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*BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS*

*NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION VERSUS BODY CULTURE AND*

*THE BALLET AESTHETIC: THE EFFECTS ON THE LIVES*

*OF FEMALE DANCERS*

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**

**Dr Tansin Benn** B.Ed, DPSE (Dance in Education), M.Ed, M.A, PhD

Tansin is currently head of Physical Education, Sports Studies and Dance at the University of Birmingham, Westhill, which becomes part of the School of Education, University of Birmingham from August 1<sup>st</sup> 2001. Moving from a career in secondary specialist teaching of Physical Education and Dance, into higher education in 1981, Tansin has continued to contribute to secondary and primary teacher training, course diversification and development at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Research interests have developed in aesthetic activities, notably gymnastics and dance, and into 'life experience' research as a means of increasing understanding of particular cultures. An important programme developed at the University has been the ACE / B.Phil / MA in 'Applied Studies in Dance' which enables full-time dancers of Birmingham Royal Ballet to enter higher education on a part-time customised programme, designed around Company schedules. This is the first research to be published from the work of the successful 1997 cohort who graduated with MA's in July 2000.

### **Dorcas Walters**

Dorcas is a Principal Dancer with Birmingham Royal ballet. She trained at Elmhurst Ballet School before attending the Royal Ballet School from the age of thirteen. She joined Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet in 1986 and, in 1990, moved with the Company when it re-located and became Birmingham Royal Ballet. She was promoted to First Soloist in 1991 and Principal in 1997, performing many lead roles for the Company throughout the UK and on international tours, most recently to South Africa, Hong

Kong and America. Dorcas was a member of the first cohort of 'BRB' dancers to study at the University of Birmingham, Westhill, graduating with an MA in July 2000. This paper is adapted from her final Masters dissertation and a version was first presented at the 'International Symposium on Dance and Medicine – Medical, Psychological and Nutritional Aspects of Dance' at the Opera House, Helsinki, Finland in June 2001.

## **ABSTRACT**

A key objective of the empirical study was to investigate whether improved education for dancers about nutrition has made a positive change to the body culture of the ballet world and lifestyle of female dancers. The issues were foreshadowed by sociological theories of the body, performance nutrition, and disordered eating. An interpretive, critical research approach was used to maximise the 'insider perspective' of the researcher, with over twenty years' experiences of the training and professional ballet culture. A small-scale qualitative research project aimed to capture 'thick description' and authentic accounts of the human realities of ballet culture from the inside.

Interview and questionnaire responses were gathered from student-dancers, professional dancers, teachers / managers, and medics at a UK vocational ballet school and a company fed, to some extent, from that training school. Findings were collated with experiential observations in the daily workplace, retrospective participant observation through personal diaries and documentation including biographies and autobiographies of professional dancers.

Findings indicated that there is still a gap between the rhetoric of nutritional education and the reality of the ballet world's aesthetic and practices. 'Cult-like', authoritarian behaviour and 'docile' submissive attitudes were apparent and contributed to problems with self-esteem, body image and eating disorders. Whilst dancers in training were better informed, pressures related to the body inside the profession dominated attitudes and behaviour. The recommendations include a re-appraisal of the ballet aesthetic and body culture in the management of the profession and more empowerment of dancers to encourage them to question, critique and improve the culture of their art form rather than merely accept its ideals and demands.

## **BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYDBIS:**

### **NUTRITIONAL EDUCATION VERSUS BODY CULTURE AND THE BALLET**

#### **AESTHETIC: THE EFFECTS ON THE LIVES OF FEMALE DANCERS**

Body image, that is the beliefs, attitudes and values we attach to our bodies, results from socialization into particular ways of thinking and behaving, attributable to multiple influences. The western twentieth century transition to the ‘cult of slenderness’ is evident in current media, icons and lifestyle aspirations and is fixed in a consumer culture. (Featherstone et al 1991). The world of ballet is one of many sites in which this cult is reflected and the pursuit of the often unattainably thin physique, by women in particular, has been identified as an issue of increasing concern. It does not exist in isolation but as part of similar concerns, both in society generally, and within particular ‘body focused’ arenas such as modelling, gymnastics and dance. (Vincent 1989, Adair 1992, Buckroyd 1996, 2000, Fay 1997, Hamilton 1997). The female ballet dancer is not only influenced by her genetic endowment but also by peers, teachers, role models, company managers and directors. Expectations of body control are learned. In addition to the obvious technical and expressive mastery of the body, dancers also learn that controlling body shape and size is essential to success in their careers. This study offers an insider exploration of attitudes and behaviours that influence the body image of female ballet dancers.

#### **FORESHADOWED ISSUES**

Theoretical frameworks that foreshadowed this empirical investigation included theories of institutions and the effects on ‘bodies’, for example Goffman’s (1982) concept of ‘total institutions’ identified characteristics common across sites, for example, a ‘managerial’ / ‘managed’ split, conformity, control and surveillance.

Smith (1998) identified ballet as an authoritarian, power / achievement culture which he described as 'cult-like' where participants comply with the regime. This supports Wulff's notion of cultural adaptation suggesting that dancers gradually absorb and mirror their culture (Wulff 1998). It is the unquestioning, subservient way in which this is done, sometimes even accepting abuse and unreasonable behaviour, which has been criticised as 'silent conformity' (Stinson 1998). Foucault's notion of 'ascetic discipline', for example in monastic life, was a valuable notion in terms of collusion in self-sacrifice and denial in subservience to higher ideals. The 'disciplined body' was further explored in Frank's typology of body usage, interestingly applicable to the world of ballet, which also included the mirroring body, the communicating body and the dominant body (Frank 1991). From Bourdieu's work (cited Featherstone et al 1991), it is useful to consider the nature of the socially constructed body and, in particular, the notion of 'physical', 'cultural' and 'economic' capital in increasing understanding of the development of a dancer's body image.

The second major theoretical dimension foreshadowing the study was the 'ballet aesthetic' or 'the look', that is, the perceived ideal of the female ballet dancer, described by some as the 'anorexic look' (Stinson 1998). Where does this ideal stem from? Why and how does it change? How is it perpetuated? How is it challenged? What are its effects on students and dancers in the profession? (Vincent 1989, Adair 1992, Novack 1993, Hamilton 1998). One way in which it manifests itself is in 'disordered eating habits' amongst dancers as they continually compete for selection, recognition, roles, and general approval from the 'gatekeepers' to their life-opportunities as ballerinas. It is not surprising that some dancers develop a distorted body image, poor self-esteem and narcissistic preoccupations.

The power of socio-cultural influences cannot be ignored as increasing common-sense nutritional education reaches dancers both in training and in their professional careers (Chmelar, 1992, Brinson and Dick 1996, Koutedakis and Sharp 1999). As knowledge of the physiological and psychological effects of disordered eating patterns is translated into positive action via 'nutritional education' there is no room for complacency. This study seeks to explore the space between the rhetoric of improved sensitivity, knowledge and professional input and the lived experiences of dancers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research paradigm was essentially interpretive and critical. Interpretive, in assuming that interaction and reality are subjective and constructed through interpretation, the aim being to understand meaning, perception and action. Critical, in examining the role of ideology in the maintenance of oppression and control as well as the ways in which power systems and institutions legitimate their version of reality. The researcher has over twenty years of experience: six years of vocational training and fourteen years as a professional dancer. The research aimed to capture 'thick description' and authentic accounts (Geertz 1973) of the human realities of ballet culture from the inside. Interviews, questionnaires and observation were used to gather data from ten female dance students in full-time vocational training at a boarding school (data collected is coded St-9 for group interview and St-10, St-11, St-12, St-13 for individual interviews and questionnaires), and eight professional dancers (coded D1 – D8), from a company fed, to some extent, from the school. In that sense the school and company will be regarded as 'an institution'. The researcher's life experience inside both the school and the company, whilst enabling access to

otherwise largely impenetrable cultures, adds a rich dimension to the project.

Interviews were also held with four teacher / managers (coded T-A, T-B, T-C, T-D), and two medics at the school and company (M-E, M-F). Findings were collated with experiential observations in the daily workplace and retrospective observations through personal diaries and documentation, including biographies and autobiographies of professional dancers.

## **RESEARCH OUTCOMES**

Three emergent themes are used to frame the research outcomes;

- i.) nutritional knowledge and health,
- ii.) the ballet aesthetic and disordered eating practices,
- iii.) factors influencing a dancer's body image.

### **i) Nutritional knowledge and health**

There was no consensus in attitudes of students and / or professional dancers to nutritional education, which either indicates attention to different sources or diverse interpretations of information received. Nutritional knowledge levels were variable but there was a lack of awareness about risks associated with poor nutrition. This was supported by a medic with extensive knowledge of sports nutrition, who suggested that dancers' nutritional knowledge was comparatively "poor in relation to what they need and in relation to danger levels"(M-F). Support systems in the school had changed since the researcher's training days with the inclusion of nutritional education and concern amongst teachers and managers. The culture of a ballet company is slower to change, partially attributable to common practices of re-employing former dancers into teacher / managerial positions, thus perpetuating rather

than challenging traditional values, beliefs and attitudes. For example, one dancer, in an attempt to lose weight as directed, undertook an aerobic programme using the running machine in the physiotherapy room and had to cope with a flippant remark from management: "... you're not an athlete ... you're a dancer". The tension between positive advances in placing such equipment inside a company and dealing with traditional expectations of dancers is clear. There can sometimes be a reluctance to consider new ideas inside the ballet world and a cult-like devaluation of outside advice or knowledge in what one teacher described as some 'museum cultures' (T-C).

There was a mismatch between dancers' attitudes and behaviours towards health and nutrition. Most thought that they led fairly healthy lives in relation to exercise demands and the lifestyles of 'average people'. Only one dancer admitted to not eating properly whilst evidence from food diaries suggested "a lot of dancers" are only consuming "between 700 and 900" calories per day and many are under 700 (M-F). As the medic highlighted, such habits can promote a starvation response that is potentially highly dangerous. This would mean that many dancers might be maintaining an apparently reasonable weight by means of gentle starvation. They may appear to be 'healthy' because they do not look drastically underweight but they could be nutritionally deficient. Many do not acknowledge this or are denying the potential long-term problem. Such discrepancy between what dancers 'say' and what they 'do' was supported by the lived experience of the researcher:

I know this to be true because in the past I myself fooled people into thinking I was being healthy whilst following an inappropriately restricted diet ...

(Walters, 2000)

The medic working with student dancers believed that they all ate healthily but recognised a change in the older pupils (aged 14 – 16) who started to cut back indicating vocational concerns related to weight. Many older students and dancers think they are eating healthily and normally, but their ideas of healthy and normal are formulated according to the norms and values of the ballet world. Most cited cutting down on food as their main way of losing weight, with extra exercise mentioned by a few. Predominantly, dancers reported any lectures received as inappropriate for them or too basic, depending instead on nutritional and health information from magazines, books, and other dancers.

All the students had received professional nutritional advice but most again considered the advice inadequate, contradictory and full of the “blindingly obvious” such as “don’t drink coke and don’t eat junk food” (St-12). One problem identified by the medics was that specialist nutritional advice was required by the dancers and rarely available: “you really need elite performers’ dieticians” (M-F). Dependency on provision of food at vocational boarding school was identified as a problem by the older students who were concerned about having to cook for themselves when leaving and that they would not know “what to eat and what not to eat” (St-9). None of the students mentioned having learnt about the physiological importance of good nutrition.

All the teachers expressed concern for the present and future health of their students and dancers. At the school in particular there was open discussion of potential problems caused by negative body image and poor diet in adolescence:

...if people get paranoid at a young age that is often a recipe for disaster later on, people with eating disorders can have them all the way through their school years and their years in a company and on beyond then, but the damage they may do will be with them for the rest of their lives.

(T-C)

The professional dancers, on the other hand, felt almost unanimously that management did not want to get involved with these issues. The medic identified some indicators of positive change suggesting that management and teachers were now more informed about the dangers of poor nutrition and rapid weight loss. Former requests for instant results, for example: “we want the weight dropped for next week” were no longer made. (M – F) The employment of specialist expertise was a positive step and was making a difference in challenging previous managerial demands that had potentially damaging consequences.

As society moves in a more sensitive and litigious direction, company and school managers are increasingly aware that they owe their dancers a ‘duty of care’ and could face legal repercussions for consequences of excessive demands. (M – F). “...ultimately directors will start being sued by dancers who have eating disorders.” (T-C). Teachers and directors were all aware of the growth of nutritional knowledge and of the increasing professionalization of this dimension of medicine: “...(we) should also know the limits of (our) knowledge and when to delegate to other professionals” (T-C). One medic, who identified a link between poor nutrition and injury, supports the case for extending professional support in this area. She suggested

some injuries were caused by lack of concentration and fatigue attributable to bad eating habits. Dancers still believed there was a taboo surrounding weight issues in the profession that still results in a silent, reactive response.

Overall, the evidence indicates that there has been an improvement in nutritional education during the training of dancers and that there is some change in the profession. However, while "... many dancers now use aerobic exercise and specific training regimes to deal with weight and body shape issues, there is still evidence of dancers taking short term measures" (D-3). There appears to be a mismatch between what dancers say and do; issues of nutrition and health are exacerbated as student-dancers move closer to entering the profession. Whilst professional attitudes and provision are changing the rate is variable across company networks. This can leave the established professional dancer feeling disadvantaged in terms of nutritional knowledge and support.

## **ii) The ballet aesthetic and disordered eating practices**

Dancers' concerns over their body weight, shape and size are related to anxiety to conform to the expectations of their vocation. The question of an ideal physique for a female dancer is not fixed or isolated from societal trends; it is politically sensitive in the context of equal opportunities and it is rarely verbalised but visually evident in selection and casting practices in the ballet world. Currently the ballet aesthetic pursues the 'cult of slenderness'. Student-dancers and professionals experience the consequences. Comparing biographies of leading ballet dancers with views expressed by respondents illustrates the effects of such pressures:

My head is full of prescriptions and descriptions of physical ideals, and I don't match up to any of them.

(Bull 1998, p85)

Most respondents thought that the 'ideal' ballet physique did not actually exist although there was consensus over essential attributes. These included long limbs and a long neck, flat chest, being slim, skinny or very thin, but having toned muscles and good proportions were thought most important. One suggestion was for an overall look as "... relatively androgynous" (D – 3) and another suggested: "The perfection is to be as strong as an ox but to look like a pin" (D – 1). These views are remarkably similar to Kirkland's description of the 'Balanchine look' as skeletal (1992, p57). His "... female dancers have the elongated, curveless figure that is so different from the nineteenth century ideal" (Fonteyn 1980). The dominant view amongst dancers was that ideals were internalised and were a consequence of the training and the culture. This equates with the mirroring bodies theory (Shilling 1993) in which bodies are a reflection of their habitus, and the socialisation of dancers into the ballet culture.

Disordered eating is one consequence for some dancers who strive to attain the desirable attributes to improve their 'physical capital' as a dancer. Many of the behavioural descriptions that emerged in the data reflect the diagnostic criteria and characteristics of eating disorders identified by Buckroyd (1996, 2000) including: low self-esteem, disturbed body image, failure to menstruate, excessive exercising, obsessive focus on food and weight, other compulsive behaviour, and secretive or solitary eating.

Professional dancers provided evidence of disordered or inappropriate eating practices, whether experienced directly or vicariously, at both training and professional career stages. This was experienced differently in relation to physiological, psychological and social factors. One dancer felt she had been relatively 'lucky' having experienced few problems in this area but she reported that at school there were "a lot of cases of girls who really messed around with their food or had anorexia or bulimia" (D-6). She described one of her best friends going down to four and a half stone and felt girls were "very vulnerable at school" especially when they were trying to get a job. One interviewee admitted she alternated between "calorie counting starvation diets and eat-everything binges" and "developed an unhealthy neurosis about food," suggesting that for many dancers "weight is a psychological, not a physical issue" (D-3). This raises the question of whether an unacceptable number of dancers suffer silently from eating problems/disorders. All the dancers interviewed talked at some point about anorexia or eating disorders and most believed that a proportion of their colleagues were anorexic. Most also believed Hamilton's assertion (1997), that eating problems occur in up to 35% of female ballet dancers, was a fair statement. In the words of another dancer:

...the majority of dancers have what I call a slightly anorexic mind, but are not actually anorexic ... they perceive themselves as bigger than they are. (D - 5).

The 'anorexic mind', or distorted body image, appears to be something absorbed within the ballet culture at a very young age with potentially life-damaging consequences. For example, a dancer who, when she was younger, was really obsessed with "every inch" of herself looking perfect, admitted: "...it was very

detrimental to my mind and my health ...I never made myself sick but I would eat barely anything.” (D-7). This dancer, who had not menstruated for five years, later found out that she had osteoporosis, with the bone density of her spine being equivalent to that of a seventy year old woman.

Professional dancers linked their physical appearance with a system of rewards and sanctions in which weight-gain led to non-selection for parts and negative reinforcement, whilst weight-loss was linked with praise and selection. Observations and experiences of the researcher reinforced this. One dancer described an incident several years ago in which a ballet master told her to lose weight, giving her three weeks, saying: “I don’t care how you do it” (D-4). When she did so, by basically starving herself she was rewarded with a part in a ballet. She could not maintain the weight when eating normally and so the starvation cycle was perpetuated. This story demonstrates the links between body weight and self-esteem, and the impact of an authoritarian culture on the lives of those ‘managed’.

The professional respondents considered disordered eating practices an inevitable consequence of the ballet culture. Psychological manifestations included feelings of guilt associated with food, secretive eating habits, obsessions with the mirror-image and with aerobic exercise. For example, six out of the eight professional dancers disliked their bodies. One dancer described feeling constantly guilty about eating and commented: “...there are loads of people at work I’ve never seen eat” (D-1), and three dancers felt that often people would not socialise or eat out because of this. Self-talk was used by some to continually rationalise this behaviour: “I feel I lose it mentally sometimes – you start weighing yourself all the time and you go ‘why am I doing

this?' ... Because I've got a show coming up and I want to get to a certain weight and I know I feel better at that weight, or I get more attention, or look better in a white all-in-one." (D – 2).

In contrast, student-respondents made no mention of obsessive behaviour or eating problems. Lack of disclosure might have been related to the brevity of time together or the researcher's position as a leading dancer in a top company. 'Pressure to be thin' was mentioned by a minority of students and rumours about 'weight-limits' in pas de deux classes were shared. Evidence did not match that gathered by Buckroyd (2000). Respondents reported that teachers did not comment on weight for fear of causing an overreaction, which supports the increased sensitivity of teachers identified earlier. They were weighed every term but felt this was mainly to check they had not lost weight, their focus was on healthy eating. It may be that this represents an increasingly health conscious and positive attitude amongst the next generation of dancers. Alternatively this could be merely youthful optimism since the pressures of the profession have not yet been experienced. Teachers and medics were aware of possible triggers for eating problems, such as puberty, professional role models, and current ballet trends.

An obsessive attention to weight issues does, for some dancers, go on to "rule most of their waking hours" (D-3). Dancer - 1 thought such preoccupation with body shape could; "really get in the way because you become self-obsessed, you are always driven by what you see in the mirror." However, there was consensus that dancers required extreme determination to be successful and that striving for success could lead to a dancer being willing to sacrifice anything, including health, for their love of

ballet. Teacher C thought that: "...very sadly people can take that to extremes, they try and control the one thing they feel they can control", whilst teacher A suggested: "very often the reason (some) have got so thin is because they really want to dance so much". Both quotations illustrates how eating disorders may indeed be a form of adaptation to the ballet culture in which it appears that thinness is often interpreted by the institution as a sign of commitment or dedication and rewarded with advancement in the profession. In addition, such adherence to behaviours controlling a particular body-type demonstrates a level of self-denial similar to the ascetic discipline, constant surveillance and martyrdom of monastic institutions as described by Foucault (Featherstone et al, 1991).

Based on the researcher's experience, data gathered and biographies, it is suggested that many of these attitudes and behaviours to eating are considered normal in the ballet world, suggesting cultural hegemony whereby there is compliance and perpetuation of the ideals of the culture by female dancers. Choosing to ignore advice on health, or even life-threatening behaviour, can be likened to the elite athlete, setting aside legal issues, who is prepared to take performance-enhancing drugs, regardless of known serious health risks, for one moment of glory.

### **iii.) Factors influencing a dancer's body image.**

Respondents identified several key factors influencing the body image, beliefs, values and behaviour of female ballet dancers, including transmission of historical traditions, contemporary role models, 'gatekeepers' and selection procedures, gender relations and culture-specific phenomena. Complex interplays of these factors have shaped and re-shaped the dancers' relationship with their bodies.

Ballet ideals were thought, by most respondents, to be part of a cultural heritage, a historical tradition, of which they were part, transmitted through generations visually and orally via photographic and film records and by dancers turned teachers / directors, / choreographers. More recently globalization and communications technology enable the transmission of images around the world in microseconds that embody ‘the latest look’ of ballet stars, most recently influenced by dancers from America, Russia, and France. The link with wider societal trends in fashion, films, and other art forms was also recognised. It is “no coincidence that our best-bodied dancers can also double as fashion models” (D-3). A more ‘body conscious’ society, with commercially saleable ‘slender’ bodies fuelling a consumer culture, was recognised as influential on the body-images of dancers: “... a reflection of society, everything has become more streamlined...” (T-C). That interplay of cultures may owe a lot to past values and traditions in ballet. One dancer cited Pavlova’s assertion that sponsors and patrons would select dancers as “post-performance entertainment” and suggests that “dancers have always been required to be attractive in contemporary terms” and “the link between glamour, sponsorship, and the ballet physique should not be underestimated” (D-3).

World-class female ballet dancers provide influential contemporary role models for aspiring students and professionals alike, including both the ‘global’ stars of the day, and the ‘local’ principals in any given company; “one leading dancer kind of sets the standard” (T-A). Kirkland’s autobiography reinforces this, when she describes Balanchine’s desire to give all his dancers, through his training, the endowments of his muse, Suzanne Farrell. The result being that: “...he magnified the demoralisation

of each female dancer; her despair that she did not look like somebody else.” (Kirkland 1992, p54). Kirkland continued to describe the whole company as being “constantly engaged in imitation” and the effects on her as she underwent cosmetic surgery, silicone implants, and starvation in her desire to match an ideal. (Ibid.) The view amongst professional respondents was that individual personality mattered. Where dancers had realistic ‘body aspirations’ they coped well with demands on physique, dancers who were constantly unhappy, usually had an unrealistic, unobtainable ‘utopian ideal’.

The power of management, of school entrance selectors, company directors, teachers and choreographers, cannot be underestimated in the search for external influences on a dancer’s body image. These are the gate-keepers of the profession who hold the key to others’ life-chances and their view of the ‘preferred look’ for the female dancer mattered. ‘The look’ might vary according to the personal preferences of each company director, for example, while “Forsythe<sup>i</sup> doesn’t give a jot about body shape, Derek Deane<sup>ii</sup> by his own admission cares greatly about it” (D-3) (Pook, 1999). Directors’ and choreographers’ preferences will usually be evident in their choice of principal dancers, although, as one dancer pointed out, other dancers might misinterpret the reasons for choosing those principals. Nevertheless dancers continually interpret intentions and implications of day to day company life through many sources such as: interactions in daily class and rehearsals, canteen talk, cast lists and promotion. A positive strategy identified by the professionals was the opportunity to work with different choreographers because they came in with different ideas, body-type preferences and approaches, resulting in new opportunities and perspectives.

In the world of ballet body physique plays a role in selection for vocational training, often as early as eleven years of age, and subsequently in auditioning and casting procedures. Respondents believed there was a more open perspective on ideal body physique in England than in some other countries, that attention to ‘facility’<sup>iii</sup> was essential to prevent possible injury, but that other qualities of artistry, musicality and expression were also recognised. Teachers spoke of their awareness of the moral responsibility when accepting someone for vocational training. Attention to physique in selection procedures continues amongst dancers as they compete to join particular companies, to gain promotion and certain roles. The dancer’s focus on ‘selection criteria’ and the ‘subjective preferences’ of gatekeepers is sharpened at such moments because of the personal investment and costs involved.

Respondents agreed that ballet would lose more than it gains with over zealous early selection procedures. The preference was for “... personality and artistry” in a dancer, rather than a great physique. One medic expressed the opinion that within a wide range of body types, while there were certain physical characteristics which might be undesirable, on the whole no single one of those should prevent acceptance for training, because body types can adapt when training is appropriate. Both medics were trying to change the common perceptions within the ballet culture and both placed the emphasis on toning the muscles with specific body conditioning and aerobic exercise. They believed that the ‘look’ was achievable without weight loss or compromising health.

'Culture-specific strategies' is a term used here to cover behaviours that have occurred within the training / professional institution of ballet. Those identified by respondents as influencing body image included gender relations, teacher / dancer interactions, environmental issues of mirrors and costumes and ballet critics. Issues of gender-relations in the world of ballet have been raised elsewhere (eg Adair 1992, Novack 1993, Hanna 1998), since it is an arena in which the female dancer is both 'idolised' and denied. The female dancer does live in a world dominated by male directors and choreographers, but in this research the professionals spoke of the pressure to be thin being exerted by their 'male-partners'. One teacher attributed this to increasingly ambitious pas de deux work in which women are "...thrown around, therefore, the lighter they weigh the better" (T – C). One dancer talked about a particular male principal, whose stage partners all became very thin, the suggestion being, that it was he who had this effect on the 'physique aspirations' and behaviour of his partners (D-2). It is not clear to what extent such pressure is attributable to overt male demands or the perceptions of the women.

Teacher / dancer interactions have had profound effects on the body image and self-esteem of dancers. In the past public humiliation has left a lasting effect on individuals. Negative inferences on body size have been wrapped in such comments as: "...stay off the milkshakes' across the heads of the entire corps de ballet" (D-3), or being told "... you look like a puppy" in front of colleagues and the choreographer (D-1). This type of behaviour describes one means through which an authoritarian 'power' culture maintains control and submission. Practices have improved in this area with a company teacher stating that, in this situation "privacy and sensitivity are absolutely vital".

The ballet teacher is often revered, respected and / or feared. He or she has much power and influence over students and professionals. Tradition evokes an authoritarian model of teacher-pupil relationships established in the ballet school, which often carries on into companies. Recent improvements in teacher training and inspection are changing this but the power of the teacher was raised in this research:

I don't know if they (the teachers) realise quite how much the children hang on their every word and want approval from them, it's everything ... they are the people that their whole life hangs on.

(M-E)

Directors and choreographers can also hold apparent omnipotence as suggested in Kirkland's account of how Balanchine's "monopoly on taste and creative control was absolute" and that "his word was holy" (Kirkland 1992, p49). She felt that the dancers': "devotion to him made us dependent on him for ideas and psychological motivation" (ibid, p47). These examples of extreme dependence on an authority figure imply 'cult-like' behaviour, described by Smith (1998), and may explain in part the lengths some dancers will go to in pursuit of a successful ballet career. Where a culture of dependency and acceptance exist, self-reliance, autonomy and critical thinking cannot. The practice of re-employing former dancers straight into managerial positions was thought to perpetuate such practices:

I think a lot of dance managements, especially company managements, are completely (unprepared) people, who just stop dancing one season and

become a ballet master or mistress the next. What gives them the right? ...  
What do they know about people management skills? So they feel threatened  
and unprepared, they think if they are frightening enough you won't dare  
question them. ... We've all grown up with that, haven't we?

(T-D)

There was agreement amongst respondents that new teachers are more informed and  
therefore students being trained today are better prepared to manage their careers.  
Similarly, the education and further training of dancers is improving which will have  
positive effects on the profession.

Further influential factors on dancers' body image can be found in the ballet  
environment. The training and rehearsal environment utilises mirrors for self-scrutiny.  
Respondents blamed these for some of the body obsession amongst dancers. One  
teacher had trained in a studio with no mirrors and consequently had no image of  
herself as a dancer. When she turned professional, the company moved to new  
studios, with mirrors all the way round the room which she found "completely  
amazing and very off-putting ... I was like Narcissus" (T-A). From daily observations  
and experience it is clear that many dancers will stand in front of the same mirror  
every day in class because they find it flattering and it makes them feel better. Others  
avoid looking in the mirror or stand well back from it, because they know it will make  
them feel negative, and "it can ruin your whole day" (D-1). For the students, mirrors  
were recognised by some as an important aid, but not to be trusted. Perhaps it is the  
moment of entering the profession that predisposes some dancers to 'mirror paranoia'

since this step entails taking responsibility for yourself and the mirror can become a daily source of self-check.

Also within the ballet environment, costumes came high on the list of influences on body image and self-esteem because they can play a large role in professional opportunities and progress. Costumes can influence casting, dancers describing revealing costumes, such as the leotards and tights worn for many Balanchine ballets, as making them much more aware of every bulge. For some the benchmark for a classical company was what a dancer looked like in a tutu, so if you had big legs you were out. Practice clothes, the everyday costumes of dancers, were also dictated by body image. Hence, those who felt insecure about their physique would cover up more of themselves. “Then you’ve got the people who are so pleased with their bodies, if they’re really skinny, and they are always wearing fantastic outfits.” (D-1)

Finally, ballet critics have demoralised dancers with critical and personal references to body shape or size. In addition to the effect this has on an individual it also reaches and gains a response from directors, with further repercussions for the dancers. One example occurred when performing a Balanchine ballet in leotards and tights, two critics gave bad reviews and made damning comments about physiques. One described “an awful lot of wobbling bottoms on display” while another said: “... (this company) has rejected the starved-greyhound look in ballerinas – but now things have gone too far the other way. Bonnard legs and Ingres bottoms are all very well, but not on a ballet stage, and particularly not in Balanchine.” These remarks caused the management to react by telling several corps de ballet members to lose weight quickly, under threat of losing their jobs, which naturally had a very detrimental effect

on company morale, not to mention the individuals' self-esteem. Unsurprisingly some of them resorted to starvation tactics. This is indicative of directors as servants of more powerful masters, mediators and the paying public, who share some responsibility for perpetuating rather than challenging cultural stereotypes.

In summarising these findings, it is evident that there are many influential sources impacting on the body image of female ballet dancers, some of which are considered inevitable and some of which could be obviated. The main themes that emerged were in relation to the level and quality of nutritional knowledge, the provision of appropriate nutritional advice, the physical and psychological consequences of inadequate attention to health, and physical and psychological problems caused by the ideals of the ballet world. It is also evident that a female dancer's body image and confidence are vulnerable to distortion due to the image conscious, physically selective nature of the profession and can be damaged by the effects of an authoritarian power culture in which the body is a site of control, oppression, and expression. Both the nutritional and psychological effects can be long lasting, but because they are often internal, they can go unnoticed and untreated, leaving the dancer to suffer in silence:

The ideal has been ingrained ... I personally would like to get to a stage where I don't worry or think about it anymore, and have a stable diet, and where it is no longer something I stress about every day of my life. But right now I can't envisage that happening.

(D-4)

## CONCLUSION

This research showed evidence of a training and professional environment in transition from one of traditional ‘cult-like’ authoritarian behaviour with ‘disciplined’, ‘mirroring’, and ‘docile’ dancers to a more enlightened, better educated and prepared environment. The identity and self-esteem of dancers appeared to be affected by striving to attain a ballet physique and many characteristics of eating problems were recognised in the profession. ‘Physical capital’ was gained on the basis of both physique and technical skill and was higher for dancers closer to the preferred ‘ideal physique’. A strong sense of surveillance was apparent but was regarded as natural to the culture. There appeared to be a more balanced attitude towards physique and health issues amongst the students than the current professionals, which is promising for the future.

It is clear that there are different perceptions of the ideal ballet physique and that they are constantly changing. Influences come partly from outside the ballet world in the form of fashion, the media, and idealised femininity in a male dominated society. Mainly, influential factors exist inside the ballet world in the form of mirrors, ballet aesthetics, demands of choreography, role models, teaching technique, costume design and critics. The power of directors, choreographers and teachers cannot be ignored. There appears to be a dominance of male influence through teaching, partnering, choreographing, and directing but there is no consensus as to whether this has any effect on forming or perpetuating particular ideals about the physique of female dancers. Most respondents thought dancers’ bodies are a reflection of their habitus and culture (Shilling 1993). Traditionally authority figures have used rewards and punishment and asserted absolute power but a cultural hegemony was evident in

dancers' participation in the system and outward compliance with the institutional and cultural ideals. Even though dissatisfaction or disagreement may have been expressed in interviews it had rarely been expressed to management or challenged in public. All these characteristics are consistent with power cultures, authoritarianism and cult-like behaviour described by Goffman (1982), Foucault (Shilling1993) and Smith (1998). It was recognised by some, and unwittingly demonstrated by others, that these characteristics may play an important part in the body image and eating problems developed by many dancers. There needs to be further education and action amongst controlling powers and dancers if real change is to benefit the female ballet dancer. It was apparent that nutritional education was inadequate, despite improvements in its provision, and that some dancers continue to take short cuts, regardless of advice, in order to meet their higher ideal. It seemed most dancers were unlikely to heed advice that was not related to the real demands of the profession. This demonstrates the extent of socialisation, as well as the level of acceptance that exists in relation to physical demands and ideals. In discussions on selection the dilemma arose between the principle of not eliminating anyone on the grounds of physique yet not offering false hope to someone destined to fail on the grounds of physique at audition / casting points later. The main concern was to leave the door open for special or exciting talent.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a result of this research and reviewing the available literature it seems there are many ways in which dance can move to a more enlightened approach as well safeguard the interests of the whole profession. Some recommendations for action and contemplation:

**Dancers (student and professional) should:**

- ◆ Recognise and develop their intrinsic motivation rather than passively relying on extrinsic motivation to work.
- ◆ Learn how to safeguard their health and well being through nutritional and physical knowledge.
- ◆ Stand up to and resist the pressures which breed inappropriate eating practices and an obsessional focus on physique, and develop their individuality.
- ◆ Not turn to docility and subservience as a safe refuge from the pressures of the ballet culture.
- ◆ Strive for empowerment, and have the courage to question and critique their culture and their art rather than merely accept its ideals and demands.

**Management, directors, and choreographers (in schools and companies) should:**

- ◆ Ensure students, dancers and staff are provided with increased nutritional education, appropriate for dancers and given by elite performers' dieticians. Professional one to one advice should also be available on a regular basis. The increased involvement of professional dancers should also be considered, to provide positive role models.
- ◆ Include mental training to deal with stress and self esteem in the training of dancers and teachers and offer it to professional dancers.
- ◆ Discard the traditional dictatorial authoritarian model, which damages self-esteem, creativity, and artistic integrity, and instead lead the way in fostering respect and communication.
- ◆ Be aware of the potential for abuse that power carries.

- ◆ Recognise that weight gain is not always the result of overeating and that inappropriate handling of the problem can damage a dancer, mentally and physically, for life.
- ◆ Resist the temptation to succumb to an idealistic, image conscious culture and try to see beyond a dancer's physical appearance. Dance is after all about, not only expression through control of the body, but also the creation of illusion and transformation through characterisation.
- ◆ Recognise that dancers possess intrinsic motivation, passion, and artistry, which can, and needs to be, cultivated, and that intimidation and humiliation destroy confidence, self-esteem, and motivation.

**The dance world in general** should:

- ◆ Critically examine the current physical aesthetic and the motivation behind it and whether it enhances or damages ballet dancers as artists or ballet as an art form. The profession should question its priorities for the 21st century in relation to emotional, physical, and artistic integrity as well as what it has to offer the world.
- ◆ Dancers, choreographers, directors, medical professionals, and ballet teachers should all share responsibility for dancers' bodies and communicate better on the possibilities and limitations of nutrition, physique and career opportunities.
- ◆ The same level of responsibility should apply to psychological health and artistic development.

- ◆ Dancers who move into management or teaching should be adequately trained in the new skills and responsibilities those jobs will require, especially in relation to nutrition, psychology, communication, and people management skills. They should not be expected to deal with unfamiliar and potentially alarming situations unprepared and untrained, since this may encourage inappropriate or abusive responses.
  
- ◆ As is beginning to happen in other countries, ballet training for students and professionals alike, should be developed to include variety of content, method, and approach such as the use of visualisation, stress control techniques, and aerobic work. This may take the emphasis away from physique and physical appearance, and encourage the development of healthy, happy, and balanced dancers who can perform to their peak.

Only by finding a healthy balance of mind, body and spirit can one truly become a great artist.

(John Alleyne, Artistic Director, Ballet British Columbia 1999)

(see Bronkhorst 1999)

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<sup>i</sup> William Forsythe is a choreographer, and Director of Frankfurt Ballet. His work is contemporary although he has choreographed on major classical companies and classically trained dancers.

<sup>ii</sup> Derek Deane is the Director of English National Ballet and has been quoted in the press complaining of the unsatisfactory physiques of British ballet dancers.

<sup>iii</sup> Facility for dance usually describes natural joint mobility, hip rotation, flexibility, and skeletal strength.

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