around food and eating in public spaces, of what food and how much and when. I fear watchful, judgmental eyes that do not exist in the spaces around me now. In truth, they may not have existed back then, or at least, been fewer in number than I imagined, but still I felt them. The result of years of being surround by mirrors, judged on my body and its limits, the judgement of peers and teachers, the laughter and gossip of my gaining weight and the roles I was now cast in. I have an intensely warped perception of what a human body should look like, and though I am making progress in being less harsh on my body, the moment I step back into a ballet studio, that all disappears. I will always want to weigh less, the numbers on ballet school weight charts seared into my brain, imposing on me no matter how aware I am of their illogical and unsafe proportions between height and kilograms. I have anxiety of being without clear direction, without a path or plan to follow. I used to know what my future was going to look like, if not where exactly, but I knew what I would be doing. How I can't seem to hold myself accountable without the fear of what someone else will think motivating me.

The love I had for ballet as a small child was pure, untainted by the stresses and insecurities later created by the institution. I had no awareness that my body was anything but my tool to dance, and nothing could be wrong with it. How to continue loving something that also causes harm? Complexity does not have to be a bad thing, and utopia will never be reached, but dancers strive for that unreachable perfection in their technique and artistry. Can that same dedication and effort not also be put towards creating a better environment in which to learn and

love our craft? The tradition of ballet is just that, a tradition. We inherit such a wealth of knowledge and history as dancers, but like all things, ballet must evolve and change. Indeed, ballet has been evolving and changing and advancing since the 16th century when what would eventually become “ballet as we know it” was imported to France from Italy. What began as exclusive to the royal courts, steeped in etiquette and classism, has transformed to the art form we know today, the one I love. Yes, some traditions of the Old World still linger, but the total control of the body, or at least the aim for such control, results in the utmost freedom. For me, that is what ballet once was, a refuge from social anxiety and overthinking, and an outlet for the bubbling boundless energy I used to have.

An Experiment of Translation

It is hard to put into language what is felt in
the body. It is deep in the cavern, the chest
inward and tugging, crawling, lurking.
Slow down. Inside the bones in the feet,
implosions, bone marrow molten.
Fatigue travels down from the top of the legs
swirling iron down the veins
cotton wads stuffed inside an ankle
an empty chamber opened,
oblivion contained in bone.
Pinpricks of ice behind the stuck kneecap,
heavy weights drag at the other.
But the curtain goes up,
the lights are blinding, white orange blue.
Icehot electricity replacing steel and gravity
is of no consequence now.
Weightlessness coursing through all limbs
strain on hips and thigh gone, bubbles
float up, heart reaching
sky sky sky
but no
not quite
that is a mistranslation
what I mean is:

II.

9/21/2017

I dance because I have to. I can't sit still when I hear music. It's just not an option. My earliest memory is of watching a video of *The Firebird* that my mom had checked out of the public library. I remember the music, the costumes, the story, but most importantly, I remember not being able to take my eyes away from the dancers.

I'm fairly shy when it comes to speaking to people but dance allows me to express myself in a more comfortable way. Even though I'm shy, I've always loved performing. Time moves differently on stage. The feeling of being on stage doesn't really compare to anything else in my life.

I think ballet has always appealed to me the most, compared to other styles of dance, because it was the style that I was first introduced to. I love the history behind the steps and the ballets and I love that some choreography we learn is older than anyone currently living. I appreciate the discipline and respect that is required in ballet, and how universal the language is. I really like acting and playing characters, which is probably part of why I love story ballets so much.

I dance because I like the athleticism. Working hard through a good class and leaving looking like I've just had a shower feels so good, and I like getting to return to the studio each day to try to improve upon yesterday's work. I don't like any sports really, so ballet is really the only way I would get that feeling of working hard.

6/15/2018

My teacher, Ms. Knight, told me that instead of getting sad when something doesn't work, I should try to analyze what is throwing me off. That, and she also said that instead of having a "little rain cloud above my head," I should dance as if there is sunlight above me, which I think is a really great visual.

9/20/2018

I can't actually remember when I first fell in love with ballet; it happened before I could retain memories. I know when I was younger, I loved ballet because it was a way to express myself and feel free without having to speak. My family moved out of New York City when I was two, and my mom enrolled my twin sister and me in a ballet class for toddlers in our new town. It was just meant to be a fun way to get rid of excess energy and to meet new people, but something must have awakened inside me, because from that moment on I was hooked. My love for ballet has grown to be so much more than anyone would have predicted. I am passionate about this athletic art form and the way stories and emotions can be portrayed, transcending the boundaries of time.

As I've grown older, ballet's meaning to me has evolved. Part of why I dance is because I want to be a storyteller, to impact other people in some meaningful way, but mostly, I dance for myself. When I'm in the studio, it doesn't matter what is going on in my life, I can forget everything and just focus on the choreography I'm doing. Even when I'm having a "bad day,"

spending my time dancing is the best way for me to be spending my time. When I don't dance, I'm more likely to feel depressed. Ballet is my outlet.

I dance because I love performing. There's a certain rush of excitement and adrenaline that I get when I'm onstage and that feeling doesn't compare to anything else. After being injured last year, I know now more than ever that I truly *need* to dance.

10/1/2021

Today was my first time taking a ballet class in a studio for almost two years. My longest time away from ballet in my entire life. I can't explain just how much I missed this kind of full body exhaustion, the best kind, of being absolutely drenched in sweat. I finally had the space to do grande allegro for the first time in two years and oh how I missed flying through the air. Today was the first time I've done jumps in a ballet class without any pain in years. It felt incredible. It's taken me two and a half years to come to terms with no longer pursuing a career in the art form I dedicated most of my life to. I think I'm alright now. I know now that I will always be a ballet dancer, regardless of how much time I spend in the studio. It's still who I am.

11/30/2021

I've been going to a studio that does open classes while been been living here in London. I've been trying to go once a week, now twice a week. That first class was tough. Realizing my body is different. And it's changing. The euphoria from that first class was a high I haven't felt in so

long. The teacher asked me during the class where I had trained, told me that I clearly had good training. Today she gave me a few reminders: I shouldn't be so hard on myself, I am not a bad dancer, my technique is there so trust it, make musicality my priority, and try not to think too much.

I still can't look at myself sideways in the mirror, but the classes are so full that it hasn't really been a problem. Even though I'm weaker and it had been nearly two years between my last real class and my first one back last month, some things are actually working better than before. The muscles I was learning to use before I stopped; I know where they are now.

Since moving here, I've had to introduce myself to a lot of people, the same thing over and over. I've been trying to figure out what verb tense to use when talking about myself and ballet. I didn't really realize it was a problem till J brought it up. We were waiting in the basement of a pub in Leytonstone a few weeks ago. I was supposed to interview his band, but the rest of the guys were late. We were chatting, waiting for them, and the subject of ballet came up. I guess I paused too long because J backtracked, asked if it was okay to talk about. It wasn't till then that I realized, that, yes, I did want to talk about my life and ballet, but I didn't know how. I was a dancer. Yes. True. I am a dancer? Could I still say that? Is it strictly a professional description, or something closer to identity?

About an hour later though, towards the end of the interview, I had a moment of clarity while T was speaking that, yes, I am happy with where my life is now going. Somehow that felt like a betrayal of who I used to be, the dancer I used to be.

5/18/22

I am back in London. Currently reading Jennifer Homans' book *Apollo's Angels*, one of the only overarching scholarly works on the history of ballet. I am sitting on the terrace at the Royal Opera House, a view of a London skyline to my left. I can see the London Eye, parliament with a union flag flying, the spire of St. Giles in the Fields, Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square.

To my right, the open door leading in to the Royal Opera House's costume shop. Older women are steaming and cutting fabric. It looks like they are working on a men's jacket. Last October I saw these same women steaming the tulle of the costumes for the wilis in *Giselle*.

I feel like I am on the precipice of the ballet world, now almost on the outside, clinging to my past, desperately trying to hold on to my foothold in this world. Because it is another world, fairly closed, and I still worry about fitting in, about my place in it. The snobbery of my youth persists in telling me that I am no longer welcome, and I wonder how I learned to have that opinion. Who decides who is "in" and who isn't, who has a place in ballet, and is welcome, and who isn't. And why? Why must it be open to some and closed to others? Does it really need to be? Or can ballet be something open to all, accessible to those who have loved it their entire lives and also to those who have never set foot in a ballet studio or theater, who have no idea what the difference between a plié and a relevé is.

There are some things I don't miss. Being judged entirely on my body while I was going through puberty, worrying every day about how much I weighed. I used to obsessively weigh myself nearly every morning. I like not knowing exactly how much I weigh now. Seeing the numbers steadily creep upwards as I got older, even though I knew it was due in part to building muscle,

which is good...I just remember feeling sick each time I had to fill out my weight on an audition form. After I turned fourteen, I started lying. Shaving six to ten pounds off the number I wrote down, trying to figure out how much I could believably lie. Because smaller was better.

6/2/2022

When I decided to leave my ballet training, I had to rationalize it to myself as solely because of my injuries. But plenty of dancers get injured in their final years at school and still have careers. So it wasn't just my injuries. At least, not only my ankle and knees. I was in pain all the time — I still am. There is never a moment when my body is at a zero on the pain scale, but I can still dance, can still move my body (somewhat) freely. I think that was one of the things I was most scared of if I continued down my planned path. I was scared of the physical demands of the profession of ballet and ruining my body so that I could never dance again. Those last three years at school, age fifteen to seventeen, I had at least one new injury every year. First my bunion joints, the right and then the left, then I tore a ligament in my left ankle and danced on it for three months before getting an X-ray. And then my knees. They'd been hurting on and off since I was twelve or so, but in the last few months of school had gotten the worst they'd ever been. On and off for weeks I would sit down during Pas de Deux class so that I would be able to make it through the rehearsals after. Some weeks when the pain was worse I wouldn't jump, but as soon as I felt even a little better, I would go back dancing through all of my classes and rehearsals. I never told my parents I might need to see a doctor, because once I saw a doctor, the pain would be more real, and I would have to face the recovery time that would take me away from ballet. I

didn't realize that the longer I put off healing, the longer and more devastating recovery would be.

I was onstage during a tech rehearsal during CB's tour upstate. We were rehearsing the Joplin ballet that we would premiere that evening. I was sitting in a chair, and when I went to uncross my legs, something under my left kneecap moved and stuck. I swear it made a sound, and I panicked. It took about five minutes, and felt like an eternity, before I could bend and straighten my leg properly. The next week when I was back home from the tour, I had an MRI. I didn't know staying completely still for nearly an hour could be so painful. My doctor had a hard time diagnosing the cause of my pain. From the searing cold pain in the center of my knee joint, I thought there must be nerve damage. The best my doctor could tell, I had worn down the cartilage in my knees from the years of forcing my turnout to 180° and my kneecaps no longer tracked straight as they should. Without a clear path when I bent and straightened my knee, ligaments would roll over each other, and this is what had made my kneecap get stuck on stage and what was causing the pain.

At that point, I figured my hips were next to go. What was more important to me, being paid to dance every day and performing on stage, or being able to dance on my own, for the joy of it? Because that's how it started, the joy of moving wildly to orchestral music, of learning a language in which I didn't have to speak to express myself. A language that gave structure and guidance for moving, for control, for freedom.

I spent the summer I turned eighteen back in physical therapy. I remember on one of my last days, walking past a building in Midtown after my session and catching sight of myself in the

reflection from the metal. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the complete awareness of how my body was moving, of my knees bending and legs moving forward with each step, and I was just so *grateful* that I was walking with little to no pain. Just walking, not skipping, running, jumping, dancing. The most basic form of movement that we learn as babies. But in that moment, the simplicity was intense.

What is the difference between being a ballet dancer by profession and dancing ballet for the joy of it? I was conditioned to think that getting a contract with a company and spending my life dancing was the only way to be a ballet dancer. Now though, I don't think the label of "ballet dancer" has to be reserved for only those currently in school or in a company. There is a quote attributed to Margot Fonteyn: "Ballet is more than a profession, it is a way of life." It might be even more than way of life, but a way of existing in the world. When I stopped pursuing a career in ballet, all of my training didn't leave me. It is still locked into my body and mind, and still affects how I move through the world, both literally with my body, and mentally. I carry it with me as I walk, as I look at art and films and sports. When I hear music playing, from a speaker or a live instrument, I am still a dancer. So ballet is even more than what Fonteyn claimed, it is a way of existing and moving through the world.

7/25/22

I finished reading *The Empathy Exams* by Leslie Jamison today. She concludes the collection of essays with her "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain." In this list and exploration of pain, she designates menstruation as Wound #5, through the lens of Stephen King's *Carrie*. I got my first

period while in ballet class. I had decided to wear a white leotard that day. Before I left my room, I put on a pair of black shorts. My mom asked me “what, did you get your period?” Bewildered that that was even a question, I said no. I was twelve. That evening just before pointe class began, a girl in my class asked me if I had brought a pair of shorts with me today. I said yes and she told me I might want to go put them on, that I was bleeding from, you know, down there. Embarrassed, I ran to the dressing room and looked in the mirror. There were indeed some reddish-brown splotches on the crotch of my white leotard. I quickly put on my shorts and ran back to class. I wasn’t embarrassed to have gotten my period, only that it was visible. After those couple days in February, I didn’t get my period again for another 11 months. Whether it was because of my intense ballet schedule or my body simply wanted to retract its statement that I was starting to go through puberty for a little while longer, I do not know.

Puberty, the dreaded change. The ideal ballet body according to the Russians is a small head, long neck, short torso, long arms and legs. And skinny, very very skinny. Before puberty, I had that body. My dad used to joke that I was so skinny that I should put rocks in my pockets so that I wouldn’t be blown away by the wind. And then I turned thirteen, and puberty really began. Suddenly I was no longer a stick figure, I had hips, thighs, breasts. No longer did I look like a “ballerina” in the mirror. I began to scrutinize every change, every additional pound. Looking back at photos and videos of that time, I can’t believe I ever thought I was “big,” though I have such vivid memories of those ugly feelings. I couldn’t see the positive side of those changes. Yes, before, I was so thin, and I thought my body looked similar to the Russian ballet dancers I admired so much. But I had no control over my limbs, I had no muscles. My movements were gawky and awkward (at least in my eyes). After puberty began and my body began changing, I

was able to retain muscle, and that is why I was able to learn how to control my limbs and movement. But I couldn't appreciate that at the time. All I could see was that my thighs were getting bigger.

8/10/22

I met up with a friend from ballet school today. She is still dancing, still aiming for a career. She recounted to me the process of learning a ballet by Balanchine from one of his dancers. What it is like to learn from a dancer who we both grew up viewing as a larger-than-life idol, to have the honor of learning a role from her but to also be subjected to their volatile moods, their harsh critiques, the mind games of casting. I don't miss that. Yet, what I wouldn't give to be in a studio again, learning.

1/12/23

Being a ballet student is so all consuming, especially when the leftover energy is being put towards academics. But in the time off from injuries, I had the chance to explore other interests, other forms of art. I had grown up thinking that I could only ever be happy in life if I made ballet my profession, if I was dancing all the time. By the time my ballet training had reached a more time-consuming level, when I was ten, when most kids are just starting to figure out who they are, this thought was so deeply ingrained into my being that I never gave myself the time to learn if I liked other things. Even if I had continued on and gotten a contract in a company, what

then? How can you be an actor, because that is also part of a dancer's job description, if you have no life experience from which to draw inspiration? No experience except for training and trying to perfect technique. Dance does not exist in a vacuum, and neither should dancers — before they get a job or when they are students.

But a career in ballet is a race against time, to do as much as possible before your body gives out or a career-ending surgery is required. Back then, I knew I would need bunion surgery eventually, it was just a question of when. One of my teachers had had bunion surgery years ago, but still could not manage a relevé on that foot, her demi-pointe gone. I remember googling the surgery, looking to see just how it worked, and somewhere I was that the recovery statistic that a full range of motion would come back after surgery was 2%. My career was always going to be cut short by my body.

4/15/23

I realize not everyone looks at ballet the way I do. I have been immersed in it since I was two years old, it has been my constant companion. And to someone unfamiliar with watching ballet, all I can say is don't try to figure it out in the moment. Just watch and notice how you feel, during the performance and after. We trade in the currency of emotion, with our bodies as the vessel.

Like Albrecht

Like Albrecht, I lead a double life. The first, the expected, academic expectations of As and mathematic equations. Noble and institutional, betrothed from birth to public school. The second, the chosen path, the true love unadorned. Afternoons living at the ballet studio, not unlike Albrecht in the countryside village along the Rhine. The body, true desire fulfilled. Like Albrecht, I wanted. I wanted despite other commitments. Everything else fell away.

Albrecht used to seem like a villain. Isn't he the villain? He breaks Giselle's heart, kills her. But all he wanted was a different life. I wanted too, but I returned to the first path, as Albrecht did.

III.

Giselle loves to dance, yet she has a weak heart and her mother forbids her from the thing she loves most, for fear it will kill her daughter. Giselle defies her mother and dances, dances with the villagers and her lover, a man her mother does not approve of. Giselle should not dance, for her health's sake, but she does anyway. She loves it too much to stay away. That is what it is to be a dancer. It is hard, near impossible, to stay still when movement brings joy, brings a way to communicate without having to speak. The body holds in it language and memory, and history and stories can be passed down through these bodies. There is only joy felt, even pain can be forgotten and ignored. Giselle danced in spite of the limits of her body, and isn't that what all dancers do? Push themselves further than they probably should because they can't help themselves? Because they *must* dance and that is not up for debate?

During a ballet class one summer, I was practicing in the back of the studio while another group ran through the variation we were learning that day. I slipped and fell, and landed *hard*. The sound was deafening. Utterly embarrassed, I popped back up to standing and attempted to act as if nothing had happened. The girls around me, having seen and heard my fall, asked me if I was alright, making the scene I had hoped to avoid. The teacher asked what had happened and I meekly replied that I had slipped. He then told the class "be like Claire, if you fall, get up before people hear the sound you make." In other words, if you fall, get right back up and continue.

During my last year at school, my ballet teacher once told another student who was visibly in pain “Don’t be like Claire, she will keep going until her legs don’t work anymore.” She was trying to tell my friend to pace herself, to listen to her body, to not dance if she was injured. I was an example of what not to do. And yet, in that moment, I felt a glimmer of pride in my chest, that yes, I would keep going until I couldn’t stand anymore, till even lying down I felt pain.

I could never make myself admit to my teachers when I was hurting. There is a difference between good pain and bad pain, but it took me a long time to learn the difference. My teacher would tell us, “Pain is an experience to go through, not something to make you shut down.” I leaned into that “experience” a little too much.

There is a culture in ballet of strength, and admitting pain means weakness, but it also means you will be replaced. There are far more ballet students training and aiming for a career than there are open places in companies or prestigious schools. Everyone is replaceable when it comes to casting. There will always be someone younger, thinner, better than you waiting in the wings.

There was a day when I was newly thirteen, dancing in the big beautiful studio at the New York City Center, when I had excruciatingly painful blisters on the backs of my heels. This was before I had switched to using mesh elastics on my pointe shoes and I was still sewing them on the inside of the shoe (as I was taught to), and I used to get popped blisters inside popped blisters from the friction of the elastic and stitches. I went up to my teacher, a world-renowned

and celebrated dancer who had had a long career dancing at some of the best ballet companies in the world, and asked her if she knew a way to wear my pointe shoes to accommodate or prevent this pain, which was amplified every time I put my shoes on. Instead of telling me a secret remedy, she launched into an anecdote of her own. She had been in Milan for a series of performances at La Scala, and had broken her pinky toe. The doctor had told her she absolutely could not dance on it, but she had a performance to do and so she cut a slash in the box of her pointe shoe to release some of the pressure, went onstage and finished the three-hour performance before going to the hospital and taking care of her toe. I had no response to this story. I was in constant awe of this teacher, so lucky to be learning from her, and yet, this was not an answer to my question. What it was was an example of how dancers often do not let themselves take care of their injuries when they should, because they are inconvenient, because they will lose out on opportunities and a ballet career is short. A dancer trains for ten years as a student and if they are lucky enough to get a job, they have at most 25, maybe 30 years before their body cannot work well enough to perform at an “acceptable” level. It feels as if there is no time to take a break and heal.

And so I learned to dance with the pain. After all, it is a part of dancing, and I had been taught by dancers I admired that to be a dancer I must push through the pain. The headaches from concentration and lack of sleep, the exploding pain from inside my bunions (the hallux valgus joint), the icy and pulling sensations in my knees, the unpredictable fleeting but frightening sensations in my ankles when landing jumps. I would continue on with class after rolling my

ankle, so used to the instances of hyper-supination. It is not just in ballet where pain is glorified, but in ballet this glorification has obvious and bodily ramifications.

Too many instances of supination of my ankle (commonly known as “rolling an ankle”) culminated in November 2017 during a rehearsal for the Winter Exam. At the end of each semester, we were assessed on “Presentation and professional demeanor,” “Barre,” “Centre and pirouettes,” “Allegro,” “Pointe,” and “Musicality” during a performance of a memorized technique class. In order to keep the exam to two hours, we would only perform each exercise to one side, instead of both sides like in a normal class. When preparing for the exam, we would alternate sides each day so as to stay even. On this particular day, during the pointe section, I was supposed to do the hops on pointe exercise to the right, hopping on my left side, my weaker side, not the side I would present during the exam. On the second hop, mere seconds into the combination, my ankle gave out and the entire side of my foot was parallel with the studio floor. I felt the air rush out of my chest and my teacher stopped the music. I stopped for a moment, assessed whether I was in pain or just in shock. I carried on with the rest of the day. To be safe, since it had been a particularly drastic tweak of my ankle, I didn’t jump for the next week, but otherwise carried on as normal. I had the exam coming up and would have plenty of time to rest during the winter break before audition season started up in January. Looking back now, I think it was the demands I put on myself during that audition season that led me to incapacitating pain. With weekends taken up by auditions, as few as two and as many as four over the two days, I never had a day off to rest. This non-stop schedule eventually led to throbbing pain in my ankle even when lying down in bed at night with no pressure on the joint. By mid-February, I finally

saw a doctor, an orthopedic surgeon, who took one look at my X-ray, grasped two hands around my foot and pulled it down (a feeling I can only describe as my foot bone being pulled away from my leg bones and the space in my ankle expanding) and less than kindly asked me how I had not noticed I had torn a ligament in my ankle. For three months I had danced on the torn ligament and thus I had to spend the next six weeks in an immobilizing brace. Absolutely no dancing allowed while the muscles in my ankle atrophied in an attempt to deal with the inflammation and pain in the joint.

Leslie Jamison says “the act of admitting one wound creates another.” And yet, like her, I must record my pain. Because since it is not visible, I often wonder if I have imagined it. She also says “*trauma* implies a specific devastating event and often links to *damage*, its residue.” But I had no one moment of trauma, no shocking and specific occurrence to blame. Yet I am damaged, to some degree. I do not write that to ask for pity, or to wallow in it myself, but I state it as a fact. Physically, my ankles and knees are damaged, and I’m sure other parts of me are as well. My heart too. I know I am not alone in this damage. But in ballet, even by accident, it seems that everything becomes a competition. Whose injury is worse, who is more exhausted, who was able to recover faster? When we talk about our pain seriously, we talk about the physical damage; the toenails that have fallen off, the tendonitis developed as a teen, the os trigonum surgery to remove the pesky extra bone. We engage in pain Olympics, seeing who can experience more pain and still keep dancing. What we laugh off is the emotional damage; “I don’t want to see your lunch” becomes a joke though we all feel the cut of the language within us.

There were times, however, that I had no choice but to admit my pain. When I was fifteen I injured my right bunion on the first Wednesday back to classes. I was straining to be worthy of the compliments my teacher had bestowed on me during barre, and even though I felt the ligaments move underneath the ball of the big toe joint that was holding up all my weight, I kept going until my vision blurred from tears and I was convulsively sobbing from the pain. That teacher, in her usual cold french demeanor, simply told me to sit down. Later when I was seventeen and my knees were acting up more and more often, my teacher would massage the ligaments in the back of my knees after technique class. Without that near-daily help, I could not get through my five to eight hour days of dancing. There was another teacher who shared with me a home remedy for an anti-inflammatory oil that really did help, and showed me how to KT tape my feet to provide extra support.

There is a good pain, as my teachers used to refer to it, yet I don't think "pain" is the correct word. "Struggle" is more accurate. When you struggle through nausea, working so hard you think you are going to throw up and collapse, there comes a moment where you work past those feelings, and it is after this struggle that a dancer can have maybe three, four more hours of energy left where the work is more rewarding than before the nausea. If you stop before the fatigue reaches the point where you can no longer engage your muscles safely, those hours are the best to work in. And it comes from pushing through struggle, not pain.

Biomechanics Risks Associated with Foot and Ankle Injuries in Ballet Dancers

lower extremities

foot is subjected

there are consequences

the compression of the soft

tissue structure

therefore joint injury

hallux valgus

metatarsal injury

subsequent ankle pain

crucial to perform

dead

and

new

peak pressure

fatigue

common risk

increase

high

demands

lack of support

chronic ankle instability

IV.

To me at least, the tradition of ballet completely explodes time. 1831 was not so long ago, not a forgotten time that has no connection to today. I measure time in lifetimes and living memory. A dancer's training can be traced like a genealogical chart; who taught them, and who taught their teachers. When on stage, 50 seconds can feel like four minutes, 35 minutes feels like ten. The rest of the world falls away.

Ballet is passed down from person to person, there must be that physical touch. Many dancers and choreographers in the past have tried to create notations, different systems of documenting their work. But if left to these convoluted, complicated notes and drawings that few understand — indeed, often the writer of the notes may be the only person to understand them — choreography will disappear, and with it the experiments and ideas of that time. A student requires an outside set of eyes to give corrections, to mold them into a dancer who has full control of every muscle.

They say time heals all wounds. I know this is not true. The soft tissue damage I sustained during my years as a ballet student will never fully heal. My left ankle is filling with scar tissue, my knees constantly ache and limit me. Yet, the injury from my first death, is, I think healing. Before I started writing, I was very bitter about my injuries. I needed to let myself feel that, the anger and grief for the loss of the life I had been pursuing. In the matter of a few short months, I went from starting my ballet career dancing as an apprentice with CB and had an offer

of apprenticeship at another company for the following year, to a college campus in a new state after another round of physical therapy. For sixteen years, I had defined myself as a ballet dancer, had presented myself to the world as someone very much in love with the art of ballet. I had forgone the traditional high school experience in favor of enrolling in a pre-professional finishing school in New York City. At first I was eager to say I was coping with this change, that I was “manifesting a new version of myself,” but I wasn’t not really. I was grieving though I didn’t know how to grieve.

Part of why I find myself still clinging on to ballet, why I cannot detach from it, is that I do truly believe it is a tradition from the past worth saving. All the heartbreak and pain made me into the person I am today. Though some days I find it easy to linger on the hurt, on other days all I care about is the beauty and strength on this art form. From an early age, I was connected to something greater than myself, connecting with and learning from people from countries I have never visited; Russian master teachers from the Bolshoi Ballet Academy, teachers from Romania, France, Denmark, Japan, students from Canada, Russia, Brazil, and Guam. Ballet was our common language, our common love. Love and pain are not opposites, and pain can never be fully prevented outright. But if we address it when it happens, if we figure out what to change to prevent that specific pain from reoccurring, then dancers can continue dedicating themselves to ballet and to the stage.

Jennifer Homans says in her epilogue of *Apollo’s Angels* “Ballet has always and above all contained the idea of human transformation, the conviction that human beings could remake

themselves in another, more perfect divine image.” This comes just before her claim that “ballet is dying.” But I believe it has been dying for the last 200 years, since the Romantic era of *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* and what we today would recognize as ballet. It has always dying because ballet survives within the muscles and minds of dancers, who are mortal. The tradition of ballet is passed down orally, physically, from teacher to student. Dancers and choreographers worry that ballet is dying when it is actually evolving, changing. It is not a stale, stagnant tradition, but a method of moving the body. Or at least, that is what ballet should be. Ballet is perhaps the only realm in which I remain blindly optimistic. The years I devoted myself to the art form will not allow me to be anything but. I am not alone in my wish for a safer, more nurturing and equitable ballet world and I do believe it can happen. That it is happening, it is transforming.

Appendix A: The Story of *Giselle*

Young love, a harvest festival, betrayal, death, revenge, mercy.

Giselle is often considered to be *the* Romantic ballet. Capital R Romantic, it premiered in 1841 at the tail end of the Romantic period in art and literature, a nostalgic tribute to the Romantic era of ballet and *La Sylphide*. Physically characterized by soft, lilting port de bras, a slight pitch forward of the torso, and ballerinas skimming across the stage on pointe. *Giselle* has been continuously performed for the public since the Paris Opéra premiere in 1841.

The libretto was written by Théophile Gautier and Jules Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges after *De l'Allemagne* by Heinrich Heine. Gautier recounts the creation of the ballet in a letter he wrote to Heine on July 5 1841. Inspired by a passage in Heine's book about "snow-colored wilis who waltz pitilessly," the French ballet pulls from German fairy mythology and folk traditions, and the new technique of dancing *en pointe*, on the tips of the toes. Gautier writes in his letter to Heine that "all those delicious apparitions you have encountered in the Harz mountains and on the banks of the Ilse, in a mist softened by German moonlight" made him think "'Wouldn't this make a pretty ballet?'" Indeed it did. Just as the words paint a picturesque setting of a cloudy moonlit night, so do the choreography, set design, costuming, and music. Work on the new production began quickly, with rehearsals beginning just a week after Gautier first had the idea. The composer Adolphe Adams provided the base for Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot to choreograph. Coralli, as staff choreographer at the Opéra was responsible for the majority of the

ballet, though it is generally accepted that Perrot (Carlotta Grisi's husband and a fellow dancer and choreographer) contributed many ideas and choreographed Grisi's solos. Many productions today derive from the Petipa's 1884 staging in Russia of Jean Corelli and Jules Perrot's choreography from the original production in Paris.

Five months after the first performance of *Giselle* in Paris, it premiered in New York at the Olympia Theater. It eventually joined the repertoire of the Ballet Russes, with Tamara Karsavina and Valsav Nijinsky in the leading roles. *Giselle* was added to the repertoire of the Sadler's Wells ballet company (later known as the Royal Ballet) in 1934, and today the company performs Peter Wright's version, modeled after Petipa's.

The ballet is set in the vineyard country village bordering the Rhine. Giselle is a peasant girl who lives in the village and has fallen in love with a man she believes is a fellow villager named Loys. Unbeknownst to her, Loys is really Count Albrecht, a noble from the court nearby (in other versions of the story, Albrecht is referred to as Albrecht, Duke of Silesia). He has disguised his identity because he has fallen in love with Giselle, and wants to be with her.

Hilarion, the village huntsman and a gamekeeper to the court, returns from his early morning chores and pauses before Giselle's cottage. He is also in love with her. Villagers pass through on their way to the vineyards, where they will harvest the last of the grapes before the Wine Festival. Hilarion hears someone coming and hides.

Count Albrecht arrives with his squire Wilfred and enters a cottage opposite Giselle's. He emerges dressed as a peasant, has his squire look him over for inspection, and dismisses him. Hilarion witnesses this exchange and is puzzled that a squire should show such deference to this young man, who is known to the villager as a fellow peasant named Loys. Wilfred pleads for Albrecht to leave, but he refuses, and gives Wilfred his sword, Cale, and hunting horn to conceal. These items raise Hilarion's suspicions as to Loys' true identity.

Albrecht knocks on Giselle's door and playfully hides. Giselle comes out and dances, knowing Loys is watching (but not knowing Hilarion is watching too). Albrecht comes out and they sit on a bench together. He swears eternal love, and she takes the traditional test with a daisy: "he loves me, he loves me not." When she counts the remaining petals and it appears the answer will be "not," she throws the flower away in tears; Loys retrieves it and, by slyly discarding a petal, shows her that the answer is "he loves me."

Hilarion interrupts, protesting that he, and not Loys, truly loves Giselle. The two men quarrel, and Hilarion's suspicions deepen as Loys instinctively reaches for the sword that, as a nobleman, he is accustomed to wearing.

The villagers return, and Giselle invites them to join in a dance to celebrate the harvest. Her mother, Berthe, interrupts the dancing and warns her that her life may be in danger if she overexerts herself by dancing, because of her frail heart. She is struck by a momentary hallucination of her daughter in death. She sees her as one of the Wilis, the ghosts of young girls who have been jilted and died before their wedding day. Their spirits are forever destined to

roam the earth from midnight to dawn, taking revenge by forcing any man who crosses their path to dance to death. (In other versions, Berthe recounts the legend of the Wilis to discourage Giselle's love for Loys). Berthe takes Giselle back into their cottage.

The stage is empty except for Hilarion, who is determined to prove to Giselle that she should not be in love with Loys. A horn sounds in the distance and Hilarion hides. Loys recognizes it as coming from the hunting party of the prince of Courland. As Loys hastily departs, Hilarion breaks into Loys' cottage.

The Prince of Courland and his daughter Bathilde arrive at the cottage with their hunting party, in want of refreshments. Girls from the village bring out chairs, goblets and wine. Giselle is in awe of the nobility and Bathilde's fine clothes. Bathilde, amused, gives Giselle a gold necklace when she learns they are both engaged to be married. The prince and his daughter then go into Giselle's cottage to rest, and the others in the hunting party depart.

Hilarion emerges from Loys' cottage with a hunting horn and a sword, further evidence that the supposed peasant is, in fact, a nobleman.

The villagers return and proclaim Giselle the queen of the Wine Festival. They begin to dance again, and Albrecht (as Loys) joins Giselle. Hilarion pushes them apart to denounce Loys as an impostor. When Loys denies the charges and threatens the gamekeeper with his sword, Hilarion blows the hunting horn, a signal for the prince to return.

The hunting party all return and recognize Albrecht, though he is dressed in peasant clothes. Albrecht kneels before Bathilde and kisses her hand, exposing his identity and his betrothal to Bathilde.

The shock of learning of Albrecht's duplicity is too great for Giselle's frail constitution. Her mind becomes unhinged (and the mad scene ensues). Giselle flings the necklace Bathilde gave her to the ground. She faints, and when she comes to, she wanders around the crowd, limply recalling the steps she danced with Albrecht earlier, unable to recognize anyone, not even her mother. She dies of a broken heart—her love unrequited. (In modern versions Giselle dies from stabbing herself with Albrecht's sword). Hilarion realizes what he has done and Albrecht is held back from trying to kill Hilarion. Albrecht, distraught cries over Giselle's body. As everyone leaves, Berthe is left crying over her daughter's dead body.

The second act is set in a clearing in the forest near Giselle's grave. Hilarion keeps vigil at the grave, though it is midnight, the time when the Wilis materialize. Hialrion, terrified, flees from these apparitions.

The wilis are summoned by their queen, Myrtha, to attend the ceremonies that will initiate Giselle into their sisterhood.

Albrecht appears in the clearing and the Wilis disperse. He lays flowers at her grave and Giselle's spirit appears. He follows her into the forest.

Hilarion has been pursued by the Wilis and is at their mercy. They force him to dance until he is exhausted. Having lost his wits, he drowns in the nearby lake.

Albrecht is still in the forest and the Wilis seek him out. Myrtha commands him to dance to his death. Giselle pleads with Myrtha to spare him. Giselle urges Albrecht to the safety of her grave where he is safe from the Queen of the Wilis. Myrtha orders Giselle to dance, and as the newest of the wilis, she cannot refuse. Albrecht leaves the cross to be with Giselle. The two of them plead with the wilis, but they refuse and force them to dance. Albrecht grows weaker and weaker, almost to the brink of death. Giselle dances with him until dawn, when the wilis lose their power. Albrecht is rescued from death and Giselle's spirit is freed from the power of the Wilis, as her love has transcended death. Albrecht remains grieving and alone in the forest.

Appendix B: A Selected Timeline

1531

King of France Henry II marries Catherine de Medici, age fourteen. Catherine brings the Italian tradition of *balli* and *balletti*, elegant social dances, with her to France, where it is called ballet.

1570

King Charles IX of France establishes the Académie de Poésie et de Musique. The Academy also supports the production new ballets.

1651

Louis XIV makes his ballet debut, following his father's love for the art form.

1669

The Royal Academy of Music, later known as the Paris Opera, is founded.

1738

The beginning of the Imperial Ballet School (later named the Vaganova Academy of Ballet): French ballet master Jean-Baptiste Landé, with the patronage of Empress Anna of Russia, begins teaching sons and daughters of palace servants the tradition of ballet.

1766

Empress Catherine the Great of Russia creates the Imperial Directorate, establishing three state theaters in St. Petersburg, including the Franco-Italian opera and ballet theater that would become the Mariinsky Theatre.

1773

The beginning of the Bolshoi Ballet company and school: Filippo Beccari is hired at an orphanage in Moscow to teach ballet to the children. These children were used in productions by a haphazardness put together theater troupe.

1805

The theater troupe in Moscow is taken over by the state and becomes the Bolshoi Theatre.

1831

21 November - Premiere of the opera *Robert le Diable* in Paris. Third act of the opera features the "ballet of the nuns," with Marie Taglioni as the mother superior, choreography by Filippo Taglioni. One of the most successful operas of the 19th century, it was the first connection between ballet and the literature of the Romantic movement.

1832

Premiere of *La Sylphide* by the Paris Opera. The ballet was written by tenor Adolphe Nouritt, who had performed the lead role in *Robert le Diable*, and choreographed by Filippo Taglioni. A beautiful Sylph falls in love with a scotsman, James, who is engaged to a local girl named Effie. He falls in love with the sylph after she appears to him in his dreams, but he cannot touch her. He tries to capture her with a magic scarf, but it burns off the sylph's wings and she dies. This version has been lost.

1836

August Bournonville sets his own version of *La Sylphide* in Copenhagen after purchasing the scenario from Nourrit. He commissioned a new score by Norwegian composer Herman Severin Løvenskiold. Bournonville enhances the role of James, and Lucile Grahn performs the role of the Sylph for the premiere. This ballet becomes the basis of the Danish style of ballet. This is the version we have today.

1837

Marie Taglioni moves to Russia to dance. She spends five years there. *La Sylphide* arrives in Russia with her.

1841

28 June - *Giselle* Premiere at the Paris Opera. Libretto by Theophile Gautier based on Heinrich Heine's version of the myth of the wilis, score composed by Adolphe Adam, choreography by Jean Corelli and Jules Perrot. Carlotta Grisi originated the role of Giselle and Lucien Petipa danced the role of Albrecht.

1842

Giselle is staged in St. Petersburg, Russia by Jules Perrot, assisted by Marius Petipa. Carlotta Grisi is there as well.

1845

12 July - the divertissement *Pas de Quatre* is first performed in London, England. Choreographed by Jules Perrot for Lucile Grahn, Carlotta Grisi, Fanny Cerito, and Marie Taglioni (Fanny Elssler chose not to accept the invitation to dance), with music by Cesare Fungi.

1847

French dancer Marius Petipa arrives in St. Petersburg after his brother Lucien Petipa arranges a position for him at the Imperial Theater.

1870

25 May - Premiere of *Coppelia* in Paris. Libretto by Arthur Saint-Léon and Charles Nuitter after a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, score by Leo Delibes and choreography by Arthur Saint-Léon.

1890

15 January - Premiere of *The Sleeping Beauty* in St. Petersburg. Choreography by Marius Petipa with music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

1892

17 December - Premiere of *The Nutcracker* by the Imperial Ballet (later known as the Kirov) at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, score composed by Tchaikovsky, libretto based on the E.T.A. Hoffmann story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.

1895

27 January - Premiere of *Swan Lake*, choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, music by Tchaikovsky, at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg.

1907

22 December - Premier of *The Dying Swan* at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Choreography by Michel Fokine and music by Camille Saint-Saens. This became the role Anna Pavlova was know for internationally.

1908

8 March - Premiere of Mikhail Fokine's *Les Sylphides* in St. Petersburg. Choreography by Fokine, music by Frédéric Chopin, arranged by Alexander Glazunov, inspired by Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*. Glazunova had previously arranged the pieces by Chopin under the name *Chopinana*, and the ballet is sometimes referred to by that name. The ballet has no story, other than the young man, sometimes called the poet, dancing with a group of sylphs.

1909

2 June - French premiere of *Les Sylphides* by Diaghilev's Ballet Russes at the Théâtre du Châtlet, Paris. Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky, and Anna Pavlova danced the lead roles.

1911

19 April - Premiere of *Le Spectre de la Rose* by Les Ballet Russes se Serge de Diaghilev in Monte Carlo. Choreography by Michel Fokine, based off the poem by Theophile Gautier.

1931

The Vic-Wells Ballet, headed by Ninette de Valois, makes its home at Sadler's Wells Theatre, where the company will remain until 1939 and the beginning of World War 2.

The company also performs at the Old Vic Theatre, though it takes the name of its new home theater.

1935

1 March - Premiere of George Balanchine's *Serenade*, set to Tchaikovsky's Serenade in C for Strings. Balanchine's first American ballet. Originally danced by students from the School of American Ballet in Hartsdale, New York, the ballet changed over the following years, with additional choreography added and costumes changed to the long blue tulle skirts standard for performances today.

1938

12 October - The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo premiere a re-staged version of *Giselle* by Serge Lifar in New York at the Metropolitan Opera House.

1939

Ballet Theatre, later renamed the American Ballet Theatre is founded in New York City.

1940

11 January - *Romeo and Juliet* premieres in Leningrad. Choreography by Leonid Levrovsky with the score composed by Sergei Prokofiev. Juliet was danced by Galena Ulanova.

28 February - Premiere of *Graduation Ball* by the original Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo at the Theatre Royal in Sydney, Australia. Choreography by David Lichine, music by Johann Strauss and selected and re-orchestrated by Antal Dorati

10 October - American premiere of *Graduation Ball* by the Ballet Russo in Los Angeles, California

1944

8 October - American Ballet Theater's first New York performance of *Graduation Ball* at the Metropolitan Opera House featuring Marjorie Tallchief (sister of Maria Tallchief) and Alicia Alonso.

1946

February - The Sadler's Wells Ballet relocates to the Royal Opera House, which opens its doors again after the war. The first ballet the company performs in their new home is *The Sleeping Beauty*

1948

George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein found the New York City Ballet company.

1956

To celebrate its 25th anniversary, the Sadler's Wells Ballet receives a Royal Charter, and is renamed The Royal Ballet.

- 3 October - The Bolshoi Ballet performs *Romeo and Juliet* in Covent Garden, London.
- 1958
John Cranko choreographs his version of *Romeo and Juliet* for La Scala in Milan, Italy.
- 1959
16 April - The Bolshoi Ballet performs *Romeo and Juliet* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in the midst of the Cold War.
- 1961
16 June - Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev defects to the West in the airport in Paris during the Kirov's tour to Paris and London.
- 1962
German premiere of John Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* by the Stuttgart Ballet.
- 1965
9 February - Premiere of Kenneth Macmillan's first three-act ballet *Romeo and Juliet* by the Royal Ballet at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London. Inspired by Lavrovsky's and Cranko's ballets, as well as Franco Zeffirelli's production of Shakespeare's play at the Old Vic in 1960-61, and choreographed for Lynn Seymour and Christopher Gable, though Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev performed the title roles on opening night.
- 1967
Balanchine choreographs *Jewels*, a three-act ballet representing three traditions of ballet: the French Romantic style as Emeralds, his American style as Rubies, and the Imperial Russian style he grew up with as Diamonds.
- 1974
Russian dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov defects in Canada.
- 1980
16 December - Baryshnikov's staging of *Giselle* premieres at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. Baryshnikov dances the role of Albercht. The production has its New York premiere the following April, with Cynthia Gregory and Susan Jaffe as Giselle and Myrtha, respectively.
- 1983
3 February - World premiere of Erik Bruhn's staging of Bournonville's *La Sylphide* by American Ballet Theatre.
30 April - George Balanchine dies.

24 May - New York premiere of Erik Bruhn's staging of Bournonville's *La Sylphide* by American Ballet Theatre.

1985

Rudolf Nureyev, Director of the Paris Opera Ballet, stages his version of *Swan Lake*, based off Petipa's original.

3 January - American Ballet Theatre premiere of Macmillan's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.

1998

21 May - Kevin McKenzie's staging of *Giselle* for American Ballet Theatre premieres. Irina Dvorovento dances the role of Myrtha.

2008

12 April - The Kirov Ballet come to New York City on tour. Performances at the New York City Center run from April 1-20. The performances include excerpts from *Chopiniana*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, and *The Dying Swan*.

2014

4 June - Westchester Ballet Company performs *La Sylphide* for their gala.

2016

10 June - Westchester Ballet Company performs *Pas de Quatre* during their gala, along with the "Jewels" variations from *The Sleeping Beauty*.

2018

18 October - SLK Ballet School perform part of Act II of *Giselle* at Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital, New York, NY.

2019

1 June - Chevalier Ballet Company performs a mixed bill of classical ballet pieces at The Strand Theater in Hudson Falls, NY. "Friends" from Act I of *Giselle* is included.

22 June - SLK Summer Soiree. Program includes excerpts from *Giselle*, and *Don Quixote*.

2022

9 May - American Ballet Theatre announces Susan Jaffe as their new Artistic Director, effective December 2022.

Notes

The opening epigraph comes from the Florence + The Machine song “Choreomania” from their 2022 album *Dance Fever*. Much of this collection was written while listening to the album.

The beginning quote in the poem “Two Deaths” is by Martha Graham.

In Section II: 9/21/2017 and 9/20/2018 are excerpts from the essays I wrote as part of my education at SLK Ballet School. 6/15/2018 comes from my post-exam conversation at SLK Ballet School. I am grateful to my friends Isabella and Irenie whose conversations often prompted the ideas explored in this section.

“Biomechanics Risks Associated with Ballet” is a found poem using the language from the study by Charlotte Leanderson, et al. “Musculoskeletal Injuries in Young Ballet Dancers.” *Knee Surgery, Sports Traumatology, Arthroscopy* : Official Journal of the ESSKA, vol. 19, no. 9.

Much of the content in Appendix A: Source Material, The Ballet *Giselle*, and Appendix B: A Selected Timeline comes from Jennifer Homans’ book *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, Rosalyn Krokover’s *The New Borzoi Book of Ballets* and Chapter 4 of *Ulanova and the Development of Soviet Ballet* by V. Bogdanov Beresovsky, translated from the Russian by Stephen Garry and Joan Lawson.

Some of the research for this collection was done at the British Film Institute Library and Mediatheque in London, England, and at the Palais Garnier Opera House in Paris, France.

My personal archive of videos, handwritten class notes, programs, ballet tickets, social media, and general ballet ephemera was useful in filling in certain gaps in my memory and research.

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