BALLET’S CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY:  
THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Drexel University

by

Adam Schnell

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

of

Master of Science in Arts Administration

September 2014
DEDICATIONS

Dedicated to Camilo,
who is my everything,
and to my parents,
who have taught me that education (in all its guises) is the key to a life well lived.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the entire faculty of Drexel University’s AADM program. It has been a privilege to study with all of you. I believe that with programs like yours, the future of the arts in the United States is bright indeed. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Andrew Ziteer who, as my thesis advisor, provided more insight into my topic and my own abilities than I could have ever expected. Your quiet thoughtfulness has most certainly shaped this thesis into what it has become.

In addition, it is with the most humble gratitude that I thank Peter Anastos, James Canfield, Stephen Mills, and Mikko Nissinen (my interviewees for this study). You have reignited my faith and belief in ballet in ways I never thought possible.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT............................................................................................................................................................. v

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE – THE INNER WORKINGS OF AN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:
APPROACH, VALUES, AND PHILOSOPHY .................................................................................................................. 20

CHAPTER TWO – HOW TO CURATE A RELEVANT REPERTOIRE ................................................................. 27

CHAPTER THREE – THE CULTURAL RELEVANCY DEBATE ............................................................................ 39

CONCLUSION............................................................................................................................................................ 47

BIBLIOGRAPHY.......................................................................................................................................................... 51
ABSTRACT

I embarked on this project because I have become more acutely aware (since starting a ballet company) of the perceived lack of cultural relevance in ballet. I examined this topic from the perspective of current artistic directors of ballet companies in the United States. Though I did not fully realize it at the start of my research, I was hoping to make sense of the complicated marketplace I was entering as a newly minted artistic director.

I conducted in depth interviews with four separate artistic directors. The interviewees were encouraged to respond (at length) to prompts covering various topics related to the cultural relevancy of ballet. I found that artistic directors of ballet companies see ballet as a relevant, living, evolving art form. They see ballet this way because the art form’s core values exist in a near vacuum that transcends fad and fashion, war and revolution. These image-makers affect ballet’s cultural relevance simply by applying these core values to their work in the field. Moreover, whether stated or not, I was able to glean specific pushes towards relevancy relating to each interviewee.
INTRODUCTION

The tale of the tutu is indeed the story of a bunch of crazy dreamers, dancers, warriors of anatomy who have worked ludicrously hard to formulate, shape and perfect the highest form of the human physique, and the result is a glorious paradox: the manifestation of morality in muscle, truly Whitman’s body electric. What a noble and superb cause! What folly in the face of guaranteed evanescence! (Bentley 2010)

Ballet is perhaps the most evanescent of art forms. Indeed up until the advent of film recording, there was no efficient way to record dances. Despite this shortcoming, ballet has continued to exist for over 400 years. In fact it may be the very universal language of ballet that has made it so durable (Homans 2010, 242). Dance, including ballet and mime, is the only art form that can tell a story that transcends the spoken word or written language. This makes dance a powerful catalyst for understanding, and change, across cultures.

But what is ballet’s place in the twenty-first century? Where do the tutu and the pointe shoe, the swan queen and the faun, Tchaikovsky and Terpsichore fit into the modern world? Noted dance critic Jennifer Homans sent shock waves into balletomanes’ (ballet enthusiasts) souls in the epilogue of her 2010 book “Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet,” when she decreed that ballet was dead. Though Homans is only one in a long line of insiders to engage in ballet bashing, an industry term (Carman 2007) to describe what critics and detractors do to constantly slam the art form, the issue remains: the fleeting world of ballet has always had a tempestuous love-hate relationship with the public.

After all, to become a ballet dancer requires years of rigorous study, and even a casual observer must accept certain conventions and rules of etiquette and hierarchy in
order to not be completely lost when watching ballet. Also, ballet has not yet translated well into our modern all-access, all-hours, digital age. Across the field, to truly connect with the dancer and the dance, it is still generally considered a requirement to enter a theatre (or a studio) and remain quietly, singularly focused, and alert for hours at a time. These qualities have exacerbated a perceived lack of cultural relevancy in the ephemeral world of ballet.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In 2013, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a report on how people in the United States engage with art. This study, entitled “The 2012 Survey Of Public Participation In The Arts”, found that ballet had the second lowest attendance rate out of any art form (NEA 2013, 12). Only opera ranked lower. It would be easy, based on this statistic, to say that Americans just don’t care for ballet specifically, and dance in general, but in delving deeper into the report, several other statistics emerge.

That same NEA study found that Social Dancing has the highest reported incidence of art making and art sharing in the U.S. Almost 1 in 3 adults participate (33). Dance has the second highest percentage (other than instrumental and vocal training) of learning participation at some point in Americans’ lives (41). And, dance is a discipline most likely learned outside of school (39), which indicates participants make an extra effort (and most likely incur extra expense) to learn. All indicators: encountering an art form in a social and familiar setting, high rates of education throughout the country across age groups, and a willingness to make an extra effort to learn, demonstrate that ballet should rank much higher in participation by Americans.
Yet, from a Tylenol™ television ad in 1998 (http://youtu.be/PSAX_oEe9Bw), to a long-standing industry-wide effort to appeal to American men by beefing up ballet’s macho factor (Fisher 2007), to articles by industry professionals entitled “Five things I hate about ballet” (Segal 2006), ballet has always had a somewhat tenuous relationship with the American public. Homans takes that tenuous relationship and obliterates it with the assertion that, in terms of our modern American culture, “nothing could be further from the public, physically concrete, and sensual world of dance” (549).

While social dancing seems to be deeply imbedded in the vast panoply of cultures that make up our American landscape, and dance education has certainly become a surrogate team sport for young girls (particularly), the idea that watching ballet and dance performed by professionals can make for a deeply satisfying artistic experience has simply not caught on with the majority of the American public. Perhaps this is due to the fact that resident professional ballet in America has only been around for just over eighty years (www.sfballet.org/about/history). Ballet’s short history in the United States aside, some of the other criticisms that are examined in the literature review of this project are high ticket prices, a lack of ethnic diversity within the field, and an out of date and perhaps out of touch repertoire.

As a former professional dancer, I can attest to the fact that a certain amount of acceptance of these facts exists within the world of ballet. I do not remember when this dogma was indoctrinated in me, but I do know that on some level I always understood that the majority of people in the U.S. did not understand, accept, or even like my chosen calling. Yet I did it anyway, and I am not alone. There are no shortages of ballet companies, choreographers, or even aspiring dancers in the U.S. I have never been able to
articulate more than perfunctory explanations for why ballet attached itself to my soul, nor am I equipped to comment on why so many others have an aversion to it; further research into that topic is certainly necessary. What is abundantly clear is that ballet still does capture the imagination of some and the rancor, or at least ambivalence, of many.

The issue is: how does an art form with an image problem make itself culturally relevant at a time when its values and that of the culture it inhabits arguably do not meld? Who even has the ability to affect change in the cultural relevance of the art form of ballet? Choreographers? Sure. Dancers? Maybe. The true image-makers of the art form, however, are the artistic directors of ballet companies. Throughout the history of ballet, they have always been the ones to decide who and what get seen. Indeed once dance making passed through the hands of the royal court and on to Noverre and Petipa, Diaghilev and Grigorovich, Bournonville and Balanchine, artistic directors (sometimes just called directors or ballet masters) have shaped the art of ballet as much, or possibly even more, than the dancers who appear onstage (Homans 2010). And in the 21st century, modern American artistic directors shoulder the largest burden in affecting ballet’s cultural relevancy. As a newly minted artistic director myself, I was anxious to understand these effectors, and it was with them that my study began, but first, as a point of reference, it was imperative to explore what others have written on the cultural relevance of the world of ballet.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

In beginning to examine the available literature on cultural relevancy in ballet, I must state the warrant that ballet is not considered culturally relevant to the majority of Americans in the 21st century.
THE CULTURAL RELEVANCY DEBATE

According to a Washington Post book review, Jennifer Homans’s *Apollo’s Angels* is the definitive history of the art of ballet (Arana 2010). Yet, it is the very depth and breadth of Homans’s tome that allowed her edict of ballet’s imminent demise to ring so true. If anyone could pronounce ballet dead, surely it was the woman who wrote its most expansive history. In her epilogue Homans bemoans contemporary culture’s lack of belief in ballet (Homans 2010, 547-550). She cites ballet’s inherent elitism, etiquette, and hierarchy as being completely outmoded in the modern world.

Lewis Segal, who published his scathing article “Five things I hate about ballet” in The Los Angeles Times in 2006 took an even more direct shot at the art form. “In this country, ballet simply will not address the realities of the moment, and its reliance on flatulent nostalgia makes it hard to defend as a living art” (Segal 2006). Segal further asserts that ballet is not just elitist but racist in terms of characterizations of non-white Europeans within the classical and neo-classical canon. This has led to the claim made by others that diversifying the ranks of today’s ballet companies is the path to cultural relevance (Hayes 2014). Segal adds to his argument that the art form has worn the public down to a point where if people decry that they don’t like it, they are shunned or feel guilty about their own lack of understanding. Homans reiterates Segal’s assertion by stating, "most people today do not feel they ‘know enough’ to judge a dance” (548).

The issue with both Homans’s and Segal’s arguments is that they are not new, and while ballet bashers may have been correct in their assertions in specific epochs, or in responding to certain works or dancers, a history of criticism does not make an art form irrelevant. Ballet, however, has consistently been out of step with the culture that
surrounded it. In fact, it is the very book Homans wrote that illuminates the long lack, or perceived lack, of cultural relevance in ballet. Only seven pages into her 550-page volume, Homans points out that the very first ballet was seen as culturally irrelevant. 

*Ballet Comique de la Reine*, which was produced in 1581, the work that most historians classify as the first example of a structured ballet, was performed during a period of great civil strife in France. King Henri III was criticized for spending the state's money on entertainment rather than war (Homans 2010, 7). Homans does not stop there. Once Louis XIV had codified ballet in France, the criticism of the art form continued.

In the 18th century, dancers and ballet masters were concerned with pulling ballet away from its elitist, courtly, godly image and recreating it in the image of the people (50). One of the great French ballet masters of the time, Jean Georges Noverre, struggled to make ballet relevant after the collapse of the French court. In Noverre's time, the meaninglessness of ballet became the problem. The order, aesthetics, and classification that ballet had reflected had disappeared. Ballet didn't say anything anymore because the etiquette and structure of court life did not exist in the same way it once had (73). In the 19th century, Homans recalls attacks by the Russian writer Shchedrin on the almost sacredly held Russian ballet. He called ballet “conservative to the point of self-oblivion” (262). Homans also quotes Mikhail Fokine (the father of neo-classical ballet and a voice that straddled the 19th and 20th centuries) as having said ballet was outmoded (293).

Where Homans leaves some gaps in the history of ballet’s lack of cultural relevance, others have stepped in. Auguste Bournonville closed himself off in his native Denmark because his beloved art form sunk deep into the realm of cancan in Paris (Bentley 2010). Even the father of classical ballet, Marius Petipa, had to deal with thinly
veiled death pronouncements hanging over the art form. In an 1896 review in the
Peterburgskaya Gazeta (St. Petersburg’s newspaper at the time), a critic wrote that ballet
in St. Petersburg would survive as long as the Italians did not have their way with it.
Ironically, the Italian school played a rather large role in modernizing the ballet in St.
Petersburg (Scholl 1994, 15). And, in a rebuttal to Segal’s 2006 article, John Rockwell,
writing in The New York Times, reminds us that when George Balanchine first began
making ballets in America, he was blasted and maligned (Rockwell 2006). In a prescient
twist, Rockwell also points out biases held by Homans a full four years before her book
was published.

In a cold, hard reading of history, it may be possible to say ballet has never truly
achieved cultural relevance; however, it is also true that throughout the history of the art
form, leaders inside and outside the field have always championed ballet as essential.
Dwight Garner, a book reviewer for The New York Times (and newly converted ballet
fan), recently wrote that ballet seems “on its best nights, like an art form that towers
above the others” (Garner 2014). Historically, Garner is in good company.

Russian ballet master Fyodor Lopukhov (who managed to have a career both
before and after the Communist revolution) wrote that lack of knowledge led to ballet
being seen as irrelevant in the new Soviet Union (Pawlick 2011, 47). And, in the 21st
century, trade publications are constantly furthering the dialogue of ballet and cultural
relevancy. “Beyond Ballet Bashing” appeared in Dance Magazine as a response to
Segal’s article (Carman 2007), and “What Ballet Needs Next” appeared in Pointe
Magazine only recently (Carman and Cappelle 2014).
Also, both Homans and Segal were sharply criticized when their works were published. Alistair Macaulay, dance critic for *The New York Times*, wrote in his book review of *Apollo’s Angels*:

> I have written this before, but it bears saying again: Ballet has died again and again over the centuries. The dances that Louis XIV and Voltaire and Pushkin cherished did not survive. We can smile at that now, because we know how ballet, phoenix like, rose again from its ashes; how, protean, it changed its nature with each new era. (Macaulay 2011)

In another review refuting Homans’s words, a critic points out how devastated Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald were when the great ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev died. They felt ballet died with him (Bentley 2010). Diaghilev died in 1929, but ballet is still here.

All of these writings combine to show a historic and current image of ballet’s cultural relevancy debate. The evanescent art form, it seems, has always had its share of champions and detractors. It has also been declared dead innumerable times, but still, it remains. Towering figures in ballet history have left us with assertions to refute the claims of ballet bashers. The great and revolutionary Russian pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova stated ballet could never die (Pawlick 2001, 44).

In exploring the cultural relevancy debate, I have encountered many reasons for the pronouncements on ballet’s demise, but Rebecca Martin’s view adds an especially intriguing, and thus far un-discussed, point to the debate. Writing for *Dance Informa Magazine*, Martin cites Sarah Keough’s view that ballet in the 21st century is simply suffering from a lack of self-confidence (Martin 2011). An article in *The Journal of Social Psychology* even found that ballet dancers have lower self-esteem than other dancers, and also the population in general (Clabaugh and Morling 2004, 31-48). Though it is impossible to draw concrete conclusions based on this study alone, I would assert
that it is extraordinarily possible that ballet and the artists who practice it are simply less confident in themselves and their place in the 21st century. Therefore, their art form is seen as dead or dying. Perhaps 400 years of ballet bashing has taken its toll. Further research into the cause of ballet dancer’s lower self-esteem is needed, still, ballet appears to go on. Therefore, to more completely examine ballet’s current state of cultural relevancy; it is germane to examine ballet’s face (the art) as it is presented in the 21st century.

THE CLASSICAL/NEO-CLASSICAL REPERTOIRE AND CULTURAL RELEVANCY

Ballet bashers bemoan the fact that ballet’s repertoire seems stale and out of date. Segal’s “flatulent nostalgia” is more or less echoed by the “dull, flat-screen look of today’s dances and dancers” (546) that Homans sees. Can these critics’ views be taken as more than mere speculation and opinion? I could point to bad reviews throughout history as a way to contextualize modern critics musings. After all, it may not be an argument for relevancy, but, as mentioned above, ballet bashing is nothing new. Nor is manipulating classic and neo-classical work. Even some of the greatest, and most dogmatically revered choreographers (Blackwood 1997) and pedagogues (Katz Rizzo 2012) were prone to revisions and re-toolings of their ballets and methods, but to truly show that the classical and neo-classical ballet repertoire continue to be culturally relevant, the literature of the last twenty years is what must be examined.

I think there is something to breathing fresh life into the classics and not necessarily trying to re-create things. We need to find new ways to present these ballets to a young iPod generation. If we don’t, they’re going to stay at home with their computers. (Carman 2007)
The above quotation, by Christopher Wheeldon, appeared in an article responding to Segal’s diatribe on ballet. Wheeldon is, in point of fact, the most commissioned choreographer working in ballet today. Homans does not even include Wheeldon or his widely performed, and currently working, contemporaries in her book that decries ballet’s death. On this point, a rival critic wrote: “In a book that inclines to this kind of exaggeration, an epilogue arguing that ballet is dead arrives simply as one more overstatement” (Macaulay 2011).

Ashley Wheater, current artistic director of The Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, arguably America’s first maverick ballet company (founded 1956), tends to take a light touch when blowing the dust off his company’s once revolutionary repertoire. Wheater has redesigned lighting to accommodate modern technology and has even re-orchestrated scores in an effort to draw contemporary audiences into heritage work (Diana 2010, 44-46). Other companies have also made minor adjustments to classic work in order to engage their audiences. San Francisco Ballet changed a character’s makeup in Mikhail Fokine’s *Petrushka* from a blackface to blue (an idea taken from Oakland Ballet) for a recent production (Carman 2010), and Houston Ballet has long been practicing colorblind and forward thinking casting (www.houstonballet.org). In fact it is the classical canon’s very evanescence that lends itself to revision and streamlining.

For dance makers that wish to push the boundaries even more, there is the approach of drastic revisionism. This, as has been shown, is not a new concept. Homans herself parades us through 400 years of the editing of ballets. Matthew Bourne, the choreographer responsible for changing the swans of Swan Lake from lithe and delicate ballerinas to virile bare-chested and barefoot men, uses the wide appeal of the stories of
the great ballets, and literature for that matter, and then drastically alters them to catch the imagination of the broadest audience possible (DancePulp 2010). Incidentally, Bourne’s *Swan Lake* ran for 18 weeks on Broadway, was seen by nearly 150,000 people (http://www.playbillvault.com/Grosses/Show/850/Swan-Lake), and has subsequently toured the world and made return visits to New York. Ashley Page, Scottish Ballet’s artistic director, uses Bourne’s approach (tempered a bit) to simply return to the darker side of the origins that the stories for the great ballets are based on. This dark edge removes the saccharine from the classics and broadens their appeal (Anderson 2007).

Homans’s own assertion that this recycling is a bad thing is disproved by the fact that ballet has always had one eye on the past in order to sweep into the future. The touchstone works that moved ballet into new eras: Petipa’s *Sleeping Beauty*, Fokine’s *Les Sylphides*, and Balanchine’s *Jewels*, were all giving a nod to what once was (Scholl 1994, 101). To further argue for relevance, specifically in the neo-classical repertoire, an entire film about the preservation efforts aimed at George Balanchine’s body of work speaks to the importance of the past in shaping the present and future of ballet. Balanchine is Homans’s self described voice of Apollo’s Angels (539), so the preservation of his legacy is germane here simply due to the fact that his work is still generating revenue for companies around the world. In the film, Jean Christophe Maillot (artistic director of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo) sums up perfectly the delicate job of curating the classical and neo-classical repertoire while still keeping ballet fresh and relevant. “Inspiration is only memory, and from memory you can, with your experience, your vision of the world, bring new ideas, say again what has been said before, but with the aesthetic of today” (Blackwood 1997).
NEW WORK

Maillot’s vision of the path to innovation and relevancy rings true with the directors and choreographers of today. Many have found success using contemporary music to appeal to today’s audiences. From live jazz accompaniment in Pittsburgh, to rockers like Pink Floyd, Beck, and the Indigo Girls in Portland, Memphis, and Atlanta, ballet has moved beyond Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. Ironically, both Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky were avant-garde composers in their time.

Most of these projects are designed to cast a wider net in terms of audiences (Brown 2000), but in another ironic and pro relevancy twist, nearly all of these forward-thinking works were premiered alongside more traditional works (Anderson 2002). Audiences experienced the traditional on the same bill as the avant-garde. What is to be made of pairing a ballet featuring The Indigo Girls live onstage in a new work with George Balanchine’s *Serenade*, or a work to the music of Pink Floyd presented alongside the second act of *Swan Lake*? It is difficult to say whether traditional and non-traditional audiences would be taken aback, moved, or dumb-founded, but what is clear, is the fact that at least there is some sort of forethought by the artistic directors making these program choices.

In Europe, where narrative work never really fell out of favor as it did in America, dance relies most heavily on its intermodal qualities, using not just the human body, but other arts, like music and visual art, to propel it forward. Emily Alane Erken argues, “just as film is created by audio visual combination, ballet is a multimedial [sic] genre. Its essence may be dance, but, narrative or not, it always requires something more” (2012, 12). Perhaps the success of the marriage between popular music and ballet in the United
States is an example of this. British choreographer and director David Bintley agrees that adding another element to ballet is a step into the future. Bintley has incorporated modern music (Nutcracker Sweeties) and also political themes into his work (Edward II). Though not many ballet choreographers have gone as far as Bintley’s depiction of the rumored way Edward II died (a red-hot poker to the anus), his work has been widely lauded (Carman 2000).

Back in the U.S., The Washington Ballet’s artistic director Septime Webre recently premiered a ballet version of The Great Gatsby. Webre believes that music choice, story, and social comment combine within his work to make it relevant for today’s audience (Fuhrer 2010).

American choreographer Alonzo King takes his own new work a step further. He believes that by embracing world-views that seem to be the antithesis of ballet, his work propels the art form towards global cultural relevance. In an article for The San Francisco Chronicle from 2005, dance critic Rachel Howard agrees: “he [King] renders ballet so alien that it becomes universal” (Jensen 2008). Indeed King has placed his ballet-trained dancers onstage with collaborators as diverse as Pygmy tribes and Shaolin Monks. King’s distinct brand of de-Europeanizing ballet, both through his own artistic voice and the collaborations his company undertakes, has caused his work to be embraced by diverse audiences the world over.

All of these varying perspectives on new ballets only scratch the surface at the innovation and ingenuity present in ballet today, and the results at the box office galvanize the argument that new work is making ballet relevant. Peter Boal (artistic director at Pacific Northwest Ballet) has reported that mixed repertory programs,
featuring ballets where nearly all of the choreographers are currently working in the field, have outsold full-length classic story ballets (Carman 2007), King’s company is booked consistently around the world (www.linesballet.org/performances/tour-list/upcoming/), and Bourne’s international blockbuster success has already been discussed. Ballet bashers may not like all of the new works that are presented, as has been the case throughout history, but there is simply no room to argue that new work, and the way it is presented by today’s artistic directors, does not have the power to affect ballet’s cultural relevancy. Though further research into instances where new work has surpassed the standard classical rep in terms of box office receipts and audience engagement is indeed necessary.

THE NUTCRACKER PARADOX

If the cultural relevancy of ballet is being aided by a repertoire that includes classical, neo-classical, and new work, what about that oh-so-different animal, *The Nutcracker*? This gateway drug into ballet has been embraced by American culture like no other. Doctoral dissertations have been written on the subject of its cultural relevance. *The Nutcracker* “is performed anywhere someone has ballet shoes, a Tchaikovsky CD, and a dream” (Fisher 2003, ix), and yet, does not this ballet smack of the inability to connect that ballet bashers speak of?

Mikko Nissinen, artistic director of Boston Ballet (and an interviewee for this study), doesn’t think so. In an article for *Pointe Magazine* entitled “Nut Necessary,” Nissinen states “If you perform it [*The Nutcracker*] with quality and freshness, there is so much depth in a production that you can watch it many times and it's delightful” (Anderson 2006). In Rockwell’s response to Segal, there is another argument for the cultural relevancy of the ballet. “Even its hoariest traditions give pleasure, as in the
delighted faces of audiences young and old at a good account of *The Nutcracker*” (Rockwell 2006).

In addition, many American ballet companies have employed ballet’s long-standing practice of revisionism within their annual Nutcracker productions. Transplanting the location and time period of the ballet has been a favorite source of relevancy for choreographers (Peradotto 2008).

But it is Fisher, in her 230-page text *Nutcracker Nation*, which emerged from her doctoral dissertation, who exploits these ideas, and indeed the whole cultural phenomenon of *The Nutcracker*, to their fullest potential. She refers to the dual nature of the ballet as elite and accessible (51), she takes its ideals of hearth and home to meld perfectly with the spirit of the season that exists each December across North America (31), and she cites the nature of the ballet’s history as immigrant and underdog as the perfect marriage with American constitution and values (2). If the literature referenced above does not paint a clear picture that *The Nutcracker* remains crucial to ballet’s cultural relevance, then the sheer volume of productions in the U.S. each year must. How else could a blockbuster ballet be explained?

**SUMMARY**

In showing that ballet’s current face (the art) is striving for cultural relevancy and also that the history of the art form has always been a struggle between critics and champions, it is clear that it is the negative public image of ballet that is affecting its cultural relevancy. Thus, in addition to exploring how artistic directors perceive the cultural relevance of ballet in the 21st century, the question also becomes what, if
anything, are they doing to affect it? Increasing cultural relevance could possibly obliterate the ballet’s negative public image.

**STUDY METHODS**

The focus of this study was to conduct in depth interviews with artistic directors currently working in the field of ballet. The purpose of these interviews was to inquire how organizations are working toward a more relevant form of ballet. Current artistic directors in the field of ballet were encouraged to expound on the following prompts:

- What are the values you subscribe to when approaching your job as an artistic director? Do you see your approach as unique in the field?
- Can you talk about your approach to curating the classical and neo-classical repertoire? What about the production of new work? *The Nutcracker*?
- What is ballet's relevance in the 21st Century? How do you respond to those who say ballet is dead (or dying)?
- Are you able to do anything in your role to affect ballet's cultural relevance, and if so, what?

These questions, along with a thorough examination of the history of the art form, provided a rich and detailed analysis of ballet’s relevance according to some of its foremost proponents. Armed with that analysis, it has been my hope to provide steps forward and best practices toward ballet companies being able to clear the hurdle toward greater attendance at, and engagement with, ballet. By addressing cultural relevancy, side issues such as ballet’s image problem and low attendance should begin to fall away as well.

The interviewees for this study were:

Peter Anastos  
(Artistic Director of Ballet Idaho)

James Canfield  
(Artistic Director of Nevada Ballet Theatre)

Stephen Mills  
(Artistic Director of Ballet Austin)

Mikko Nissinen  
(Artistic Director of Boston Ballet)
LIMITATIONS

There were four main limitations to this study. The first was that the study is not attempting to glean whether ballet is perceived to be culturally relevant to the majority of Americans. Ballet’s low attendance rate is well documented, as is the relatively steady stream of criticism lobbed at the art form from industry and non-industry press. There was little need to ask the question whether ballet is currently relevant to the majority in the United States. The interesting question was what is being done about the lack of cultural relevance. Thus the starting point of this study was the premise that ballet is not considered culturally relevant to the majority of Americans in the 21st century.

The second limitation of this study has to do with dance education. This study was not seeking to understand why so many study ballet as children, but do not attend ballet as adults, nor was it specifically interested in efforts to expose more children to ballet training and performances. As mentioned in the introduction, the dance community is actually fairly successful in terms of education. The focus of this study was more broadly aimed at attempting to document successful efforts to shed the perceived lack of cultural relevance in ballet and as a result, increase earned and contributed income for professional ballet companies in America.

The third limitation of this study had to do with the interviews themselves. It was not possible for me to travel to each company and conduct interviews and also view audience development strategies in person. This has to do with limitations on time and money available. Instead, I limited my research to in depth phone interviews.

The final limitation to this study is the fact that I have relied almost exclusively on the opinions and experience of the artistic directors themselves. Quantitative data to
support the insights of the artistic directors interviewed was not readily available without extensive further study beyond the scope of this paper. Future research exploring the quantitative data that could back up the conjecture of the interviewees is recommended.

**FINDINGS**

I began this inquiry hoping to find a prescription or formula for showing the general public what I, the interviewees in this study, and balletomanes around the world see as the most relevant art form: ballet. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that this would not occur, and indeed it didn’t. And while the lack of a magic bullet is not surprising, what I did discover in the course of this study actually was. Artistic directors of ballet companies see ballet as a relevant, living, evolving art form despite the historically constant stream of criticism that is slung at the genre. They see ballet this way because the art form’s core values exist in a near vacuum that transcends fad and fashion, war and revolution. These image-makers affect ballet’s cultural relevance simply by applying these core values to their work in the field.

Moreover, the results of this study illuminate the very nature of art. All people may not believe ballet is necessary for a well-lived life, but there will always be those, like the interviewees for this study, that devote their life to spreading word of its worth. Therefore, the conversation is not whether art or ballet specifically is relevant, it is: are there individuals willing to continue to make an art form their life’s work? In ballet there continue to be many of these disciples, so relevancy continues to be achieved.

Does this conclusion solve ballet’s image problem? Absolutely not. Does this conclusion even increase greater attendance at, and engagement with, ballet? Again, no. What has been illuminated for me, with this study, is the fact that, like anything else,
ballet is relevant to those who believe in it. Beyond that, I have become even more convinced that artistic directors, through holding fast to ballet’s in-bred values and through smart decisions about what work is presented, hold the key to increased belief. Belief, which becomes relevancy. Relevancy, which obliterates the negative public image of ballet.
In beginning my in-depth interviewing of selected artistic directors, I wanted to make sure that I was not laying all my cards on the table too soon. My intention was to purposefully skip over the full intent of my inquiry in order to glean the most genuine opinions and thoughts possible. Therefore my first two questions in each interview were meant to establish a baseline for how each artistic director approached his job. In this way, I hoped for, and was rewarded with, answers that mirrored the concept shown in my literature review that the current and continued push in the art form is to strive for cultural relevancy in the same way it has always been done, with diligent work and an eye on quality.

In asking interviewees about their approach, values, and philosophy, an interesting trend emerged. The artistic directors not only possessed a clear vision for how they approached their job, this is not surprising considering how few actually rise to the rank of artistic director, but this vision permeated the entire way they thought and spoke about ballet and its cultural relevancy. For purposes of introduction and clarity, I will discuss each interviewee separately in this chapter.

**PETER ANASTOS**

Peter Anastos is currently the director of Ballet Idaho. He also has three previous artistic directorships to his credit including Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, the original all-male comedy ballet company Anastos founded (http://balletidaho.org/company/peteranastos/). As a seasoned artistic director, Anastos
takes a rather philosophical approach to his job. He believes that “What matters, is that you approach the whole thing from a sense that everything should be first class and have quality” (2014). Anastos harvested this approach from watching the choreography of George Balanchine. He uses Balanchine’s work, and the integrity, rigor, and quality found therein as the benchmarks from which he operates.

Though he never danced for Balanchine, Anastos was indeed present in New York, and watched Balanchine’s company nightly, during some of the choreographer’s most creative periods. So, there is little surprise that he derives inspiration from the man many in dance consider the master. Anastos elaborates, “watching how he [Balanchine] choreographed and cast, the way ballets were put together or improved over the years, the whole mechanism of the New York City Ballet at that time, was the best education I could have received”. Anastos even credits some of Mr. Balanchine’s lesser works as being able to advance the art form through the daily work of improving dancers and educating audiences. Despite his clear leaning toward Balanchine as his barometer for his artistic directorships, two points that Anastos makes on his own philosophy do bear further scrutiny.

One is the fact that even though Anastos, as he himself puts it, “worship[s] at the shrine of George Balanchine,” he mentions earlier influences such as The Royal Ballet (London) and The Paris Opera Ballet. This begs the point that, in ballet, there is simply no way to escape the notion of tradition wrapped in the guise of etiquette and correctness. Dancers are taught from the very beginning that there is a way things should be done. Far from making the art form rigid and stagnant, as many ballet bashers have suggested, this staid adherence to a set of values has actually made the art form less prone to fads and
fashion, and has allowed it to meld, almost without exception, with its surroundings wherever it is introduced. After all, we are talking about an art form that at the heights of its creativity survived both the French and Russian revolutions. Integrity, rigor, and quality are values that never wholly (if ever) fall out of fashion. Anastos concedes that these guidelines even trump personal taste. He may not like a particular ballet, but if it was presented according to his own stated principles, then it has a place in the dance world.

Second is the fact that Anastos credits much of today’s perceived malady in ballet with the instances where these values are absent. He believes a lack of sincerity and integrity, whether it is from directors, choreographers, or performers, can lead to a feeling that the art form is sick, or sickly. “We are in a profession. If you are running a company, if you are a choreographer, if you are a dancer, it doesn’t matter. You’re in a profession and sometimes the business gets in the way of the art…One wants to try, at all times, to keep integrity, in a way kind of keep your innocence. Keep your good spirit”.

**JAMES CANFIELD**

As director of Nevada Ballet Theatre and the former founder/director of Oregon Ballet Theatre, James Canfield may glean his values from a different muse than Anastos, but the results are the same. Having spent the majority of his professional performing career working at The Joffrey Ballet under co-directors Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino, Canfield links his values directly to Robert Joffrey (http://www.nevadaballet.com/html/History_ArtDir.html).

Canfield still hears Joffrey’s voice in his head and asks himself what his mentor would do in any given situation. Canfield calls Joffrey “the Johnny Appleseed of dance”
(2014) because of his efforts to make dance more relevant and accessible to the American public. The young Joffrey Ballet toured the U.S. in a station wagon, stopping almost anywhere they could put on a performance. Joffrey was also unafraid in his work to embrace the most avant-garde themes of his generation. That accessibility, relevancy, and historical value (Joffrey was famous for seeking out and mounting lost works that held historical significance) of the Joffrey mentality have stuck with Canfield into his time as an artistic director.

Again, though, it is important to point out that Canfield trained at The Washington School of Ballet with founder Mary Day. Day was one of the most respected teachers in the United States for many years. Quality in training, rigor, and integrity from a source mentor in Joffrey, encourage more parallels between Anastos and Canfield than one would observe at first glance.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that Canfield’s first artistic directorship was in a place with no ballet history (Portland, Oregon), and that his current company (Nevada Ballet Theatre) must compete with the glittering lights of the Las Vegas strip. One is left to wonder whether Joffrey’s pioneering spirit led Canfield to companies that could harness these values, or whether his appointments in such environs are mere coincidence.

**STEPHEN MILLS**

In contrast to Peter Anastos and James Canfield, Stephen Mills, the current artistic director of Ballet Austin (his first directorship; a post he has held for nearly fifteen years) does not have the perceived standard ballet pedigree. In fact most of Mills’s teachers steered him toward modern dance. Despite this fact, he persevered, and danced with
notable companies such as The Harkness Ballet, another groundbreaking troupe, and Cincinnati Ballet (http://www.balletaustin.org/about/artists.php).

Mills has a philosophy that mirrors those previously discussed, but adds a specific element. “All you’ve got in a dance company is people and art” (2014). Mills speaks about the quality and the integrity mentioned before in terms of the work, but adds to the fact that he likes to give his dancers a voice. If one combines this with his experience in modern and theatre dance, forms that are much more historically collaborative than ballet, and also the fact that he came of age in a time where ballet dancers were not necessarily treated well, one can understand this philosophy perfectly.

Another piece of Mills’s philosophy is to focus on what he calls one’s “circle of genius” (2014). Mills is quick to point out that his company, Ballet Austin, was never going to receive national attention for a production of a full-length classical ballet. It is important to him to be distinguishable from other companies and to have a place in the dance world that is all Ballet Austin’s own. To that end, Mills has made it his mission that Ballet Austin is continually producing new work, and the company has made a name for itself in the dance world for this very reason.

MIKKO NISSINEN

Mikko Nissinen, current director of Boston Ballet, and former director of Alberta Ballet, really combines all of the philosophies listed so far. Nissinen was born in Finland, and not only did he receive his training at the Finnish National Ballet School, he studied at the Kirov Ballet School (the famed Vaganova academy in St. Petersburg Russia), and danced with top flight companies including Dutch National Ballet and San Francisco Ballet (http://www.bostonballet.org/mikko-artistic-director.html). Quality, integrity, and
rigor: check. In fact, Nissinen’s own philosophy as he approaches his work is: “integrity, high quality, and I see myself as somebody who is opening doors for audiences to experiences that sometimes they have not been exposed to” (2014). Nissinen also latches onto the concept Mills espouses of a circle of genius with his interest in contemporary choreographers, specifically European imports.

Where Nissinen adds his own stamp on personal philosophy has do with personal faith. “You have to be 100% true to yourself. You have to understand your environment and community where you are, but you’re not supposed to change who you are”.

Nissinen even states that in twelve years as Boston Ballet’s artistic director the instance of a work ending up onstage that he personally did not approve of has been very slim.

CONCLUSIONS

The clearest through line I can draw within the context of the inner workings of an artistic director is that of quality. The interviewees possess a quality approach to the work, the choreography, the production values, and to the treatment of the people throughout their organization. As I have hinted at, this quest for quality comes from the very principles of ballet itself. A dancer is considered to be of exceptional quality if he or she represents well, not only all of the values and techniques passed on from his or her teacher, but uses his or her instrument to synthesize and transcend what has come before in order to push the art form forward. I am unaware of a way to describe relevancy better than that. Artistic Directors appear to be no different. Whether the interviewees specifically mention this shared tradition or not, I got a sense of a greater responsibility than simply running a company according to their own personal values.
This underlying thread may be augmented by the rigor put forth by Anastos, the accessibility touted by Canfield, the respect afforded to the dancers Mills employs, or the self possessed confidence of Nissinen, but the fact remains the very structure and discipline, etiquette and form that have built ballet for over four centuries passes, whether they like it or not, to the current crop of artistic directors working in the field. Rather than shy away from this history or even crumble under its weight, Anastos, Canfield, Mills, and Nissinen simply approach their jobs with the quiet correctness and high standards that they imbibed in the classrooms where they learned to dance.

To these image makers, ballet’s cultural relevancy is a moot point because the art form has always been relevant for them, and it is through their diligent and careful work that, as those who have been in their shoes before have always done, the most evanescent art form works its way into the hearts of critics and champions alike.
CHAPTER TWO – HOW TO CURATE A RELEVANT REPERTOIRE

Clearly, it is the actual work that is presented that allows the interviewees for this study to work towards the cultural relevance of ballet within their own communities. After all, ballet is a performing art, and it is the performances that shape whether or not the public is engaged with the art.

In the course of interviewing artistic directors for this study, the logical building blocks for putting together a repertoire were explored in near chronological order. I asked each artistic director about classical repertoire and neo-classical repertoire, the production of new work, and *The Nutcracker*. The purpose of this inquiry was to build a case for how artistic directors curate an engaging and relevant repertoire.

For the purposes of my study, I limited discussions of classical repertoire to mean ballets that have been passed down to us from around the globe up until the arrival of Balanchine, Fokine, and the other neo-classicists. Think of classical ballets as *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and the like. Neo-classical work, again for the purposes of this study, encompasses work that has been preserved from right around the turn of the 20th century and forward. In many cases repetiteurs that actually worked with those who created the work still stage these pieces. This category, with apologies for the misnomer, also served as a catch all for contemporary choreographers that are still alive and working today whose work the interviewees brought to their respective companies (though it was not first choreographed for their dancers). New work and *The Nutcracker* are perhaps the easiest categories to define. *The Nutcracker* was discussed separately simply because of its unique and completely unaligned with the rest of ballet place in North American
culture. New work simply refers to work that is choreographed directly for, and premiered on, the interviewees’ dancers.

**THE CLASSICAL AND NEO-CLASSICAL REPERTOIRE**

Even in the twenty-first century, the word ballet conjures up images of tutus and princes, tiaras and swans. The classical repertoire is inescapable despite complaints of it being outmoded, out of touch, and even racist. Indeed Stephen Mills asserts that, “the business model doesn’t exist that we would not be required to do those type of [classical] works”. Mills would know. He cited the following figures in our interview. His company, Ballet Austin, just sold over $250,000 worth of tickets to their production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. This is a substantial amount of revenue for a company whose budget is around $6.5 million annually. *The Sleeping Beauty* was Ballet Austin’s highest grossing repertory program outside of *The Nutcracker* last season.

But if the classical repertoire is a given when balancing the equation of works a company performs, how do artistic directors approach making these ballets relevant for a modern audience? Peter Anastos decries “there is no way you could show the four hours of *Sleeping Beauty* as it was done in 1893 today, they would be leaving in droves”! In fact, Michael Kaiser, in his book *The Art of the Turnaround*, recounts the presentation of a faithful reconstruction of the original *Sleeping Beauty* by the Kirov Ballet during his tenure at The Kennedy Center as a non-starter due to the production’s length (Kaiser 2008, 153). So, it was again prevalent among all the interviewees that quality, and upholding the standards of ballet in general, in the way these works are mounted is paramount. Mills’ “circle of genius” also plays a major role here. All of the interviewees
alluded to the fact that if a company can’t do a work justice, a director should not program it.

To that end, James Canfield holds the value that presenting sections of these works more closely to their original intent shows restraint and integrity, rather than augmenting large portions of the cast with students or volunteers in roles inappropriate to their experience level. Mills agrees, while adding to the point. “You have to allow yourself the freedom to manipulate them [the classics] in a way that the dancers can do a credible job and that you can give the best to the history of the work”. This sense of a sure editor’s hand extends to the view Anastos has of presenting the classical canon. He believes that, while you can’t edit the material for what you wish it was, directors and choreographers have a responsibility to show the work with integrity, respect, and reverence, and make the ballet come alive for a modern audience. To be sure, this philosophy is sometimes at odds with itself, but he tries to present the classical rep in a way that first time audiences can learn why these works have survived. Mills agrees, and likens the classics to “high art,” thus extending the assertion that they be treated with respect, quality, and a nod to an individual organizations’ strengths.

Mikko Nissinen takes the discussion of classical ballet rep one step further. He agrees with the other interviewees in terms of quality, and in terms light editing, to streamline the work for a modern audience, but as artistic director of an organization with over $33 million dollars of revenue in 2012 (according to Boston Ballet’s IRS form 990), he is in the position to add the element of procuring what he sees as the definitive versions of works in the classical canon. Boston Ballet’s size and healthy budget allow Nissinen to have access to more dancers, better production values, and the best
knowledge in the dance world, and he endeavors to have stagings of all the major surviving classical works that represent, to his mind, the version “closest and most successful to the original intent of the piece”.

Nissinen’s thought brings the discussion full circle to the values of quality and sticking to what an individual company does best. While Canfield may choose to present only Act III of *The Sleeping Beauty*, Mills may mount the entire production slightly scaled back, and Nissinen may find the use of Konstantin Sergeyev’s, the assistant choreographer on the original production, full-scale version to his taste, they all subscribe to the values stated above, and also to Anastos’s view to “keep the integrity of the piece, and you’re teaching them [the audience] something they need to learn”. After all, the classics are ballet’s past, and without an exposure to the past, the ballets of today would make little contextual sense.

When the interviewees for this study add neo-classical work into the mix of curating their company’s individual repertoire, the benchmarks discussed for classical rep remain intact with two notable additions. First, that all begin to fall in line with Nissinen’s “definitive version,” and also, all of the artistic directors tend to use the neo-classical rep to diversify their audiences’ experience at the ballet.

In terms of aligning to definitive versions of neo-classical work, there really is no surprise here. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, for this study, neo-classical work has been partially defined as work that was codified with some sort of record. Despite this fact, some of the interviewees for this study are incredibly blunt about the ability to replicate even the neo-classical repertoire faithfully to an original production. Anastos and Canfield particularly cite the fact that different repetiteurs will
stage sometimes drastically different versions of the same work (even when the
choreographer may still be alive). Anastos, in particular, is able to parlay this potentially
damaging side affect of ballet’s ephemeral nature into an argument for relevancy.

I think we have to wrestle with: how do you update and upgrade and continue a
dynamic technical expertise, but still hold on to the integrity of a classical ballet
that you are staging, you know those are really big important questions. We’re
still looking at ballets of Balanchine, that are 50 years old and they don’t look
anything like they did when he first did them. They look totally different now. So,
even the newer stuff that was created in the 20th century continues to change. And
I think that is really the way it ought to be.

This is a return to the assertion of ballet’s durable nature. Because bodies change,
fashions change, and tastes change, Anastos is making the case that because ballet has, in
the hands of capable artists, the ability to grow and adapt, because the language of the
dancers, through more refined technique and increased ability, continues to evolve. A
ballet that was created in the 1800s may not look of a certain era in the same way a piece
of music, a play, a painting, or an orchestral work from the same time could. In other
words, Anastos is asserting that classic work danced by contemporary dancers will have a
life and a freshness that is simply not available to say a reading of Shakespeare or a
viewing of Renoir.

For the artistic directors interviewed for this study, classical work may be the
foundation of a company’s rep, but neo-classical work provides some much needed
balance to the fairy worlds and melodramatic tragedies of ballet’s past. Anastos uses the
neo-classical repertoire to augment on both ends of this spectrum. He programs fun and
frivolous work and also serious brooding work. His preference for ballets, whether dark
or light, include pieces that are entertaining and those that make the audience want to
return for a second, third, or even fourth look. Mills adds that repertoire must advance the
taste of his audience, so that perhaps if a choreographer has a lighter piece to start an audience off on, that work can eventually lead to programming some of that choreographer’s more challenging works.

Canfield’s ideal would be to move along this path toward more challenging works every season. He believes that if you look at each season as an opportunity to tell ballet’s evolution, then your audience will come along for the ride. “I would start in the fall with the most classical…and then we would do Nutcracker, and then we would start transitioning to the second half of the season, so we might do a rep show…and maybe even something that’s wild and crazy”. In this way, through the art, Canfield endeavors to show ballet’s evolution each year, and thereby prove its relevance. Nissinen, likes to delve deeper into the neo-classical canon when programming for his audience, “I am trying to go much deeper into the catalogue”. He programs certain cornerstone works of the great choreographers, but likes to push his audiences further in terms of familiar and unfamiliar work. He even digs into the vaults to try and find work that has not necessarily been seen in North America.

Again, we return to the fact that the period beginning with the neo-classicists, and moving up into and including work by today’s elder statesmen and women of choreography, represents a notable period in ballet’s history. Whether these pieces were danced differently at their premiere or not, they, like the classical repertoire before them, teach an audience how dance evolved to this point. And so, according to the interviewees, they must be approached and presented with the same values that artistic directors approach all other aspects of their work.
NEW WORK

In moving into a discussion of where new work fits into curating a relevant repertoire, it is imperative to include a statement by Nissinen. “Swan Lake wasn’t always a classic. It was the most avant-garde thing the day it was done, [and it was] very unsuccessful. Later renditions became more successful, but that is how things move forward [in ballet]”. Modern audiences may perceive ballet as tutus and princes, tiaras and swans, but the art form in reality is constantly churning out new work. New work may be the most difficult to position in a repertoire simply because it represents the untried and the unknown, but all of the interviewees for this study rate it as an essential part of any ballet company’s makeup.

For this discussion, it is relevant to start with Nissinen. He describes himself as a non-choreographer. This is opposite of the other interviewees in the group, and yet, he has built a reputation, both at Boston Ballet and in his previous directorships, as a cultivator of new voices within the art form. Most notably, he pretty much single-handedly pushed his friend Jorma Elo into the international spotlight as a choreographer. He sees his role as that of a mentor to the choreographers his company commissions. He uses his vast experience to push and challenge them in the same way he would his dancers or his audiences.

Nissinen’s drive to introduce new voices to the art form harmonizes seamlessly with the views of the other interviewees. Canfield, during his time at Oregon Ballet Theatre, introduced the “American Choreographer’s Showcase”. This full program of new work by American choreographers had the audiences ecstatic because it was always fresh and new. Canfield himself has been known to push the boundaries of his own
choreography. He, however, sees himself more as responding to his audience the way his mentor Robert Joffrey did. His *Go Ask Alice*, set to the music of Pink Floyd was an attempt, in Portland Oregon, to achieve relevance with the city’s pioneer/steel and lumber town spirit. The music of Canfield’s own generation brought his peers to the ballet “through the back door”. He met audiences where they were with art they were comfortable with, and paired it with an art form they would not necessarily have experienced otherwise. Incidentally, and returning full circle, Canfield programmed *Go Ask Alice* alongside the second act of *Swan Lake*.

Mills, a prolific choreographer in his own right, used and uses his platform as an artistic director to stretch himself as a choreographer. At the start of his career as an artistic director, Mills was charged with filling gaps in the season when money was scarce for commissions. This allowed him to see what components were missing within a Ballet Austin season, and challenged him to create work, often outside his comfort zone, to fill in those gaps.

A signature Ballet Austin work, *Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project*, has become the touchstone for Mills’s circle of genius when it comes to Ballet Austin’s dedication to new work. The ballet, which is about the Holocaust, but also genocide and human rights, is presented as part of community wide efforts to engage in a dialogue on these issues in an attempt to work towards greater understanding of the human condition. The performances of the ballet are actually a culmination of months of symposiums, workshops, and panel discussions that seek to answer questions about community understanding, bigotry, and how the Holocaust remains a relevant lesson to be learned from. Mills has used dance as a catalyst for social change in a huge way. The project has
been undertaken in Austin twice, Pittsburgh, Miami, Denver, and on tour in Israel. Mills 
was even invited to speak about the project at the United Nations.

Whether new work means discovering the undiscovered, meeting the audience 
where they are while pushing them beyond, or pulling in community resources in a 
statement of relevancy, all of the interviewees stated, in one form or another, the same 
sentiment as Anastos when he was asked about new work: “ballet doesn’t survive unless 
it gets a constant injection of new choreography…it should be at least half of what any 
company does”. This stands to reason. Without classical work, we would not have neo-
classical work, and without something to come after neo-classical and contemporary 
work, ballet’s repertoire would be in danger of falling into irrelevancy. This is not an 
earth-shattering conclusion, but it hardly builds a case for a lack of cultural relevance to 
show the extremes today’s artistic directors go to in order to foster the work of artists 
creating for today’s audiences. Though not all finished work achieves relevancy, the 
process of continuing to create new ballets continues to propel the art into the future.

THE NUTCRACKER

I have referred, in the literature review of this study, to The Nutcracker as the 
gateway drug of ballet. Over the holiday season in North America, this ballet appears to 
be everywhere, so what do the interviewees for this study make of the Nutcracker 
phenomenon, and how do they approach the ballet so it remains relevant? There was no 
argument that the work is essential to any ballet company operating in the United States. 
The most popular reason given for this fact was that the ballet is a cash cow. The 
interviewees provided the following statistics. Boston Ballet alone dances around forty-
three performances of the work per season. Ballet Austin sold out its fourteen
performance run in December of 2013. Canfield’s new version for Nevada Ballet Theatre has “made over $2 million in two years and 24,000 single tickets have been bought. Never in the history of this company has that been” (Canfield 2014).

Also, in his own way, each director spoke about the fact that some audiences may only come to see The Nutcracker and not any other ballet they present. Standard marketing and development practices are employed by all the interviewees to turn Nutcracker audiences into full-time audiences, and even though each is content to allow the lumbering holiday giant to work its spell silently on potential balletomanes, some offered up additional suggestions for attempting the conversion and pushing toward relevance.

Nissinen has crammed his production, one of his few choreographic credits, with technically challenging and exciting dancing for his entire company. In this way he ends a Nutcracker run with better dancers. This if you have to do it, strengthen your dancers in the process philosophy runs as a parallel benefit to the approach Anastos takes. He tries to put a lot of pure classical dancing in the second act of his production. His hope is that audiences actually latch onto the sheer beauty of ballet itself, as opposed to the technical spectacle laden and story-heavy, first act of most productions. Perhaps with such a plethora of dancing, audiences will make the connection that they want to see more actual ballet and come back for other productions.

I say actual ballet, because as Anastos himself puts it, “The Nutcracker is less about ballet than any other ballet in the world…It’s more about the feelings of home, hearth, and family at Christmastime. It’s a tradition in a way that a lace doily is a tradition”. And yet, it is this lace doily that enables many ballet companies in the U.S. to
even produce a season. Nutcracker is to ballet what the great masters are to art museums, what a blockbuster mega-musical is to musical theatre, and perhaps, what a pops concert is to an orchestra. It is logically unsound to argue that all of these works are irrelevant when they tend to connect with more audiences than any other.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Mills may have said it best when he stated that, in a ballet company, there is only the people and the art. This chapter has focused on the art itself. The building of a relevant repertoire is a calculated and logical balancing act. Strikingly, both Nissinen and Anastos presented a powerful metaphor for the task of repertoire building. From Nissinen: “my way of balancing the season is like if you have kids, and you ask what they want. They’ll be eating candy, candy, and candy, so it’s my job as an artistic director to make sure that we get a healthy balance of nutrition for the soul and mind”. From Anastos: “We never want to feed them [the audience] candy all the time…it is really important to give them solid food. I think that is kind of how one approaches a repertoire. There can be some candy on there and some sweets, but you gotta really give them solid food that nourishes their spirit and nourishes their soul”.

In this way, and combined with their approach to the task of simply being an artistic director, the interviewees for this study create a picture of a relevant art form from within. If we distill Mills’s statement to a business perspective, the employees and the product of ballet have been shown to be relevant. Using the values artistic directors apply to themselves, and provided the members of their organization are on board, any business run by diligent, driven, and forward-thinking managers whose aim it is to broaden the reach of their product, should succeed. If we add to that a nuanced and multi-faceted
product that is not only meeting the consumer where he or she is at, but also pushes the boundaries of what he or she may want or need, the factors are there for success. It was at this point in my research, over and over again with each interviewee, that I wanted to shout out “so what is the problem?!”, and this is precisely why I moved on from the inside-to-out approach to relevancy and began questioning the outside factors encroaching on the cultural relevancy of ballet.
CHAPTER THREE – THE CULTURAL RELEVANCY DEBATE

As I mentioned earlier, I purposely did not mention the true nature of my inquiry to the interviewees of this study until I had created a baseline of each artistic director’s philosophy in job approach and also the art that he elects to present. This approach led to a phenomenon I never expected, but in retrospect, should have spotted from the back row of the theatre. Artistic directors of ballet companies in the United States do not even acknowledge the image problem, and therefore the cultural relevancy issues, facing ballet in any circumstance unless they are specifically probed. As I say, I should have seen this fact coming at me fast, but at the point when I arrived at my primary research, I had spent my review of secondary sources hacking away at arguments from ballet bashers. These sources said that I cared about a completely irrelevant and dying art, and the quantitative data available seemed to agree.

I say I should have seen this lack of preoccupation with the cultural relevancy debate in ballet coming because, as an artistic director myself, I know that there is little time during the day-to-day running of a ballet company to stop and ponder whether the art you are making is relevant. That, as more than one interviewee told me, is the place of critics, historians, and yes, ballet bashers. Instead, as has been thoroughly reviewed in the previous chapters of this study, artistic directors tend to apply the values that have been passed down to them through ballet’s bloodline to their work, and as a result, affect the cultural relevancy of the art form. This nearly blind trust and faith is instantly recognizable to anyone who has had more than a passing experience with the art of ballet. As Homans herself writes, “classical ballet has always been an art of belief…layered with
centuries of courtly convention and code of civility and politeness” (547). I would add faith, as well as the characteristics the interviewees discussed of quality, rigor, and integrity.

Despite the fact that throughout their day to day lives in the dance industry the interviewees for this study perhaps pondered the cultural relevancy of our art form less than I expected, their responses corresponding to my main research question (How do ballet artistic directors perceive the cultural relevance of ballet and what, if anything, are they doing to try and affect it?) were incredibly varied. In order to truly give voice to the interviewees for this study, I will introduce each of their thoughts with an extended quotation, then delve into a deeper discussion of their words, and end with my own interpretation of each artistic director’s legacy of relevance.

PETER ANASTOS

It [ballet] is relevant in a sense that it’s a great art form that has been passed down to us, and has continued to improve, and so that wouldn’t be happening if there was nothing there. I think it’s still, in the 21st century, the triumph of the human body. It’s still the beauty and the glory of the human body. It’s still a great triumph over physical difficulties. It still takes discipline, rigor, brains, artistry. It still takes all those things to put it across, and so it is relevant because this is what man has always done. Man has always created art and tried to create beauty, either on an easel or onstage or on the page in music, and so it still has to do that and it still does that.

Anastos asserts that the constant striving in ballet is what connects with modern audiences. He sees man’s innate desire to better himself writ large across the art form, and though he does worry about the obsession with instant gratification in our modern world, he completely dismisses the notion that ballet may be dead or dying. On this topic, he returns to his earlier assertions that if there is a lack of sincerity or integrity in the art,
it can have the appearance of sickness. That is where he sees the ‘ballet is dead’ refrain emerging.

Anastos is pretty self-effacing when discussing his own ability to affect ballet’s cultural relevancy, stating “it is for other people to decide if you’ve kept the relevance there”. Yet, whether or not the results are measurable at the box office, his efforts, through the qualities attached to all of the interviewees described above, have shaped the modern relevancy of the art form. Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, the all-male comedy ballet company Anastos founded, has performed in over 500 cities and thirty-three countries around the world in its nearly forty-year history (http://trockadero.org/performance-record.html). The beauty of this company, and indeed the genre of drag ballet that Anastos helped shape, exists in the fact that the art form has been made to laugh at itself while keeping the values that have sustained it over the centuries. Audiences see the form’s foibles one second and then gasp at the technical brilliance of these men in tutus the next. It is simply transcendent. Having danced for this troupe, and prior to that, attending their performances in towns as small as Council Bluffs Iowa, there is simply no denying the fact that part of the awesome power associated with an artistic director’s job is the fact that through his or her vision, larger audiences can be exposed to ballet. Trockadero audiences are some of the most diverse I have ever danced for or sat amongst. Young, old, gay, straight, seasoned, neophyte, and all the colors of the rainbow laugh, and sometimes cry through a ballet together. Exposure is, to be sure, the first step to relevance. This is Peter Anastos’s legacy toward relevance.
JAMES CANFIELD

Through all the growth, and all of the financial challenges, there are probably more people seeing dance now than there ever has been in the history of this country, so that’s its relevance. It’s impactful.

Canfield cites shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing With the Stars*, and movies such as *Black Swan*, as proving that there are more people, at least in terms of Hollywood producers, that are trying to push dance as a relevant art form. He makes a powerful point. It has been a long road from *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Bell Telephone Hour*, and Ed McMahon’s *Star Search* to the point where on any given night of the week on television, you can find a program that features dance as its major plot point or subject matter.

Canfield points the ballet death rattle debate towards a source matter of previous generations not seeing ‘their ballet’, neither what they themselves danced, nor what they may have seen. This does align strictly with my examination of the history of the art form, and much as older generations tend to bemoan the current generation’s lack of substance, the same is true in ballet. And, though he points to his ability to affect ballet’s cultural relevance through a constant cognizance of what is keeping kids’ attention, he does offer an intriguing reason that may be the reason ballet has failed to reach mass cultural appeal in the U.S.

Canfield asserts that not only is concert dance an unknown, “a curtain goes up, it’s a blank stage, and you don’t know what to expect. People don’t like to be surprised, they like to be prepared, and in control, and that’s a hard one with ballet, or any dance,” but it also may carry over some social stigma from our younger years. He paints a picture of social in-casts and out-casts preparing for prom. Those without dates are seen as
losers, while those with dates are seen as winners. When Canfield rolls all of these factors in with the fact we have already explored that there is a definite language to ballet, the effect may be just too intimidating for many people to take. As mentioned in chapter 2, and supporting the passages on this topic in my literature review, Canfield himself has had great success in dispelling this unfortunate possible stigma and meeting his audience where they are at through music choice and his self-described out-there programming. James Canfield’s “getting them in through the back door” approach to audience development is his legacy towards relevance. Attracting audience by using music by groups like The Doors and Pink Floyd took away the unknown for would be ballet bashers, and gave Canfield a chance make audiences, that would not normally have found the art form, fall in love with it. He meets/met audiences on more known and comfortable ground.

**STEPHEN MILLS**

I think that dance will always be relevant because dance…when you tell a message through a metaphor, it reaches deeper because it doesn’t just reach your brain, it reaches into your soul, and dance is filled with metaphoric stories, and so that is why I think it will always be relevant.

Despite Mills’s genuine optimism in the above quotation, he does mention specifically technology as something artistic directors are going to have to learn to harness in order to maintain ballet’s relevance. Mills parleys that availability of technology into an explanation for our current me-centered culture. “I think we live in a period right now, sort of a neo-baroque period, where young people are looking for stories, and they’re looking for ways to tell their own story”. This is perhaps why Ballet Austin’s homegrown narrative ballets, choreographed by Mills, but not so far off from
the structure of standard classical story ballet, have found such a following. Mills has tackled Shakespeare, fairy tales, and borrowed stories from opera.

Mills dismisses ballet bashing outright by pointing out that critics have always existed in the arts. He also takes the argument a step further by inserting the observation that from his perspective, there is no dearth of talent in the dance world (something ballet bashers continually bemoan). But, it is the point Mills makes about his ability to affect ballet’s cultural relevance as an artistic director that completely gels his argument.

Mills pushes for taking the audience, including their perceived penchant for technology and their me-centered attitude, and making them the jumping off point for relevance. He believes that if he can allow an audience to define why ballet is important for them, based on stories with which they identify or global issues they wish to conquer, then he has given them the power to speak of relevance. This philosophy takes the nugget of accessibility put forth by Anastos and combines it with Canfield’s willingness to “get them [the audience] in the back door”. As Mills puts it, “I think it is important for us to stop saying it’s important because it’s important. We live in a time where young people assume that is a bogus argument, so we have to think more critically about what we do and why we do it in order to expose people to something that we think is beautiful”.

Moreover, Mills places the blame squarely on the leaders of the dance world themselves. He points to the fact that there are entire societies throughout the world that get along just fine without art, so it is the industry’s job to convince the public that ballet is relevant. Marketing, education, and again, putting the audience member in the center of the experience are the tactics Mills endeavors to employ to accomplish this, but really it is Stephen Mills’s ability to draw audiences in with a story, or by depicting an issue that we,
as a world, need to face that is his legacy towards relevance. He stirs passions: emotional and political.

**MIKKO NISSINEN**

Ballet, or dance, if the work can touch you and it becomes something that feeds you as an individual and replenishes you, then we are in the right place. It needs to be something that gives you either that eureka moment, or a nice escape, or intellectual stimulus, so that people will carve time in their busy calendars. Everybody’s busy…we have lots of options, so you know quality is the most important thing. Quality, quality, quality. People don’t have to know [what quality is], but people always sense.

Nissinen again appears to bring us full circle in the discussion of cultural relevance. His confidence in his own values, combined with his work ethic, may indeed be the reason Boston Ballet emerged triumphant from the great recession, resumed national and international touring, negotiated a re-branding effort, and managed the transition to a new home theatre after unceremoniously being squeezed out of their former home. This work ethic, arguably coming from the same values and discipline ingrained in him in his early training as a ballet student, directly shapes his view on ballet bashing. “People can say many things. It is easy to kill things. It is very difficult to keep plants alive, and then when you have bonsais it gets more complicated”. Nissinen decides that, instead of dwelling on naysayers, he gets to work. His rare-plant metaphor digs deep into the soul of the cultural relevancy in ballet debate. Nissinen is pointing out what the other interviewees echoed, ballet is an art form, art forms are always going to be cyclical, they will always be lauded or jeered depending on the work, the season, or the epoch. Better to simply work in line with one’s values and the history that one has inherited than worry about what critics or champions are saying.
Nissinen further points out that his ability to affect the art form’s relevance stems from the power he holds as an artistic director. From marketing efforts, to special campaigns, to repertory choice, he approaches it all with an eye on where the world is at and what today’s audiences need, not always what they want, but what they need, and yet, Mikko Nissinen’s legacy to relevance is most assuredly his encouragement of the best of the past while deftly cultivating the future. He pushes the art form forward.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the interviewees for this study may not spend their days preoccupied with the cultural relevance of ballet, they certainly affect it through their values and actions. Just as opinions and reviews from an audience at a particular performance vary, so too do the explanations as to what ballet’s cultural relevance is in the 21st century. Despite this varied reasoning, there was simply no denying that all of the interviewees held ballet as culturally relevant, and all are able to affect that cultural relevance, directly or indirectly, through their work. In this chapter I have offered up my humble interpretation of what is each artistic director’s legacy of relevance, beyond aligning himself with ballets principals and presenting engaging work. Exposure, meeting perspective audiences where they are at, stirring passions, and pushing an art form forward. A magic bullet, no, but a way forward, definitely.
CONCLUSION

This was a study of cultural relevancy in ballet. In retrospect, I should have begun this inquiry with one more assumption. I must credit a friend and patron at the first ever benefit for Ballet Vero Beach, the ballet company I recently founded, for this one, “you [as artistic director of a ballet company] are giving people something they did not know they needed”.

After all, this is the very nature of art. Stephen Mills echoed this sentiment in his interview when he stated that many people around the world, arguably, get along perfectly well without art in their lives. And yet, there are those that choose to make art, in all its forms, their life’s work. In my mind there is no more powerful argument for the relevancy of ballet or art in general that still, in the cynical 21st century, young and old gravitate to the most evanescent of art forms: ballet. Current artistic directors in ballet are among those who still believe in ballet’s power. They see the art form as relevant, and they are able, through the very nature of their positions, to affect ballet’s relevance on a day-to-day basis.

But, to be frank, so what? I find ballet relevant, but I am an artistic director. Is ballet’s cultural relevance in the 21st century that it only matters to a tiny group of balletomanes? The NEA survey cited earlier certainly supports that assertion. Or maybe, ballet has never been truly relevant. Maybe it is an elite art, and the current generation who care about it is merely trying to take the stigma out of the word elite, not take the ‘elitism’ out of ballet. These are difficult points to rebuff, and, in addition, this study has not even attempted to understand the conversion, or lack thereof, of Nutcracker audiences
to full time audiences, or why so many children study ballet, but then do not attend performances throughout their lives. On these last points alone, entire studies could be written.

I think a step back is in order. I began this study with the idea of examining cultural relevancy in ballet, but I did not begin with a clear picture in my mind as to what a culturally relevant form of ballet would look like to me. It was only in undertaking this process that I realized this was because ballet is relevant to me, and to the interviewees in this study, already. This begs the question what does increased cultural relevancy in ballet look like?

I know that, for me, financial success is a concern but not a requirement. Clearly ballet companies must be able to meet their financial obligations, but I didn’t enter the field because I was looking to get rich. I did enter the field because I loved it. I responded to the quality, rigor, discipline, integrity, and even elitism ballet requires, and I wanted to share those qualities, wrapped in a shroud of beauty like I had never experienced, with others. Following that reasoning, success for me would be a higher percentage of the public engaging with ballet, and to achieve that with Ballet Vero Beach, I plan to follow a progression not unlike a ballet class: from demi to grand, adagio to allegro, one step, or person, at a time.

This journey, for myself and for Ballet Vero Beach, has already begun. I currently take steps to curate a relevant repertoire for my young company. With a mix of classical, neo-classical, and new work, I aim to engage seasoned balletomanes as well as newcomers to the genre. Thanks to my time with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, I am able to delve further into a relevant repertoire with the programming of comedic
masterpieces that spoof ballet’s foibles, which again engage die-hard fans as well as neophyte audience members. I call this approach de-stuffying [sic] ballet.

The board of directors of Ballet Vero Beach and I have also initiated a ticket donation program. This exciting program offers complimentary tickets to local nonprofits whose constituents might not have the means or wherewithal to attend the ballet. These agencies can also take advantage of workshops and lectures provided by Ballet Vero Beach that promote deeper engagement and learning. This program, combined with our lowest ticket price being only $10, will hopefully set us well on our way to increased cultural relevance. In the future, I hope to experiment with incorporating social dancing, the highest form of arts participation/art making in the U.S. as referenced in the introduction to this study, into our programming in order to further engagement and relevance.

So, in the future, yes I would like Ballet Vero Beach to be performing for full houses and be fully funded, but more importantly I would like to see constituents as diverse as our community, attending, engaging, and accepting ballet as a necessary part of their lives. I believe the programs referenced above, along with an adherence to ballet’s stated values, and drawing on my own conclusions about how the interviewees for this study are achieving relevance will take us there.

Though I am not ending this paper with a cure-all for what ails ballet, I have been shown a way forward. That path is illuminated by ballet’s core values, written in the past, to continue to practice this durable art form to the highest standards. Beyond that, we can take a page from Michael Kaiser (the turnaround king himself): great art, well marketed (Kaiser 2008). I would add my own conclusions gleaned from discussing relevance with
the artistic director’s interviewed for this study: exposure, meeting prospective audiences where they are at, stirring passions, and pushing the art form forward. As Mikko Nissinen put it, “we curate the past, we live in the current, and we pave the way to the future”, in that way we achieve relevance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anastos, Peter. Peter Anastos Interview, June 3, 2014.


———. “Nut Necessary?” Pointe 7, no. 6 (December 2006): 34.


Canfield, James. James Canfield Interview, June 4, 2014.


Erken, Emily Alane. “Narrative Ballet as Multimedial Art: John Neumeier’s The Seagull.” Nineteenth Century Music 36, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 159–71,204.


