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Dance Luminaries Weigh in on the Conspicuous Absence of Female Choreographers

By GIA KOURLAS JUNE 23, 2016



Lauren Lovette, right, with the School of American Ballet students Chloe Sherman and Harrison Ball in 2009, when Ms. Lovette was a participant in the school's Student Choreographic Workshop. Credit: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

"Listen, I've lived in a women's world my whole life," said Peter Martins, the ballet master in chief of New York City Ballet. "The last thing we are is sexist here."

At the same time, the lack of female choreographers is glaringly obvious at City Ballet and other major ballet companies.

There is Twyla Tharp, the rare woman to succeed as an important choreographer in the ballet world, but few others. (Ms. Tharp, who prefers to be recognized as a choreographer, not a female one, declined to comment for this article.)

People in the dance world have different ideas about the reasons behind the dearth of women in a field where, as Mr. Martins points out, women predominate in number. Certain issues, though, come up again and again.

One is time. It's impossible to overemphasize the arduous work it takes for women, on a daily basis, to stay in optimal physical shape while working to perfect their technique and artistry. Mr. Martins pointed out that his female dancers perform two or three ballets every night: "And it's hard work. In Balanchine's choreography, you don't stand idly by — you dance. And it's less so for the men."

Male dancers simply aren't as busy as their female counterparts, who, on top of everything else, are trained from a young age to be obedient and to not step out of line. (Notably, Ms. Tharp has never danced in a classical company.)

In modern dance, composition is part of the training, but in ballet there is a lack of structured choreographic training. Most ballet choreographers emerge from companies, and most — including today's pre-eminent ballet-makers Alexei Ratmansky, Christopher Wheeldon and Justin Peck — begin creating works while still performing.

And men are still rare commodities in the ballet world; from their earliest days in the classroom, they are outnumbered and usually given more attention — and scholarships. They don't, in other words, start out from what Lauren Lovette, a City Ballet principal, called “a place of insecurity.”

Prominent people in the dance world were asked to weigh in on the topic, which has emerged as an increasingly urgent part of the ballet conversation. What follows are edited excerpts.



Sara Mearns, in foreground, and members of New York City Ballet in “Walpurgisnacht Ballet” in January. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Sara Mearns

Principal dancer, New York City Ballet.

Girls have this dream of being a ballerina, and obviously they're going to try and see it through until it doesn't work. That's what we think about before choreographing. I don't think it really concerned me until recently, when it came to my attention that we had five choreographers coming [to City Ballet], and none of them were female. I was like, wait a minute. There can't be at least *one* woman in this whole group?

[Pam Tanowitz](#)

Contemporary choreographer who has worked with New York Theater Ballet and Ballet Austin, in Texas, among others.

Once in a while, they'll look around and say, “Where are the female choreographers?” I don't know if it's understood that you just don't get a female ballet choreographer. They have to be cultivated. Why it's not of interest to cultivate women is deeply ingrained in the ballet world historically. There is the famous quote from Balanchine: “Ballet is Woman.” Well, it's a woman made by a man.

Benjamin Millepied

Artistic director of Paris Opera Ballet (until [July 15](#)); founder, L.A. Dance Project.

Ballet is really this strange art form that is not taught like other art forms. There's no reason that the craft of classical ballet choreography couldn't be looked at like classical music composition or visual arts or architecture — as an art that you study. There really is a need. You'll see better choreography all around, and naturally women will be engaged more.

It's also interesting that there are more successful female choreographers in modern dance. I think the reason is that roles in modern and contemporary dance are often interchangeable. In ballet, the woman — at least in tradition — has most often found herself in the place of the muse, where she is presented on kind of a pedestal. In modern dance, there is less of this hierarchy and dancers being treated more like children; the women in modern dance are adults. They have points of views.



From left, Katherine Williams and Christine Shevchenko of Gemma Bond Dance. Credit Robert Altman for The New York Times

Gemma Bond

Corps de ballet member, American Ballet Theater; in March, she will present a work for the [Atlanta Ballet](#).

Often we're called girls. "Girls, can you get into place?" It's like we don't age. There have been 40-year-olds here that were always girls. It's different when you're talking to a male principal; he's a man. And it sounds so simple, but that, to me, is the biggest issue. When I go and am trying to present my work and say, "This is what I've made," in the ballet world, I think I'm still sometimes seen as a girl.



Lourdes Lopez, artistic director of Miami City Ballet, coaching Kleber Rebello. Credit Max Reed for The New York Times

Lourdes Lopez

Artistic director, Miami City Ballet; former principal dancer, New York City Ballet.

At Miami City Ballet, we have something like 20 works a season, and if most of them have female dancers, as they do, I have a male corps de ballet that doesn't dance. Let's pick a ballet: "Symphony in C" or "Giselle." How many corps de ballet men are in those ballets? Very few, so this is what it means: If you're Christopher Wheeldon or Justin Peck, and you want to get into a studio and work on your choreography, as you should because it's your craft, you have the time to do it.

Kevin McKenzie

Artistic director, American Ballet Theater, said in a statement:

For ballet choreographers, there are more men, because as partners, men tend to be more exposed to the intricacy of the actual structure of choreography and what makes it work, while the women tend to be the face of it. Women are more focused on extending themselves with trust in a partner who helps facilitate their expression.



Ashley Bouder during a performance of Justin Peck's "Year of the Rabbit" at New York City Ballet. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Ashley Bouder

Principal dancer, New York City Ballet; artistic director, Ashley Bouder Project.

Every time we see a female choreographer in the spotlight at a major company or where she's the only woman in an all-male thing, the pressure is high, and if it's not good or if it's just O.K., the critics are a lot harsher and she's either shy to try it again in such a big light or people are more hesitant to hire her.

Peter Martins

Ballet master in chief, New York City Ballet.

I wish I had an answer. My own speculation is that to become a female dancer, it's a little more demanding than for a male. It's probably sheer volume. I've been asking Lauren Lovette every year, "Do you still think about choreography?" I remember what she had done at [the School of American Ballet]. She says, "Of course I do, of course I do, but I'm so busy now." So I think there's probably a true conflict there.

[Lauren Lovette](#)

Principal dancer, New York City Ballet; she will choreograph a new ballet for City Ballet's fall season. As a student, she participated in the Student Choreographic Workshop at the School of American Ballet.

We're so used to being told what to do. It's not like a contemporary company or even when you go to Juilliard, where you're doing improv and creating things all the time. To think creatively, to jump outside the box and start choreographing is a huge undertaking. We just don't practice that muscle.

Rachel Moore

President and chief executive officer of the Music Center in Los Angeles and former chief executive officer of American Ballet Theater, where she danced in the corps de ballet from 1984 to 1988.

I think it's [about] the culture of what it means to be a female ballet dancer. You do not develop a voice. I grew up having quite a voice, and then when I danced, I felt so afraid to speak out that when I went back to college, it took me about two years before I felt like I had it again. Being third swan from the left, while you are an important piece, it is also a role that becomes internalized. I find it deeply ironic that in the fields that are predominantly women, the men are treated well. Over and over and over again. It's ridiculous.

Leave a comment to share your own experiences and ideas about the absence of female choreographers in ballet.

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