

# **PROBING THE POLITICS OF THE FEMALE BODY: ROBYN ORLIN'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CLASSICAL BALLET CANON**

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*COMPULSORY DECLARATION*

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	6
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	7
<b>1. Methodology</b>	8
1.1 Qualitative research gives multiple perspectives	8
1.2 The “playful pluralism” of interdisciplinary research	9
1.3 Data collection	10
1.4 A discrepancy between subject matter and style	10
<b>2. Literature review</b>	11
2.1 Gender as a construct of Western culture	12
2.2 Surveillance, self-discipline and the docile body	12
2.3 The evolution of the ideal body in classical ballet	13
2.4 Dance education and docility	14
2.5 The health of female ballet dancers	14
2.6 Dance reflects Western cultural inscriptions of the body	15
2.7 The ambiguity of the ballerina’s body	16
2.8 The male gaze in classical ballet	17
2.9 Not all interrogations of female representation provide reassuring visions for the future	17
2.10 Challenges to prevalent scholarship on ballet’s representations of gender	18
2.11 Suspending conventional expectations of female representation in dance	19
2.12 The value of deconstructive reworkings	19
2.13 The canon and the counter-canon	20
2.14 The relationship between postmodernism and feminism	21
2.15 Rejecting the master narrative	21
2.16 Rejecting a linear narrative	21
2.17 Absurdist strategies allow Orlin to cultivate an open text	22
2.18 Resources on Robyn Orlin	22
<b>3. The value of the study</b>	23
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	26
<b>1. Mind/body dualism in Western culture</b>	26
<b>2. Body obsession and body affection</b>	27
<b>3. Man is mind, woman is body</b>	28
<b>4. Physical ideals and their significance</b>	29

<b>5. Slenderness and its significance to women</b>	30
<b>6. Female slenderness and its significance to patriarchy</b>	31
<b>7. Women collude with a dominant patriarchal ideology</b>	32
<b>8. Foucault sheds light on modern power</b>	33
<b>9. Women’s collusion through a Foucauldian lens</b>	36
<b>10. Unfastening from dualistic power</b>	36
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	38
<b>1. Understanding the canon</b>	38
1.1 High art: Beauty and goodness	38
1.2 The canon preserves independent high culture	38
1.3 The dance canon	39
<b>2. An historical overview of ballet</b>	41
2.1 The beginnings of ballet	41
2.2 The Romantic ballet and the rise of the ballerina as icon	42
2.3 Ballet prospers in Russia	45
2.4 Balanchine modernises ballet	46
2.5 Balanchine’s aesthetic endures	47
<b>3. Theoretical reflections on the agency of the ballerina</b>	48
3.1 The agency of the ballerina: A polarising subject	48
3.2 The male gaze	51
3.3 The relevance of the male gaze to ballet	52
3.4 The contemporary ballerina: Active or passive?	55
3.5 Surveillance in ballet: From studio to stage	58
3.6 The ballerina consciously neglects her body	59
3.7 A culture of silence disables dancers from taking ownership of their bodies	61
<b>4. Ballet is not solely responsible for docility and neglect</b>	62
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	64
<b>1. Introducing Robyn Orlin</b>	64
1.1 Career Background	64
1.2 The “artistic tsotsi”	64
1.3 Interrogating the danced-choreographic	65
1.4 Deconstructing classical ballet	66
<b>2. The canon as a foundation for critique</b>	68
2.1 Perfection, transcendence and docility	69
2.2 Focusing attention on the male-constructed gaze	70

2.3	Assigning dominance to the gaze	70
2.4	Implicating the gaze of the audience	71
2.5	Orlin advocates alternative theories of spectatorship	72
<b>3.</b>	<b>An alternative female presence</b>	73
3.1	Hybridity in <i>Swan Lake</i>	73
3.2	Drawing attention to reproductive organs	74
3.3	'Imperfect' bodies and different vocabularies	75
3.4	Dismantling the comforts of optical perception	76
3.5	Distorting the classical movement vocabulary	77
3.6	Destabilising the relationship between audience and performer	78
3.7	The ballerina as a stripper	79
<b>4.</b>	<b>Orlin undermines the status and hierarchy of ballet</b>	80
4.1	A horizontal dance domain	80
4.2	The risk of reversal	81
4.3	The female body as a vehicle for subversion?	82
4.4	"Using dance to bust dance"	82
4.5	The risk of reinstating the canon	83
4.6	From parody to power	84
4.7	The significance of feminist criticism to postmodernism	86
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>		88
<b>1.</b>	<b>Master narrative and counter narrative</b>	88
<b>2.</b>	<b>Orlin's treatment of narrative in <i>Rock my tutu</i></b>	88
<b>3.</b>	<b>Reactions against narrative structure and formalist aesthetics</b>	90
3.1	The rise of the plotless ballet	90
3.2	The relevance of the plotless ballet to Orlin	91
3.3	Fragmented impressions lead to new methods and forms	93
<b>4.</b>	<b>Orlin cultivates an open text</b>	94
4.1	Form follows content	95
	4.1.1 <i>Orlin rejects traditional narrative structure</i>	95
	4.1.2 <i>Orlin rejects formalist aesthetics</i>	95
4.2	Empowering the audience	98
4.3	Empowering the performer	98
4.4	Challenging the phallogocentric drive to stabilise, organise and rationalise	100
4.5	The pleasures and responsibilities of a collectively created, socially fluid doing	102
<b>CONCLUSION</b>		103

<b>ADDENDUM A</b>	i
<b>ADDENDUM B</b>	iv
<b>REFERENCE LIST AND BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	a



## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative, interdisciplinary study predominantly focuses on the South African choreographer Robyn Orlin and her deconstructions of classical ballet. To inform a gender-centred investigation of Orlin's work, attention is given to the origins of patriarchal dualisms and the way in which these manifest in contemporary Western culture. Emphasis is placed on the institutional repression of the body as a way to preserve particular power structures. In this instance the theories of Michel Foucault, in particular, are referenced. His concepts serve to illuminate a consideration of Western concert dance, with a particular focus on classical ballet, as an institution that sustains gender as a system of power. The origins of the aesthetic of the ballerina as an icon of femininity, and the way in which certain values and expectations impact on the bodies of female ballet dancers, particularly but not exclusively, provides a context for the discussion of Orlin's work – how and why her form and content questions and undermines the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes in classical ballet. This dissertation examines Orlin's work in order to expand discourse around the subversive potential of the female body, informed by an understanding of the body as an ever-changing entity that resists definition by way of essentialist meanings.

# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the work of the controversial yet important South African female choreographer Robyn Orlin (1955 – ). Of predominant concern is Orlin's deconstruction of classical ballet whereby she exposes particular issues related to conventional tropes of femininity and ballet's representation and perpetuation thereof. To contextualise the analysis of Orlin's work, this dissertation provides a theoretical background on how the institutional repression of the female body assists in preserving the power systems within the dominant patriarchal ideology of Western culture. The ways in which mainstream modes of representation, such as classical ballet, may influence the ways in which people think about themselves and society, is considered. This implicates ballet as an institution that supports a gender-based system of power. Ballet as a dance form is traditionally female-populated but not female-dominated, and, as such, it perpetuates some of the most potent symbols of femininity within Western culture. Orlin therefore feels compelled to interrogate the dance form's cultural meaning.

Orlin understands that the essentialist meanings attributed to the body by the dominant ideology are not fixed and, accordingly, has recognised the potential to deconstruct that which is socially constructed. This dissertation considers how Orlin questions and undermines traditional gender stereotypes, particularly as they relate to the ballerina – the icon of femininity. Considerable emphasis is placed on *Rock my tutu* (2001), Orlin's deconstruction of Petipa's *Swan Lake*, to illustrate how she utilises the subversive potential of the female body to comment upon the patriarchal ideals of desirability in dominant discourse and to free the female dancer from these ideals. Orlin explores the notion of changing, fluid, plural bodies, and cultivates an open text. Just as she rejects the idea of the body as a fixed entity, defined by essentialist meanings, Orlin rejects the tradition of the ballet production as a structured unit and a perfect, finished product. By including performers and audience members into a collaborative process of creation she cedes her power as the sole author of the work. In this way she challenges the hierarchical system of ballet production which casts the ballerina as a docile object of desire.

Although this dissertation is predominantly concerned with gender, it recognises that this cannot be dissociated from discussions on race, class and other social categories. Many feminist theorists have reflected upon the ways in which the social statuses, personal identities and life chances of women and men are intricately tied up with their racial group, social class, ethnic and religious groups, family background, and place of residence (Lorber, 2010). This dissertation will address, where necessary, issues related to race, particularly as it pertains to the discussion on gender. Race remains a key area that affects any consideration of gender, in dance and in society in general and, no doubt, remains a relevant area for study within the South African context. Still, as Lorber points out, these vastly

differing groups of people have to fit into either of two socially recognised genders in Western societies – ‘men’ and ‘women’. Men and women are supposed to be different from each other and members of the same gender category are supposed to have essential similarities. The discourse surrounding this notion forms the foundation of this research.

The particular conceptualisation and contextualisation of the body around which this critique is constructed and the difference between the body in training and the body in performance is important: A discussion on the body in training will usually focus mostly on the experience of the dancer. In classical ballet this experience will (in varying degrees) involve the negotiation of the reality of pain, physical exertion and the limitations of the body, in an attempt to create an illusion of ease and effortlessness. An investigation of the body in performance will instead focus on the experience and interpretation of the spectator. In classical ballet, the person watching may escape from his or her reality and be transported to a world of particular views of beauty, wholeness and perfection through the form, and through the bodies creating the form. This dissertation focuses on Orlin’s construction and deconstruction of images that serve to challenge the audience’s expectations and preconceived ideas about the body in dance, with particular reference to classical ballet. For these reasons emphasis is placed on the body in performance in this thesis. While the body in training is not central to this discussion, it does receive some attention in Chapter Two, to provide the context necessary for understanding how the shaping and disciplining of the body simultaneously informs and is informed by the dominant representations of femininity in ballet. It also serves to clarify the strategies that Orlin employs in her deconstruction of classical ballet and its representations of gender.

Finally, it is important to note that this dissertation is written with the understanding that people’s encounter with ballet cannot be typified, as the concept of a ‘typical’ experience is questionable (Novack, 1993). Accordingly, the discussion should be understood as an illumination of the themes and constraints of gender in ballet and as an illustration of a way in which the deconstructive reworking of the classical ballet text can be read and comprehended – as exemplified in Orlin’s work.

## **1. METHODOLOGY**

### **1.1 Qualitative research gives multiple perspectives**

The method of inquiry that has been used for this research is qualitative in nature. In contrast to positivist or quantitative research, the questions that this study explores are not based on the assumption that the world is a predictable place. The studies discussed by Green and Stinson (1999), illustrate that qualitative research does not seek to make predictions by way of determining, through objective research methods, the laws according to which the world operates. It rejects the positivist tendency to regard research as value free and as having the ability to ascertain a single measurable reality.

Rather than aiming to accept or reject a hypothesis, qualitative research attempts to develop a language that is able to reveal several dimensions of the subject under study. The indisputable rules that guide traditional quantitative research are not applicable. The notion of value free research is rejected in favour of understanding reality and truth as being determined by the position of a person in the world and the perspective from which that person is looking. Acquiring multiple perspectives and meanings is therefore a central aspect of qualitative research, explains Green and Stinson (1999). This kind of research, which Locke<sup>1</sup> describes as being in a state of “zesty disarray” (cited in Green & Stinson, 1999: 92), underscores Orlin’s counter-canonical position, whereby she attempts to highlight more than just the voices and points of view that are perpetuated by the ballet canon.

## 1.2 The “playful pluralism” of interdisciplinary research

Dance studies, the research domain to which this dissertation belongs, draws from a number of academic fields and disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psycho-analytic theory, media studies, literary theory and semiotics, as well as from other interdisciplinary subjects such as gender studies and performance studies. The interdisciplinary focus of this dissertation is well suited to Orlin’s endorsement of plurality. As Chapters Three and Four will demonstrate, Orlin calls attention to bodies that are hybrid and plural – at once classical and grotesque, beautiful and ugly, civilised and primitive. This exploration is made possible through Orlin’s postmodern appropriation of varying dance styles, dance vocabularies, theatrical techniques, dramatic formulations, text, film, various genres of music, audience participation, scenography and lighting. In the same way that Orlin places on a level platform previously hierarchically ordered dance forms and bodies, interdisciplinary research employs various theoretical frameworks and approaches. Daly calls it the “playful pluralism” (2002f: 334) of research – a pluralism that, as Richard Schechner (2002) explains, reflects a need to destabilise the idea that a single system of knowledge or one subject area is superior to another. The prefix ‘inter’ points to the acceptance that no single theory, framework or approach is suitable for all objects of study, or for all researchers and the questions they wish to address (Schechner, 2002).

The identification of interdisciplinary humanities as being central to the investigation of “the messy, debatable and unquantifiable but essentially human dimensions of life” (Bate<sup>2</sup> cited in Willis, 2012: 5) reflects again Locke’s “zesty disarray”. Interdisciplinarity in the humanities is not built around homogeneity, repeatability or focussed application. On the contrary, it shows that heterogeneous views do not mean a failure to find answers, but rather a capacity to reflect the messiness, heterogeneity and complex diversity of human knowledge (Willis, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Green and Stinson (1999) quote from Lawrence F. Locke’s 1989 article *Qualitative research as a form of scientific inquiry in sport and physical education*. This article was published in *Research Quarterly*, 60, March, p. 1-20.

<sup>2</sup> Willis (2012) quotes from the introduction of Jonathan Bate’s book *The Public Value of the Humanities*, written in 2011 and published by Bloomsbury Academic, London.

### **1.3 Data collection**

This emphasis on heterogeneity and subjectivity calls for open-ended interviews. Because these are more conversational and relational than interviews conducted for quantitative research, it is often more difficult to take a critical perspective (Green & Stinson, 1999). Nevertheless, open-ended interviews are integral to qualitative research for this methodology allows the interviewee to frame his or her own experiences, opinions and impressions. For this dissertation open-ended interviews were conducted with Robyn Orlin (the choreographer whose work lies at the centre of this study); with Adrienne Sichel (an arts journalist and critic who has written about Orlin's work since the 1980s); and with Julia Burnham, Teboho Letele and Muzi Shili (dancers from Moving Into Dance Mophatong around whom Orlin created *Beauty remained for just a moment and then returned gently to her starting position...* in 2012). Additional data collection involved attendance and personally drafted notes of the 2013 colloquium hosted by The Ar(t)chive in Johannesburg. This event included, firstly, a Skype interview with Orlin by Sichel who probed Orlin's themes, genres, repertory, company, career and creative process. Second, the programme included a panel discussion facilitated by Sichel and David April, former artistic director of Moving Into Dance Mophatong. This dealt with Orlin's creative process, particularly as it was experienced by performers Gerard Bester, Robert Colman, Mark Hawkins, Toni Morkel, Sello Pesa, Sonia Radebe and Muzi Shili. Lastly, a panel discussion facilitated by Sichel and Professor Cynthia Kros, heritage specialist at the University of the Witwatersrand, considered the opinions and experiences of Orlin-collaborators John Hogg, William Kentridge, Matthew Krouse and Georgina Thomson. The documentation of this event, due to its informal nature, cannot be included in the list of references. References to statements from this event will be acknowledged as footnotes. The Ar(t)chive also provided access to archival video material and a variety of texts about Orlin and her work. The filmed footage of *Rock my tutu* was obtained from the archives of *Ballet de Lorraine*. The company's research coordinator couriered a DVD copy from France to the author in Cape Town, South Africa. For some of the texts that were accessed through The Ar(t)chive not all the information necessary for referencing purposes could be obtained. Copies of these texts are compiled in Addenda B – M. The analysis of the video material and the systematic review of relevant literature completed the process of data collection for this dissertation.

### **1.4 A discrepancy between subject matter and style**

Within qualitative research the interpretation of reality and truth as a product of how a person is positioned in the world warrants acknowledgement of the researcher's partiality and subjectivity. Accordingly, explains Green and Stinson (1999), it is important that this subjectivity – the way in which a qualitative researcher's writing is inscribed by experiences, social constructions and preconceived ideas – is made visible. There is a need to display how a researcher's own voice enters the text – for self-reflectivity and deconstruction of one's own agendas.

This dissertation may appear to contain a contradiction in terms of how the subject matter, dealing with the subjectivity, partiality and plurality of voices, is presented seemingly objectively from a third person perspective. My deconstruction of ballet, significantly based on my own memories and experiences as a dancer, eliminates sensual, subjective or contextual language, often criticised for seeming self-indulgent and un-academic. In contrast, the objectivity that comes with a third person narrative helps to endow academic writing with authority. The writing appears reliable because objectivity is associated with the accepted notion that research should not be based on personal experience.

On the one hand, one could argue that the current subordination of dance scholarship to other academic fields necessitates a more academic style of writing. This may make the subject matter more acceptable to conventional academia – proving that one can engage with the topic of ‘the body’ on an intellectual and philosophical level. On the other hand, such an ‘objective’ approach might reinforce the separation of mind and body that traditional academia advocates, but which this dissertation attempts to oppose. This dilemma, grounded not only in the patriarchal deprecation of the body, but also in the suppression of the female voice in a profession which values hierarchy, competitiveness, detachment, and objectivity, is captured in the words of Marilyn Frye<sup>3</sup> (cited in Annas, 1985):

We are caught in a position where we keep trying to contribute to building a world in which the vocation of women no longer is the pleasing of men, by producing scholarship about women that will be pleasing to men [...]

I acknowledge the presence of this dilemma in this dissertation. It may appear as though I am unaware that my own perspectives are subjectively inscribed by my experiences and culture. I acknowledge that there is a discrepancy between what I am saying and how I am saying it. It is interesting to note that this contradiction fittingly parallels Orlin’s postmodern deconstructive approach. In many of her works Orlin both reinstates and rejects the ballet canon. Because this dissertation is positioned both inside and outside the institution, I am, like Orlin, also implicated in the value that I seek to challenge.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature for this dissertation can be clustered into three broad parts. In Chapter One, this study draws on writings that deal with the concept of the body in Western culture. With particular focus on the female body, much attention is given to texts in the fields of cultural theory, critical theory and feminist theory. The second cluster of writing facilitates the application of cultural body notions to the body ideals imposed on women in classical ballet. The aim is to consider the dance canon as a compelling symbol of the identity of a culture, and to elucidate how ballet reinforces particular ways of thinking about gender. Emphasis is placed on literature in the fields of dance history, dance pedagogy, dance science and medicine, performance studies and dance studies. Dance studies is a

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<sup>3</sup> Annas (1985) quotes from Marilyn Frye’s 1980 article *On second thought*. This article was published in *Radical Teacher*, 17, p. 37-38.

broad field that is located at the intersection of dance and feminist, cultural, post-structuralist, queer and psycho-analytic theory, all of which deal in some way with the politics of identity and the politics of the body. The third cluster of texts is relevant to the discussion on Robyn Orlin's work. The analysis of Orlin's deconstruction of the ballet canon in Chapters Three and Four is supplemented by literature in the areas of literary criticism, semiotics, as well as the history of drama and theatre. Orlin-specific texts include dissertations, book chapters, newspaper and magazine articles, reviews and personal interviews.

## **2.1 Gender as a construct of Western culture**

Integral to this dissertation, which critically considers the conceptualisation of an ideal body that is imposed on women by Western concert dance and particularly classical ballet, is *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993) by Susan Bordo. Considered a cornerstone of the field of body studies (Heywood, 2003), this text looks at the ways in which the female body and concepts of beauty and femininity are shaped and constructed by modern Western consumer culture. Of particular significance is Bordo's interrogation of Cartesian dualism and the philosophical origins of the mind/body dichotomy which has solidified gender stereotypes and categorisations through the historical association of men with the superior mind and women with the subordinated 'body'. Bordo discusses the development of a cultural veneration for control and improvement of the body with, as Oliver (2005) describes, physical appearance signifying deeply rooted, unspoken, societal values.

Bordo deals with the cultural construction of gender in Western culture, but veers away from earlier feminist conceptualisations of the female as a victim within an oppressive patriarchal society. Informed by newer feminist methodologies, Bordo also considers the differences among women from varying race, class and economic groups. This approach is acknowledged by Judith Lorber in her book *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (2010), which traces the development of the numerous divergent streams of feminist thought. Bordo also looks at the frequent attempts at resistance by some women, as opposed to the collusion with patriarchal culture by many other women. Central to Bordo's interpretation of power as not operating through excessive force or coercion, are the poststructuralist writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. To build on Bordo's critique, this dissertation also directly uses relevant Foucauldian literature.

## **2.2 Surveillance, self-discipline and the docile body**

Foucault's theories of power and discipline serve contemporary feminist aims. They reveal how cultural normative practices, expressed through popular media and construed as free will, are responsible for the homogenisation of representations of femininity. Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* in 1979 as an analysis of the social mechanisms that influenced the major shift in Western penal systems during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This work is paramount to an understanding of the concept of discipline and introduces the notion of the 'docile body' as a product

of discipline and self-discipline, resulting from the presence of continuous hierarchical surveillance. Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon – the architectural model that allowed prisons and other institutions to instil in prisoners the sense of always being watched, for the Panopticon was designed to make it unknown to the prisoners whether or not they were being observed. This atmosphere of constant surveillance was aimed at inducing self-surveillance by internalising the authoritarian gaze. Foucault's discussion of the prison, as a modern disciplinary institution, elucidates his understanding of modern power: people are their own disciplinarians who judge and correct their own behaviour through the normative practices and bodily habits of everyday life. Foucault elaborates on this notion of self-modification by individuals in *Technologies of the Self*, a chapter in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (1988) edited by Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton and Luther H. Martin. Foucault explains self-modification as generally being aimed at achieving a state of "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988: 18).

While Foucault's work has been used by various feminist theorists, Shane Phelan's article *Foucault and Feminism* (1990) serves as a reminder that many feminists have in fact also rejected Foucault's theories. He has been accused of failing to understand certain feminist perspectives, and the foundation of his work has been denounced by some as being defective for feminists. Phelan, on the contrary, and in line with Bordo, argues that Foucault's work is indeed vital for the development of feminist theory. The article allows for a more solid understanding of Foucault's ideas, and enables Phelan to discuss how his work converges with feminist concerns.

### **2.3 The evolution of the ideal body in classical ballet**

This dissertation aims to relate the theories of Bordo and Foucault to the training and modification of female bodies according to the feminine ideal of classical ballet. Attention has therefore been given to literature that applies the concepts of Bordo and Foucault to Western theatrical dance training and practice. However, in order to write about the ballerina as an icon of femininity, a historical overview of ballet, with a particular focus on the development of a definitive aesthetic for the contemporary ballerina, proves imperative. Dance history books that steer this overview include Jack Anderson's *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History* (1986), Susan Au's *Ballet and Modern Dance* (1988), Joan Cass's *Dancing Through History* (1993) and Tim Scholl's *From Petipa to Balanchine: Classical Revival and the Modernization of Ballet* (1994). The ideal look for the body of the female ballet dancer is discussed in an article by Heather Margaret Ritenburg, *Frozen Landscapes: A Foucauldian Genealogy of the Ideal Ballet Dancer's Body* (2010). Ritenburg's article constructs a Foucauldian genealogy to trace a body shape that came to dominate the principal female dancers of the New York City Ballet. Also significant is her argument concerning the ways in which this female ballet body continues to be disseminated through popular media today.



## 2.4 Dance education and docility

The work of Dr. Jill Green has proven especially important for its application of the concepts of Bordo and Foucault. Her article *The Politics and Ethics of Health in Dance Education* (2004) draws predominantly on the work of Foucault and other diverse postmodern, feminist and somatic thinkers. Similarly, the theoretical frameworks of other articles<sup>4</sup> by Green are rooted in Foucault, but also include significant reference to the writings of Bordo. In *Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education* (1999) and *Foucault and the Training of Docile Bodies in Dance Education* (2002 – 2003) Green contextualises her overarching investigation of how bodies in dance are socially inscribed and how dance students perceive their bodies in relation to socially constructed ideals. She explains that the pedagogical approach used in most ballet and modern dance classes gives power to the teacher to manipulate students' bodies and is therefore fertile ground for a Foucauldian analysis. Green (1999 & 2002 – 2003) outlines key Foucauldian concepts such as hierarchical surveillance, normalising judgement, self-surveillance and habituation and looks critically at dance education as a “disciplinary power that trains students to be docile citizens in the dance world and creates standards for dance behaviour and bodily being” (Murphy & Russel, 2002 – 2003: x). Green's *The Politics and Ethics of Health in Dance Education* (2004) looks beyond the studio and addresses the health concerns of dancers by examining how a system of health care, based on particular political, economic and social concerns, may also work to disempower dancers and normalise socially habituated movement patterns.

## 2.5 The health of female ballet dancers

Recently, the health of ballet dancers has been placed under academic scrutiny. This is evidenced by the establishment of a journal dedicated to dance medicine and science (since 1997), featuring such articles as *Psychological Factors Associated with Performance-Limiting Injuries in Professional Ballet Dancers* (2004) by Maya U. Adam, Glenn S. Brassington, Hans Steiner and Gordon O. Matheson, and *Energetic Efficiency, Menstrual Irregularity, and Bone Mineral Density in Elite Professional Female Ballet Dancers* (2010) by Ashley F. Doyle-Lucas, Jeremy D. Akers, and Brenda M. Davy. More notable for this dissertation is Wendy Oliver's *Reading the Ballerina's Body: Susan Bordo Sheds Light on Anastasia Volochkova and Heidi Guenther* (2005). Oliver contextualises her discussion with the stories of two ballerinas: Anastasia Volochkova who was fired from the Bolshoi Ballet for presumably being too heavy and Heidi Guenther of the Boston Ballet who died of heart failure after developing an eating disorder. Of exceptional relevance is Oliver's application of Susan Bordo's critique of the feelings of empowerment associated with moulding the body according to a cultural ideal, to the subculture of Western theatrical dance. Oliver questions the agency of the ballerina – perceived as a super-charged athlete – by highlighting how success and feelings of

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<sup>4</sup> Including articles such as *Somatic authority and the myth of the ideal body in dance education* (1999) and *Foucault and the training of docile bodies in dance education* (2002-2003).

empowerment in ballet are connected to an “interpretation of femininity which includes a potentially dangerous degree of thinness” (Oliver, 2005: 44).

Although they are absolutely dependent on their bodies as the instruments of their art form, ballet dancers are known for failing to take adequate care of their bodies. Anna Aalten’s articles *In the Presence of the Body: Theorising Training, Injuries and Pain in Ballet* (2005) and *Listening to the Dancer’s Body* (2007) tie in with Oliver’s research. Aalten wonders about the moral beliefs that underlie why dancers chronically overburden their bodies. She draws on contemporary body theory to analyse the meaning of injuries and pain in the context of ballet culture. While considering the impact of physical demands and the belief that a dancer’s body is always in need of improvement, Aalten sees the dancing body as being neglected and as becoming absent. The ballerina is required to be as light and waif-like as possible, and dancers often knowingly ignore signals of pain and exhaustion in their efforts to show resilience and dedication in competing for lead roles.

## **2.6 Dance reflects Western cultural inscriptions of the body**

An influential and rather seminal book in terms of delineating the area of dance studies as a whole (Manning, 2004) is *The Body Dance and Cultural Theory* (2003) by Helen Thomas. Thomas first introduces the idea that, despite the rich material that dance provides for generating insights into the politics of difference, it has been relatively uncharted terrain for social and cultural theorists of the body. The last three decades, however, have witnessed a growing interest in dance as a topic of inquiry from cultural and social critics. Similarly, dance scholars have in recent years demonstrated an emerging concern with the themes and issues that have preoccupied more traditional disciplines (Thomas, 2003).

Thomas’s foremost intention is to utilise the interest in the body within social and cultural theory to cultivate an increased concern with the body in dance studies. She also wishes to show that dance can be “a means of reflecting on the problems associated with the ways in which the body has been conceptualised generally in social and cultural theory” (2003: 3). She pursues a multi-dimensional and cross-disciplinary dialogue between dance studies and cultural theory and adapts ideas from critical theory (including the work of Foucault) to demonstrate the potential of dance studies

to contribute to contemporary debates in social and cultural criticism concerning the construction and production of difference and representation that [have] emerged through a series of theoretical and methodological interventions and that [have] fostered the interest in the study of the body in recent years (2003: 2).

Thomas draws on varying perspectives, including feminism, semiotics, poststructuralism and postmodernism to introduce the problem of the body in social and cultural theory. Of particular relevance is her attention to the contribution of feminisms and poststructuralism to the study of the body. These schools of thought have been trying “to overcome the problems of dualism inscribed in the Western humanist tradition of thought” (Thomas, 2003: 34) and have allowed for a greater

understanding of how social inequities imprint the mutable body. Despite these noble intentions, however, the feminist and poststructuralist rhetoric has in fact been criticised for upholding the mind/body duality, for it continues to create the body through discourse and, accordingly, discourse continues to maintain its privileged position. In reaction to this criticism, Thomas argues for dance studies as providing greater attention to embodiment, corporeality and the lived body – “necessary correctives to the discursive theories of the body” (Manning, 2004: 167) – and turns to consider dance and the body in cultural theory at the hand of particular dance case studies (Thomas, 2003).

In her chapter *Dance and Difference: Performing/Representing/Rewriting the Body* Thomas specifically hones in on the compatibility of feminist scholarship, which inquires how the body is shaped and comes to have meaning, with the study of Western concert dance, a field long populated by women and which predominantly focuses on the female image (Daly, 2002d). Thomas concentrates on the writings of dance scholars whose work reflects the impact of feminist scholarship. The cited texts deal with the ways in which women are generally represented in Western theatrical dance, while contemplating the possibilities for female performers to transcend or subvert these dominant modes of representation. One such text is Ann Daly’s *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (2002), a book which in part utilises feminist theory to deconstruct the gender biases embedded both in the dance world and in Western society at large. This book is also used as a direct source in this dissertation.

## **2.7 The ambiguity of the ballerina’s body**

*Theorizing Gender* is the final part of Daly’s *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* and provides the richest material for this dissertation. Here Daly specifically problematizes the ballerina icon. She acknowledges that it may well be impossible to posit who the ballerina would be outside of the male constructs that have created her, but points to the importance of asking questions that will expose ‘difference’ – “the seemingly natural and innocent phenomenon in which the ballet discourse is rooted” (Daly, 2002b: 289) – as a socially and politically constructed ‘opposition’. Daly’s discussion of the ballerina, particularly the Balanchine ballerina, echoes how Oliver exposes the ambiguity embodied by the ballerina: both as a glorified icon of femininity and the object of male desire.

Daly (2002g) contributes to the historical overview of ballet in this dissertation with her discussion on the Romantic period as the key era in the construction of the ballerina icon. She argues that the rhetoric of gender differentiation in ballet that was established on the Romantic stage is also evident in Balanchine’s misogyny, discreetly disguised and often revered for being a veneration of women. Daly ultimately argues against the artificial and idealised construction of femininity, perpetuated by ballet, which becomes the yardstick by which women in general are judged (Thomas, 2003). Daly’s

critique is also significant in terms of the conversation about the potential negative effects of the demands of the profession and the training regimes on ballet dancers' health.

## **2.8 The male gaze in classical ballet**

Daly (2002d) and Thomas, in their writings about representations of women in Western theatrical dance, note the relevance of the theory of the male gaze to the study of gender representation. Their deliberations concerning this theory serve to assess Laura Mulvey's "influential Freudian semiotic analysis of spectatorship" (Thomas, 2003: 159) and they evaluate the theory's applicability to Western theatrical dance. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, introduced in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), offers a model for understanding how "women are associated and objectified through their bodies and their lack of cultural power within the discourse of patriarchy" (Thomas, 1996: 73). She analyses a structure of looking which duplicates the unequal power relations between men and women in Western society. Mulvey's theory ties in with the topic of surveillance and self-surveillance, as introduced by Foucault, which is of considerable importance to this dissertation. Moreover, Mulvey's theory has been appropriated by numerous dance scholars and a review of such literature therefore proves valuable. Other texts that have been consulted to bolster this dissertation's consideration of the male gaze include Thomas's *The Body Dance and Cultural Theory*, Daly's *Critical Gestures: Writing on Dance and Culture*, Christy Adair's *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (1992) and Emilyn Claid's *Yes? No! Maybe... Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (2006).

## **2.9 Not all interrogations of female representation provide reassuring visions for the future**

Both *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* by Christy Adair and *Yes? No! Maybe... Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* by Emilyn Claid significantly coincide with the literature discussed thus far. Adair's feminist analysis of the female body relates the social construction of the body to the ways in which it is presented and perceived in Western theatrical dance. Adair introduces her readers to critical theory and suggests ways in which dance studies can benefit from this work. She argues that dance is a valuable arena for feminist practice because of feminism's recognition of the arts as central to the shaping of people's ideas about themselves and their society. Adair highlights the notion that, although Western theatrical dance is densely populated by women, it is not a female dominated art form. On the contrary, women have mostly been the *interpreters* rather than the *creators* of dance images.

As Fowler (1995) points out in a review of *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens*, Adair follows a Marxist approach in her understanding of how the body is historically and socially constructed. As a cultural materialist, Adair, unlike Bordo, conceptualises the female body as a blank slate awaiting inscription – a view which fails to provide women with an empowering definition of the body, for it renders their bodies passive and unable to act on their own behalf.

Claid (2006), on the other hand, in her autobiographical yet theoretically informed account of her experiences as a young and dedicated ballet dancer, contributes to the understanding that ballet dancers' internalisation of the gaze of authority figures generally cultivates unattainable expectations for themselves in their striving towards perfection. Claid's clear articulation of the power dynamic inherent in classical ballet is more accurately aligned with the theories of Bordo and Foucault, as also applied by other dance scholars such as Green (1999, 2002 – 2003 & 2004), Oliver (2005) and Thomas (2003). Moreover, like Aalten (2005 & 2007), Claid also addresses many dancers' engagement with the creation and nourishment of pain:

the power system perpetrates the dancer's desire: that which will bring the reward of success, with the dancer imposing the pain upon him/herself. The dancer, now a tool of the system, supports the system through a cycle of self-inflicted pain, inducing the power, which brings success (2006: 40).

Pain, along with the accompanying desire for perfection, is thus not simply imposed upon a dancer by the teacher, choreographer, director, spectator or critic – the ballet dancer willingly participates in this pain/accomplishment/power cycle (Alterowitz, 2008).

#### **2.10 Challenges to prevalent scholarship on ballet's representations of gender**

There is an increasing range of dance literature, employing a feminist framework to consider critically the politics of representation in classical ballet, of which the authors propose counter arguments to the prevalent critiques previously discussed. In her book, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage* (1998) Sally Banes analyses thirteen ballets and ten modern dance works using historical, political and cultural contextualisation to generate a more complex picture of dancing women than proposed by many feminist writers. One of Banes's main objectives is to challenge prevalent scholarship on representations of gender and ethnicity in ballet and early modern dance. She attacks what she calls the "anti-ballet feminists", including Ann Daly, Christy Adair and Susan Foster. According to Banes, Daly not only posits the ballerina as a victim but also shuns ballet and modern dance for the way in which these genres contribute to the exploitation of women in daily life. Ramsay Burt (1999) acknowledges that the methodologies and radicalism of some feminists may be troublesome, but views Banes's labelling of Daly as an anti-ballet feminist as a misrepresentation. Daly (2002a) does not advocate the abolishment of ballet, but she criticises traditional ways of looking at ballet, which she believes are incompatible with a feminist critical approach. Burt rightly notes that Banes, in her attempt to reclaim ballet and modern dance, produces rich and thought-provoking material about a number of dance works that have otherwise been discussed to the point of becoming tiresome. However, Banes seems to deny the possibility that some of the inequalities which feminists have identified in contemporary society are related to Western theatrical dance. It is important that a matter be argued both ways, particularly in the context of this dissertation's regard for postmodernism's undoing of binaries. Banes herself appropriately argues that essentialist characteristics of genre representations and gender representations should be avoided. Unfortunately, she does not adequately succeed in offering a viable alternative to the feminist methodologies she contests.

Jennifer Fischer is another dance scholar who wonders whether the ballerina is not misunderstood. In her article *Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse* (2007) Fischer describes ballet as having had a positive impact in her life, facilitating her learning about “personal agency, collaborative effort and spiritual expansion” (2007: 4). Many of the women involved in her study similarly identify ballet as a symbol of resistance and independence. Of course, as Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalegeropoulou point out in their article *In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency and the Philosophy of Pleasure* (2012), one must differentiate between amateur dancers who only pursue ballet as a leisure activity and those to whom ballet is a profession. Kolb and Kalegeropoulou address the notion of pleasure as it relates to adult practitioners who pursue ballet recreationally. The reasons listed for the pleasure that their participants experience during ballet class include discipline offset by freedom, hard work offset by diversion from work, control offset by relaxation and concentration offset by serenity. Kolb and Kalegeropoulou acknowledge that, among their participants with professional ballet ambitions in the past, feelings of frustration, pain and stress were also reported. One can of course not simply assume that professional ballet dancers do not take pleasure in their profession. Nor can one merely construe their pleasure as a ‘truth game’, a Foucauldian concept (Foucault, 1988) that will be expounded upon in Chapter One. Nevertheless, Kolb and Kalegeropoulou’s notion of pleasure, as it relates to professional ballet dancers, begs a consideration of Foucault’s understanding of the pleasure related to the transformation of the self as possibly being illusory in nature.

### **2.11 Suspending conventional expectations of female representation in dance**

In the second part of *Yes? No! Maybe... Seductive Ambiguity in Dance*, Claid discusses her personal exploration of feminism and her involvement with the 1970s British new dance experiment, which witnessed various dancers’ and choreographers’ re-imaginings of how to be a woman on stage in a new era. In Claid’s third and final section she draws on the tactics of queer theory and performance to describe and illustrate the seduction of ambiguity. Claid explores the notion that, if spectators were to reject the idea that there is a single truth and accept the possibility that there are many truths, they may be engaged by the practice of ‘not knowing’ yet desiring to know. Attention is given to the concept of a refigured spectatorship – of cultivating an active and engaged audience and of suspending conventional expectations. This includes the disruption of traditional performer-spectator relations and the development of a malleable and unpredictable relationship with the audience.

### **2.12 The value of deconstructive reworkings**

In the review of the literature that facilitates the reading and interpretation of Robyn Orlin’s work Vida Midgelow’s *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (2007) is of paramount importance. This book, focusing predominantly on reworkings of dances from the classical and romantic ballet canon, proves significantly valuable in guiding an analysis of Robyn Orlin’s *Rock my tutu*, a deconstructive reworking of *Swan Lake*. Midgelow gives considerable attention to

reworkings of *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*, both of which have been revisited in various ways by different choreographers. She notes that these canonical dances form part of a body of work that perpetuates particular ideologies which need to be questioned and therefore they continue to incite such revisitations. Why specifically *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*? These are well-known ballets, which provide a sturdy base for making the choreographer's counter narrative understandable and accessible.

Midgelow's main objective is to investigate the extent to which the reworkings succeed in demythologising the dances of the canon through their participation in canonical counter discourse. In their attempts to open up the canon, the reworked dance texts generally take up a polemic stance toward their source texts, explains Midgelow. In the process gaps and omissions are revealed and it is through the traversing of these gaps that the ballet is turned from a classical performance into a vital reconsideration of gender, sexuality and cultural difference. Midgelow, like Claid, delves into the concept of active spectatorship, for intertextual works encourage the viewer to read the discourse between the texts and to become a co-creator of meaning.

[T]hese dances are never [...] fully 'closed'. They always remain 'open', inviting viewers to read and re-read the reworking and the ballet at the source (2007: 187).

### **2.13 The canon and the counter-canon**

According to Midgelow the inherent nature of reworkings – in which the source text is both destroyed and recreated – requires one to consider the tense and paradoxical relationship that exists between the canon and the counter-canon. A reworking cannot transgress the bounds of its source without re-invoking the source, for the reworking is framed by the status quo of the ballet canon, which resonates continuously. Claid (2006) discusses parody as a means of questioning, destabilising and sabotaging common practice but she also points out the disconcerting potential for this strategy to simply perpetuate the system it attempts to displace. This tension, which is particularly pertinent in feminist theatre, is adequately addressed in Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989).

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon uses the media of fiction and photography as vehicles for a discussion of postmodernism's commitment to the critique of domination. This critique she describes as "complicitous" because of the inevitable participation of postmodernism in the very systems it attempts to challenge. Hutcheon explores the politics of parody, which she regards as a deconstructive postmodern mechanism through which to reread history, albeit in a paradoxical way that at once affirms and challenges the representations of the past. Of additional importance is Hutcheon's consideration of postmodernism's cross-disciplinary approach. She explores the tension between different aesthetic forms – from painting and poetry to sculpture, film, and video – and points out the ways in which the overlapping and interference of supposed opposites can serve to challenge general conceptions of mass media and 'high art'. In her final chapter, *Postmodernism and Feminisms*, Hutcheon examines the potential compatibility of these two concepts. According to

Owens (1983), postmodernism is generally considered to be an expression of the crisis of cultural authority. Hutcheon (1989) believes that feminisms share in this same crisis. She asserts that both postmodernism and feminisms challenge notions of representation, particularly of the body. There is a distinct parallel between the foci of both postmodernism and feminisms on the gendered subject, the appropriations of the female body and its desires, and pleasure as a socially and culturally determined concept.

#### **2.14 The relationship between postmodernism and feminism**

The major difference between postmodernism and feminisms, which discredits any possible conflation of these two cultural enterprises, explains Hutcheon (1989), is that the aim of feminisms to instil change and social agency resists the ambiguous nature of postmodern politics. Postmodernism's irony and self-reflexivity results in work that reinforces as much as it undermines the conventions it intends to subvert, thus making it politically ambivalent. Feminisms on the other hand have distinct and unambiguous political agendas of resistance. Regardless, there remains potential for a symbiotic relationship. Hutcheon declares that feminism has had a powerful impact on postmodernism. Likewise, postmodern strategies, such as parody, have offered feminist artists effective ways of challenging, while also working within, dominant patriarchal discourses. It enables women artists to contest old and outworn misrepresentations of their bodies and their desires without denying them the possibility of reclaiming both body and desire as sites of meaning and value.

#### **2.15 Rejecting the master narrative**

Postmodern art's self-reflexive nature – its engagement with the philosophical discourse around what is art, or in Orlin's case what is dance – begs for a consideration of the master narrative that dictates the way in which works of art succumb to particular stylistic and philosophical constraints. Arthur Danto's *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997), Larry Lavender's *Post-Historical Dance Criticism* (2000 – 2001) and Elaine J. Lawless's *Transforming the Master Narrative: How Women Shift the Religious Subject* (2003) facilitate this examination. Orlin's postmodern rejection of formalist dance aesthetics cultivates a form that compliments the content of her work which, for example, deals with the questioning of the master narrative that dictates gendered role expectations, as is the case in *Rock my tutu*. As a literal depiction of her rejection of master narratives Orlin's *Rock my tutu* rejects the original story line of *Swan Lake*. Although a classical ballet's coherence is not solely dependent upon its narrative structure it is significant to consider what the abandonment of such a structure signifies and how it contributes to the deconstruction of the ballet canon and the *Swan Lake* text.

#### **2.16 Rejecting a linear narrative**

To guide the discussion on the rejection of traditional linear narrative this dissertation uses two texts, the *Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play* (1967) by John Russel Taylor and *The Theatre of the Absurd*



(1980) by Martin Esslin. Taylor looks at the history of this dramatic genre and gives an explanation of the neo-classical nature of the traditional model of play construction, with tight plots, twists, climaxes and an ultimate return to order. This not only allows for a better understanding of the narrative structure that Petipa's *Swan Lake* adheres to, but also provides an important background for a consideration of Esslin's work. Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* is a ground-breaking study of the playwrights who, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, dramatized what they believed to be the absurdity at the core of the human condition. According to Esslin the Theatre of the Absurd, with its main proponents Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter, gave expression to Albert Camus's notion of life as inherently without meaning, expressed in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Esslin reflects upon the emergence of a new type of theatre that formed part of the 'anti-literary' movement fuelled by the disillusionments that followed World War II. The absurdist playwrights and dramatists shattered dramatic conventions – at the heart of their rebellion was a renouncement of psychological realism and an interest in shaping characters with an inability to understand each other. While the playwrights and dramatists of absurd theatre did not consciously form a school of thought, they generally all aimed to reflect the preoccupations and anxieties of their contemporaries in the Western World. Esslin's aim is to demonstrate how these playwrights and dramatists expressed an attitude that was representative of the time in which they lived and worked.

### **2.17 Absurdist strategies allow Orlin to cultivate an open text**

While Orlin's work is not part of the genre of absurd theatre, a consideration of this style of theatre is valuable. There has certainly been an inheritance of strategies, originally employed to convey the absurdity of life, by postmodern theatre makers who foster the notion that there is not only one truth but many truths. An overview of Esslin's work thus gives an understanding of the significance of absurdist strategies and how it might communicate in theatre today. It also compliments Midgelow's and Claid's discussions of open texts and active spectatorship. The Theatre of the Absurd required that viewers ask, not, "what is going to happen next?", as in a well-made play, but "what is happening?". Orlin's work is characterised by such openness and by the active role audience members must play in interpreting the mirage of seemingly non-sensical images that communicate a rejection of a traditional narrative structure and aesthetic formalism.

### **2.18 Resources on Robyn Orlin**

Literature that deals specifically with Robyn Orlin's work consists of other dissertations, Orlin's own website, newspaper and magazine articles and personal interviews. The two dissertations that aided preliminary research on Orlin is *Performance Art is an Effective Site for the Exploration of a Feminist Discourse, the Female Psyche, and an Explosive Space in which to Challenge the Status Quo* (1998) by Daniella Sarkin from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and *The Politics and Poetics of Choreography: The Dancing Body in South African Dance* (1995) by Juanita Finestone from Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Sarkin addresses the status quo and the subjugation of the

female psyche. Through an investigation of Orlin's *Naked on a goat* (1995) Sarkin argues that performance art is a genre which grants female performance artists the space to explore an alternate discourse to that of mainstream culture. In line with the inquiry of this dissertation, Finestone questions the notion of the ideal body in dance. Along with a work by Gary Gordon from the First Physical Theatre Company, Finestone analyses Orlin's *In a Corner the Sky Surrenders* (1995). By way of her analyses Finestone aims to reveal the potential of postmodern choreographic strategies to mobilise the dancing body and demystify and deconstruct previous ideal representations of this body. Access to the majority of other archival information was made possible by The Ar(t)chive, co-managed by Adrienne Sichel and Jessica Denyschen at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. South African journalists who have regularly written about Orlin and her work include Adrienne Sichel, Hazel Friedman, Robert Greig, Marilyn Jenkins and Matthew Krouse, whose book *Positions: Contemporary Artists in South Africa* (2010) also includes a chapter on Robyn Orlin, her background and work. The opportunity to mull over a career's worth of reviews, interviews, programme notes, photographs and a limited selection of filmed works (some of which were also made available by the Dance Umbrella Festival) has proved invaluable and has provided a comprehensive sense of the general themes and characteristics of Orlin's work. While this dissertation focuses mainly on *Rock my tutu* as an example of Orlin's pertinent deconstruction of classical ballet, the extensive archival research has provided supplementary information on themes and strategies that are characteristic of Orlin's work. Personal interviews were conducted with Robyn Orlin, Adrienne Sichel, who has followed Orlin's career over the past three decades with great commitment, and three dancers from Moving Into Dance Mophatong, who worked with Orlin on one of her recent works, *Beauty remained for just a moment then returned gently to her starting position...* (2012). In addition, the colloquium *Here for the Duration: Deconstructing the Archive/Reconstructing History*, hosted by The Ar(t)chive in Johannesburg on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2013, provided significant information. For this event, Sichel interviewed Orlin (in Berlin at the time) over Skype, and various dancers, actors, choreographers, curators and other artists, all of whom have worked with Orlin, were given the opportunity to share their personal experiences of these collaborations and their insights into her work and creative process.

### **3. THE VALUE OF THE STUDY**

Dance scholarship has traditionally been viewed as the domain of the body and therefore subordinate to other academic fields and sciences of the mind (Desmond, 1993-1994). Construed as non-verbal, idiosyncratic, infantile, female and uncoded, dance has come to stand in opposition to the civilised, social, adult, male reasoned code of language. The deeply ingrained cultural marginalisation of the non-verbal has rendered the body, and with it dance, as the "other" in the privileged signifying system of language, explains Daly (2002e). This dissertation, existing as a piece of academic writing that deals with the subject of dance thus, in its very nature, addresses and challenges "the academy's

aversion to the material body, and its fictive separation of mental and physical production” (Desmond, 1993-1994: 34) – an attitude which is not only produced by, but continues to reinforce, the body-mind split that exists within Western thought (Desmond, 1993-1994). This dissertation also contributes to a growing body of literature in which representations of women in Western concert dance are deconstructed in an effort to counter dance criticism’s earlier tendencies to discuss dance texts independently from their conditions of production and reception, without consideration of issues of gender, race and class (Adair, 1992).

The value of this dissertation predominantly lies in its cultivation of the study of bodily texts, with dance being a significant vehicle through which to do so. As a discourse of the body, dance is particularly vulnerable to definitions based on essentialised identities that have their origins in biological difference (Desmond, 1993-1994). Western concert dance forms (particularly but not exclusively) provide rich material for the study of the body as a locus of patriarchal control. In other words, dance studies can provide considerable insight into how the body acts as a ground for the inscription of meaning, a tool for its enactment, and a medium for its continual creation and recreation. Dance, says Daly, is like a “living laboratory for the study of the body – its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world” (2002d: 298-299).

Reflecting on dance as a way to ‘read’ the body provides a better understanding of socially constituted and historically specific attitudes toward the body in general, and of specific social groups’ usage of the body in particular. An investigation of this kind simultaneously contributes to the discourse around the artificial constructions of marginalised social groups, while also highlighting the ways in which a codified form of dance, such as classical ballet, can function as an institution and an ideological strategy through which to contain the subversive potential of the moving body. It demonstrates the centrality of art in the shaping of people’s ideas about themselves and their society, for mainstream modes of artistic representation have the potential to set the standard for everyday life by making the artificial constructions of the dominant ideology seem ‘natural’. Accordingly, such modes of representation serve to maintain the hierarchy of the patriarchal symbolic order.

However, even though many South African theatre goers have questioned Orlin’s merits as an artist, often debating her relevance to dance, this dissertation aims to use Orlin’s work as an example of how normalised representations in art can be challenged and how the body – that which has become the site of oppression and objectification – has the potential to be a vehicle for change. Recognition of the body as socially constructed and the interrogation of the assumed essentialist meanings that the dominant ideology attributes to it, gives choreographers such as Orlin access to endless possibilities through which to subvert and challenge preconceived notions about the body and the body in dance. More specifically, as a female artist, Orlin can challenge and undermine the system of representation that not only places women in the position of the ‘other’, but also orchestrates a history which has

misrepresented women within the symbolic order (Sarkin, 1998). This dissertation aims to shed light on the potential of dance to promote individual consciousness and freedom of choice – to show that the dancing female body does not have to be a docile object of desire. Orlin, in her attempt to subvert ballet's traditional display of the female body, illustrates the potential for the liberation of women through a radical redefining of the relationship between female performers and their bodies.

Reading, thinking and writing about the type of work that Orlin creates, helps to underline the significance of art that seeks to deconstruct the Western hierarchy by revolting against the determinism, essentialism, idealism and logic of traditional Western philosophy, a particularly important endeavour within the context of South Africa, a country in which identity politics remains a salient topic.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1. MIND/BODY DUALISM IN WESTERN CULTURE

The concept of dualism has been a characteristic of Western philosophy and theology since the classical Greek philosopher Plato (428 – 427 BC) first expressed the view that human existence is bifurcated into two realms (Bordo, 1993). Following from the biblical notion of *good* versus *evil*, the former not comprehensible unless the latter is also understood, Plato, and later St. Augustine (354 – 430), and ultimately René Descartes (1596 – 1650), philosophised about the distinct difference between mind and body. Descartes even went as far as to metaphysically scientise the myth, explains Susan Bordo (1993). Considered binary oppositions, which also include male/female, culture/nature, science/art, objective/subjective, active/passive, self/other, and sameness/difference,<sup>5</sup> mind and body have been placed in a hierarchical relationship that always recognises the former as positive, normative and prime (associated with good) and the latter as negative, deviant and subordinate (associated with evil) (Finestone, 1995). The mind, considered to be the seat of rational thought that is located in the part of the human organism which is closer to the heavens, acquired a superior status to the body, conceptualised as being closer to the earth, where animals live (Lavender, 2013).

Plato, St. Augustine and Descartes articulated the belief that the body is not ‘me’, although inescapably *with* me, existing merely as the material envelope for the inner and essential self – the thinking thing, which is the mind. The body came to be regarded as an alien entity, a confining and limiting prison or a cage from which the mind struggles to escape. Its inevitable appetite for food, its susceptibility to disease and illness as well as its lusts, fears and fancies strip the mind of its power to think – the body obstructs and distracts from the pursuit of finding ‘truth’. In short, the body is the locus of everything that threatens the human’s attempt at control. The ultimate desire of these philosophers, Descartes in particular, was learning how to gain absolute control over the body in such a way as to be able to live completely without it. They pursued a state of disembodiment – and intellectual independence from the distracting lures of the body’s desires and hungers (Bordo, 1993).

While from a Christian perspective the body was regarded as an instinctual and sexual animal – a site of sin and lust – that stood in the way of spiritual control and purity, science deemed the body a mechanical biologically programmed system that could be fully quantified and (in theory) controlled. From the Renaissance onwards, man’s quest for scientific development necessitated that the body be treated objectively. In order for the mind to comprehend things as they really are, and not as imagined by an embodied and subjective person, a disembodied view from nowhere needed to be obtained (Bordo, 1993). Anatomists and research scientists therefore rendered the body a mere work object and

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<sup>5</sup> This list is not comprehensive.

offered, through dissection, new ways of seeing, understanding, and fragmenting the body, which generated new forms of knowledge and, ultimately, socio-political power (Sharp, 2000).

## **2. BODY OBSESSION AND BODY AFFECTION**

Because the Western mind-set deems the tangible real body as something that needs to be recreated into more than flesh (Oliver, 2005), there exists an active preoccupation with the body as an objective, mechanical entity, suggests Jill Green (1999). An internalisation of the belief that the body is an alien force and an impediment to the soul, teaches men and women from a young age, to harbour a disdain for the body and its appetites, and to strive toward that which is displayed as being the physical ‘ideal’.<sup>6</sup> Bordo (1993) believes that contemporary society is far more obsessed with reshaping and remoulding the unruly body than in previous eras. The amount of time and money that is spent on acquiring the ideal body may beguile one to think that, nowadays, people have a high regard for their bodies. On the contrary, it is exactly this notion that the body can be forced to fit a culturally constructed external ideal, that exemplifies the disconnect and the hierarchical relationship between mind and body.

In an attempt to adhere to socially acceptable and predictable ways of being and doing, people come to treat their bodies as something outside of themselves – an object, or rather a machine, that can be recreated through the faculties of the mind (Green, 1999). According to Lavender (2013), patriarchal power is obsessed with mechanised productivity. In keeping with classical Cartesian thinking, bodies are expected to suggest ‘machinality’, the civilising force to which its opposite, ‘animality’, must give way. Animality is defined as “the messy and unpredictable tendencies within nature” (Lavender, 2013: 2). These opposites have otherwise also been conceptualised by the Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin as the ‘classical’ and the ‘grotesque’. The classical body signifies civilisation. Through the privatisation and absence of base bodily functions, desires and appetites the classical body adheres to its carefully designated and patrolled range of acceptable behaviour (Wolff, 1997). Standing in opposition to the classical body is the grotesque body with its “orifices, genitals and protuberances” (Wolff, 1997: 84) – a body that suggests animal primitiveness, in need of discipline, reshaping and remoulding according to the image through which will be exhibited the advancement of civilisation (Adair, 1992).

Bordo (1993) probes this growing obsession with the body, which she claims does not suggest greater acceptance of it. People still take very little pleasure in the experience of embodiment. Instead, she explains, the central identification with the mind, ideals of spiritual perfection and fantasies of absolute control in an increasingly unmanageable culture, continue to encourage society to strive towards a form of disembodiment.

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<sup>6</sup> These idealised representations of the human body were first introduced by way of classical Greek and Italian Renaissance painting and sculpture. Curiosity about the make-up of the human body – particularly the male body – as well as the belief in man as god encouraged these representations (Adair, 1992).

### 3. MAN IS MIND, WOMAN IS BODY

Women are particularly vulnerable to the demands concerning the bodily management and re-creation that Bordo (1993) writes about. The reason for this is the historical dualistic conceptualisation of the body as the 'sphere' of women (Adair, 1992). "With the establishment of the binary opposition model, women increasingly came to be associated with their reproductive biology" (Thomas, 2003: 40). Female reproductive organs were initially thought to be underdeveloped homologues of male organs, but 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists redefined women's reproductive biology as a system opposite to men's. In particular, the identification of the uterus as the most important organ, not only to women but also to mankind, elevated the value of the female reproductive system and rendered reproduction the essence of Woman (Gallagher & Laqueur, 1987). In addition, women's reproductive female activities of menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding and lactation also reinforced the association of the female with the inferior body (Adair, 1992). This prejudicial view of women was further bolstered by a range of findings that had come to be regarded by many as scientifically accurate. The classification of the female skeletal frame as having a wide pelvis, a small neck, a narrow ribcage and a small skull gave rise to the conclusion that, because the female physique is childlike, she is unfit to take up the tasks of men. The small skull and wide pelvis in particular were used as evidence against women partaking in intellectual labour, especially science. It determined that women were "in the depths of their bones [...] unsuitable for intellectual labour" (Gallagher & Laqueur, 1987: ix).

Perceptions such as these allowed Man to justify his own association with the linear Apollonian mind,<sup>7</sup> with its rational and objective thought processes deemed necessary for scientific and cultural advancement (Adair, 1992). In their writings on the making of the modern body, Gallagher and Laqueur (1987) explain that nature was readily assumed as the foundation for social inequality. Michel Foucault expounds upon this perception in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* in which he explains that dominance conceals itself beneath the gentle force of nature (1979). An emphasis on the notion of 'inborn' or 'natural' gender differences allowed for hierarchical ordering that favoured male dominance. The dualism of male/female, masked as a neutral binary, served to create politically oppositional and exclusive categories (Lavender, 2013). Daly explains:

It separates the world into "us" and "them" with the "us" always providing the measuring stick and the "them" inevitably failing to measure up. In modern Western culture, Woman has always been the Other, defined according to the fantasies and power structures of men (2002d: 300).

Woman was made *other* by being identified with the body, states Adair (1992). In terms of research and science, women's viewpoints were disregarded and their voices were silenced. Her link to the body, sexuality, sensual pleasure and Dionysian ecstasy and emotion (Adair, 1992) resulted in deeply sedimented images of Woman as temptress, owning a body that speaks the language of provocation.

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<sup>7</sup> Apollo is a Greek mythological god who represents order, reason and civilisation. Standing in direct opposition is his brother Dionysus, the god of the darker and more primitive forces in man such as sex and the urge to violence (McCrum, 1970).

Especially within the Christian tradition such associations enabled men to shift the blame onto women for actively seducing and luring them to arousal. They disclaimed male ownership of the body and its desires and admonished women for manipulating and arousing these desires. Woman was often labelled as, or equated with, distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God and capitulation to sexual desire, violence, aggression, failure of will, and even death. Attached to her was the image of a *sexual temptress*, yet the comparison between body and appetite cast the *devouring woman* as an equally potent image of dangerous female desire (Bordo, 1993). As a result, both Woman and the body have come to be equated with lower, subordinate physical functions that have to be transcended in pursuit of the pure (Finestone, 1995).

#### **4. PHYSICAL IDEALS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE**

The body that is considered to be ideally shaped and moulded within Western culture – especially for women – has not remained constant, and what the ideal symbolises has also changed with time. There have been periods in which the larger and more curvaceous figure, at least for women, has been cast as the physical ideal. In the 1950s and 60s, for example, when the American actress, model and singer Marilyn Monroe (1926 – 1962) was deemed the quintessence of female beauty, women had just been fired *en masse* from the jobs they held during World War II. The voluptuous large breasted woman – a symbol of female domesticity – was glamorised in an attempt to shamelessly propagandise women back into the full-time job of wife and mother. From the 1970s onward, however, the ideal of slenderness took root in Western culture (Bordo, 1993). The image of the slender body as an aesthetic ideal first appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to express disdain towards the excesses of the French Revolution (1789 – 1799) (Anderson, 1986) and the bourgeois need to display wealth and power ostentatiously. Those who could afford to eat well systematically began to discipline their diet. Slenderness as an emblem of aristocracy was quickly appropriated by the new status-seeking middle class, who had grown prosperous through commerce and industry, and thin wives became trophies of their husbands' success (Bordo, 1993). The rise of the middle class was also accompanied by a wave of prudishness and hypocrisy that admonished the display of naked flesh, especially for women (Anderson, 1986).

This Victorian capitalist need to hide the body stands in contrast to contemporary consumer capitalism, which seeks to put the human body on display. However, concealed behind a so-called 'celebration' of the natural human form remains the obligation to contain and suppress the body. The majority of women no longer wear corsets, but they are required to use their muscles to hold their bodies (Thomas, 2003). Contemporary society has come to expect that women not only be slender, but also toned and muscular. Their bodies must emanate strength, vitality, health and power – a curiously androgynous ideal (Bordo, 1993), with sexual features made invisible so as to appear anatomically gender-less, stripped of any identifiable sexual signs (Claid, 2006).



This contemporary demand for tight firm muscles, for women as well as for men, is indicative of a society in which the triumph of the mind over the body remains significant. The muscular slender body is admired for the strength, will, self-control, energy and purity that it suggests. “My soul seemed to grow as my body waned” (West cited in Bordo, 1993:148). A tightly honed body is bolted down and its internal processes appear to be under control – protected against the eruptions from within. For many it indicates a ‘correct attitude’ which allows for a sense of self-worth. Bordo (1993) interprets this active obsession with the body as the manifestation of anxieties and fantasies that are fostered by our culture. Green (1999) similarly believes that it results from the sense that it is one of the few available domains of control that is left in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Bordo (1993), people often feel incapable of exercising control over events outside themselves – how well they do in their jobs or how healthy their personal relationships are – but they can control the amount of food they consume, the amount of exercise they do and, granted they have enough time and money, any beauty regimes they choose to participate in. Abstinence and tests of endurance have come to exist as ways of proving self-sufficiency. The capacity to deny the body its materiality by ignoring discomfort and pain (such as hunger, muscular over-exertion or surgical modification) seems to be taken as further proof that the body is being mastered and the flesh is being transcended.

The quest for slenderness and the willingness to subject the body to violent practices, explains Bordo (1993), results from the desire to be disembodied. Like Plato, St. Augustine and Descartes, people still want to live without that which impedes absolute control. Advertisements that promote slimming products or services generally reflect the disdain for the body and very often feed into the desire to violently eradicate the body: words such as “attack”, “destroy”, “burn”, “bust” and “eliminate” are regularly used in relation to ridding the body of unwanted flesh. Fat, it seems, has come to denote a capitulation to the lusts and appetites of the uncivilised animal – becoming *all* body. Areas that are soft or loose are unacceptable, even on thin bodies, as it marks a lack of discipline, an unwillingness to conform and an absence of all the managerial abilities that, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility (Bordo, 1993). Sharp (2000) uses the phrase *a hierarchy of beauty* to highlight the way in which physical appearance has come to drive definitions of self and social worth. People are conditioned to think that their ability to acquire the ideal body is indicative of their success and social status, as well as of their societal values and inner moral states (Oliver, 2005).

## **5. SLENDERNESS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO WOMEN**

The history of female marginalisation in Western culture makes women’s pursuit of success and social status through bodily practices and manipulations particularly significant. The historical association of Woman with the body and its insatiable appetites and desires render females considerably more vulnerable to the demand for disembodiment and thus to extremes in cultural manipulations of the body. For the female, the unyielding physical self is constantly at war with the inner self, characterised by the so-called ‘male’ values of spirituality, intellectuality and strength of

will. According to Sharp (2000), it is the need to rid the female body of its dangerous appetite and untamed sensual desire that has allocated it as particularly susceptible to regulation and that has allowed culture's grip on her body to become a constant, intimate fact of life. For young adolescent women the obsessive striving towards the current androgynous ideal relates, according to Bordo (1993), to an anxiety about becoming a mature, sexually developed and reproductive woman and falling into the lifestyle they associate with their mothers. To them fat represents the confinements of domestic life as well as the subjection to the full-bodied domesticated physique's cultural association with incompetence and social and sexual vulnerability. Moreover, the obsession with slenderness, for young and old, expresses a fear of the archetypal image of the female as hungering, voracious, all-needing, all-wanting and with an insatiable lust. The cultural disdain and suppression of female hunger makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs. Through the ideological moorings for a rigorously dualistic sexual division, women learn to nurture and feed others and not the self. The desire for self-nurturance and self-feeding is seen as excessive (Bordo, 1993).

## **6. FEMALE SLENDERNESS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO PATRIARCHY**

Bordo (1993) explains that the ideal of the slender female corresponds particularly with periods of female assertion for political and social independence. Times such as these result in a pervasive sense of 'manhood in danger' – anxiety over women's uncontrollable hunger. The first feminist wave can be traced to 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) addressed society's prescriptive grip on women's bodies. As a privileged woman she recognised all the mundane, seemingly trivial aspects of women's bodily existence, demanding delicacy and domesticity as significant elements in the social construction of an oppressive feminine norm. This female resistance incited some visual and literary representations of women as dark, dangerous and evil vampires, killers or castrators. In the fields of science and medicine female revolt was often interpreted as, or associated with, bad sexual behaviour and excessive sexual excitement that needed medical treatment and correction. Scientists and doctors constructed a medical fantasy – the disciplined and purified woman – which corresponded with yet another popular artistic and moral theme of the woman as a sweet, gentle and domestic ministering angel without intensity or personal ambition of any sort.

For every historical image of the dangerous devouring woman, there arises a corresponding fantasy – an ideal femininity from which all threatening elements have been purged (Bordo, 1993). In terms of female archetypes the potent and alchemical goddess, Aphrodite, stands in opposition to the innocent and passive Psyche (Sayers, 1993). When maternal power – the full-bodied Aphrodite (akin to Lavender's concept of 'animality' and Bakhtin's concept of the 'grotesque') – threatens to disrupt, female bodies are necessitated to strip all psychic resonances with such power. They must resemble the "lovely" (Sayers, 1993: 172) and "perfect" (Sayers, 1993: 172) Psyche – an archetype perhaps more suitable and less threatening to patriarchal social and cultural organisation than Aphrodite.

In psychoanalytic terms, the female's body is fetishized in order to make it something reassuring as opposed to something threatening. Fetishism amplifies the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. Freud believed that sexual fetishism in men develops out of a fear of castration since a woman's real absence of a penis bestows upon her a symbolic association with the threat of castration (Mulvey, 1975). Freud theorised that, when a male infant enters the phallic stage of sexual development (ages 3 – 6) and for the first time becomes aware of differences between male and female genitalia, he assumes that the female's penis has been removed. He becomes anxious that he will also be castrated by his rival, the father figure, as punishment for the incestuous desire for his mother that has developed (Sigelman & Rider, 2006). The female body therefore not only instils admiration in the male, but also fear and deprecation (Adair, 1992).

## **7. WOMEN COLLUDE WITH A DOMINANT PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY**

Western culture now finds itself in such a period of female assertion and heightened male anxiety. In an age in which women have entered arenas traditionally reserved for men (for example, law, business, higher education, politics and medicine), maternal power threatens to burgeon. Ironically, from a female perspective, power has come to be associated with adherence to the societal demand for a lean muscular body that communicates an ability to exercise the traditionally masculine values of self-control, energy and purity. To master and transcend the cravings and desires of the body not only allows for liberation from the domestic, reproductive destiny of the archetypal woman, it also affords access to the privileged male world. These values have rarely been made available to women and allow for feelings of power and worthiness in a world in which they otherwise feel excluded and unvalued (Bordo, 1993).

From the standpoint of male anxiety, however, a woman who adheres to the societal demands for a lean muscular body is not only declaring "symbolic allegiance to the professional, white, male world", (Bordo, 1993: 208) but also her "lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative 'female values'" (Bordo, 1993: 208). The new power look is no less determined by hierarchical, dualistic constructions of gender than was the conventionally feminine norm of Wollstonecraft's time (Bordo, 1993). Accordingly, Oliver (2005) is concerned about the inference that the androgynous female body exudes strength and vitality. Most problematic about this new ideal is that "[w]omen say they want to *look* healthier, not *be* healthier", states Thomas F. Cash, professor of psychology at Old Dominion University in Virginia who surveyed 800 adult women about the way in which they perceive their bodies (cited in Brant, 1995: 88). Green (1999) believes that this new strength training craze requires women to spend even more time conditioning and manipulating an ideal body – thin, yet now muscular. Bordo (1993) describes this behaviour as a modification practice that leads women to collude with a dominant culture.

## 8. FOUCAULT SHEDS LIGHT ON MODERN POWER

The French philosopher Michel Foucault, considered by many to be a model thinker in looking at how bodies are shaped and moulded by society, reflects on the durability and flexibility of the normalisation and regulation of the (female) body as a strategy of social control. Within a capitalist society, modern power, according to Foucault (as cited in Bordo, 1993), is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial and non-orchestrated. It does not possess individuals or groups, nor does it require arms, physical violence or material constraints. Modern power exists as a dynamic network of non-centralised forces – practices, institutions, and technologies – that are not random, but that configure to assume particular historical forms within which certain positions of dominance and subordination are sustained. Although a patriarchal system may grant men higher stakes in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied positions of dominance over women, Bordo (1993) advises against the tendency to cast men as the enemy. Often, men, as much as women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions that they as individuals did not create and do not control. Dominance is not, like sovereign power, upheld by means of decree or design, but through the organisation and regulation of time, space and the movements of people's daily lives which trains, shapes and impresses their bodies with the predominating historical forms of selfhood, desire, femininity and masculinity. People's bodies become direct loci of social control (Bordo, 1993).

The state's interest in conquest and colonization through the suppression of superfluous individuating characteristics is thus positioned to operate from within, through repression of embodied nature (Lavender, 2013: 4).

Foucault looks, in particular, at the extremes of standardised bodily behaviour that have historically characterised institutions such as military schools, prisons and mental hospitals (Bordo, 1993), because it is through such institutions that the value systems of the dominant ideology is maintained (Adair, 1992). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault refers to the soldier of the seventeenth century as the epitome of bodily honour and respect. He uses the military description, below, to illustrate the way in which the body needs to be mastered before adequate levels of perfection and control can be achieved:

a lively alert manner, an erect head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, a small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet, because a man of such a figure could not fail to be agile and strong (1979: 135).

He explains that the military man's body was created through discipline, a specific technique of a power that regards the body as both an object and instrument of its exercise. Foucault notes that discipline detracts power from the body because it not only renders the body an 'aptitude' which it aims to increase, but it also negates the power that might result from it, turning the body into a relation of strict subjection. Disciplinary power makes the body obedient, responsive and skilful, but it only achieves these traits because it becomes docile (Foucault, 1979).

A docile body is self-regulated and habituated and behaves in normalised ways (Green, 1999). Bordo (1993) explains that the normalisation of behaviour is achieved through homogenisation – the smoothing out of racial, ethnic and sexual differences that subvert white male heterosexual expectations and identifications. Because, from a dominant ideological standpoint, the body has been placed on the nature side of the nature/culture divide and is therefore seen as relatively unchanging in its most basic aspects, one model is thought to be equally and accurately descriptive of all human bodily experience. This neutral generic homogenised core is usually a white male body passing as the norm for all. Consequently, men and women are persistently incited by mass cultural representations of masculinity, femininity, beauty and success to measure, judge, discipline and correct themselves (Bordo, 1993). Through the normative practices and bodily habits of everyday life people hope to achieve a certain form of selfhood or subjectivity that has become dominant within society (Green, 1999). In terms of gender, Butler (1990) explains, men and women are taught to believe that there is an essentialism of gender identity. In reality, however, their normative practices, or what Butler calls performative acts, simply permit these attributes to create the illusion of a pre-existing essence (Butler, 1990).

Foucault's concept of *technologies of the self* explains the mechanism by which people come to discipline and correct themselves. Foucault defines *technologies of the self* as regimes of power prescribed by society to facilitate the self-disciplining of people and the actualisation of a number of operations on their bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being (Foucault, 1988). Crucial to the functioning of this modern power is the presence of an authoritarian gaze. Foucault uses the Western prison system to illustrate how continuous hierarchical surveillance (a key factor in exercising discipline) is particularly effective in training and correcting citizens to regulate their own behaviour according to an institutionalised system of values and practices that is dense and complex (Foucault, 1979).

Of particular significance to Foucault's explanation of how, in a number of fundamental institutional spaces, technologies of surveillance have come to control the behaviour of those subjected to the gaze, is Jeremy Bentham's architectural Panopticon device, which was designed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Bentham's Panopticon consists of an outer circular building with windows facing in towards a central watchtower. The watchtower also has windows, facing towards the outer circle of cells, which enables the overseer in the central tower to see the prisoners in the individual cells. The prisoners, however, are unable to see the overseer or the other prisoners. This structure, and the ensuing system of surveillance, was designed to coerce the inmates into controlling and monitoring their own behaviour (Thomas, 2003). According to Clyde Smith (1998), an atmosphere of constant surveillance, created by the observer, causes the observed to always feel watched. This authoritarian gaze will be internalised to the point that each person under its weight will become his or her own disciplinarian (Green, 2001) who will exercise this surveillance over and against himself, whether or not the surveying power is

present (Bordo, 1993). Foucault (1979) explains that, while disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility, it imposes a principle of compulsory visibility on those subjected to it.

The shift from an institution that punishes through torture and physical abuse, to one that emphasises reform through seemingly more humane and sensitive ways, is deceiving. Foucault deems domination through an authoritarian gaze and normalising judgement equally repressive (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2004). Regrettably, as their own disciplinarians, people come to believe that their choices aimed at transforming the self, are being freely derived and attained. From this they hope to acquire a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Green, 2004). The pervasiveness of the dominant ideology is generally not recognised, thus allowing people to view it as common-sense, apolitical and beyond challenge (Adair, 1992) and making it all the more difficult to confront. Green (2004) explains that the key concept in *technologies of the self* is the idea of pleasure in the enjoyment of transforming the self. According to Foucault, people fail to see that what they experience as control, power and pleasure is in fact docility. They become blind to the larger normalisation process whereby they force their bodies to fit an external ideal (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2004).

The modern age is the age of the free subject, and as such it cannot admit of or legitimate a power that overtly dominates and controls. Thus modern power must operate in such a way as to prevent us from seeing it for what it is (Dreyfus and Rabinow<sup>8</sup> cited in Phelan, 1990: 424).

Foucault believes that people should exercise prudence when confronted with the knowledge they gather about themselves. Instead of indiscriminately accepting such information, they should consider it to be *truth games*, used to construct an illusion of happiness and success in attainment of the goal (Foucault, 1988).

Shane Phelan (1990) explains that Foucault is not arguing for a society in which people simply “do their own thing”. He is not, as many have criticised him, a nihilistic opponent of all values, but rather someone who is actively searching for

a political language that will enable humans to make claims without resorting to (and thus conforming to) Enlightenment (white male) standards of rationality and membership (Phelan, 1990:437).

Foucault is interested in the history of how individuals act upon themselves (Foucault, 1988) and through his investigation and writing he encourages people to always be suspicious of arguments that demand that they *be* a certain sort of person (e.g. male, female, white, non-white) to qualify for rights and inclusion. Any sense of social order naturally requires some sense of ordering of the self. What Foucault challenges is the peculiar modern organisation that internalises that ordering and then covers it up so that people are not aware that they *could* be anything other than what they have been trained to think they *should* be.

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<sup>8</sup> Phelan (1990) quotes from Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow’s book *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, written in 1982 and published by Harvester, Brighton.

## **9. WOMEN'S COLLUSION THROUGH A FOUCAULDIAN LENS**

When viewed through a Foucauldian lens, the independence, masculine self-containment, self-mastery and control that women experience in their striving towards the androgynous body ideal, seem to form part of a *truth game*. The pursuit of slenderness has been viewed as a feminist protest, albeit an unconscious protest, expressing antagonism toward the limitations of the ideal of female domesticity that reigned throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Bordo (1993) believes that, as a protest, the obsession with slenderness is hopelessly counterproductive. Thinness, as an avenue towards freedom from the domestic life of the traditional female, actually functions as if in collusion with the dominant patriarchal system. Bordo emphasises the idea that the thousands of girls and women who strive to embody these homogenised images and who, in that service, suffer from eating disorders, exercise compulsions, continual self-scrutiny and self-castigation are anything but the masters of their lives.

Like Foucault, Bordo (1993) believes that the experience of strength, independence and power – esteemed qualities in a male-dominated society – can be deceptive. The ability to mould the body into one that might suggest so-called masculine self-containment and control should not necessarily be equated with procuring male power and privilege. “To feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (Bordo, 1993: 179). In reality, though seemingly contradictory, women have been turned away from their bodies and they have been taught to ignore them, states French Feminist writer Hélène Cixous (1976). By habituating their forces and energies to external regulation, subjection, transformation and improvement, their bodies become docile and not empowered. Women continue to perpetuate the social roles they have learned to adopt, which is, among many, the need to defer to others rather than being the main actors in their own lives (Adair, 1992). By abiding by the laws and “institutional parameters governing the construction of gender in our culture” (Bordo, 1993: 61), the female continues to stand as signifier for the male other, fettered by the symbolic order and subjected to the commands that man imposes on her silent image – the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning – through which patriarchy can live out its fantasies and obsessions (Mulvey, 1975).

## **10. UNFASTENING FROM DUALISTIC POWER**

Is it possible that female liberation from patriarchal dominance is an unfeasible proposition? The picture of women as discussed above, whether curvy and domestic or lean and executive, might seem particularly bleak and discouraging. Dualistic habits are not easily extinguished, says Lavender (2013), because they do not announce themselves as problematic and they behave as assumed truths about the natural order of things. Lavender does assert, however, that, if people are prompted to examine how they use and are used by the workings of power that is ideologically founded upon one or more of the ancient dualisms, ways of unfastening from dualistic power and of creating experiences that promote emancipation from its logic might begin to seem possible. A focal point of this

dissertation is therefore to probe points of interference in dominant discourse around the body. Concurrently it delineates a context for the analyses of Robyn Orlin's work, the focus of Chapters Three and Four, which also evidence such points of interference.

The body ideals imposed on women in ballet that are the result of notions presented in this chapter are considered next. Chapter Two looks at classical ballet's ideals of transcendence and its perpetuation of patriarchal beliefs so as to supplement and navigate the discourse surrounding the agency of the ballerina.



# CHAPTER TWO

## 1. UNDERSTANDING THE CANON

### 1.1 High art: Beauty and goodness

In her book *YES? NO! MAYBE... Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (2006) Emilyn Claid points to Plato's presumption that it is the duty of artists to imitate 'the beautiful' through representation in music, dance and poetry. From as early as Plato it came to be accepted that the way in which art is able to characterise the concept of beauty and excellence is through the properties of mathematical proportion, balance between parts, simplicity of geometric form, the straight line and the circle. The straight vertical line, in particular, is what the Ancient Greeks identified as "pictorially sensible and heroic" (Volinsky, 1983: 256). Volinsky (1983) refers to German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) who argued that, while it was more natural for man to live horizontally, crawling and hunting his prey over trees and ground, standing upright is an act of the spirit that overcomes the natural state and raises man above nature. "With the vertical begins the history of human culture and the gradual conquest of heaven and earth" (Volinsky, 1983: 256). In line with this reasoning, Claid (2006) comments on the symbolic relevance of the vertical line within the arts: due to its association with movement from the lowly and bad pleasures of the body to the high and good conceptual pleasure of the mind it has come to symbolise goodness and morality – the essential form of beauty – in the arts. For Plato "This higher beauty cannot be seen with the eyes but grasped only with the mind: it is a beauty that follows the line of rationality and reasoning" (Claid, 2006: 19).

In terms of Western culture's 'high art' versus 'low art' discourse, inclusion into the category of 'high art' demands that a work of art inspires in man this concept of a higher beauty (Claid, 2006). Works that are deemed able to do this qualify as masterpieces, created by the unquestionably great creators (Middelow, 2007). These works form part of a collection – the canon – that is considered to be permanently established as being "of the highest quality", according to the Oxford Dictionary ("Canon, n.", 2014). Moreover, because this higher beauty can only be fathomed by way of rationality and reasoning, as argued by Plato, these canonical masterpieces are considered to be comprehensible only by educated men who can appreciate the spiritual form of perfection (Claid, 2006).

### 1.2 The canon preserves independent high culture

The canon zeroes in on the ideology and practice of connoisseurship, explains Daly (2002g). Apart from being able to appreciate the spiritual form of perfection, a connoisseur is someone who understands the details, techniques and principles of what they consider to be high quality art. Because the defining ethos of the canon is self-sacrifice to tradition, the role of the connoisseur is to evaluate whether a work of art's adherence to (or controlled manipulation of) the affirmed technique and vocabulary continues to uphold and reinforce the necessary aesthetic and social pedigree (Daly,

2002g). The canon sets the standard for what is considered to be good and valuable art and therefore exerts formidable power. In addition, the connoisseurs – canon ambassadors and apologists – assume commanding positions, for they have control over the canon, which tends to reflect and perpetuate the ideologies of particular points of view (Midgelow, 2007).

Almost invariably, especially until more recently, it has been the points of view of privileged, white, heterosexual, middle-class Western males that have formed the criteria of canonicity (Midgelow, 2007: 22).

Consequently the canon is a potent symbol of the identity of a culture – it acts as the legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity (Midgelow, 2007). It is in no way value free; rather, it is value laden, says Midgelow, especially with regard to the way in which it encourages the hierarchical binary oppositions of mind and body, man and woman, nature and culture, science and art, self and other (Claid, 2006).

However, the canon is made to seem universal and objective. Midgelow (2007) explains that the canon operates in a way that empowers canonically approved representations to hold the status of myth. According to Roland Barthes (1977) “myth consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural’” (Barthes, 1977: 165). It is a collective representation that is socially produced but that is inverted so as to come across as usual practice. Myth, and therefore the canon, thus denies social and political development. It produces the effect of being an eternal, ahistorical, apolitical artefact (Midgelow, 2007). The canon’s veneer of objectivity, ahistoricity and the apolitical is what enables canon apologists and connoisseurs to enforce a set of aesthetic values through which they promote exclusivity – ultimately hoping to maintain an independent high culture that will remain unspoilt by popular or commercial influences (Daly, 2002g).

### **1.3 The dance canon**

In dance this normative significance of works within the canon has naturally resulted in the perpetuation of a particular type of dance and compositional approach, generally considered to be “of the highest quality” (“Canon, n.”, 2014). Although the works of modern dance pioneers might well by now have been absorbed into the dance canon, its foundation no doubt is rooted in classical ballet, which, as Mackrell (1997) explains, remains the most academic and rigorously codified of all Western dance forms and, as Novack (1993) explains, is understood to hold a position of cultural and institutional dominance.

This position of dominance is, in part, due to ballet’s adherence to measured harmony and verticality, the symbol of idealised beauty in Western culture. Ballet visually strives to conjure the concept of perfection (Claid, 2006) by moving away from the earth and towards the heavens. This aesthetic is achieved through the form’s focus on line, harmonious spatial design and mathematically virtuosic

language, with its emphasis on *pointe*<sup>9</sup> explain work and air work<sup>10</sup> for example (Lepczyk cited in Thomas, 2003). Accordingly, there is only one kind of body that is suitable for the accomplishment of ballet's desired appearance (Claid, 2006). The balletic body – the medium through which the artist creates his or her representation – must be able to resist gravity and push outwards and upwards from the ground, says Claid. It is a body that is trained to be “taut, muscular and straight, with legs that unfold to a great length, spines that arch upwards and backwards away from the central axis of the pelvis” (Claid, 2006: 20). It is a body that upholds the Cartesian desire for what Lavender (2013) calls ‘machinality’ and Bakhtin calls the ‘classical’. The grotesque, primitive and animal-like body, as conceptualised from a dualistic patriarchal point of view, has been eradicated in favour of a body that signifies civilisation (Adair, 1992).

Ballet's canonical status and its continued assignment as the premier art dance form by many national governments endow its Eurocentric understanding of race, gender, sexuality and class with cultural power (Novack, 1993) – cultural products which are made to appear a ‘matter of course’. Stated otherwise, the parallel and interactive operations of the canon and history provide classical ballet with the gloss of universality and ahistoricism. The authority of the ballet canon invests the rows of identically dressed and identically shaped women of the *corps de ballet*, the extended linear positions of the ballet vocabulary and the fairy tale narratives (the basis of many ballet librettos) with the status of myth (Midgelow, 2007). As is the function of myth, the notion of ‘this is the way it should be’ is endorsed – on stage as well as in Western society at large. The demand for a specific physical ideal in ballet is not just a symptom but also an endorser of society's need to keep citizens under control (Oliver, 2005) – it serves to sustain the ideologies of a “privileged, white, heterosexual, middle-class Western male” (Midgelow, 2007: 22) point of view. Its ideals of perfection and its fantasies of absolute control locate the mind as superior to the body. Its central identification with the mind encourages disembodiment – an odd paradox when one considers ballet's reliance upon the human body as its raw material (Copeland<sup>11</sup> cited in Aalten, 2005).

As ‘high art’, classical ballet has long been deemed sacrosanct. The last few decades, however, have witnessed an increasing need to question, in particular, the body ideals imposed on women in ballet. Before delving more deeply into the academic and artistic critique of the ballet canon and its perpetuation of an essential femininity, particularly in relation to the glorification of the disembodied ballerina, some historical landmarks in the development of ballet need to be highlighted.

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<sup>9</sup> In classical ballet, *pointe* work refers to the technique of dancing on the tips of one's toes in specially designed *pointe* shoes. The stiffened vamp of the shoe allows the dancer to balance her entire body weight on a tiny flat surface. *Pointe* work has traditionally been reserved for female dancers but increasingly choreographers are exploring the possibility of putting male dancers *en pointe* (Craine & Mackrell, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Air work refers to steps that are performed while jumping (Craine & Mackrell, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Aalten (2005) references Copeland's 1990 article *Founding mothers: Duncan, Graham, Rainer and sexual politics*. This article was published in *Dance Theatre Journal*, 8(3), p. 6-30.

## 2. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BALLET

### 2.1 The beginnings of ballet

Ballet originated in the French courts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. It began as a diversion for noble amateurs but gradually transformed into a professional art form, with increasingly difficult acrobatics that required greater technical skill and more intensive training. To enable the audience to better see and admire the perilous leaps, pirouettes and other feats of the professional dancers, ballet was transferred from the courts to the proscenium stage. This physically and psychologically distanced the performers and the spectators, who were given a new vantage point (Au, 1988).

The need for more intensive training led to the establishment of the *Académie Royale de Musique et de Danse* (later known as the *Paris Opéra*) in the early 1670s – an institution which was directed by Jean - Baptiste Lully (1632 – 1687). Pierre Beauchamp (1631 – 1705), who was appointed as the dancing master of the *Académie*, was responsible for codifying the ballet technique and systemising its teaching by establishing its foundations. These foundations include, most notably, the five canonical positions of the feet and the turned out position of the legs. Although first used only for grotesque dances, ‘turnout’ was established to give the dancer maximum freedom to move in every direction. It also allowed for the optimal display of the body within the proscenium arch. Other distinguishing features of ballet, as formalised by Beauchamp, are the use of a straight spine, the high held chest, the elegant carriage of head and arms and the scrupulously arched feet of the French courtier (Adair, 1992).

It was in 1681 that the profession first accepted female dancers (Au, 1988). Men had been dominating the stage, not only because of tradition and a patriarchal ideology, which kept women in subordinate positions, but also because of the restrictive female attire. Women’s clothing – long heavy skirts, panniers<sup>12</sup> and wigs – limited their movements which, along with the heightened demand for decorum, caused the movement style of women to differ distinctly from that of men. With the establishment of dance as a profession, the demarcation of gender roles within the ballet tradition became even more so prominent. Men, in addition to their star status on the 18<sup>th</sup> century ballet stage, were also assigned roles as organisers, teachers, theoreticians and choreographers. Even as women’s popularity in ballet increased, they continued to function only as dancers – selected according to technical ability and becoming appearance (Adair, 1992). The late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries saw ballet recognised as a purely decorative form of entertainment and the dancers were admired only for their technical proficiency (Au, 1988).

Ballet, however, steadily evolved from a mere display of decorum and politeness towards a medium through which to express a variety of emotions. This, the *ballet d’action* to which Jean Georges

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<sup>12</sup> Panniers were hoops that 18<sup>th</sup> century women wore around their hips to extend the width of their skirts at the side, while leaving the front and back relatively flat.

Noverre (1727 – 1810) was integral, required that dancers adopt a movement style that conveyed emotion through the entire body and not only the face and arms. At the same time, however, much attention was given to the dancers' facial expressions, which helped to reinforce their gestures and heighten the emotions they were trying to convey to the audience. Moreover, female dancers were freed from their restrictive panniers, which were replaced by flowing dresses, in neo-classical style. These allowed for greater freedom and expression of movement and also revealed the women's figures more flatteringly (Au, 1988).

## 2.2 The Romantic ballet and the rise of the ballerina as icon

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the concept of disembodiment in ballet was made manifest. In this time of social upheaval, young artists rebelled against the stultifying moral convictions and outworn artistic forms of the new middle class who had started to patronise performances of drama, opera and ballet (Anderson, 1986). In an attempt to escape the grim reality that followed the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (Cass, 1993), artists explored themes inspired by exotic locations, as well as by the supernatural – interests that rose out of the recognition that the industrial revolution and the invention of the railroad allowed access to remote corners of the world, but at the same time threatened these places' untainted charm. Audiences during this time, also known as Romanticism, witnessed the abandonment of plots inspired by Greek and Roman literature and mythology. This resulted from a novel fascination with magic that emerged out of the need to bridge the gulf that exists between reality and aspiration. The introduction of gas lighting, made it possible to dim the houselights, which enhanced the ghostliness of nocturnal landscapes and heightened the sense of theatrical magic and enchantment. Sprites, elves, sylphs, water nymphs, fire spirits as well as demons frequently figured in many Romantic ballets and came to represent the artist's yearning for the unattainable. In addition to the fantastical, choreographers also explored imaginary voyages to far-off lands as a portal through which to escape reality (Anderson, 1986).

These two different yet complimentary aspects of the Romantic ballet gave rise to two distinct female character types: the exotic foreigner and the supernatural creature (Foster, 1996). While the former resulted in the frequent use of balleticised national dances (Anderson, 1986), the latter brought about the sophistication of a technique that allowed the ballerina to stand on her toes. This technique, known as dancing *en pointe*, was made possible by way of specially designed ballet slippers. At first *pointe* work was used only as a technical trick<sup>13</sup> (Craine & Mackrell, 2000), but during the Romantic period it became the perfect vehicle through which the ballerina could capture a quality of ethereality and convincingly convey a sense of the supernatural (Au, 1988). Moreover, the Romantic tutu, a bell-shaped skirt made of layers of diaphanous material that almost reached the ballerina's ankle, also

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<sup>13</sup> It is not possible to say with certainty who the first ballerina was to dance *en pointe*. Both the French dancer Geneviève Gosselin and the Russian dancer Avdotia Istomina are known to have danced *en pointe* before 1820, after which the technique was appropriated for Romanticism's otherworldly narratives (Craine & Mackrell, 2000).

served to assign supernatural qualities to the ballerina because of how it concealed her figure and revealed only her neck and shoulders as signs of real flesh and blood. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is considered to be the period in which ballet acquired many of the characteristics – *pointe* shoes, the tutu and the desire to create an illusion of weightlessness and effortlessness – that are still associated with it today (Anderson, 1986). Most significantly, the Romantic ballet initiated the principle of distinct male and female vocabularies. Women specialised in intricate footwork, *developés* of the leg and extended balances. Men excelled in high leaps, beaten jumps and multiple *pirouettes*. New conventions of partnering also emerged. The male and female dancer no longer moved side by side, as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, the male dancer supported, guided and manipulated the female dancer as she balanced delicately and spellbindingly *en pointe* (Foster, 1996).

Marie Taglioni (1804 – 1884), daughter of Filippo Taglioni (1777 – 1871), who choreographed *La Sylphide* in 1832 at the *Paris Opéra*, has been identified as a revolutionary ballerina due to her initiation of changes in the attitude toward technique and performing manner. Her ability to execute technical difficulties with seeming ease and effortlessness stood in direct contrast with the display of muscular strain that had been characteristic of earlier ballet performances (Cass, 1993). As the sylph in *La Sylphide*, Taglioni leapt, jumped and glided lightly and fluidly *en point* (Au, 1988). Taglioni no doubt played an indispensable role in centralising ballet's ideal of masking strength and exertion, the display of which would have been inappropriate to the ideology upon which the form was founded (Sayers, 1993). Taglioni's training, necessary to build the strength that would enable the female dancer to dance with such lightness and effortlessness, was so gruelling that by a lesson's end she was ready to faint and had to be undressed, sponged, and dressed again before she regained full consciousness (Anderson, 1986).

Marie Taglioni's father, her teacher, made possible the creation of a new type of heroine out of the sylph (Au, 1988). So convincing was she as the elusive and unattainable Sylphide that her audiences adored her and numerous other dancers attempted to imitate her (Anderson, 1986). Taglioni's seduction lay in her ability to make the spectators engage with both reality and illusion, continuously teasing them with the "persistent dualism between flesh and blood physicality, and spiritual beauty and perfection" (Claid, 2006:48), for her near-perfect technique along with her chaste and modest bearing which allowed for a performance that was devoid of all traces of the carnal (Anderson, 1986). Contrary to the shamelessly immodest, seductive and provocative smiles and curtsies that had epitomised ballerina conduct (Cass, 1993), Taglioni appeared to be an airy being, innocent of human lusts and desires (Au, 1988).

Taglioni's greatest contemporary and rival, Fanny Elssler (1810 – 1884), earned renown for her performance of the balleticised Spanish dance, the *Cachucha*, in which she twisted and turned with bewitching gestures that some viewers found voluptuous and provocative (Anderson, 1986). Although

her special gift lay in the precision and rapidity with which she executed small quick steps, it was more so the warmth, passion and sensuous vitality that earned her fame. Dressed in pink satin and black lace, Elssler was labelled the “pagan dancer”. Taglioni, adorned in white muslin as the ethereal sylph, was called the “Christian dancer” (Au, 1988). This overt juxtaposition of the dangerous, devouring woman with the corresponding male fantasy – an ideal femininity from which all threatening elements have been purged – again confronted and seduced the audience with man’s apparent dualism and the tension between perishable flesh and immortal spirit (Cass, 1993). This strategic pairing of Taglioni and Elssler by the *Paris Opéra* echoed the rivalry between Marie Sallé (1707–1756) and Marie Camargo (1710 – 1770) of an earlier era, and anticipated the conflicting natures of Anna Pavlova (1881 – 1931) and Tamara Karsavina (1885 – 1978) of the Imperial Russian Ballet.

While in the time of King Louis the XIV it was considered improper for women to appear on stage, the Romantic period reversed this situation and made an idol out of the ballerina. The 19<sup>th</sup> century has been noted as the period in which a “touch of hysteria accompanied the cult of the ballerina” (Anderson, 1986: 69). Whether represented as whore or virgin, women in ballet were idealised and idolised (Anderson, 1986) and an infinite amount of souvenirs, lithographs, prints and pictures, endowed the ballerina with iconic status (Adair, 1992). The ballet stage was dominated by charismatic female dancers (Au, 1988) who were able to inspire in man the concept of pure beauty and often also goodness and morality, because they symbolised, through their skill and more so their characterisation of supernatural beings, movement from the lowly and the bad pleasures of the body to the high and good conceptual pleasure of the mind (Claid, 2006). So adored was the ballerina that, in many ballets, the leading male role was given to a woman. The male dancer, a masterly and gallant figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was demoted to a servant who merely waited around at the ballerina’s feet. His main purpose, if on stage at all, was to lift the ballerina and carry her through space, thereby amplifying the image of her weightlessness (Cass, 1993). Male dancers, who suffered a severe loss of prestige, were more than often entirely absent from the stage. This seemed to give women the opportunity to be accepted as sufficient unto themselves, explains Cass. Along with allusions to the exotic, some ballet themes suggested the emancipation of women, which made discernible a new vigorous female image (Au, 1988).

As the Romantic period progressed, ballet increasingly became synonymous with the shapely female form (Daly, 2002b). The Romantic ballet had lost much of its initial impact – its creative excitement, its poetry and its expressiveness were abandoned in favour of a more superficial concentration on visual spectacle. No longer even considered a serious art form, ballet began to function only as a platform for the display of ballerinas’ bodies (Au, 1988). Their skills were dismissed in favour of their natural physical attributes (Foster, 1996). Most men candidly admitted that they only attended performances to ogle the dancers of the ensemble (Au, 1988). A dancer’s ability or her interpretation

of a role was only rarely commented upon. Writings of critics and balletomanes – mainly male – provided exceedingly more detailed descriptions of the dancers than the dance (Adair, 1992):

La Cerrito<sup>14</sup> is blonde; she has blue eyes which are very soft and tender, a gracious smile despite its perhaps too frequent appearance; her shoulders, her bosom do not have the scrawniness which is characteristic of female dancers, the whole of whose weight seems to have descended into their legs (Gautier, 1992: 87).

This fetishization of the ballerina is discussed in greater detail in the section sub-headed “The relevance of the male gaze to ballet”.

### 2.3 Ballet prospers in Russia

Ballet in Western Europe lost its prestige as the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close and, as a result, the creative focus of ballet shifted north and east. While Danish ballet master August Bournonville developed a unique style of ballet that mixed Romanticism, Danish folk tales and naturalism, ballet in Russia evolved along the course already established by France and Italy (Mackrell, 1997). International stars, such as Taglioni and Elssler, as well as foreign ballet masters and choreographers were welcomed into Russia and regarded with great reverence. Although no longer esteemed in their own countries these dancers, teachers and choreographers were integral to the rapidly growing popularity of ballet in Russia. Imperial patronage bestowed great status upon male and female dancers who had become morally suspect in Western Europe (Anderson, 1986). The Imperial Ballet of Russia, as in the Renaissance and especially in the time of King Louis XIV, “was a reflection of the court’s splendour” (Mackrell, 1997: 26). With an emphasis on technically skilful dancing as on elaborate stage settings and ornately bejewelled costumes, ballet was considered a dazzling visual entertainment for the upper class (Cass, 1993). Although Russian ballet first emulated the Western European tradition, this situation changed between 1890 and 1910 when classical<sup>15</sup> ballet, the quintessence of which can be seen in the works of French-born choreographer Marius Petipa<sup>16</sup> (1818 – 1910) reached its pinnacle. Particularly characteristic of the classical tradition is the heightened attention to technical virtuosity. Guest appearances by Italian ballerinas, who displayed powerful point work and athletic jumps and turns, inspired the Russian ballerinas to master a new range of bravura feats. Additionally, developments in the technology of ballet shoes, providing greater protection and support to the foot, led to increased virtuosity (Mackrell, 1997).

Even though the Imperial Russian Ballet managed to bestow upon the art form some of its former eminence, the Romantic tradition of putting the ballerina on display remained intact. Petipa’s ballets

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<sup>14</sup> Fanny Cerrito (1817-1909) was a contemporary of Taglioni and Elssler.

<sup>15</sup> The term ‘classical ballet’ refers to a choreographic approach that emphasises formal values – clarity, harmony, symmetry and order (Au, 1988). “The academic technique is paramount and its rules are rarely transgressed” (Au, 1988: 62). Even though classical ballets did not entirely abandon emotional content, this aspect was usually secondary (Anderson, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Petipa, who practically dictated Russian ballet (Anderson, 1986) for nearly thirty years, and who is lauded most for his high degree of inventiveness and variety (Au, 1988), choreographed approximately sixty ballets, including *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), *Nutcracker* (1892) and *Swan Lake* (1895) (Cass, 1993).



continued to feature the ballerina, carried around and displayed by her male partner. In fact, the need to display the new technical feats and intricate footwork of the ballerina increased in importance to the extent that the length of the ballerina's tutu was dramatically altered. The long tutu of the 1800s century gave way to a much shorter skirt that not only revealed more of the ballerinas' legs but also allowed the female dancers' greater mobility in the technically demanding ballets of Petipa. Despite a lesser moral concern with 'unclothing' the female body, the Imperial ballerinas were not considered glorified prostitutes, as most of the Romantic ballerinas of the *Paris Opéra* eventually came to be seen. However, they (and the male dancers) did effectively act as Imperial servants who had to please the most important gaze in Russia – that of the Tsar (Cass, 1993).

Petipa and the Imperial Russian Ballet were integral to the resurgence of ballet in Europe which had fallen into decline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. European ballet's new breath of life was additionally bolstered by Russian art critic, patron and ballet impresario, Serge Diaghilev (1872 – 1929), who assembled dancers from the Imperial Theatres of St. Petersburg and Moscow, established the avant garde *Ballets Russes* and sought to show Russian art to the West (Au, 1988). More mention will be made of the work of Petipa and the choreographers of the *Ballets Russes* in later chapters. Of greater significance to the current discussion is the influence of George Balanchine (1904 – 1983), founder of the New York City Ballet, whose career was markedly influenced by both Petipa and the *Ballets Russes*.<sup>17</sup> Balanchine was responsible for the development of a uniquely American style of ballet which not only came to permeate international standards and expectations, but which also adorned the contemporary ballerina with the status of "supercharged athlete" (Oliver, 2005: 51).

#### **2.4 Balanchine modernises ballet**

According to Tim Scholl (1994), Balanchine was devoted to demonstrating the inherent beauty of the human body. Balanchine maneuvered within what he himself called the "morality of classicism" (Daly, 2002g: xxxiii), yet he also experimented with innovative and often unconventional ways of applying ballet technique. Characteristic of his style was a modern emphasis on speed, flashing brilliant legwork (Cass, 1993) and unexpected shifts of weight and energy (Anderson, 1986). Balanchine demanded greater athleticism and prowess, often at the expense of classical teaching (Mazo, 1974). Legs were expected to soar up to ear level and extend at extreme angles, and if forcing the hip from its traditionally correct alignment was the only way of achieving this, then that was what was demanded (Mackrell, 1997).

The specific 'look' and style of movement that Balanchine wanted was achieved through the personal shaping of his dancers' bodies by means of a rigorous daily technique class in which the underlying

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<sup>17</sup> Balanchine was trained at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, Russia. He choreographed for Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes* before him and Lincoln Kirstein, who had envisaged an American ballet school that would train dancers in a distinctly American style, established the School of American Ballet. This became the training ground for Balanchine's company, the *New York City Ballet*, established in 1933.

principle was speed. Moreover, an opportunity to train with and dance for Balanchine was based on a pre-selection of dancers according to body shape and size (Cass, 1993). Balanchine's ideal female dancer's body, according to Heather Margaret Ritenburg<sup>18</sup> (2010), was exceedingly thin and streamlined with small breasts, narrow hips, long lean legs, long slender arms, a short torso, a flat stomach and abdomen, a small head and a long slender neck. This aesthetic preference firstly conserved the Romantic feminine ideal of the ballerina as possessing a demeanour of delicacy and emanating an illusion of lightness. For Balanchine, such a body also enabled the dancer to optimally display the physicality of the body, move with increased speed, exhibit dynamic line and extension, and easily contort and twist into spectacular shapes and positions (Cass, 1993).

Balanchine's faith in the power and beauty of the moving body in time and through space brought forth his commitment to plotless ballets. Although Balanchine did not invent the plotless ballet – Michel Fokine's<sup>19</sup> *Les Sylphides*<sup>20</sup> (1909) is considered to be the first – he explored this genre more thoroughly than any choreographer prior to him (Anderson, 1986). Balanchine chose to rid his work of the dramatic characters, strong emotions, elaborate settings and costumes that had characterised the Imperial Russian Ballet. His dedication to form and composition, to the visual orchestration of the musical score, and to the exhibition of the body, further inspired his streamlining of spatial design and his use of smaller ensembles that performed intricate combinations with faster rhythmic development (Cass, 1993). His dancers were mostly costumed only in leotards and tights, allowing them maximum freedom of movement and the spectators an unobstructed view of the workings of the body. More elaborate costumes, such as *Serenade's* (1935) skirts that resembled the long tulle tutus of the Romantic period yet were made to be lighter and more fluid than their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, still served to reveal clearly the workings of the legs (Scholl, 1994).

## 2.5 Balanchine's aesthetic endures

Balanchine's choreography and dancers were initially considered cold and mechanical (Au, 1988) – a sanitised geometry that emphasised physical discipline and dedication (Foster, 1996). In the 1960s, however, tastes began to swerve in Balanchine's favour (Au, 1988) and schools and ballet companies around America began to adopt his aesthetic (Ritenburg, 2010). In time, Balanchine was credited as a

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<sup>18</sup> Ritenburg is affiliated with the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada. Her description of the ideal Balanchine female is based on a study in which she analysed photographs of six of the twelve principal female dancers appointed by Balanchine between 1960 and 1983.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Fokine (1880 – 1942), a student from the Imperial Ballet School and later chief choreographer for the *Ballets Russes*, instigated a new approach to choreography in Russia. In particular, he rejected the rigid emphasis on academic technique at the expense of emotional content. He believed that a choreographer should have the freedom to dispense with technique if the ballet's theme so required. He deemed *pointe* work especially inappropriate to many of the ballets' themes. Yet he did not advocate the complete abandonment of technique, as he considered it to be the only form of training that could equip a dancer with the necessary strength and versatility. Fokine's most notorious ballets include *Firebird* (1910), *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911) and *Patrouchka* (1912) (Au, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> In *Les Sylphides* Fokine, who devoted most of his career to ballets with narrative and symbolic foundations, demonstrated that movement could exist free from such structures. *Les Sylphides* is a suite of ethereal dances to various works by the composer Frédéric Chopin (Cass, 1993).

master – the man who brought ballet fully into the realm of the modern. Balanchine’s impact on ballet, in America and internationally,<sup>21</sup> has been so significant that a host of imitators has risen in his wake, and many young choreographers have found it difficult to escape his pervasive influence. The style and expertise of the New York City Ballet – considered one of the leading ballet companies in the world – have not veered considerably from what Balanchine had instigated. Even under the directorship of two Balanchine successors, Jerome Robbins (1918 – 1998) and Peter Martin (1946 - ), the company’s aesthetic and objective have remained discernibly ‘Balanchinian’ (Anderson, 1986).

### **3. THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE AGENCY OF THE BALLERINA**

The preceding historical overview might have seemed overly factual, but it is important to establish a context, particularly in terms of the development of a definitive aesthetic for the contemporary ballerina, from which to launch the academic and artistic critique of the ballet canon and its perpetuation of an essential femininity.

#### **3.1 The agency of the ballerina: A polarising subject**

The agency of the ballerina, who epitomises femininity, is a central theme of the work of Orlin that is yet to be analysed. The discussion thus far has helped to construct a context for when, how and why the ballerina came to be esteemed as an icon of femininity. The remainder of this chapter delves into ways of interpreting and negotiating what has become quite a polarising topic – the agency of the ballerina icon, as it pertains to both the Romantic ballerina and her contemporary counterpart.

With regard to the Romantic ballerina, there seems to be greater consensus concerning her subordination, despite her growing prestige, apparent dominance and her arousal of ideas of female liberation (Daly, 2002a). As part of a social structure in which women were undeniably oppressed, male dancers may have been overshadowed but they were not overpowered. Men retained dominance in the representation onstage. Although the Romantic ballets were often named after the leading female characters, such as *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*,<sup>22</sup> the heroes were the ones who bore the problems of the ballet. The male onstage – the central term against which the ballerina could only be compared – displayed and often ‘created’ these object-forms as their own possessions. He was not inscribed as a form, but rather as an active principle. While the ballerina’s superficial display tended to work against the development of a story line, the male served as the narrative’s driving force – the creator rather than the created (Daly, 2002b). The men acted while the ballerinas were acted upon:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has not the slightest importance (Boetticher cited in Mulvey, 1975: 11).

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<sup>21</sup> Increasing globalisation and communications technology enable the transmission of images and trends around the world (Benn and Walters, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> *Giselle* was created in 1841 for the third great ballerina of the Romantic period, Carlotta Grisi (1819 – 1899). This ballet was jointly choreographed by Coralli, the chief ballet master at the *Paris Opéra*, who arranged the ensemble dances, and Jules Perrot (1810 – 1892), Grisi’s mentor and husband, who was responsible for Grisi’s dances.

In addition, Gautier and other Romantic critics such as Jules Janin (1804 – 1874) clearly differentiated between female and male participation in the display of the body. They deemed it suitable for male dancers to take action parts – pantomime and character roles – but not pure dance (i.e. pure display) parts. Men’s participation in the dancing spectacle was detested, for it was believed to emasculate their unquestioned power and authority:

[T]here is nothing we like so little as to see male dancers; a male dancer in anything else but character numbers and mimed parts has always seemed to us a species of monstrosity (Gautier, 1932: 44).

That this bewhiskered individual who is a pillar of the community, an elector, a municipal councillor, a man whose business it is to make and above all unmake laws, should [...] come to pirouette in the best place while the pretty ballet girls stand respectfully at a distance – this was surely impossible and intolerable, and we have done well to remove such great artists from our pleasure (Janin<sup>23</sup> cited in Daly, 2002b: 290).

Pure dancing only befitted shapely young women. The display of the body as entertainment was beneath men, whose presence intruded on the illusion of the Eternal Feminine being played out onstage. To be female was grace incarnate, while strength and action was the male’s sole domain. In short, the male dancer’s waning reputation during the height of Romanticism does not speak of a subordination of men, as many scholars have interpreted it, but rather an attempt to endorse man’s virile image – his dominance – uncorrupted by the feminine (Daly, 2002b).

The dominance of men was further reinforced by their continuing occupation of positions of power such as those of teachers, choreographers and theoreticians. The ballerina acquired a technique created by men for men. The relationship she had with her male teacher and choreographer and the responses she received from a predominantly male audience defined her role as dancer. The hours spent training and rehearsing served to perfect her technique and shape her according to the choreographic design of the choreographer or teacher and the aesthetic requirements of the audience (Adair, 1992). The ballerina’s apparent star status, says Peter Stonely (2002), created a misleading aura of agency. In reality, she symbolised and embodied the buying power of her audience. The female dancer as commodity was supported and enhanced by capitalist marketing strategies and, as with Taglioni and Elssler, ballerinas were pitted against one another in rigorous, objectifying advertising campaigns (Foster, 1996). It is no coincidence, explains Daly, that the cult of the ballerina emerged at a time when the *Paris Opéra* was trying to earn a profit after being hurtled into private enterprise by playing to the rising middle class’s desire for entertainment (2002b).

There are, nevertheless, scholars who argue for the empowerment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ballerina. Jennifer Fisher, in her article *Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse* (2007), equates the Romantic ballerina to other types of 19<sup>th</sup> century female performers that Mary

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<sup>23</sup> Daly (2002b) quotes from Ivor Guest’s book *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*, written in 1966 and published by Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT.

Russo<sup>24</sup> (cited in Fisher, 2007) considers critically in her book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994). Russo argues that actresses, circus fliers and acrobats in the 19<sup>th</sup> century consumed more space on stage than women were permitted in other social situations. Even though they were featured in performances directed by men for men, they publically used their bodies in extravagant ways that could only have incited admiration (but also ambivalence) in female spectators, who were denied such freedom of movement and disposition. Fisher (2007), like Russo, believes that a representation of femininity through movement that challenges normative female behaviour, such as that of the Romantic ballerina, implies “enormous control, changeability and strength” (Russo<sup>25</sup> cited in Fisher, 2007: 19). Sally Banes similarly reinterprets the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ballet heroines as women who may have upheld the status quo while also exhibiting independence. In *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (1998) Banes highlights the various ways in which female heroines and other female characters assert independence. Her examples include Aurora’s rejection of male suitors in *The Sleeping Beauty* and the Sugar Plum Fairy’s exertion of influence as the “magisterial, supreme commander of her realm” (1998: 56-60) in *The Nutcracker*.

It is, however, the question surrounding the agency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ballerina that seems to create a particularly noteworthy divergence of opinion. It has already been mentioned that Balanchine’s legacy has adorned the contemporary ballerina with the status of a “supercharged athlete” (Oliver, 2005: 51). It is this identification that especially confounds, for many, notions of her as occupying the traditionally female passive role. The arguments of Fisher (2007) and Banes (1998), who regard the ballerina’s exceptional skill and spectacular movements as powerful and liberating, attest this. Banes (1998) argues for the ballerina’s independence by pointing towards her mastery of high extensions, unsupported turns and extended balances. For Banes the ballerina’s regal bearing, femininity and grace makes her the “perfect aristocratic woman”, yet her “ability to command space and to display precision, strength, balance and control” (1998: 59) endows her with agency and authority. Fisher’s (2007) research on the agency of the female ballet dancer supports Banes’s assertion, for it exposes a myriad of ways in which contemporary women of different ages, different social and ethnic backgrounds, and different levels of ballet practice exercise assertiveness and independence both on- and offstage, in amateur and professional ventures. Fisher believes that the movements of the present-day ballerina may still have something of the “extravagant” about them, not only for the audience but for the dancer as well. For Fisher the ballerina’s extraordinary skill and movements suggest power and freedom. Moreover, many of Fisher’s research respondents affirmed that the experience of either watching or dancing in a ballet has contributed to the fulfilment of personal ambition and education, for themselves and for their children. A similar study, conducted by Alexandra Kolb and Sophia

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<sup>24</sup> Fisher (2007) references Mary Russo’s book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, written in 1994 and published by Routledge, New York.

<sup>25</sup> This quote appears on p. 44 of Russo’s book.

Kalogeropoulou (2012), also raises the question of why, if ballet indisputably degrades and objectifies women and forces them to fit into a stereotypical patriarchal role, many women continue to partake in the art form voluntarily, as viewers and participants. These scholars believe that the lived experiences of ballet practitioners have been neglected by academia and they feel that it is imperative that the experiences of the large number of women who entertain ballet as a leisurely, amateur activity be considered. The research participants of Kalogeropoulou and Kolb's study positively identify various, albeit sometimes seemingly contradictory, aspects of their ballet practice as enjoyable and pleasurable. The discipline and freedom, the hard work and diversion from work, the control and relaxation, the concentration and serenity, along with the sense of achievement, the perceived harmony of mind and body, the music, the expressivity and the social aspects of attending classes are among the assortment of varying attributes that make ballet attractive and inspiring for women of varying ages. The female amateur ballet dancers that participated in the study do not view themselves as passive victims of a male-constructed or -dominated environment.

One must, however, distinguish between ballet as a hobby and ballet as a profession. Research participants who had held professional career ambitions in the past did also report feelings of frustration, pain and stress (Kalogeropoulou & Kolb, 2012). Subsequently, the critiques of dance academics such as Ann Daly, Jill Green, Christy Adair, Susan Leigh Foster, Cynthia Novack and Helen Thomas, who acknowledge but challenge interpretations such as those of Banes, Fisher, Kalegeropoulou and Kolb, are not unwarranted. For them it is not enough to observe that the female dancer is of primary interest or that she is a technical dynamo – they believe that the ballerina as an icon of femininity should remain a topic of considerable concern. Daly quotes Balanchine, who said,

[i]n ballet [...] Woman is first. Everywhere else Man is first. But in ballet, it's the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her" (2002a: 279)

to illustrate how Balanchine confessed his love of women as the instruments of his art form, while simultaneously denigrating them and rendering them inferior to men. One cannot deny the patriarchal underpinnings of his statements nor can one confuse them with a respect for women as equal human beings. Daly (2002a) focuses specifically on the role that Balanchine played in firmly establishing the tradition of putting the contemporary ballerina's body on display. Like Taglioni, Elssler and their Romantic contemporaries, the Balanchine ballerina (the precursor to the contemporary ballerina) was the centre of attention because she was the one being displayed. Her body was arranged and rearranged by men – first the choreographer, then her partner and then the voyeuristic spectator – to create the beauty they longed for because, "[...] Woman's function is to fascinate men" (Balanchine cited in Daly, 2002a: 286).

### **3.2 The male gaze**

A theory that has proven significant in terms of evaluating how certain Western theatre dance practices and dance forms render women secondary in – and even absent from – representation within

a patriarchal culture (Daly, 2002g) is Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. This theory also offers a model for understanding how such dance forms – classical ballet being the prevailing topic of concern – might perpetuate the objectification of women through their bodies and reinforce women's lack of cultural power within the discourse of patriarchy (Thomas, 2003).

British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey proposed the theory of the male gaze in the mid-1970s to explain how the performer and spectator of a film – each assumed to have a stable position in the encounter – operate on a linear basis of binary opposition. According to Mulvey, the positions of those who look and those who are looked-upon are gendered (Daly, 2002d): the spectator, who actively consumes and possesses, is in the dominant masculine subject position while the performer, and specifically the female on screen, assumes the traditionally feminine passive position – an object on display for the gaze. Even though, arguably, men can also assume this passive feminine position on screen and women can also exercise the dominating gaze, the gaze has been dubbed the 'male gaze'. This structure of looking, whereby the performer is styled according to the fantasy of the dominant spectator, as explained by Mulvey, duplicates the unequal power relations between men and women in society (Thomas, 2003).

Mulvey suggests that there are two distinct modes through which the male gaze operates in order to satisfy the male unconscious: 'voyeurism' and 'fetishism'. The voyeuristic gaze arises from the need to satisfy the instinct that exists as the erotic basis for pleasure in subjecting another person to a curious and controlling gaze that reduces that person to an object. The cinema effectively plays on this voyeuristic fantasy by producing a sense of separation between the voyeur and the performer (Mulvey, 1975). The other mode of the male gaze, fetishism, stems from the need to make the female body something reassuring in order to counter its allusions to castration, as proposed by Freud and as explained in Chapter One. The domination of the female by the male gaze, which seeks to amplify the beauty of the physical object so as to strip it of all psychic resonances with maternal power, forms part of a patriarchal strategy whereby the threat that the mother embodies is contained, explains Mulvey.

### **3.3 The relevance of the male gaze to ballet**

Despite its roots in film discourse, the theory of the male gaze has been appropriated by numerous dance scholars working within the field of Western concert dance. While the applicability of the male gaze theory to early modern dance and postmodern dance, for example, seems to elicit rather disparate opinions, a survey of the literature in which feminist critics apply gaze theory to classical ballet reveals strikingly similar conclusions (Manning, 1997). Despite different emphases, scholar after scholar has shown how the spectator is positioned as a voyeur through ballet's form, states Manning. The contrast between the darkened auditorium and the light-filled proscenium stage creates the illusion that one is looking in on a private world. An ideal site is provided for the voyeur, to whom the body – in flesh and blood – is endlessly displayed. Like 'the woman' in the Hollywood film, the

ballerina is conceptualised as something to be seen by the male spectator. Consequently, her appearance is manipulated and constructed according to a male fantasy (Daly, 2002a). This concept of the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of the female on display, as introduced by Mulvey (1975), is significant to Orlin’s critique of ballet. In Chapter Three attention is given to the strategies Orlin uses, particularly in *Rock my tutu*, to draw attention to the centrality of the gaze that, according to Daly (2002a), turns the ballerina into a bearer of male desire.

A central choreographic structure of ballet that has been interpreted as a literal manifestation of the way in which the body of the ballerina is controlled and manipulated by a man, and, more metaphorically, is suggested by the theory of the male gaze, is the classical *pas de deux*:

He opens her arms [to the] side and then puts her arm in front. He’s doing her port de bras [...]. The boy should appear then to be strumming – playing – some sort of harp or cello. The girl is like an instrument (Schorer in Daly, 2002a: 280).

This feature of classical ballet not only serves to emphasise the display of the female body, it also feeds into the enlightenment notion, as established through essentialising scientific representations, of the female body as “smaller”, “feebler”, “weaker” and “less well developed” than the male body (Thomas, 2003: 41). Like the male gaze, the *pas de deux* constructs men and women as essentially different, with the male being the standard by which the female is measured and judged (Thomas, 2003). She is the passive ‘other’. This underlying tension inherent in the classical *pas de deux* is another theme that aids Orlin in her deconstruction of ballet.

In line with the previously discussed gender inequality that arguably thrived within the Romantic ballet institution, it comes as no surprise that the concept of the male gaze might, once again, seem more applicable to the Romantic period. The Romantic ballet did after all largely revolve around the lifting, carrying and displaying of the ballerina, who was the focal point. Moreover, there was a distinct gender differentiation between spectators and performers: the audience members were predominantly male, while the performers were predominantly female. Men were literally watching women. The notion of fetishism also effortlessly ties in with Alderson’s (1987) identification of the undefiled beauty of the ballerina as Sylph – being a negation that contained its opposite – an example of the prohibition, suppression or subterfuge of the primordial appetites and desires of the body that has been identified as characteristic of the art of the rising middle class who prudishly and hypocritically admonished the display of naked flesh during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The important transition in gender relationships that occurred in Western Europe at this point in time also accounts for the transformation of the ballerina into a fetish. The legal and religious structures that had been the foundations of patriarchy were crumbling under the pressures of bourgeois individualism (Alderson, 1987). The persistence of male privilege came to rely increasingly on the persuasions of imagery that appeared to give women a distinctive place in the order of things. It seems necessary to reiterate here the concept of modern power within a capitalist society, as proposed by Foucault, whose theory of



hierarchical surveillance ties in with Mulvey's premise of the male gaze. The non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial and non-orchestrated mechanisms of modern power, exist as a network of non-centralised forces that configure to assume particular historical forms within which certain positions of dominance and subordination are sustained. These enabled the Romantic ballet, as an institution, to reinforce a patriarchal ideal of femininity which accommodated both male and female interests.

For women, the "Christian dancer" or the "dancer for women", as Taglioni was labelled, symbolised female liberation (Jowitt, 1998). The Romantic ballerina presented a demure, perfected, admired body which – although being the raw material of her art – exemplified a sought-after state of disembodiment. Her simultaneous allure and virtuousness was desirable to many female spectators (Alderson, 1987). However, as Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson explain, women carry around with them an image of the "male-in-the-head" (1998: 11). Thus, the women of the Romantic period became male surrogates who admired and desired a male ideal as a throwback to automatic, mechanistic thinking, and reinforcement. This notion of a male surrogate, as introduced by Hutcheon (1989), ties in with Sandra Bartky's (2013) concept of the 'panoptical male connoisseur' that permeates women's consciousness. This concept, an extension of Foucault's interpretation of the panoptic schema, is useful in explaining how women were rendered narcissistic confederates who, through the allure of the idolised ballerina, were made as passive as the women being watched (Hutcheon, 1989).

For men, the repression of the ballerina's body – a beauty and purity which, according to Alderson (1987), depended upon a sexuality that was refined to the vanishing point – relieved them from fully acknowledging a sexuality they could not control. Sayers (1993), who comments on the writing of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century critic Adrian Stokes<sup>26</sup>, explains that the ballet technique served to etherealise and suspend the ballerina's body. In addition to her onstage characterisation of otherworldly or transcendent creatures, the ballerina's technique made possible the illusion of the absence of the grotesque. Rigorous technical training allowed for the creation of a classical body. The ballerina's apparent weightlessness and effortlessness served to suggest the transcendence of gravity and earthboundness – a denial of the mundane world (Mackrell, 1997). As Mackrell explains, ballet avoided the expression of "raw sex or brutal pain" (1997: 5). Rather, as Stokes's description reveals, the ballerina seemed to be cut off from the sources of her being, which he regarded as dark and internal (cited in Sayers, 1993). As a result, her image – resembling the innocent and passive Psyche<sup>27</sup> – became safe for examination and possession within the distance of the male spectator's enchanted gaze (Sayers, 1993). At the same time, however, the ballerina was placed in opposition to the respectable middle-class wife and mother and was therefore ironically deemed a *femme fatale*,

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<sup>26</sup> Sayers (1993) references Adrian Stokes's book *Tonight the Ballet*, written in 1942 and published by Readers' Union and Faber & Faber, London.

<sup>27</sup> See Chapter One

representing all that is erotically potent and compelling about women (Jowitt, 1998). Her portrayal of an elusive ghost or sylph did not strip her of erotic appeal. Rather, it made her sexuality more tantalizing. This ambiguity, which Orlin regularly explores through the juxtaposition of these supposedly opposing female properties, is aptly captured by Mackrell:

These women, flesh and not flesh, alive and dead, inviting yet remote, could hardly appeal more to men raised in an era of repressive social propriety and sexual double standards. They represented licensed fantasy; they were danger and desire incarnate (1997: 21).

The Romantic ballerina, in fact, came to be regarded as a particular kind of prostitute, whose arts and performances were little more than a display of her wares (Stonely, 2002). The *Opéra* ladies often yielded to the lures of prominent male devotees of the ballet (Au, 1988). Privileged visitors were allowed to go backstage and mingle with the dancers in the *foyer de la danse* where the ballet company warmed up (Adair, 1992). Poorly paid dancers and inadequate government support left the institution of dance vulnerable to exploitation (Foster, 1996); ballerinas were often necessitated to make these liaisons with wealthy men – possible patrons that could pay for classes, practice clothes and other needs (Adair, 1992).

The Romantic ballerina was treated like a possession – an object of desire, both on- and offstage. Sayers describes Manet's depictions of the *Paris Opéra* as a "flesh market" (1993: 186) whilst Copeland refers to the subjects of Lancret's famous painting as "the lecherous male rakes desirously eyeing Marie Camargo's newly-exposed ankles" (1993: 145). Similarly, Daly describes the writing of Romantic critic Théophile Gautier (1811 – 1872) as "verbal ogling" (2002b: 291). She continues to explain that, through a detailed and often cruel inventory of their supposed assets and defects Gautier seemed to identify each ballerina as but one more specimen in his private collection of femininity (Daly, 2002b). Interpretations and representations of this kind support the voyeuristic infatuation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century male ballet spectator.

### **3.4 The contemporary ballerina: Active or passive?**

Even though Mulvey's gaze theory prompted dance scholars to consider important questions that had never been pondered before (Daly, 2002b) the applicability of this theory to Western concert dance has not gone unopposed. The appropriation of this concept for the purposes of critiquing the male choreographer's (and by implication, the male spectator's) privileged looking at the nineteenth century ballerina in particular, has incited much literature that expresses concern with the limitations of applying such a monolithic gaze theory to gender representations in performance dance (Thomas, 2003). Of particular importance to those feminist scholars and critics opposing the relevance of the male gaze, which Daly (2002d) has come to describe as a tiresome concept for feminists and non-feminists, is the model's inability to account for the reconstruction of a feminist subject in representation (Daly, 2002e). Thomas (2003) explains that, in spite of Mulvey's later revisions, her

theory remains locked into its original psychoanalytic structure, and its dependence upon binary logic hinders it from admitting change across time.

This leads one to wonder about the applicability of the male gaze theory to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century-ballerina, who lives and works in an age characterised by greater equality for women, resulting from decades of liberation movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women. Is it possible that the contemporary ballerina – arguably born from the legacy of what became known as the “Balanchine ballerina” (Daly, 2002a: 279) – reflects this socio-political development? Is it credible for Fisher (2007) and Banes (1998) to suggest that the present-day ballerina’s exceptional skill, exhibited as precision, strength, balance and control, endows her with power, freedom, agency and authority? Also, can one still apply the theory of the male gaze when audiences are more balanced with regard to male and female spectatorship and casts are more balanced with regard to male and female performers? And, finally, although not necessarily exclusive to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century ballet, how easily can one assimilate Mulvey’s ideas into dance philosophy when, as Copeland (1993) states, heterosexual male desire seems to play a marginal role in the ballet?

Daly (2002a) argues that while the contemporary ballerina may have control over her body in the sense that she is a technical dynamo, she continues to assume a passive role equal to that of her Romantic predecessor. In other words, a distinction must be made between the athleticism and virtuosity of the steps, and the worldview that the art form continues to express. The ballerina is more than just a technician within the stage frame. She forms part of an accumulation of customs and conventions that conspire to position her as the willing object of the audience’s desire (Daly, 2002c). Adair (1992) believes that the general display of women as active and independent in contemporary media should be considered critically. Often these ‘active’ women conform to a cultural physical ideal. It is their appearance not their activity that matters. This focus is what continues to cast them as passive objects, states Adair. The threat of the ballerina’s technical prowess and virtuosity – fast, precise and seemingly autonomous – is tamed by what Adair refers to as a subservience that results from the display of her body.

Adair (1992) also asserts that the present-day ballerina’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1975) is especially emphasised by the fitting leotards, low-cut tops and the display of the crotch and legs. Claid similarly feels that the costuming makes the ballerina’s body vulnerable to the “clutches of fetishistic femininity” (Claid, 2006: 23) that is scarcely different from the elusive Sylph of the patriarchal imagination. Particularly the *pointe* shoes – the hallmark of ballet and the ultimate symbol of transcendence and elusiveness – capture the ballerina in a dance of both fetish and freedom (Claid, 2006). “She becomes so insubstantial yet so resilient”, declares Foster (1996: 13). *Pointe* shoes, with their innocently pink hue and soft satin ribbons, inhibit the movements and confine the muscular strength of the female body. While they might represent her power, they also represent her fragility

(Claid, 2006), a paradox which, as discussed in Chapter Three, has spurred Orlin to use the *pointe* shoe in a particularly divisive way in order to supplement her deconstruction of classical ballet. With regard to the minimalist costumes to which Adair and Claid refer, Scholl (1994), who writes about the deliberate inconspicuous nature of Balanchine's costume designs, believes that it is this inconspicuousness that allows for the dancing body's physicality to be exposed. It is neither scandalous nor evocative, he says. This view, along with the continuation of this Balanchine-initiated trend by current ballet choreographers, including Wayne McGregor, William Forsythe and Jiri Kylian, all of whom stage their work within prestigious classical and contemporary ballet companies such as The Royal Ballet, *Nederlands Dans Theater* and Ballet Frankfurt, support Foucault's claim that people now have the freedom to take their clothes off (Foucault, 1979). The near-nakedness of the contemporary ballerina, which stands in stark contrast to the Romantic ballerina's long tulle tutu covering the flesh that the prudish Victorian middle class did not want to see, has become accepted and normalised by ballet audiences. At the same time, however, the scantily dressed ballerina epitomises Foucault's claim that this freedom to take one's clothes off also entails an unfreedom, because there is an adjunct that decrees that if clothes are taken off, the bodies underneath must be "slim, good-looking, tanned!" (1979: 57). The explicit exhibition of ever more muscular, athletic yet at the same time prepubescently petite, bodies that have become emblematic of today's increasingly abstract ballets, do not alter the pervasive surround of the cultural and aesthetic issues that have been inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, states Susan Leigh Foster (1996). Orlin, who works with the athletic bodies of present day ballerinas in a deconstruction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Swan Lake*, is able to subtly yet aptly explore and comment upon the way in which an aesthetic can change without a transformation of the ideology that informs the aesthetic.

At the heart of ballet, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the 21<sup>st</sup>, is the ideal of transcending the flesh. Claid (2006) explains that it is through her extraordinarily disciplined body that the ballerina is able to impart the illusion of goodness and perfection, originally associated with the image of the Sylph, surfacing through the reality of her "physical, doing, seeing, feeling and thinking body engaged in the work of daily physical tasks" (Claid, 2006: 22). The play between the real and the illusion remains inherent to the form of ballet. According to Claid, it is a feature that continues to seduce both the performer and the spectator; and it is this that still draws the spectator to watch and desire. The ballerina is a real body creating illusion, and the more her real body engages with the "rigorous practice of balletic skills and linear techniques" to create the "constructed artifice of performed surface" (Claid, 2006: 22), the more her performance will captivate the audience.

The inescapable reality of the seduction of ballet, then and now, is that it necessitates that the ballerina's body be mastered (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2004). As was the case with the seventeenth century soldier,

[t]he first aim is correctness: the ballet dancer has to comply with the rigorous demands of the system to control and mould the body to its ideal (Thomas, 2003: 97).

This concept of mastering the body is not foreign to a young person growing up in a society in which the association of success with the moulding of the ideal body is a normalised product of the patriarchal notion of disembodiment and the general need to discipline the unruly female body. Green, who implements the theories of postmodern thinkers to examine socio-cultural constructions of the self, and to address ways in which these constructions could possibly influence the health, the artistic lives and the personal lives of students in typical higher education dance technique classes, expresses her fear that dance education may follow Western culture's excessive valuing of appearance and self-fashioning of the body – possibly to an even greater extent – for society's intolerance with female indulgence and lack of control seems to be even more severe in the dance world. Accordingly, young aspirant ballet students readily accept the nature of a typical ballet technique class, which consists of neat rows of students dressed in tightly clad clothing and the teacher, telling and showing the students what to do and how to do it (Green, 2002 – 2003). Sue Stinson (1998) explains that the students attempt to duplicate the movements of the teacher, who focuses predominantly on the placement of their bodies, proper technique and efficient performance of particular movements. They are under meticulous control and constant surveillance, aimed at the normalisation of movement, behaviour and bodily being.

### **3.5 Surveillance in ballet: From studio to stage**

The constant surveillance, referred to above, begins with the ballet teacher and, later, as a ballet dancer's career progresses, becomes the undertaking of choreographers, directors, critics, audience members and the dancer herself. It is an indisputable part of the profession: although other senses such as touch and kinaesthesia play a role in ballet, the dance form conspires with the visualism of Western culture, for sight continues to be emphasised as “the primary process of artistic conception [and] perception” (Bull, 1997: 272). The “visual appearance of design in space” (Bull, 1997: 274) remains central and all the other senses are organised by, and inextricably tied to, this design through sight. While a literal interpretation of the male gaze might seem problematic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not constructive to entirely abandon the theory in the attempt to construct an alternative definition for the gaze to which ballet students and ballet dancers are subjected. While this alternative definition cannot entirely accommodate Mulvey's theory, it certainly does incorporate some aspects of it. It also incorporates Foucault's concept of hierarchical surveillance.

Firstly, with regard to the male gaze, the authority figure's knowledge and appraisal revolve around criteria, techniques and rules that are founded upon what was originally a male fantasy. Historically, the representation of the female body in dance was reserved for men, whose intended addressees were mostly other men, especially during the Romantic period. As such, whether a teacher, choreographer, director or spectator is male, female, heterosexual or homosexual, his or her gaze is male-constructed,

because it requires that the dancer be judged from the perspective of the male fantasy through which the Sylph of the Romantic ballet was created. Hutcheon (1989) explains that, when women view representations of women, the female spectator is either placed in the position of narcissistic confederate, rendered as passive as the woman being watched, or she is placed in the position of surrogate male. Bartky's construct of the 'panoptical male connoisseur' that permeates women's consciousness can again be applied.

Secondly, Foucault's notion of hierarchical surveillance is important for understanding how this male-constructed gaze operates. Hierarchical surveillance, a concept which Foucault (1979) describes as being particularly effective in the training and disciplining of citizens according to an institutionalised system of values and practices, creates a situation in which the observed ultimately maintains a state of self-surveillance, whether or not the surveying power is present (Smith, 1998). In the ballet studio, mirrors are especially powerful tools that foster the process by which the students begin to internalise the authoritarian male-constructed gaze and to define themselves according to the authority's terms. This reliance upon the internalisation of the gaze is what Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004) calls the 'science of dance training'. As in Foucault's description of the prison system, it is a less overt way of producing normalisation and it has replaced the poking, prodding and pushing that had been condoned in previous eras and which are generally frowned upon nowadays. Authority figures are no longer directly shaping the dancers' bodies. Rather, through constant and relentless self-analysis, self-judgement and self-evaluation the dancers become their own disciplinarians who strive toward the attainment of the specific ideal reflected in the image of the teacher, choreographer or director and the expectations of the audience (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2004).

### **3.6 The ballerina consciously neglects her body**

As part of a research study on the training of docile bodies in dance education, Green (2002 – 2003) interviewed a number of students, all of whom related a similar experience concerning the constant pressure to live up to expectations and to conform to a dominant ideal. The ceaseless vigilance over, and surveillance of, their bodies, whether by the teacher, their fellow students or themselves, resulted in physical and emotional stress and pain (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2001). Most of these students referred to situations in which they felt a numbness toward their inner bodily sensations and a growing loss of connection from their sensory feedback (Green 2001). They discussed themes of authority and power and how they often felt oppressed, dominated, intimidated and sometimes even violated in class (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2001).

Not all students however appear to feel this way about dance and the technique class. Many dancers maintain that they gain an immense feeling of strength, control and power from their technique training. Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004) notes that, from her experience and interaction with students, dancers often express a sense of pleasure in being pushed and challenged physically. Enjoyment in the

process of fulfilling ambitions is, of course, not in itself objectionable. In the case of classical ballet training, however, the relentless striving towards perfection, first brought about by Taglioni and necessitated by ballet masters such as Balanchine over the following decades, often results in ballet students developing an attitude of denial towards pain – an attitude which may endure throughout their professional career. Aalten, who writes about pain and injury management in professional ballet dancers, explains that rigorous training regimes are imperative to the shaping and creating of bodies that must be able to “defy the principles of human design” (Mazo, 1974: 230). In the process, dancers often learn to endure painful practices in order to cross certain physical boundaries and bring forth change (Aalten, 2005). Most problematic, says Oliver (2005), is that ballet dancers generally do not regard these occupational requirements as punishing or disempowering. On the contrary, they view them as trade-offs for success – that which will afford them a job, or a better job and better roles, in an occupation where the competition, especially among females, is extremely tough (Aalten, 2005). Many ballerinas thus deem these restrictions a challenge, not a strait-jacket, and when the ballerina overcomes the challenge she experiences an intense feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. Pain, says Aalten, is often associated with improvement and with moving closer to the elusive ideal. It is seldom regarded as a warning sign that should be heeded – rather another boundary that needs to be crossed. Pain, explains Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004), is often regarded as a sacrifice and as proof of advancement along the road towards mastering the body and moulding the ideal self – the way to happiness and perfection.

In the same way that the ability to ignore and even transcend pain in an attempt to fulfil the ideal of the elusive and disembodied sylph is heeded as a sign of the body being mastered, so too is the ability to control appetite and abstain from food seen as a way to overcome the shortcomings of the flesh. An interpretation of femininity which includes an unhealthy and potentially dangerous degree of thinness, states Oliver (2005), seems to have become more of a criterion for success on the ballet stage than technical skill. All signs of bosoms or rounded hips have been eradicated (Cass, 1993) – to create a look that strongly corresponds with the androgynous female ideal that Western culture currently propagates. To reiterate Claid (2006), sexual features need to be made invisible so as to appear anatomically gender-less, stripped of any identifiable sexual signs. Dancers today are as preoccupied with losing weight as they are with mastering turns and leaps, says Cass (1993). In her article *Eating Disorders Haunt Ballerinas*, Jennifer Dunning (1997) refers to Dr. Linda Hamilton, a specialist in eating disorders, who points out that dancers are often eliminated in auditions before they have even danced a single step, because their bodies are not what the director is looking for. A comparable scenario is when a company director warns a ballerina that she will not be promoted or awarded better roles, unless she rapidly loses weight (Dunning, 1997). Oliver (2005) believes that the more successful and prestigious a ballet company, the less tolerance they have with differently shaped bodies. Extreme thinness, Oliver continues to explain, has become associated with high status – not

only for the ballerina, but for the entire company. The moulding of the ideal ballet body, therefore, frequently leads to inadequate nutrition and eating disorders are becoming increasingly common among young female ballet dancers – an issue of much concern among psychologists and health specialists (Dunning, 1997).

Returning now to authority figures such as teachers, as well as the choreographers and directors of the professional setting, it is important to acknowledge how the occupational ideals of ballet allow for authority to be abused. Many authority figures do not abuse their power – there is a difference between being authoritative and being authoritarian – and, even though pushing, jerking and poking, offensive remarks about appearance, and the humiliation of dancers in front of the class or company are no longer widespread, such practices are, unfortunately, still present in certain dance milieus. Abusive authority figures believe that anyone who wants to climb the ladder of success is going to have to push themselves beyond any reasonable limit. With regard to teachers, Smith (1998) states that they seem to take their responsibility to prepare the student for the harsh professional world too far. Their training becomes a rite of passage – a survival of the fittest – that automatically eliminates the weaker and more sensitive dancers, states Robin Lakes (2005). It is disturbing to note how this style of teaching, choreographing and/or management is often unquestioningly accepted by dancers, particularly when the authority figure is viewed as having special insights (Smith, 1998). Smith notes that extreme levels of abuse are often considered as acceptable or even typical aspects of the dance setting. Some dancers are convinced that intense assaults on their psyches are necessary for them to advance to higher levels of practice. It becomes an honour to be attacked. Any attention, even if it is negative, is better than none (Lakes, 2005). It is in reaction to this kind of abuse that results so easily from the hierarchical ballet institutions, that Orlin emphasises a creative process whereby credit is given to the voices and desires of the performers. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

### **3.7 A culture of silence disables dancers from taking ownership of their bodies**

As noted in Chapter One, many females who strive for a state of disembodiment, the ballerina probably being the quintessential example, feel empowered by the idea that they are exercising the properties of self-containment, self-mastery and control that have traditionally been associated with the mind and therefore with male privilege. The ability to control appetite and abstain from food, as well as the ability to ignore and even transcend pain – physical and emotional – in order to fulfil the ideal of the elusive and disembodied sylph, assigns heroic status to the ballerina (Aalten, 2005). The more the ballerina succeeds in moulding and mastering her body, the more empowered she seems to feel. Dance scholars such as Green, Foster, Oliver, Thomas, Claid and Daly, however, problematize the process of normalisation whereby a dancer's body is forced to fit a culturally constructed external ideal that serves a social order in which female possibilities are limited. Green uses a Foucauldian lens to propose that the dancers' bodies become docile because of constant subjection to standards and norms of appropriate appearance and performance (Green, 2002 – 2003 & 2004). Although the



ballerina believes that the choice to recreate her body is freely derived and attained, and although she thrives on the notion that she is in control of her own destiny – a destiny of success and happiness – a Foucauldian analysis identifies this impression of control and pleasure as an illusion – a ‘truth game’. It posits that the ballerina has become blind to the normalisation process – the constant subjection to standards and norms of appropriate appearance – whereby she allows her body to become docile, states Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004). Through years of institutional training, she has learnt that listening to the demands of those who want to consume her is of more value than listening to the body crying out in pain and hunger, explains Aalten (2005).

Because the body is the medium through which the art is created – no intervention or go-between that separates the artist from the art, the dancer from the dance – the body is styled. This intimate and inseparable relationship between process and product may account for dancers’ obsession with their bodies and the struggle to reach a potentially unattainable ideal (Dixon-Gottschild, 2003: 11).

Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004) believes that the ideal body myth in dance, and the subsequent self-monitoring behaviour, aimed at achieving this external aesthetic, causes severe body-objectification. This creates a culture of silence which disables dancers from taking ownership of their bodies. It encourages them to actively neglect their bodies, explains Aalten (2005). Green (2002 – 2003 & 2004) feels that the requirements of dance technique – enforced by the male-constructed authoritarian gaze of teachers, choreographers, directors, critics as well as the spectators, all of whom, whether male or female, knowingly or unknowingly comply with and support a male fantasy – disconnects dancers from their bodies, and strips them of their inner authority. Their impressions of control and pleasure are ‘truth games’ that weaken the dancers’ ownership of their bodies and affect their overall health and well-being. This analysis exposes the perpetuation of the dancer’s disconnect with the body, and the hierarchical relationship between mind and body, despite the art form’s dependence on the body.

#### **4. BALLET IS NOT SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR DOCILITY AND NEGLECT**

A ballerina’s overall health and well-being may be compromised when her dependence upon acceptance, approval and success within the occupation strips her of agency, inner authority and the ability to think critically (Adair, 1992; Benn & Walters, 2001; and Green, 2003 – 2004). It is important to recognise, however, that ballet as an institution is not in itself solely responsible for the neglect of the ballerina’s body, as the discussion in Chapter One illustrates.

The ideal of the disembodied woman in ballet is but one product of a larger cultural and representational system in which this ideal – considered to be the desired result of rigorous self-discipline and self-fashioning – is venerated. In fact, the very act of self-fashioning has come to bear considerable value. Green (2004) explains that the sense of pleasure related to the transformation of the self in general is tied up in an ethics of health and well-being that is linked to a larger social economy and politics. She stresses the importance of looking at health and medicalization as a system

that exists primarily to ensure the health of the state – a diseased population interferes with capital production. Thomas (2003), considering the work of Foucault, explains that 17<sup>th</sup> century society and the functioning of its repressive regime of power depended upon the king's body. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, 'the body of society' became the guiding principle that needed to be protected. Since then, citizens of Western societies have learnt to mould their bodies in line with specific societal needs and expectations. Care of the self, says Green (2004: 71) "is tied up in morality and the laws of the market". Also undeniably connected to the system of capital production are the cultural standards of beauty and feminine identity. Corporations and businesses have an interest in teaching women that they must obtain an often unrealistic physical ideal – if women can be convinced of this they will 'need' and then buy the products that advertisements assure them can bring them closer to the desired ideal (Oliver, 2005).

The ballet institution – dancers, teachers, choreographers, directors, critics and audience members – is thus woven into a larger cultural system that encourages an obsession with reshaping and remoulding the unruly body, as described by Bordo (1993). The ballerina's highly disciplined and mastered body has come to epitomise the ideal to which a large proportion of females in a Western society strives. Audiences want to admire and desire the bodies that they have come to expect on the ballet stage and, Oliver (2005) explains, as long as audiences require a particular 'look', professional ballet companies will produce that look. Directors are subject to larger cultural stakeholders who influence their own and their companies' survival. Stated otherwise, the director will produce the performances that audiences will pay to see (Oliver, 2005). The ideals referred to here, and imposed by ballet, are thus intricately tied up in a Western capitalist system. When one considers the complexity of the situation, taking into account, for example, the possibility that a dancer subjects her body to the demands of the profession out of necessity – her monthly salary depends on it – it becomes apparent that one cannot simply view the ballerina as a helpless victim in a sexist plot. For the same reason one cannot hold the ballet institution solely accountable for the docility of the ballerina.

While there might be some warranted objections with regard to the body ideals imposed by ballet, the solution does not lie in doing away with ballet. After all, as this section explains, the ballet institution simply perpetuates the ideals of a larger cultural system, which is where change would have to happen if the potential problems with these ideals were to be addressed adequately. Accordingly, creating awareness of the ways in which ballet reinforces particular ways of thinking, might be of greater significance. Likewise, it is of considerable importance to activate and encourage different ways of thinking about and understanding previously normalised social constructions of gender, race, sexuality and class. This is exactly what Orlin's work as well as the next two chapters on Orlin's work, in their respectively practical and theoretical ways, aim to achieve. Orlin does not eradicate ballet – she incites a destabilisation of normative ways of thinking and being. Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation discuss the strategies whereby she takes on this challenge.

# CHAPTER THREE

## 1. INTRODUCING ROBYN ORLIN<sup>28</sup>

### 1.1 Career background

Orlin's career as a performer and choreographer in South Africa started in the 1980s at the Market Theatre precinct in downtown Johannesburg, at the time a hub for artists and art concerned with anti-apartheid activism. As part of what Adrienne Sichel (1997) refers to as the "Newtown dance movement of the 80s",<sup>29</sup> Orlin sought to challenge conservative definitions of dance and the dancing body within the South African milieu. Throughout the apartheid era, Orlin and a number of her contemporaries<sup>30</sup>, concerned themselves with the issue of race relations in South Africa (Daniel, 1987). Orlin regularly affiliated herself with organisations and projects that sought to make Western concert dance training and performance spaces accessible to all. In 1982 she established dance departments at both FUBA<sup>31</sup> and at the Funda Art Centre, based in Soweto (Orlin, 2010a). She was appointed as the artistic director of the FUBA Dance Company, considered to be the first black contemporary dance company in South Africa (Sichel, 1997). Orlin also taught dance at the Pretoria Technikon (1982 – 1989), the PACT Dance Company (1988 – 1989), the Market Theatre Laboratory (1996 – 2003) and the National School of the Arts (1998 – 2001) (Orlin, 2010a).

### 1.2 The "artistic tsotsi"

Orlin is often referred to as one of South Africa's most controversial choreographers. Despite a host of national and international accolades<sup>32</sup>, Orlin often suffers marginalisation by the conservative dance

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<sup>28</sup> Robyn Orlin (1955 - ) was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa (Krouse, 2010). She trained in classical ballet through the Royal Academy of Dance (1965 – 1972). Her academic career started with undergraduate studies at the London School of Contemporary Dance (1975 – 1979) (Krouse, 2010), where she specialised in a variety of American modern dance techniques such as the Graham Technique, the Cunningham Technique and the Limón Technique. After a number of years of working and teaching in South Africa, Orlin received a Fulbright Scholarship to read for a Master's degree in the United States of America. She attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1991 – 1993) from which she graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts (Orlin, n.d.).

<sup>29</sup> This dance movement was sustained by a choreographer's bursary fund, established by Mannie Manim, which he founded along with the late Barney Simon in 1976. It was unfortunately short-lived due to Manim's departure from the Market Theatre (Sichel, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Orlin's contemporaries include Sonje Mayo, Marlene Blom, Hugo le Roux and Sylvia Glasser (Daniel, 1987). Glasser founded Moving Into Dance in 1978, working from her home in Victory Park, Johannesburg during the height of Apartheid (Sassen, 2012). Her aim was to establish a non-racial dance company and training organisation (Myburg, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Federated Union of Black Artists

<sup>32</sup> Orlin's awards include:

- British theatre's Laurence Olivier Award for 'Outstanding Achievement in Dance' in London for her piece *Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other... A piece for six dancers and a stage* (2003).
- Jan Faber Award for the most subversive choreography for *Daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other... A piece for six dancers and a stage* (2000).
- Rencontres Choréographiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris (2000).
- 3rd place in the choreographic competition for *Afrique en Creation* in Madagascar. Sanga -a platform for choreography from Africa and the Indian Ocean (1999).

world (Friedman, 1995). She has been endowed with labels such as “national irritation” (George & Valette, 2013) and “the rebellious *enfant terrible* of South African dance” (Sichel, 2009). She refers to herself as an “artistic tsotsi” (cited in Jenkins, 1999). In 1988, while still performing in her own choreographic works, Orlin revealed her fear of and distance from “dance people” whom she felt judged her by criteria she thought she could not meet (Amato, 1988). Over time, Orlin’s work has become a tool for her own kind of judgement of the conservative dance world:

I think dance needs to be taken out of its realm, out of its context, to be bashed against the wall (Orlin cited in Sichel, 1990).

Accordingly, “very little in dance has not been grist for her derisive mill, especially classical ballet” (Corrigall, 2012). Yet, at the same time, Orlin (2013) admits that she loves to watch ballet. She does, however, remain critical of it as an art form with a politically loaded history in South Africa and therefore believes that it is important to interrogate its cultural meaning (Orlin cited in Atkinson, 1999).

### 1.3 Interrogating the danced-choreographic

It has already been mentioned that exclusion from the dance stage as a consequence of racial prejudice is an issue that Orlin has interrogated from the start of her career. It has, however, not been her only subject of concern. The strict aesthetic criteria that all dancers, regardless of skin colour, have to live up to, and the narcissism that is necessary to survive in the dance world (Booyens, 1999) are also of relevance to Orlin. “Dancing is my life, but I’ve always had a problem with the narcissism of performance” (Orlin cited in Krost, 1987). She believes that the bodies of dancers, not only those training in ballet but also those training in modern dance<sup>33</sup> (more generically referred to in South Africa as contemporary dance), are ‘colonised’ bodies. This figurative use of the term ‘colonised’ refers to how bodies are told what to do and how to do it – a ‘colonisation’ which already occurred in the development of dance in the French courts (Orlin, 2013). Lavender (2012) similarly likens dance which requires constant correction of one’s movement in accordance with external motivations and criteria, to a re-enactment of colonialist and imperialist master/slave relations. He explains that when dancers are required to routinely restore set choreography in rehearsal and performance, they must learn to align their physical facilities with the desires of teachers and choreographers. This requires of

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- FNB Regional Award for *That's the way the cookie crumbles* (1997).
  - Finalist for the FNB Vita Fine Art Award (1997).
  - FNB Vita Award for Best Choreographer (1996).
  - Foundation of the Creative Arts Grant Recipient (1996).
  - Foundation of the Creative Arts Grant Recipient (1995).
  - AA Vita Award for Choreography (1990).
  - Fulbright Scholarship, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1989).
  - Standard Bank Young Artist Award (1989).
  - AA Vita Award for Choreography (1988).
  - British Council Scholarship, Goldsmith College, University of London (1986).
  - AA Vita Award for Choreography (first recipient) (1985).

<sup>33</sup> According to Orlin (cited in Sichel, 1987) much contemporary dance nowadays contains certain structures and constrictions that stand in contradiction to its original intentions.

them to keep a mental eye on themselves. The predominant concern is to ensure that the movement is performed ‘correctly’, the ‘correctness’ of which is measured by criteria that supports a hierarchical system of production (Claid, 2006). While exploring the potential of dance as a liberatory experience, Lavender (2012), in line with the majority of the dance scholars referenced in Chapter Two, concludes that routinized self-surveillance and constant correction of one’s movement reflect Western culture-based attitudes of superiority over the ‘primitive other’, whose personal and cultural identity is seen as raw material for instrumentalisation as commodity.

Like Lavender, Orlin expresses uneasiness with the extreme standardised bodily behaviour that Western concert dance, or what Lavender (2012) calls the “danced-choreographic”,<sup>34</sup> requires, particularly for the female dancer. While Orlin’s objection is, no doubt, towards the more general danced-choreographic, which Lavender posits as a powerful and deeply entrenched cultural ideology, “braided into larger ideologies and systems of corporate/military power-over bodies” (2012: 67), she often uses the medium of ballet to stage her critique. As a predominantly female-populated form, and the most codified of Western concert dance forms, it comes as no surprise that ballet provides Orlin – working from and through her own experience of this dance form – with rich material through which to problematize the colonisation of the female dancing body. Although Orlin’s criticism is not necessarily limited to classical ballet or its construction and perpetuation of an ideal femininity, the subsequent discussion focuses predominantly on those Orlin works that have a distinct feminist footing and that use ballet as a vehicle through which to explore gender relations, representations and constructions. The term ‘feminist’, with all its unresolved debates and apparent contradictions, is not used (here or onwards) to identify or “prescribe a specific type of production but, rather, particular potentialities open to interpretation” (Sanchez-Colberg, 1993: 152).

#### **1.4 Deconstructing classical ballet**

Orlin’s continued relationship with ballet is apparent from the fact that many of her works locate themselves, in full or in part, within the canon that they seek to challenge. In her book, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-narratives and Alternative Bodies*, Midgelow (2007) uses the term “reworking” to identify dances that quote from or reference well-known traditional ballets but that substantially alter these source texts in order to create a new work that has a significantly different resonance. A reworking often aims to simultaneously evoke and question its source, which can be specific (e.g. *Swan Lake*) or general (e.g. classical ballet). However, not all reworkings necessarily challenge the canon – sometimes they continue to support and perpetuate the existing structures, explains Midgelow. An approach that truly seeks to reveal the canon as a discursive formation – as something that is not seemingly ‘ungendered’ and ‘universal’ – is referred to as deconstructive, for it rereads canonical texts as charged signifiers (Midgelow, 2007).

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<sup>34</sup> Lavender (2012) uses this term to identify dance that is fixated upon ‘correct’ appearance and technique.

Deconstruction is a philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that owes its development mainly to the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) (Ousby, 1988). It is a method of analysis (Johnson, 1980) which concerns itself with Western philosophical concepts such as ‘substance’, ‘essence’, ‘end’, ‘cause’, ‘form’ and ‘being’. These concepts have been used since Plato to centre discourse and permit a distinction between truth and falsehood, a principle which in literary theory is known as logocentrism and which involves the privileging of one term over another. Deconstruction aims to reverse the hierarchy of logocentrism and, by displacing the new hierarchy, to leave indeterminacy in the particular discursive field (Ousby, 1988). This reveals the impossibility of a single truth and non-truth – it refutes “the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another” (Johnson, 1980: 5). Deconstruction searches for what is not said as much as for what is said, thus allowing meaning to be produced in the spaces in between and resulting in the reconsideration and challenging of the canon (Midgellow, 2007).

Midgellow, writing specifically about the relevance of deconstruction to Western concert dance, understands such deconstructive reworkings as critical analyses in practice. Dances of the past are reconfigured in the light of the cultural, critical and artistic climate that is shaped by the counter-canonical positions offered by poststructural, feminist, postcolonial and queer discourse. These bodies of knowledge intersect with postmodernism and provide the critical climate of the current era by calling attention to debates around the nature of human existence and relationships, and by demonstrating the constructed nature of power and knowledge. A deconstructive reworking dismantles the edifice of received norms and allows the text to adopt an infinite range of possibilities. It rejects the notion of authorial authority, authenticity and truth. Audiences are presented with dances of the past, but they are given the opportunity to know, see and understand these dances in a way that is different to before (Midgellow, 2007). This, states Rich, is important because “we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (1979: 35). By confronting normal pleasurable expectations in an attempt to transcend outworn or repressive forms, a new language of desire may come to the fore (Mulvey, 1975).

Orlin’s references to the classical ballet canon in many of her works can be understood as deconstructive in nature, for she presents the audience with an absence of the single truth of the classic dance text. This attempt to deconstruct – which is not the same as destruction, says Johnson (1980) – necessitates that Orlin, in a characteristically postmodern manner, re-installs the classical ballet convention. But, as Claid (2006) explains about her own work and the work of other choreographers within the British new dance experiment of the 1970s, Orlin re-installs the convention from a place of difference. She self-consciously evokes an intertextual relationship with the source text to engage in a dialogue with tradition and to challenge established premises.

A particularly iconic ballet which a host of choreographers<sup>35</sup> have reworked and deconstructed in order to probe the time-honoured conventions of classical ballet is the 1895 revival<sup>36</sup> of *Swan Lake* by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. *Swan Lake* is undoubtedly one of the most well-known classical ballets – a historical masterpiece that has come to epitomise the popular understanding of the ballet tradition. Because of its status as “the exemplary classical ballet” (Juhasz, 2008: 54) and the way in which it reflects the cultural ideology that so strongly depends upon the subjugation of the body and the taming of the ‘animal’, *Swan Lake* is ideally situated for the performance of alternative identities (Juhasz, 2008).

## 2. THE CANON AS A FOUNDATION FOR CRITIQUE

In 2001 Orlin was commissioned by *Ballet de Lorraine*, at the time a classical ballet company<sup>37</sup> based in the city of Nancy in the French province of Lorraine, to create a work which she titled *Rock my tutu*. This work is Orlin’s deconstructive reworking of *Swan Lake* and will form the foundation of the analysis that follows. In order to substantiate certain ideas and extend discussions on prominent characteristics of Orlin’s work, reference will be made to other works in her repertoire.

The most apparent way in which Orlin situates *Rock my tutu* within the ballet canon is by using a cast of classically trained dancers from *Ballet de Lorraine*. From the initial entrance of the *corps de ballet* it is apparent that these dancers are highly skilled in the classical ballet technique. This entrance, a replica of the entrance of the swans in Act II of *Swan Lake*, is how this deconstruction of the original text begins. For the versed ballet spectator this arbitrary beginning would hint toward the ensuing unorthodox treatment of the ballet’s narrative, musical score and choreography. In addition to intermittent choreographic references, such as the abovementioned swan entrance, Orlin uses *Ballet de Lorraine’s* original *Swan Lake* costumes and set. Sections of Tchaikovsky’s original composition are performed live on a piano, but the pianist is frequently interrupted by everyday sounds of whistles, cell-phones, police sirens, televisions and people talking or singing. At times the piano rendition also deviates stylistically from the score, adopting either a jazz- or a flamenco-like quality. Certain characters from the ballet are vaguely referenced, yet the work does not adhere to the original plot, or to any plot at all. In various ways Orlin allows the original, culturally approved *Swan Lake* text to be

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<sup>35</sup> A chronological list of some of these choreographers includes Andy Degroat (1982), Mats Ek (1987), Matthew Bourne (1995), Garry Stewart (*Birdbrain*, 1998), Robyn Orlin (*Rock my tutu*, 2001), Vida Midgelow (*O [a set of footnotes to Swan Lake]*, 2002), Raimund Hoghe (*Swan Lake, 4 Acts*, 2005), Idan Cohen (2009) and Dada Masilo (2010).

<sup>36</sup> Petipa and Ivanov’s *Swan Lake* was not the first attempt at interpreting Tchaikovsky’s score. The ballet was first produced at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1877 with choreography by Julius Reisinger. It however achieved little success. After Tchaikovsky’s death in 1893, Petipa sent for the score of *Swan Lake* and was so inspired by the music that he drafted a plan for the revival of the ballet (Beaumont, 1937). From here onwards any mention of the ‘original *Swan Lake*’, although perhaps a misnomer, will refer to the revival of Petipa and Ivanov.

<sup>37</sup> When Orlin started working with *Ballet de Lorraine* the company had just been taken over by a contemporary choreographer. It was therefore in the process of transitioning from being a ballet company to being a dance company whose work is now more contemporary in style.

present – a presence which serves to emphasise alterations to the convention and to communicate that change is taking place (Johasz, 2008).

Orlin uses many strategies to demythologise the ballet canon and expand a canonical counter-discourse. Of particular significance to Orlin are the ideological constructions of the body and the binary nexus of male/female, subject/object, civilised/primitive and self/other – dichotomies that are usually reinforced by ballet's allegiance with the mind and its quest for perfection and transcendence. This chapter will examine those strategies that are most relevant to understanding and evaluating the ways in which Orlin not only reflects on and problematizes these constructions, but also encourages the spectators to consider the body beyond such dichotomies.

## 2.1 Perfection, transcendence and docility

To inform her critique and her desire to instil in the audience a different way of thinking about the merit that society in general and ballet in particular attribute to the transcendence of the body, Orlin finds ways to interpret the ballerina's body as docile and not empowered. In line with formerly referenced scholarly texts, Orlin questions the process of normalisation whereby a dancer's body is forced to fit a culturally constructed external ideal that serves a social order in which female possibilities are limited. One playful yet pithy way in which Orlin represents the disciplined and classical body of the ballerina is by comparing her to a wind-up toy duck. This metaphor, present in *Rock my tutu* and particularly fitting for a deconstruction of *Swan Lake*, has also been used in *Daddy, I've see this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other... A piece for six dancers and a stage* (1998a).<sup>38</sup> By equating the ballerina to a manipulable and inanimate object, Orlin aims to refute the ballerina's iconic status. The ballerina's body is admired for its performance of extreme discipline and self-control, yet Orlin questions the way in which its strength is habituated according to external regulation, subjection and transformation. Despite being an art form of the body, ballet's exaltation of faculties considered to be associated with the mind results in a metaphorical absence of the body, with limited or often non-existent room for individual creativity, freedom and desire.<sup>39</sup> To illustrate this docility, Orlin literally eliminates the live human body and replaces it with a mechanised puppet that is entirely predictable.

A similar metaphor that Orlin has used to demonstrate her dissatisfaction with artists who (literally) have to dance like puppets to the tune of authorities such as choreographers, directors, audiences and critics can be found in *my hiccups continue to growl* (1997).<sup>40</sup> Orlin, dressed in a classical tutu and eight layers of pointe shoes, swings through the air on a harness and then slumps on the floor to eat a

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<sup>38</sup> In this work, generally referred to as *Daddy...*, Orlin uncompromisingly questions the validity of art and the politics of dance in South Africa. In subsequent mentions, this work will be referred to as *Daddy...*

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>40</sup> Orlin created this work for the opening of the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997.



fistful of spinach while a recorded message declares: “The show is over. Do not feed the artist” (cited in Friedman, 1997). Essentially, this work is “about the artist as performing monkey... [the] ventriloquist’s dummy” (Friedman, 1997).

## **2.2 Focusing attention on the male-constructed gaze**

The need to question and challenge the value that is attached to the ideal and transcendent yet colonised and docile body of the ballerina is what forms the foundation of *Rock my tutu*. This, however, is no simple task when the audience is confronted with the bodies that society tells them to admire – the slender, athletic and virtuosic bodies of the ballerinas of *Ballet de Lorraine*. Accordingly, to initiate her reconsideration of the agency of these bodies, Orlin focuses attention on that which, in part, is responsible for the achievement of their supposedly ideal form – the authoritarian male-constructed gaze, existing as a symptom of the primacy of the visual within modern Western consumer culture.

In Chapters One and Two Foucault’s concept of hierarchical surveillance and Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze were introduced and the application of these theories to the field of dance was discussed. ‘Authoritarian male-constructed gaze’ is the definition that ultimately proved useful for understanding the nature of the gaze that is implemented in ballet training to produce disciplined and normalised bodies and behaviour – features that the dancers of *Ballet de Lorraine* would have had to demonstrate in order to be accepted into a professional ballet company. It is this gaze, implemented by teachers, choreographers, directors, critics and audience members, and which is internalised and then exercised by the dancers themselves, to which Orlin draws attention. She does this to challenge it and, by implication, to draw attention to what Mulvey (1975) calls the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of the ballerina’s body on stage.

As mentioned above, *Rock my tutu* starts with the entrance of the swans of the original Act II of *Swan Lake*. The *corps de ballet* enters in a line from upstage right. A short movement phrase repeated numerous times carry the ballerinas in snake-like curves across the stage. Four men dressed as modern-day doctors enter with the ballerinas, casually strolling among them and scrutinising their bodies as they unperturbedly, with unquestioning acceptance, continue to perform the choreographed steps. Similarly, towards the end of the ballet, a ballerina is placed on the operation table, a central prop throughout the work. As she moves through the various iconic *Swan Lake* arm gestures and positions, while *bouffée-ing en pointe*, the men surround the table and peruse her from below – another example of where the gaze of men upon the female body is explicitly emphasised,

## **2.3 Assigning dominance to the gaze**

To communicate that the gaze upon the ballerinas’ bodies is one that colonises and objectifies, Orlin assigns dominance to those who practice the gaze. She achieves this, firstly and quite simply, by giving the gazing doctors power through a whistle which acts as a signal for the ballerinas to freeze.

Secondly, and perhaps less explicitly, the gaze is given authority because those who are doing the gazing are placed in (or already assume) traditionally superior positions. They are men who, by way of doctors' costumes, are situated in the sphere of science and knowledge – realms of the mind. The ones who are gazed upon, on the contrary, are placed in (or already assume) traditionally inferior positions. They are women who dance – a realm of the body. Orlin constructs a simple hierarchy with the whistle – those who command versus those who obey – upon which she builds: giving visual expression to the patriarchal dualisms that place man and mind in positions that are superior to woman and body. By creating connections between the men, the mind and those who look, on the one hand, and between the women, the body and those who are looked upon, on the other, Orlin gives credence to Mulvey's (1975) assertion that, in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.

Furthermore, by placing the gazing doctors in the roles of Prince Siegfried and Von Rothbart, Orlin affirms and reinforces their position of dominance and thus the dominance of their gaze. As is the case with most ballets of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the male characters in *Swan Lake* are the narrative's driving force – they act and the female characters are acted upon. In *Swan Lake*, for example, the spell that Von Rothbart casts upon the women transforms them into swans by day, and it is only Prince Siegfried's oath of eternal true love to Odette that can break the spell and set the women free. Although the male protagonist, Prince Siegfried, in full princely regalia, makes a brief appearance, the doctors are the ones who actually fill the role of the prince, for they (all) perform the Act II *pas de deux* with the swan queen, Odette. Likewise, the doctors also portray the evil sorcerer, Von Rothbart, for they assist with the transformation of a 'swan' into a 'human' and back on more than one occasion. This strategy also exposes the way in which the characterisation and plot of the traditional classical ballet perpetuates the conventional gender roles whereby man is active and woman is passive, with the woman's passivity founded upon the display of her body as visual spectacle. Of additional significance is how the association of the doctors with Prince Siegfried and Von Rothbart underscores Mulvey's (1975) notion that those who are implementing the gaze are doing so from the perspective of the traditionally heterosexual male protagonist.

#### **2.4 Implicating the gaze of the audience**

Orlin's critique stretches beyond the relationships on stage. Through the invitation of one of the doctors to the audience, "I suggest we (men, doctors, Prince Siegfried, Von Rothbart and audience) watch the dance of the little swans" (Orlin, 2001), the members of the audience are implicated in practicing the authoritarian male-constructed gaze that dominates and objectifies. This direct address to the audience, a Brechtian technique known as 'breaking the fourth wall', is used to communicate that performers know they are being watched. In this way Orlin advances the task of creating awareness of the gaze in general, but she also draws attention to the gaze of the audience in particular.

Of further importance is Orlin's reversal of the gaze – a strategy which suggests that the choreographer and the performers are watching the audience watching. The spotlights, imperative for the audience to see the performers, yet out of their field of vision in a conventional ballet production, are made visible and are turned onto the audience. This lightens up the darkened auditorium thus allowing the performers on stage to see the spectators. At the same time it creates an image of the spotlights as blazing eyes that scrutinise the audience. Orlin emphasises this strategy with the words of one of the doctors: "Doctors, more light in the room, I am struggling to see them" (Orlin, 2001). By breaking the fourth wall, and momentarily and partially inverting the roles of looker and looked-upon, Orlin encourages the audience to acknowledge the existence of the authoritarian male-constructed gaze. She prompts the audience members to contemplate the impact of their gaze critically, thus potentially unlocking the possibility of dismantling the gaze. This Brechtian technique also brings awareness to the fictionality of the world on stage, its characters and their actions (Chalk, McEwan & Peters, 2009)<sup>41</sup> – an important strategy that will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section.

## **2.5 Orlin advocates alternative theories of spectatorship**

It is clear that Orlin employs a number of strategies to emphasise deliberately the existence and operation of the authoritarian male-constructed gaze within classical ballet. Her simple representation of men who look at women, while simultaneously drawing the audience into this equation, focuses attention on the way in which the ballerina is subjected to the surveillance embedded within cultural institutions through which a dominant patriarchal ideology and thus the binary constructions of male/female, subject/object, active/passive and mind/body are maintained. In addition, as explained by Copeland (1993), the outright acknowledgement of the gaze serves to disrupt the voyeur's sense of power, which largely depends upon invisibility and anonymity. Copeland elaborates his point by referring to Édouard Manet's *Olympia* which shocked the salon-goers in 1865, not so much because of Olympia's nakedness but because "she stared calmly and collectedly out at the viewer, consciously acknowledging the gaze" (Copeland, 1993: 144).

While *Rock my tutu's* representation of men who look at women is important for understanding the ideological power-dynamic at play, one must, firstly, remain cognisant of the reality that female teachers, choreographers, directors, critics and audience members, who might succumb to mechanistic thinking and buy into the notion that a disciplined body is an ideal body, also practice this gaze. Likewise, men do not necessarily elude scrutiny, and hence the gaze is identified as 'male-constructed'. Secondly, one must not (yet) be tempted to think that the ballerinas are being portrayed as victims. While Orlin specifically highlights the patriarchal underpinnings of the hierarchy that defines the gaze that searches for perfection and renders the classical dancing bodies of the ballerinas

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<sup>41</sup> Accessed on 30 July 2013 (at that stage via free access; currently only accessible via subscription).

as objects for visual consumption, her interpretation is more complex than a mere victimisation of women and a demonization of men.

Orlin clearly admits to and protests against the endurance of “visual mastery” in ballet and “speaks from an awareness about the deathful and truly imperialist potential of vision” (Marks<sup>42</sup> cited in Midgelow, 2007: 110). She also acknowledges that the concept of an authoritarian male-constructed gaze offers a challenge to the abstract theories of beauty and perfection that have dominated and still dominate the aesthetic tradition of ballet. However, unlike Mulvey’s psychoanalytic concept of the male gaze, the either/or binary pattern of which seems to

leave the argument trapped within its own conceptual frame of reference, unable to advance politically into a new terrain or suggest an alternative theory of spectatorship (Mulvey<sup>43</sup> cited in Daly, 2002e: 307),

Orlin does not surrender to the impossibility of change. Orlin rejects the notion of the body as a fixed reality. The ways in which she opens previously closed signifiers, thus allowing the initial stereotypical gender classifications within *Rock my tutu* to disintegrate, are explored in the following section.

### 3. AN ALTERNATIVE FEMALE PRESENCE

If Orlin believed that women’s bodies could only be portrayed through “regimes of representation which produce them as objects [...] of male [desire]” (Wolff, 1997: 88), *Rock my tutu* would serve little purpose. The mere existence of *Rock my tutu*, and other Orlin works, however, suggests that Orlin trusts in the possibility of transformation. Of particular significance is Orlin’s use of the same type of dancing body that she otherwise portrays as a wind-up toy duck. In pursuit of an alternative female presence the bodies of the dancers of *Ballet de Lorraine* become the medium whereby Orlin, through parody, irony, rewriting and re-presenting, traverses the gaps and excesses of the ballet canon. She reinstates but also subverts the ideal that the male-constructed gaze pursues. She evokes a woman that is hybrid – ideal and not ideal – and while on the surface it might seem as though Orlin is solely undermining the status of ballet and the ballerina, her redefined ‘woman’ carries the potential to release the ballerina from the grip of a gaze through which she is objectified and commoditised.

#### 3.1 Hybridity in *Swan Lake*

The notion of hybridity already exists within the *Swan Lake* script, making it the ideal text through which to unravel this concept. Odette and the rest of the swans are hybrid – human-animal. Hybridity, explains Midgelow, suggests disorder and discord. The hybrid body is “real and fleshy. It is often a grotesque body [...]” (Midgelow, 2007: 107). It is associated with ‘animality’ and nature, making it a body that does not belong in the ballet (Midgelow, 2007), for ballet subscribes to a verticality which,

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<sup>42</sup> Midgelow (2007) quotes Laura U. Marks’s 1998 article *Video haptics and erotics*. This article was published in *Screen*, 39(4), p. 331-348.

<sup>43</sup> Daly (2002e) quotes from Laura Mulvey’s 1987 article *Changes: Thoughts on myth, narrative and historical experience*. This article was published in *History Workshop Journal*, 23(1), p. 3-19.

according to Brenda Dixon Gottschild “suggests [...] uprightness and a moving away from animal nature toward a more ethereal imperative” (2003: 25). Ballet renounces the hybrid body and attempts to make features of the grotesque absent. Accordingly, in *Swan Lake*, Odette’s bird nature represents a tragic oppression from which she must be freed (Middelow, 2007). Her ambiguous and subversive potential as a bird-woman must be controlled and civilised. Thus, even though the character of Odette suggests hybridity, the dancer portraying Odette is not allowed to disclose any signs of fleshy grotesqueness. The strict limits placed on body shape and size and the coded geometry of the ballet vocabulary hold the ballerina within the classical view of the body. As a result, the ballerina continues to represent the coherent and reassuring feminine ideal that sustains the authority of order, knowledge and culture and thus upholds patriarchal dominance.

In *Rock my tutu*, however, Orlin explores and embraces the hybridity and ambiguity that a traditional ballet such as *Swan Lake* rejects. Orlin juxtaposes the patriarchal notions of the classical and the grotesque, the beautiful and the ugly, the primitive and the civilised, the animal and the machine. Through strategic utilisation of the body, movement vocabulary, characterisation or a combination of these she makes visible the forceful Aphrodite as well as the gentle Psyche and in this way frustrates the conventional expectations of the ballerina as an icon of femininity. Descriptions and discussions on a number of these strategies follow.

### **3.2 Drawing attention to reproductive organs**

There are a few instances in *Rock my tutu* where the ballerinas sit down on stage, crotches towards the audience, to put an extra pair of pointe shoes on their already pointe shoe-clad feet. In this seated position the voluminous, circular tutus effectively isolate the legs and crotches of the ballerinas from the rest of their bodies. This framing of the ballerinas’ genitals, albeit discreetly covered by pink stockings and tulle, exposes the ballerinas as women of flesh and blood – women that menstruate and give birth. The irony, however, is that the chronically decreased energy availability of many professional ballerinas – the result of decreased energy intake – suppresses certain processes such as reproduction, thermoregulation, growth, and cellular maintenance. Amenorrhea, the absence of menstrual periods, often results (Doyle-Lucas, Akers & Davy, 2010). While ballet paradoxically draws attention away from the body, Orlin draws attention to the body. The accompanying sound of police sirens and the image of flashing blue lights in the background suggest that the audience is witnessing something that is prohibited. Orlin develops this enquiry into a patriarchal authority that controls what may and may not be seen when the doctor characters move the set and decor so as to obstruct the audience’s view of the ballerinas’ reproductive organs. This strategy of deliberately concealing that which is considered to make the female body ‘grotesque’ and threatening and which, accordingly, is deemed unacceptable for public display, serves to emphasise its presence.

### 3.3 'Imperfect' bodies and different vocabularies

The means through which to make visible the grotesque is limited when using the classically trained, canonically approved, white bodies of the ballerinas from a French ballet company. The next section, sub-headed "Dismantling the comforts of optical perception", nevertheless illustrates how Orlin does manage to undertake such a provocation in *Rock my tutu*. Orlin, however, has also juxtaposed the ideal of the disembodied ballerina – sometimes only referenced by way of pointe shoes and tutus – with bodies that do not conform to balletic criteria. In one of Orlin's earliest works titled *Shelved selves* (1987), for example, Orlin herself is dressed in a red tutu, but,

unlike the usual smooth and prettily dressed dancer, Robyn exposes her hairy armpits and legs [...] The dance world focuses on the body beautiful and how to emphasise this in dance. Robyn deals in areas which are not necessarily aesthetically pleasing (Krost, 1987).

Likewise, Orlin has challenged the conventions of femininity by putting tutus on female bodies that do not conform to the prepubescent petiteness of the ballerina. In *Orpheus, I mean Euridice, I mean the natural history of a chorus girl* (1998), Toni Morkel, dressed in a tutu, evoked the response:

But she does not have a dancer's body: Orlin is playing quite a dangerous game here. We are so conditioned to displays of cute gym-toned nudity that when Morkel takes off her kit to reveal a body with the usual bumps and bulges, many people are disconcerted (Bristowe, 1998).

To reiterate Bordo (1993), the non-toned female body with "bumps and bulges" carries with it the mark of disorderliness – a dangerous devouring woman who submits to the desires of the uncivilised animal and thus contradicts the reassuring femininity of the fetishized ballerina.

Morkel's "bumps and bulges" are particularly evident next to Nelisiwe Xaba, who "has the lean body and legs of a dancer – unlike the rest of the soft-bellied cast" (Bristowe, 1998). Yet Xaba is not without her own provocation. Perhaps in 1998, four years after the establishment of a democratic South Africa, a black ballerina was no longer as outrageous a notion as it would have been pre-1994, or shortly after. Orlin, however, started dressing black bodies in classical tutus at a time when it would still have been an enormously contentious issue, such as in *Naked on a goat* which she created in 1995. The Apartheid government cultivated the legacy of colonial modernity. It was built on the premise of white supremacy and was informed by the general acceptance of racist philosophies, such as those of Immanuel Kant, that rendered the African continent the metaphorical epitome of physical ugliness and moral decay (Nuttall, 2006) and the African (or non-European) body as primitive and unsophisticated (Van Wyk, 2010). Bordo (1993) explains that the black female body was especially burdened with negative associations. Her blackness and her femaleness endowed her with an imagined hyper-sexuality that cast her as a primitive 'savage', without control of her animalism.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation cannot accommodate an in-depth discussion on the ways in which gender discrimination, in ballet and in South Africa, has been informed by racial difference. It is, however, important to note that Orlin's work does not grapple with gender alone: it sometimes also deals with the intersection of gender and race. In this way Orlin layers her challenge to the notion of an ideal feminine and the way in which it is epitomised by way of the European ballet tradition.

In addition to pairing pointe shoes and tutus, the epitome of the Western cultural notion of transcendence, with the historically constructed primitivism and animalism of the black body, Orlin also pairs them with traditional African dance. European colonisers believed that the “vulgar”, “undisciplined” and “promiscuous” (Dixon Gottschild, 2003: 16) ‘native dances’ of Africa needed to be controlled and regulated (Reed, 1998), and they considered ballet to be a superior dance form through which to disseminate a dominant ideology (Gainor, 1995: xiv). In both *Shelved selves* and *Naked on a goat*. Orlin’s use of the grounded posture and the articulated torso that draw attention to the pelvis, abdominals, breasts, and buttocks, and which is characteristic of many African dance styles (Dixon Gottschild, 2003), collides with the verticality and measured harmony that ballet’s tutu and pointe shoes suggest.

In all of the abovementioned cases – Orlin’s hairy body, Morkel’s bulging body, and Xaba’s black body – “the canonical exclusion of the non-normative body from the traditions of dance and theatre” is interrupted (Johnson, 2005: 37). These women’s bodies place gaps between what the audience expects and that with which they are confronted. By not ‘fitting into’ the discourse of normative bodies and by going against ballet’s classical aesthetics, these bodies at once evoke hybridity and claim traditional spaces anew for atypical bodies.

### **3.4 Dismantling the comforts of optical perception**

In *Rock my tutu* Orlin employs a different tactic to conjure the notion of a hybrid and ambiguous female presence. Counter to convention *Rock my tutu’s corps de ballet* steps off-stage and into the auditorium – another example of breaking the fourth wall. When Odette and the doctors begin to perform the Act II *pas de deux*, the ballerinas perform sections of the original Petipa/Ivanov choreography in the aisles between the blocks of seated audience members. The proximity of the ballerinas and the manipulated perspective from whence they are viewed not only commands a reappraisal of the audience-performer relationship but also of the ballerina as a spectacular object, to be viewed safely from a distance. Orlin introduces haptic vision which, as conceptualised by Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>45</sup> differentiates between haptic space and optical space, with haptic space using close vision and optical space using long-distance vision (cited in Midgelow, 2007). Orlin draws both these different viewing experiences into *Rock my tutu*. The use of optical space reflects and perpetuates the primacy of the visual within classical ballet, an intensification of which occurred during the Romantic period when the ballerina as an apparition resisted all tactile contact (Copeland, 1993). Orlin’s use of the proscenium stage permits the separation between the spectator and the performer upon which the voyeuristic male-constructed gaze depends. Yet, she also searches for a different mode of visibility and a more tactile representation by, as Copeland explains, reducing the physical and psychological distance that the proscenium arch creates.

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<sup>45</sup> Midgelow (2007) references Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, written in 1988 and published by Athlone Press, London.

Of particular significance is the way in which Orlin's use of haptic space draws attention to the ballerinas' corporeality. The elimination of optical perception and the frustration of the voyeuristic male-constructed gaze makes the ballerinas' breath, sweat and sound – normally strategically made 'invisible' by the distance between the stage and the audience – a part of the audience's experience. This serves to dismantle the image of the ballerina as an ethereal and disembodied creature, dependent upon the absence of these human characteristics. Additionally, the audience members are no longer able to witness or experience the line, grace, and illusion of effortlessness with which the ballet discipline have imbued these bodies and through which they are able to inspire the idea of beauty, transcendence and perfection. The geometry of the movement language that normally transforms "confused and messy bodies into distinct, clear rational ideals" (Claid, 2006: 20) is present and absent. The classical aesthetics of beauty are upset by the foreshortened perspective since, from up-close, the movements are less distinguishably balletic.

Through this intimate relationship Orlin uses both the bodies and the movements of the dancers to create ambiguity. Bodies that, from far, appear weightless and ethereal are, from close-up, evidently subject to gravity. They must clearly exert effort and energy to achieve what ultimately is only an illusion. Bodies that usually suggest the Cartesian condition of machinality become bodies that seem to be more animal, performing a dance language that, from far, is clear and understandable yet, from up close, looks messy and illegible. This alteration in perspective creates the appearance of ballerinas who continuously 'mutate' so as to simultaneously evidence both bird and woman, "making manifest and extending the subversive but unexplored hybrid potential of the ballet swan woman" (Midgelow, 2007: 108).

### **3.5 Distorting the classical movement vocabulary**

Corresponding to the discussion on Orlin's distortion of the classical ballet vocabulary is the excessive layering of *pointe* shoes that Orlin has used in a number of her works. Although *pointe* shoes serve to enhance the ballerina's beauty and ethereality, Orlin posits them as something that inhibits and restricts. She explores the ambiguous reality of *pointe* shoes, articulated by Claid (2006) as symbolising both the ballerina's power and fragility. When, as in *Rock my tutu*, the ballerinas wear three pairs of *pointe* shoes over each other, they are no longer light, graceful and ethereal but clumsy and uncouth. They cannot *posé* onto *pointe* and their lines become distorted. Instead of the 'correct' way of running on *demi-pointe* and maintaining the extended line of the pointed foot, they are forced to run flat footed, stepping with their heels first. The effect is one of graceful swans transforming into waddling ducks. This parodic image also calls forth the semblance of a clown, the character with oversized shoes, generally deemed the circus fool. It is as though Orlin queries who the 'fool' really is: those who do not measure up to the ideals of beauty and femininity or those who "feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to [what can become] an obsessive body practice" (Bordo,



1993: 179) that ultimately serves rather than transforms a social order that limits female possibilities (Bordo, 1993).

The image of layered *pointe* shoes, which Orlin has also used in other works such as *Piss elegant* (1995),<sup>46</sup> *Explaining loss to a young ballerina* (1995),<sup>47</sup> *my hiccups continue to growl* and *When it comes down to mulberry bushes* (1998b)<sup>48</sup> epitomises her interrogation of the definition of beauty and femininity in Western culture. By placing emphasis on that which is considered necessary for the creation of beauty as a device that would heighten the beauty, Orlin reveals how beauty in excess can become ugly and grotesque. In this way she forces the audience members to reassess their aesthetic values.

### **3.6 Destabilising the relationship between audience and performer**

As noted before, the use of haptic space commands a renegotiation of the audience-performer relationship. In *Rock my tutu* there are two ways in which the ballerinas occupy the space that is traditionally reserved for the audience. As already described, the *corps de ballet* dances between the audience members in the aisles of the auditorium. In another instance the ballerinas seat themselves amongst the audience members. They become spectators, looking in at the proscenium-framed world from which they had come. Although not a new or original strategy, this way of breaking the fourth wall effectively frustrates audience expectations based on *Rock my tutu's* staging in a traditional theatre. When a ballerina takes a seat conventionally reserved for an audience member, the audience is forced to conceive of her in a manner that is different from the norm. They must ask, "who is the looker, and who is the looked-upon?" The ballerina, as both looker and looked-upon, takes on a dual role whereby she at once refuses to give up the object status while also claiming the viewing subject position. Likewise, the status of the audience members is corrupted when the ballerinas dance between them. In a heightened engagement with the image and the action, the audience members are compelled to move around and continually change the direction of their gaze. The performance surrounds them and, consequently, they are no longer able to view it safely from their seats.<sup>49</sup> As such, each individual spectator may at any point also be gazed upon as he or she becomes comingled with the image. In various ways Orlin's use of haptics, which "is based more upon interaction than

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<sup>46</sup> This solo was created for Jeannette Ginslov, who performed it at the Arts Alive Festival in Johannesburg.

<sup>47</sup> This work was created for the students of the National School of the Arts.

<sup>48</sup> This work was created for the Grade Twelve students of the National School of the Arts and was performed at the Dance Umbrella Festival and the Dance Factory.

<sup>49</sup> This notion of active spectatorship, as opposed to passive consumption of spectacle, will be delved into more deeply in Chapter Four.

voyeurism [...]” (Marks<sup>50</sup> cited in Midgelow, 2007: 113), mobilises a plurality of identities (in itself a kind of hybridity) that has the potential to make both positions (looker and looked-upon) unstable.

### 3.7 The ballerina as a stripper

Close to the end of *Rock my tutu* the ballerina who is placed on the operation table to be perused by the doctors strips off her tutu and reveals her red underwear. In much the same way that the ballerinas sitting with their crotches to the audience might not be nearly as inappropriate a display of the female body as it would have been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ballerinas dressed in barely more (or less) than a leotard probably will not elicit a particularly negative response. As suggested in Chapter Two, the ballerina in full classical tutu and the ballerina in a revealing leotard are no longer the disparate images they might have been when *Swan Lake* first premiered. Orlin, however, urges the audience to reconsider this seemingly ‘tame’ image by emphasising the action of stripping. She foils the understanding of the barely naked ballerina as non-scandalous or -evocative (as was Scholl’s claim about Balanchine’s costuming), by establishing a relationship between this seemingly innocent image and an act that is overtly sexual and through which the body as commodity is made evident. This evocation of plurality – the ballerina as stripper and the stripper as ballerina – raises the question of whether the idealised classical body of the ballerina is as much a commodity as is the body of a stripper. In light of Lyon and Barbalet’s<sup>51</sup> explanation of the consumerist body as being “significantly passive” (cited in Thomas, 2003: 55), this plurality illuminates the seeming contradiction in the understanding that feminist dance critics such as Adair and Daly have of the ballerina as being simultaneously virtuosic and passive. Furthermore, the analogy through which Orlin situates the ballerina’s body as a consumerist body, supplements Adair’s (1992) belief that tight-fitting and revealing costumes that display the crotch and legs of the ballerina emphasise her ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1975). Because the look of the ballerina is often considered to be more important than her activity on stage, she continues to be cast as a passive object, despite her physical competence (Adair, 1992). This stripping scene furthermore contributes to the understanding of the feminine ideal as being culturally constructed in that it demonstrates the development from one accepted norm (tutu) to another (no tutu). Orlin reveals how norms and ideals change over time and, by shrouding both the ballerina and the stripper in ambiguity, contributes to the destabilisation of essentialised understandings of femininity.

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<sup>50</sup> Midgelow (2007) quotes Laura U. Marks’s 1998 article *Video haptics and erotics*. This article was published in *Screen*, 39 (4), p. 331-348.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas (2003) references J.M Barbalet and M.L Lyon’s chapter *Society’s body: Emotion and ‘somatization’ of social theory* from the book *Embodiment and Experience: The Essential Ground of Culture and Self*, edited by Thomas J. Csordas and published by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, in 1994.

## 4. ORLIN UNDERMINES THE STATUS AND HIERARCHY OF BALLET

### 4.1 A horizontal dance domain

Orlin's juxtaposition of that which has come to be prohibited on the female body with the patriarchal model of disembodied perfection – the body of the ballerina – supplements her aim to undermine the superiority of the ballerina and the ballet canon. In *Rock my tutu* this aim is further reinforced by Orlin's eschewal of the *Ballet de Lorraine's* internal hierarchy. Orlin avoids the custom of selection according to ranks that mark the ballerinas as either possessing or not possessing the capacity to perform more or less challenging parts in a ballet. When Orlin does single a ballerina out, she places her in the role of a stripper. Moreover, the esteemed and central part of Odette is portrayed by a male dancer. Not only does his body become a site of gender instability and a medium through which to examine sexual desire, but his muscular build and heavier approach to *pointe* work queer the image of the principal female dancer. This is complemented by the excessive manipulation of his movement by all the doctors who simultaneously partner him during the Act II *pas de deux*. Their aggressive partnering affects the line, grace and ease that create the beauty for which the ballerina – and particularly the principal ballerina – is revered. This image brings to mind the earlier reference to Schorer (cited in Daly): “the boy should appear then to be strumming [...] the girl [...] like an instrument” (2002a: 280). The overt violence in Orlin's interpretation of the classical *pas de deux* points toward her critique of the underlying violence in the manipulation and arrangement of the ballerina's body by her male partner.

Furthermore, this device, akin to the layering of *pointe* shoes, distorts the classical vocabulary. In both instances the potential for the ballet to unfold in its ‘normal’ spectacular fashion exists, yet Orlin thwarts this expectation and, instead, bids the audience to note the absence of virtuosity and conventional beauty. Midgelow's analysis of Raimund Hoghe's *Swan Lake, 4 Acts* is applicable, particularly where she writes about his work as being

full of unfilled expectations and expressions of horizontality – creating a resonance of loss and sadness – not because these things are themselves ‘losses’, but rather because we experience the presence of absence (2010: 50).

Orlin creates this absence, not simply to prompt the audience to question their perhaps nostalgic desires for this past – coherence, completion and verticality – but to advocate a horizontal dance domain and what Dempster refers to as the “democratization of the body” (1998: 233). A similar purpose resides in Orlin's integration of various different movement forms on the same stage, at the same time and often on the same bodies. In addition to traditional African dance forms, Orlin has worked with other popular ‘low-dance’ forms, including the jive, the twist and the can-can, to blur the line between canonised and uncanonised forms of movement and to break down the definition of dance as a single style or high art (Gordon, 1987).

A metaphor and theme that informs a number of Orlin works and which supports her challenge to the exaltation of ballet and the ballerina within the dance world is one of falling. For example, *my hiccups continue to growl*, described as “anarchic” (Bristowe, 1997) and as one of Orlin’s “angriest and most forthright pieces” (Friedman, 1997), was inspired by the Greek myth of Icarus, the young man who fell into the sea and drowned after ignoring his father’s caution not to fly too close to the sun with his wings made of feathers and wax (Thomson, 1998). *A drop in the ocean* (1988) as well as one of Orlin’s most recent works, *In a world full of butterflies it takes balls to be a caterpillar... some thoughts on falling...* (2013) also evidence this fascination with falling, which arguably resides in her desire to bring artists (and audiences) down to earth, literally and figuratively. This is particularly relevant to the ballerina, whose hierarchical ascent within the industry depends upon her ability to transcend (read deny) her corporeality.

Orlin has also used this image of falling in ways that are reminiscent of the dance genre Eurocrash, established in the 1980s as the “marketable trademark of physical theatre” (Claid, 2006: 169). There is a scene in *Naked on a goat* in which the dancers, dressed in classical tutus, continually and violently throw their bodies onto the floor. As with Eurocrash, expounded upon by Claid, this image of falling engages both the performers and the spectators in a postmodern subversion of transcendence. It stands in contrast to the seemingly romantic idyllic meeting of bodies in the classical *pas de deux*. There is no one to catch, support and break the fall – rather, it is an expression of “abandonment, anger and loss” (Claid, 2006: 169). Like the aggressive partnering and manipulation of Odette in the *Rock my tutu* version of the *Swan Lake pas de deux*, this technique serves to expose the violence that the body, in spite of and in service of ballet’s grace, ease and beauty, is often subjected to. It draws attention to the vulnerability of the body – a vulnerability that is denied when dancers endure pain, malnutrition and extreme physical exertion in an attempt to create the image of a body that appears to have transcended such limitations. Through the image of falling Orlin exposes transcendence as a false hope.

#### **4.2 The risk of reversal**

Although Orlin stages critiques of ballet and its status, she is not campaigning for the dance form’s destruction. This is significant since, as Lavender explains,

[s]uch reversals in the direction of power may do something to alleviate past injustices, and may feel good to the aggrieved, but these kinds of reversals inevitably promote future injustices by leaving untroubled the fundamental dynamic that produces and legitimizes hierarchical dualism in the first place (2012: 69).

Wolff (1997) elaborates on this understanding in terms of gender representation. She explains that art and theatre that reverses the idealised feminine often, unknowingly, reaffirms the status quo. To explain, Wolff refers to a number of key female pioneers of modern dance, a movement generally considered to be an important breakthrough for women in dance. She notes, in particular, Isadora

Duncan's and Martha Graham's celebration of the 'natural body' and their individual deviations from dominant representations through movements that embraced qualities that ballet rejected – angularity, pelvic movement and an emphasis on the body's weight and its relationship to the ground. The general defiance of these dominant representations of femininity and the increased commitment to women's stories and lives in modern dance have led many practitioners and critics to conclude that it was a medium for political as well as aesthetic transgression.

Others, however, believe that the female pioneers of modern dance were simply given 'permission' to steer this movement because it unintentionally continued to perpetuate destructive sex-role stereotypes such as 'Woman' as 'Mother Earth', 'primal body' or 'natural force' (Copeland, 1993). In line with this reasoning, Wolff (1997) reminds her readers of the critique of essentialism, urging them to remain wary of a cultural politics based on notions of women's 'natural body' or women's 'universal essence', conceptions which often founded Martha Graham's representations of Greek myths. One can never safely assume a positive answer with regard to how transgressive images, practices, and ideas are absorbed by society in general. At the very least, the suppressed is rendered visible – which is important – but such images also run the risk of being re-appropriated by the dominant culture so as to “collude with a kind of sexist thinking which identifies woman with the body and assumes an unchanging, pre-given essence of the female” (Wolff, 1997: 96).

#### **4.3 The female body as a vehicle for subversion?**

The prospect of the female body as a catalyst for subversion has therefore been met with great apprehension by feminist scholars such as Janet Wolff (1997) and Linda Hutcheon (1989). In light of Western culture's comprehensive coding and defining of female bodies, Wolff wonders how, if at all, women are able to engage in a critical politics of the body. Hutcheon asks: “could there be such a thing as women's visual art?” (1989: 151). She wonders whether the intentions of the female artist might be eclipsed by the pre-established meanings of the female body as sex object and as object of the male gaze – meanings that might prevail and re-appropriate her body. Does the “eruption of the grotesque body, the explosion into visibility of its suppressed features constitute a political revolution as well as a moral transgression?” Wolff asks (1997: 86).

#### **4.4 “Using dance to bust dance”**

Despite her reservations, Wolff believes that, because the body is a site of repression and possession, it can also be a privileged site of political intervention. Imperative to any political and cultural critique that employs the female body, states Wolff, is self-reflexivity and the recognition of the body as a product of ideology and discourse. Dance as body politics must simultaneously speak about the social and discursive construction of the body and subvert existing regimes of representation. It must draw attention to itself as dance (Wolff, 1997). In the words of Orlin, it is about “using dance to bust dance” (Orlin cited in Gordon, 1987).

Because, as described above, “popular bourgeois culture learns to assimilate the fiercest attacks on its values by transforming them into pleasing entertainments” (Bowman & Pollock, 1989: 113), efforts to undermine the co-optative powers of popular culture might result in nothing being said. Part of the reply within postmodernism to modernism has thus come to necessitate that the past, which cannot be destroyed because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited (Eco<sup>52</sup> cited in Bowman & Pollock, 1989). This strategy, born from the philosophical question, “What is art?”<sup>53</sup> – a question which came to the fore in the 1960s – is about the ironic rethinking of the “already said” (Eco<sup>54</sup> cited in Bowman & Pollock, 1989: 114), thus allowing for a critique of, not only the past, but also the present. It also brings to the fore the very act of constructing reality and its instability in representation in any form.

In *Rock my tutu*, Orlin’s deconstructive reconsideration of history, Orlin works within the gaps and excesses of the ballet canon, via existing feminist criticisms, to create a reimagined *Swan Lake*. She does not seek to define a new dance language. Rather, as Dempster (1998) explains about postmodern dance, Orlin employs this strategy and method of inquiry to interrogate the process of representation itself, to analyse, question and manipulate the codes and conventions through which classical ballet inscribes the body.

#### 4.5 The risk of reinstating the canon

A potential risk of a deconstructive reworking such as *Rock my tutu* is that it can be criticised for being an elitist insider’s game. The reason for this, says Middelw (2007), is because the efficacy of a reworking often depends upon the audience’s prior knowledge of the pre-text upon which it comments. Much of a spectator’s pleasure in an intertextual work depends upon his or her understanding of how the source text is being altered. In other words, for the parody and its resultant humour to be appreciated, the audience must be an informed audience. There is little room for naivety. This, some have argued, limits the success of the work, which ultimately does not surrender its elitist position. One can, however, also argue that such an elitist insider’s game communicates the provisional and context-specific nature of its existence. As Middelw explains, the dance that has been deconstructed no longer pretends to be universal and ahistorical, as did the ballet at its source. Rather, it reflects and adds to the contemporary discourses through which canonical texts have been opened up to reveal their artistic, cultural and political specificity (Middelw, 2007).

Another concern that has been expressed with regard to deconstructive reworkings is that they are complicitous, not political. Hutcheon calls them “politically ambivalent” (1989: 142) – implicated in

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<sup>52</sup> Bowman and Pollock (1989) reference Umberto Eco’s book *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, written in 1984 and published by Harcourt, New York.

<sup>53</sup> The term ‘art’ is used here to refer to the fine-arts traditions in the West as these developed from the Renaissance onward (Lavender, 2000 – 2001).

<sup>54</sup> This quote appears on p. 67 and 68 of Eco’s book.

the value they seek to challenge. The doubleness of postmodernism brings into effect the impossibility of stepping outside that which the artist contests. Derrida, Caws and Caws articulate the postmodern position as follows:

the authority of representation constrains us, imposing itself on our thought through a whole dense, enigmatic, and heavily stratified history. It programs us and precedes us (1982: 304).

Midgelow (2007) similarly acknowledges that deconstructive reworkings operate on a tightrope between that which alters and exposes the canon and that which re-enshrines and reinforces the canon. That which is quoted or referenced as an obligatory intertext continues to carry its own embedded values which cannot be escaped. In *Rock my tutu*, ballet is at once absent and present; the ballet's "simultaneous manifestation and dematerialisation" (Midgelow, 2010: 50) means that the work exists both in- and outside the institution. However transgressive the content or form of a deconstructive reworking, the work cannot escape its duplicitousness. In its attempt to critique certain hegemonic constructs these constructs must invariably be restated (Midgelow, 2007). In line with Hutcheon (1989), Midgelow (2007) describes deconstructive reworkings as ambiguous political sites. This ambiguity, she says, makes an intertextual approach dangerous for the politically motivated artist. It places a question mark over the compatibility of postmodern deconstructive art with an overtly feminist agenda.

How then does one interpret Orlin's use of the politically ambivalent postmodern strategy of reworking and deconstructing? Feminist art is never confused about its political agenda. Not only does it aim to change the allowable pleasures of female viewers and artists, but it assumes a firm position through which to offer ways of understanding aesthetic social practices in the light of the production of – and challenge to – gender relations. Postmodern parody, on the contrary, does not in itself lead to the production of the new – especially not new representations of female desire. For feminism, this kind of renewal is an imperative (Hutcheon, 1989). Hutcheon (1989) therefore acknowledges that the feminist use of postmodern strategies may be slightly problematic. At the same time, however, she also admits that it may be one of the only ways for feminist visual arts to exist. Butler (2002) supports this view when she explains that a critical stance is often only possible when one recognises the extent to which one is already implicated within the very power one hopes to oppose. Political possibilities, Butler continues, emerge only once the limits of representation and representability are revealed.

#### **4.6 From parody to power**

Both Hutcheon (1989) and Wolff (1997) have faith in the exit strategy that postmodern parody could potentially offer feminist artists, albeit a compromised one.

Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with significant change – the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture,

writes Hutcheon (1988: 130). Stated otherwise, the parodic re-presenting of the ballerina, the epitome of the idealised image of the male gaze and female narcissistic identification, allows Orlin to thwart the understanding of the female body as neutral or natural. Rather, as Hutcheon (1989) explains about this kind of parodic repositioning of the female body, it becomes clear that the ballerina's body is inscribed in a system of differences whereby the male and his gaze hold power. In other words, this strategy allows feminist artists to foreground the politics of the representation of the body (Hutcheon, 1989) and to address the artificially constructed nature of femininity.

Other theatrical devices through which Orlin explores and emphasises the social and cultural construction of the feminine ideal include making visible 'backstage' activities. For example, the visible movement of the set and decor, normally done as inconspicuously as possible, preferably behind closed curtains, supplements Orlin's challenge to specific distinctions between the private and the public, the visible and the invisible. The ballerinas putting their *pointe* shoes on in full view of the audience is in itself a significant example. This Brechtian technique draws reality into a space reserved only for the imaginary. As with the breaking of the fourth wall, the audience is reminded of the fabricated nature of the ballet, its characters and the on-stage activities – agents in the representation of a quintessential feminine.

As part of this exercise in 'exposing', Orlin literally peels various kinds of layers away. The stripping of the tutu or, in *Daddy...*, Nelisiwe Xaba's stripping of multiple floor length velvet dresses that turns the image of a towering and statuesque "African Madonna and prima donna" (Sichel, 2000a) into a petite Xaba standing on a wooden stool, serve as adequate examples. They also serve to illustrate, in a literal way, Orlin's figurative peeling away of layers of perception that encourage a diversification of interpretation, explains Sichel (1995b). Moreover, in *Rock my tutu*, the literal peeling away (and adding) of layers, aids Orlin's creation of the hybrid plural bodies through which she encourages a diversification of the interpretation of the female body. The hybrid ambiguous body that the original *Swan Lake* portrays as a kind of imprisonment is what Orlin uses to explore Foucault's notion of the body as merely adopting the illusion of being a rational unitary subject but which, in actuality, is an unfinished, unstable site of a dissociated self that is produced through a range of discourses and practices and that is productive in constructing resistances (Foucault, 1991).

By engaging with multiple identities and conflating ideas around the human as animal and the human as machine, the ballerinas in *Rock my tutu* suggest a fluid shifting presence. One moment they are everyday functional bodies that walk, sit and put on *pointe* shoes; the next they transform into 'dancerly' performative bodies that can execute extraordinary movements – bodies on display that are admired, but also objectified and commoditised. The ballerinas willingly take on this object status but they also pursue a viewing subject position. They are the consumers and the consumed, the desired and the desiring – at once active and passive. When dancing off-stage, their classical bodies become



“real and fleshy”, for some perhaps even grotesque. Other Orlin works similarly evidence female bodies that straddle conventional understandings of the primitive and the civilised, the full-bodied and the disembodied, the sensual and the ascetic. Through this evocation of hybrid and plural bodies, Orlin discourages notions of essentialism and disrupts any sense of a coherent singular identity. Orlin organises a dancing body that “fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (Foucault, 1991).

It is this notion of ambiguity – this eschewing of naïve essentialism through the use of parodic re-inscription – that gives Wolff (1997) hope in the potential of female bodies to engage in political and cultural critique. Claid (2006) explains that when a body recognises and brazenly displays its own inscriptions, it resists suppression. This results from the spectators not being given access to a fixed single truth about a performer, thus engaging them in a practice of not knowing but desiring to know – a play between a multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations. Hutcheon (1989) claims that the simultaneous provocation and subversion of the audience’s conditioned response might make them aware of how this conditioned response was first induced: “ We have to feel the seduction in order to question it and then to theorise the site of that contradiction” (Hutcheon, 1989: 154). Burt (2004), writing about the Judson Dance Theater [sic], explains that the spectators are obliged to create their own readings of the performance text. Orlin’s emphasis on plurality and hybridity, fluidity and contingency thus positions her work within a postfeminist discourse which deconstructs and destabilises concepts such as patriarchy and the male gaze (Carter, 1999). In line with Hutcheon’s (1989) reasoning, it allows her to suggest spectatorship that goes beyond voyeurism or narcissism. Accordingly, the bodies of the ballerinas in *Rock my tutu* resist commodification and disrupt the passive consumption of the homogenised image of the ballerina. They demand critique, not objectification (Midgelow, 2007).

#### **4.7 The significance of feminist criticism to postmodernism**

Postmodern representational strategies can therefore provide feminist artists with effective avenues for working within, while also challenging dominant patriarchal discourses. But the involvement of the postmodern with the feminist works both ways. Feminist criticism, says Hutcheon (1989), has made postmodernism think. One must of course acknowledge that feminism is a pluralistic phenomenon (Daly, 2002g). There is no single ‘feminist’ criticism, but there is one central ideal that feminist critics share: they aim to improve the lives of women.

With regard to Orlin’s deconstructive feminist approach, more specifically, the semiotic mechanisms of gender positioning within dance are exposed. A work such as *Rock my tutu* reveals how body image, as well as the desires such an image evokes, continue to be constructed. It has the potential to de-naturalise, destabilise and decentralise society’s common-sense conception of the body in art and, in agreement with Hutcheon’s (1989) writing about the value of feminist criticism to postmodernism

in general, it urges postmodernism to consider – in terms of gender – its challenge to the humanist universal called ‘Man’. Deconstructive feminist criticism is inclusive in its purpose, eager to expose the structures and processes by which women have traditionally and historically been excluded from not only the social hierarchy, but also the aesthetic canon. It provokes questions around the systems of power that authorise some representations while suppressing others (Daly, 2002g).

By exploring the interrelatedness and interdependence of the private and the public, the personal and the political, Orlin creates space for the expression of an alternative female presence – one that requires the audience’s interpretation and interaction rather than simply their passive consumption. Not only does this render their authoritarian male-constructed gaze unstable, it also brings to the fore female voices, experiences and bodies that are different to those described and dictated by any master narrative, a concept which will be delved into more deeply in Chapter Four. To quote Dempster: No longer can these women be identified as “perfected, ideal or unified forms”; rather as “bodies of bone, muscle and flesh speaking of and for themselves” (1998: 233).

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 1. MASTER NARRATIVE AND COUNTER NARRATIVE

The term ‘master narrative’ was coined by the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (Lawless, 2003) to denote an “all-encompassing and authoritative account of some aspect of social reality that is widely accepted and endorsed by the larger society” (Acevedo, Ordner & Thomson, 2010: 125). Of significance to this dissertation is the master narrative that determines and defines gendered role expectations based upon the patriarchal understanding of women as inferior to men – women that should listen and not speak (Lawless, 2003).

In Chapter Two the work of various dance scholars who interpret classical ballet as a reinforcer of this master narrative is discussed so as to lay the foundation for the analysis of Orlin’s deconstruction of the classical ballet text and particularly the text of *Swan Lake*. Chapter Three focuses predominantly on analysing the content of *Rock my tutu* and some other Orlin works – content which, in line with current feminist thought, denounces the master narrative that dictates the specific gendered role expectations of, not only classical ballet, but also of Western culture in general. It especially calls attention to the interpretation of the body – the locus of gender performance – as unstable and fleeting, an interpretation which makes it difficult to regard the body as a pre-given entity and which thwarts an easy and comfortable conceptualisation of the body. Orlin poses a counter-narrative that invites spectators to reconsider the generally understood ‘truths’ about the female body, and more specifically the female body in dance. She questions the notions of the ballerina’s body as exemplary of an ideal femininity and of ballet as a superior dance form because of its cultivation and expression of an idealised Western cultural understanding of beauty.

Orlin’s counter-narrative, however, manifests in more ways than through her content only. In Chapter Four the ways in which Orlin fragments and subverts formal aesthetics and traditional narrative structure are considered. Orlin foils the audience’s expectation of the ballet production as an identifiable unit, with a clear beginning, middle and end that allows it to be understood as a perfect, finished product. This subversion of traditional structure and construction complements the rejection of the master narrative in the content of *Rock my tutu* and other Orlin works. It underlines the notion of the body as something that should not be regarded as a fixed or pre-given entity.

## 2. ORLIN’S TREATMENT OF NARRATIVE IN *ROCK MY TUTU*

In order to proceed with this discussion it is necessary to sketch the sequence of events and images that give shape to *Rock my tutu*, perhaps an overdue undertaking. Upon entering the auditorium the audience is met by a piano standing down stage in front of the curtain. The pianist, a visible performer throughout, enters. His accompaniment to the beginning of Act II of the original *Swan Lake* signals

the raise of the curtain and the entrance of the ballerinas and doctors. After the doctors' fifth whistle and the corresponding freeze of the ballerinas, the ballerinas are dismissed for a smoke-break. One ballerina, performed by a male, remains on stage and does a short jive or rock-and-roll style solo after which the rest of the *corps de ballet* return. Each ballerina is holding a cluster of *pointe* shoes in her hands. The *corps de ballet* resumes its performance of the Act II choreography, but each time the music is interrupted by the sound of police sirens, the ballerinas sit down to put another pair of *pointe* shoes over the ones they are already wearing. A musical cue signals the entrance of Prince Siegfried, but the ballerinas chase after him while banging a hand-held pair of *pointe* shoes on the floor. After briefly taking the place of the pianist, who slams the piano lid onto Siegfried's fingers, the prince leaves the auditorium. At the same time the ballerinas walk upstage while undoing their buns. They collapse on the floor, walk backwards on their hands with their crotches to the audience and step off the stage to take their seats in the auditorium. Prince Siegfried, although no longer in character, remains visible on two television screens on stage. He talks to the camera as he makes his way to the foyer to get a drink. On stage, a section from the *grand pas de deux* between Odette and the doctors proceeds, followed by Odette's transformation into a 'man' by way of a black business suit. This is followed by a direct address to the audience by one of the doctors, who invites the spectators to watch the dance of the little swans. The iconic dance of the cygnets is performed by four ballerinas with *pointe* shoes on their hands, executing an adapted version of the original choreography with their arms instead of their legs. The music is given a hip-hop rhythm and one of the doctors, who has unbuttoned his shirt and has put on sunglasses and a cap, raps to this accompaniment. A similar scenario follows. This time the music for the dance of the cygnets is rendered in a flamenco-style by a female singer while two ballerinas perform a flamenco style arm dance with flamenco shoes on their hands. Again, a doctor talks to the audience, this time to invite one of the audience members to step on stage and perform his or her version of the swan. A man volunteers and is made to put a tutu on over his clothes. He is placed on the operation table where he is grotesquely and almost violently manipulated by the doctors to the music of Odette's *grand pas de deux* variation. (As this dance evolves it becomes apparent that the man is not a volunteer because his movements are predetermined). Next, a male in Odile's black tutu *bouffées en pointe* across the stage while dragging two wind-up ducks behind him. He is accompanied by *The Birdie Song*. This is followed by a *corps de ballet* of doctors performing a neatly synchronised but silly dance that draws mainly from the iconic *Swan Lake* arm positions. The previously discussed stripping scene follows, after which the pianist reclines on the operation table cuddling a wind-up toy duck. Two of the doctors drag the television screens, showing young children dancing and playing, to centre stage and, as the curtains close, they watch the audience watching them with the screens. In the lobby outside, the audience is met by Prince Siegfried, blindfolded and strapped to the floor.

This description makes it apparent that *Rock my tutu* radically deviates from the original *Swan Lake* plot in which Prince Siegfried encounters Odette, a princess who had been turned into a swan by the evil sorcerer, Von Rothbart, and who can only be released from the spell by an oath of true love. Prince Siegfried falls in love with Odette and swears eternal faith, but back at his court Odille appears, disguised as Odette. The prince is tricked into swearing his love for Odille, and Odette's chances of escape are destroyed. Siegfried races back to the lake and he and Odette leap into its waters together (Mackrell, 1997). The lovers die and the calm ending presents the couple united in a heavenly hereafter (Cass, 1993).

The plot described above adheres to the classical dramatic arc that is characteristic of the well-made play.<sup>55</sup> The arrangement of exposition, conflict, and resolution represents a world in which solutions are possible (Esslin, 1980) and which, in the case of Petipa's ballets, elicited the following response:

[H]is productions were all founded on the same formula. An inevitable *divertissement* brought his ballets to an ever happy conclusion; while such of his heroes, for whom anything but a tragic end was an historical impossibility, found themselves crowned in a final apotheosis (Mme. Karsavina cited in Beaumont, 1937: 477).

*Rock my tutu*, in stark contrast, has no such arrangement and thus disposes of

a view based on a recognisable and generally accepted pattern of an objective reality that can be apprehended so that the purpose of man's existence and the rules of conduct it entails can be deduced from it (Esslin, 1980: 415).

### 3. REACTIONS AGAINST NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FORMALIST AESTHETICS

#### 3.1 The rise of the plotless ballet

Because Orlin's work is often situated in the sphere of dance, it seems appropriate to consider first the significance of the rise of the 20<sup>th</sup> century plotless ballet, the abstraction of which is evidenced by the works of choreographers such as Michel Fokine, Léonide Massine at the *Ballets Russes*, Oskar Schlemmer and George Balanchine.

Experimentation with plotless ballets started in the early 1900s when Serge Diaghilev established the *Ballets Russes* and appointed Michel Fokine, responsible for the company's early successes, as his resident choreographer. Fokine reacted against what he considered to be the stale outworn conventions of the Imperial Russian classical ballets, epitomised by Petipa's evening-long productions, which, despite their implementation of the classical dramatic arc and formal choreographic design,<sup>56</sup> were criticised by Fokine for lacking unity and coherence. He was

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<sup>55</sup> John Russel Taylor (1967) describes the structure of the well-made play: In the exposition the characters and any necessary history is introduced, followed by a section devoted to misunderstandings, secrets which cannot be revealed, intercepted messages and the like. This leads to the confrontation or climax, followed by the *dénouement* – the unravelling of the plot (Taylor, 1967).

<sup>56</sup> He created dances for soloists, couples, small groups and large ensembles, each usually symmetrically arranged in straight lines, circles, squares, and triangles (Cass, 1993). The highlight of the ballet was the *grand pas de deux* for the ballerina and her male partner. This duet was almost always constructed according to a strict formula: 1) the *entrée*, an imposing entrance for the stars (Anderson, 1986); 2) the *adagio*, a stately section to show off the dancers' lyrical and sustained movements

particularly bothered by the incongruity of these story ballets' highly dramatic action with dance sequences that in no way contributed to the plot, but existed purely for the display of formal beauty and virtuosity. Fokine wished to separate these conflicting features, leading him to create a number of plotless ballets through which he demonstrated that movement could exist free from narrative structure. Most well-known of these is his *Les Sylphides*, which he created in 1909. Of additional significance is Fokine's contribution to the creation of shorter length dance works that audiences have become accustomed to. Through his compact one-act ballets Fokine encouraged the unified artistic image that he believed Petipa's ballets lacked (Anderson, 1986). Also influential to the steering of ballet narrative down the path of abstraction was Diaghilev's allegiance to the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde. Central to Diaghilev's modernist revolution, which coincided with Léonide Massine's formative years as a choreographer, were the key tenets of futurist performance. The futurists advocated a theatre that rejected verisimilitude and instead opted for brevity, compression, and non-objective forms of representation – ideas which all found their way into the *Ballets Russes's* modernist aesthetic (Garafola, 1989). There is also Oskar Schlemmer's pioneering performance work at the Bauhaus, particularly his *Triadic Ballet* (1922), which has been credited with marking the beginning of a new, abstract dance style (Lahusen 1986). Schlemmer was a Bauhaus staff member who, in line with the Bauhaus's growing concern with pure form and the synthesis of art and technology, concerned himself predominantly with concepts of abstraction and the exploration of space (Lahusen, 1986). Lastly, but without claiming to have provided a comprehensive list, there is George Balanchine, whom some dance historians such as Jack Anderson (1986) identifies as having explored the genre of plotless ballets more thoroughly than any choreographer prior to him. Like Schlemmer, Balanchine was interested in the exploration of space and the body in space. His pure-dance ballets were stripped of dramatic characters, strong emotions, elaborate settings and costumes so as to emphasise his dedication to, and reverence for structure, composition and the exhibition of the body (Anderson, 1986).

### **3.2 The relevance of the plotless ballet to Orlin**

Fokine, Massine, Schlemmer and Balanchine were radical for their time and one cannot deny that their individual revolts greatly impacted some of the dance practices and devices that choreographers such as Orlin still implement today. At the same time there may be aspects of their work that a choreographer such as Orlin challenges. Perhaps with the exception of Massine, who was influenced by the vanguard futurists, these choreographers rejected traditional narrative structure without rejecting aesthetic formalism. The rejection of one does not imply the rejection of the other. On the

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(Anderson, 1986); 3) the variations which consist of two solos, one for the male dancer to exhibit his high jumps, leaps and turns and one for the ballerina to display her dainty yet precise and brilliant movements (Cass, 1993); and finally 4) the *coda* in which the stars are reunited in quick, flashing steps (Anderson, 1986). For Petipa, the choreographic design of each ballet remained central. His suite of dances in no way advanced the plot, but rather resulted in a generally simple and concise narrative being stretched out over three or four acts (Anderson, 1986).

contrary, the renunciation of dramatic action can help to emphasise the formalist aesthetics of their productions.

The premise of aesthetic formalism is adequately summarised in the book *The Dance and Its Place in Education* (1925) in which Margaret H'Doubler writes that a dance, “as much as any other work of art [...] is subject to the general laws of unity or wholeness” (cited in Lavender, 2009: 380). In other words, formalism, a product of Kantian aesthetics, regards an art work’s artistic value as being determined primarily or sometimes even exclusively by its formal aspects (Dziemidok, 1993). According to the Kantian tradition, the artist is deemed a visionary genius who has mastered the principles of good aesthetic form. He or she is considered capable of moulding and wielding raw and inert materials according to object-level craft laws in pursuit of capturing and expressing universal truths. According to this tradition a work of art is “an independent world of pure creation which [has] its own, essentially spiritual, essence” (Gablik, 1984: 21) and the artist is considered to be a politically autonomous individual who stands apart from and unaccountable to his or her community (Lavender, 2009). Most early-twentieth-century artists therefore regarded themselves “as a kind of priest who divined the interior soul, or spirit” (Gablik, 1984: 21). Lavender explains that it is in accordance with this notion that the viewer of art assumes an inferior position from where he or she is obliged to receive passively<sup>57</sup> the “artistically rendered truths” of the artist (2009: 379).

This notion of the spectator as a passive consumer relates to the conceptualisations of Roland Barthes, who wrote about closed or readerly versus open or writerly texts. The classical ballets of Petipa, as well as the plotless ballets of the previously discussed choreographers, can be interpreted as closed texts that turn the reader into a consumer (Midgelow, 2007) because, as Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman said, “[i]t is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way” (2003: 569)<sup>58</sup>. In contrast to this statement, Moremi’s description of Orlin’s work, “[t]he piece is whatever the audience thinks it’s about” (cited in Jenkins, 2000), characterises what Barthes would call an open or writerly text. An open text encourages spectators to produce their own meanings (Midgelow, 2007). In this way the passive consumption of images which a closed text promotes is disrupted (Lavender, 2009).

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<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note the change in power dynamic here. In previous chapters those who do the looking were said to occupy a position of dominance. The words, “the spectator, who actively consumes and possesses”, were even used. Now, however, the concept of the audience members as passive consumers, permitted no agency with regard to how they would prefer to interpret the work, is introduced. Sayers (1993) acknowledges this contradiction and explains that the spectator is at once active and passive, an ambiguous identity that supplements the discussion on roles and positions that are fleeting and unstable, with their meanings being determined by the perspective from which they are perceived.

<sup>58</sup> This statement was first published in 1943, June 13, in the New York Times. For this dissertation it has been sourced from the second section of the Chapter *The American Avant-Garde* in part five of the anthology of art theoretical texts titled *Art in Theory, 1900-2000*.

*Rock my tutu* is without a doubt such an open text, for Orlin not only rejects traditional narrative structure, which has been recognised as a prominent characteristic of her work,<sup>59</sup> she also rejects formalist aesthetics. The rejection of a traditional linear narrative in fact mostly serves as a metaphor or signifier for the way in which Orlin rejects the master narrative to which Arthur Danto refers when he says that “[t]here is no special way works of art have to be” (1997: 47). It is for this reason that it might be of more use to look at the philosophies that informed, amongst other forms, the Theatre of the Absurd – philosophies that gave rise to the kind of open work that is created to be a socially fluid doing through which all involved may share both the pleasures and the responsibilities of the collective creation (Lavender, 2009).

### 3.3 Fragmented impressions lead to new methods and forms

It was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the suspicion of narrative plot and its artifice emerged (Hutcheon, 1989). It was a manifestation of the vanguard modernist artists’ reaction against the wide-scale changes to Western society that happened in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The development of a modern industrial society and the rapid growth of cities, followed by the ravages of two World Wars, left people questioning the former certainties of life. People were generally disillusioned by a world that had ceased to make sense – a world that appeared purposeless (Esslin, 1980). Post-nineteenth-century life became hard to anchor for many Europeans and Americans, for their primary experience had become one of incoherence. Their fragmented impression of the world was further propelled by the work of scientists, theoreticians and philosophers such as Darwin, Marx and Freud, whose ideas fractured time-honoured concepts of society, religion and culture (Leach, 2004). The French Algerian philosopher Albert Camus, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), “one of the great, seminal heart-searchings of our time” (Esslin, 1980: 23) expressed the sense that an intelligible world had become a faulty notion: “[I]n a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger” (Camus, 1942 cited in Esslin, 1980: 23).

The avant-garde artistic movements that characterise 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism were responses to this perceived fragmentation of experience (Leach, 2004). Many artists felt that they could no longer partake in art practices that conserved standards and concepts that had become questionable. Their art became a means through which to reject the notion that all human behaviour can be motivated; the concept of man’s immutable essence, particularly as challenged by the French philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (Esslin, 1980); and the possibility of “knowing the laws of conduct and ultimate values, as deducible from a firm foundation of revealed certainty about the purpose of man in the universe” (Esslin, 1980: 399-400). These rejections not only inspired and introduced new subject matter to art, but also the use of new methods and new forms (Leach, 2004).

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<sup>59</sup> Many of Orlin’s works have been noted for their lack of a linear narrative. These include *Have you seen the countryside around Johannesburg lately* (Greig, 1988), *Upsy daisy* (Jenkins, 1995) and *Naked on a goat* (Sichel, 1996).



In theatre practices these new methods and forms, which found full expression in the Theatre of the Absurd, were made manifest as explicit negations of the balanced dramatic arc of the well-made play and its tradition of verisimilitude. In stark contrast to coherent expressions of man's ultimate reality, these vanguard theatre practitioners aimed to convey a sense of the senselessness of the human condition that permeated the post-war experience. They confronted audiences with a picture of a disintegrating world that had lost "its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose" (Esslin, 1980: 411). Their desire was to communicate their personal perceptions of the human situation (Esslin, 1980) as opposed to one dictated by an all-encompassing, authoritative and widely accepted account of some aspect of social reality known as a master narrative (Acevedo, Ordner & Thomson, 2010). They achieved this by rejecting all traditional and rational theatrical devices, working instead with what Esslin (1980) calls a complex poetic image that consists of an elaborate pattern of secondary images and themes.

The impact of such a work is not determined by the suspense that comes from what Esslin describes as "the solution of a dramatic equation" (1980: 416). Esslin elaborates on this analogy when he explains that, within traditional dramatic conventions such as the well-made play (or the classical ballets of Petipa), the opening scenes generally provide the audience with clearly defined quantities through which a problem will be solved. Subsequently, the audience of such a play constantly asks, "What is going to happen next?" (Esslin, 1980). In a piece of Absurd theatre, however, the question "What is going to happen next?" becomes irrelevant, for the work does not proceed from point A to point B, showing development in time. Actions seem to lack motivation, characters are in constant flux and events are often outside the realm of rational experience. Stated otherwise, the audience is given a number of incoherent clues that demand of each viewer to make a creative effort at interpretation and integration. This, of course, does not mean that the audience cannot ask itself the question, "What is going to happen next?", but, since anything might happen next, such a question becomes almost impossible to answer. Spectators are no longer provided with solutions and so questions such as "What is happening?" or "What does the action of the play represent?" prove more suitable. Through the cultivation of an open or readerly text the dramatic suspense is created in a very different, but no less valid way (Esslin, 1980).

#### **4. ORLIN CULTIVATES AN OPEN TEXT**

For an artist who actively seeks to destabilise institutionalised hierarchies, and whose work often grapples with the issue of power (Orlin, 2013), Orlin's cultivation of an open text is significant for a number of reasons.

## 4.1 Form follows content

Firstly, as introduced at the beginning of this chapter, *Rock my tutu*'s openness is important because of the way in which it supplements the work's subject matter – the consideration of the body as an unstable and ever-evolving product of culture and society rather than a pre-given and determinate entity.

### 4.1.1 Orlin rejects traditional narrative structure

*Rock my tutu*'s classification as an open text is, firstly, a result of Orlin's elimination of *Swan Lake*'s traditional linear narrative structure. Instead of adhering to the source text's original dramatic arc, Orlin sporadically inserts a variety of narratives through dance, spoken word and film. As a result, the references to the ballet and its plot occur in multiple allusions and plural voices and, as is the case with Middelton's own deconstruction of *Swan Lake* titled, *O (a set of footnotes to Swan Lake)*,

[t]he narrative of the source text *Swan Lake* is only ever evoked as a fictive presence, never as an identifiable force. Images, texts and bodies are fragmented and never coalesce (Middelton, 2007: 111).

*Rock my tutu* therefore has no clear beginning, middle, or end. Emphasis is placed on the images which, as Friedman (1987) says about Orlin's work in general, are "interchangeable". Sections can be shuffled around so that the beginning becomes the end and the end the beginning. Such a rearrangement would not affect the way in which the work communicates and generates meaning. Another way in which to understand this aspect of *Rock my tutu* is that, in reality, the work never achieves completeness. This, along with the disposal of "brilliantly drawn characters who remain wholly consistent" (Esslin, 1980: 24), a consequence of the rejection of traditional narrative, reflects Orlin's objection to the notion that human beings and human bodies have a "core of immutable, unchanging essence" (Esslin, 1980: 24).

### 4.1.2 Orlin rejects formalist aesthetics

It has been made clear that the abandonment of narrative structure alone is not enough for the creation of such an 'incomplete' or open work of art. A sense of coherence and completeness can still be achieved through obedience to formalist aesthetics. This is where the self-reflexive nature of *Rock my tutu* becomes significant, for an understanding of the postmodern self-reflexivity of this work promotes greater comprehension of its openness.

In his book, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1997) Arthur Danto describes the 1960s, during which self-reflexivity in the visual arts culminated, as a period that marked the end of aesthetic modernism in many ways. It was during this time that many artists began to recognise that the nature of art is to ask and answer the philosophical question, "What is art?", thus allowing art to become its own philosophy (Lavender, 2000 – 2001). As a result, says Danto (1997),

post-60s art (for which he uses the term “post-historical”<sup>60</sup> art) finds itself in an era, born from the modernist era of ideology, in which it is possible for virtually anything to be art.<sup>61</sup> Because there are no longer limits placed on what art should and can be, works are often “radically pluralistic” (Lavender, 2000 – 2001: 89). Artists have the freedom to “quote, appropriate, combine and comment upon artistic styles, devices, images, and contents from all earlier and contemporaneous art” (Lavender, 2000 – 2001: 89).

*Rock my tutu* and many of the Orlin works described before similarly deal in more or less explicit ways with the questions “What is dance?”, “Who should be allowed to dance?” and “What dance should they be allowed to do?”. These works, through their diversification of dance styles, dance vocabularies and dancing bodies, can also be described as quoting, appropriating and commenting on styles, devices, images, and contents from earlier and contemporaneous dance. Accordingly, Orlin’s rejection of the master narrative that dictates that a dance work should be a certain way – “subject to the general laws of unity or wholeness” (H’Doubler cited in Lavender, 2009: 380) – results in work that is radically pluralistic. Questions asked are left unanswered and through the creation of ambiguity the spectators are summoned to unravel for themselves the meaning of the work. Various interpretations will be generated, not only because the auditorium is filled with a group of diverse spectators all approaching the work from their individual and differing contexts, experiences and memories, but because a single viewer might, on watching the work a second or third time, interpret it in a different way. As interpretations differ, clash and compete, yet evade correctness or incorrectness, spectators are urged to recognise the undeniable partiality and subjectivity of their readings. On the one hand, the spectators’ active interpretation can be seen as dramaturgical in that it allows the performance text to achieve its “fullness, becoming realised in all its semantic and communicative potential” (De Marinis, 1987: 101). On the other hand, however, the undeniably partial and subjective nature of their differing experiences will cause a work to elude completeness. The French choreographer, Xavier Le Roy’s statement, “It will never be finished as you could always maybe see something different”<sup>62</sup> (MoMAvideos, 2011), come to mind.

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<sup>60</sup> Danto uses the term ‘post-historical’ in the place of the term ‘postmodern’, for it is his belief that ‘postmodern’ refers to a style that is distinct and that can be recognised as different from other styles in contemporary art. For the sake of continuity and an ease of reference to other authors who make use of the term ‘postmodern’, this dissertation will, without necessarily disagreeing with Danto, use ‘postmodern’ instead of ‘post-historical’.

<sup>61</sup> Lavender (2000 – 2001), in his discussion of Danto’s work, points out that although the 1960s witnessed an acceleration of this process of universalising the category of art, its initial stages can be traced at least as far back as the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s introduction of the ‘ready-made’ in 1913 and his coining of the term ‘anti-art’ in 1914, whereby Duchamp signalled his “rejection of both the pervasive aesthetics of the time and the burgeoning commodity culture of art” (Lavender, 2000 – 2001: 88).

<sup>62</sup> Le Roy (in MoMAvideos, 2011) makes this statement in an interview, currently featured on YouTube, about his *Performance 15: On line/Xavier Le Roy*, which occurred in conjunction with the New York based Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*. In his latest works, including *Le Sacre du Printemps* (2007), *low pieces* (2011), and *production* (2011) created together with Mårten Spångberg, Le Roy produces situations that explore the relationships between spectators/visitors/performers and the production of subjectivities (Le Roy, 2013).

In *Rock my tutu* a literal and tactile way in which Orlin illuminates this act of meaning making, and its concurrent partiality of interpretation, is by staging and structuring the work in such a way as to make it impossible for the spectators to all see the same thing at the same time – an outcome of Orlin’s postmodern self-liberation from rote adherence to what Lavender refers to as “object-level craft laws” (2009: 383). What the spectators see is determined by how they are physically positioned in relationship to the performance. Therefore, if a spectator were to watch the work again from a different vantage point, he or she will literally see a different performance. In this way Orlin exhibits and explores what De Marinis refers to as the “deep crisis” (1987: 105) that the unitary model of performance has entered. Of particular significance to this exploration is Orlin’s strategy of breaking the fourth wall – a strategy which allows the work to bleed into what is traditionally regarded as the audience’s domain. While this strategy serves a multitude of purposes, such as questioning conventions concerning the types of spaces that performances should inhabit, how (particularly in a proscenium theatre) these spaces should be inhabited and, by blurring the distinction between performer and spectator, the types of people that should be able to perform in such spaces, it also devises a performance that surrounds the audience. At one point in *Rock my tutu* the doctors and Odette are performing on stage, the *corps de ballet* is dancing in the aisles of the darkened auditorium, and Prince Siegfried, who has left both the stage and the auditorium, is visible only by way of the television screens on stage. Consequently, what each spectator sees is different and, if a spectator were to occupy a different position on a different night (or even the same night) their experience of the work would change. Orlin is able to inhibit the spectators’ full view of the performance, making their experience of the work conditional upon their material position – their point of observation. Accordingly, she makes it impossible for the spectators to experience the work as a complete and coherent unit. It cannot be conceived as a unitary object, as is the case with the unitary model of performance in which the performance is to be grasped whole by the onlooker, a model which, for centuries, had been the basis of Western theatre (De Marinis, 1987).

This physical involvement of the audience members to give them a better (though never complete) sense of the whole performance, and the literal representation of the way in which this open work demands that they engage with the process of meaning-making, is reflected in Orlin’s encouragement of audience participation. In *Rock my tutu* one of the doctors invites a volunteer from the audience to step on stage and show his or her version of the swan. A man comes forward and introduces himself as Henry, the sheep farmer with a wife and two daughters, from Tantonville, France. Henry’s amateurishness seems credible until, as mentioned before, it becomes apparent that his movements have been pre-set. At first this is disappointing. Why would Orlin choose to plant a performer to pretend to be a volunteer? This is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter in the section sub-headed “Challenging the phallogocentric drive to stabilise, organise and rationalise”.

There are, of course, instances in which Orlin's deployment of audience participation is more authentic. In *Daddy...*, as in other instances in *Rock my tutu*, Orlin gets the spectators to clap or wave their hands above their heads from where they are sitting or standing. Moreover, in *Daddy...*, each of the performers summons an audience member onto the stage to join them for a slow dance. The significance of this kind of unrehearsed audience participation to the notion of an 'incomplete' work of art lies in the fact that the immediate reactions of the spectators to the prompts of the performers will result in a work that is unpredictable and therefore different with each rendition. A spectator watching two separate performances of the same work will, in fact, see two different works. Such indeterminacy again relates to Le Roy's words: "It will never be finished as you could always maybe see something different" (MoMAvideos, 2011). Similarly, Orlin's encouragement of performer improvisation, often in response to the audience's involvement, is also significant with regard to the production of an unfinished work.

#### **4.2 Empowering the audience**

In *Rock my tutu* Orlin denies the audience members the comfort of passively consuming what is normally neatly framed by the proscenium arch, but she also enables them to choose which part of the performance they want to engage with – where they want to look or where they want to be, for they even have the option of leaving the auditorium and watching the part of the performance that is happening in the foyer. Similarly, Orlin's open text grants the spectators the agency to choose the meanings they wish to attribute to the work. This strategy serves to remind the spectators that there is not only one 'correct' way of understanding art – there are a myriad of ways, each of which is equally valid. Orlin confronts, on a literal and figurative level, the statement of Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman about the artist having to make the spectators see the world through his or her eyes, not their own. The audience is no longer considered a dramaturgical object – a mark or target for the actions and operations of the choreographer (De Marinis, 1987). In the same way that Orlin does not want to colonise the bodies of the performers, she does not want to colonise the minds of the spectators. Rather, as the above discussion on the spectators' physical and interpretational engagements with such an open work has demonstrated, the audience is required to actively participate in the creation (albeit not the completion, for such a work is never complete) of the performance.

#### **4.3 Empowering the performer**

A direct consequence of audience interaction and participation, typical of an Orlin work, is that the performers are expected to manage a considerable amount of uncertainty – they are to some extent stripped of the comfort of knowing exactly what their next step, literally and figuratively, will have to be. Julia Burnham, a performer in one of Orlin's most recent works *Beauty remained for just a moment then returned gently to her starting position...* explains: "I had to learn different audiences' reactions. On the spot I had to learn how to solve problems" (Burnham, Letele & Shili, 2013). One could reason that, in some ways, the performers in an Orlin work are more exposed and more

vulnerable than if they were to replicate a predetermined and meticulously rehearsed work, as in, for example, the original *Swan Lake*. On the other hand, however, Orlin permits her performers the opportunity to contribute to the creation of the work. They are given agency with regard to their actions and reactions on stage. “She gives you a platform to be yourself and a lot depends on what you as an actor offer” (Moremi cited in Jenkins, 2000). Robert Colman elaborates this seeming paradox when he explains that it is empowering to be taken out of one’s comfort zone.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to the choices that the performers must make during performance, Orlin seeks to excavate and cultivate performer agency from as early as the rehearsal period. Although Orlin does approach the creative process with some ideas and plans, and ultimately large parts of her works might be set, yet she also gives considerable attention to the thoughts and feelings of the performers. Ample time is dedicated to dialogue between the choreographer and the cast. What the performers feel about the project, about Orlin, about the subject matter and about themselves within the context of the subject matter will invariably come into play, and Orlin explains that she can only begin to understand these things once she starts working with the cast (Orlin, 2013). During the creative process the performers engage with various tasks and assignments to generate material. They must reflect so as to allow the work to become a reflection of them (Orlin, 2012).

I pose a whole lot of problems to my group, which is the way I work (Orlin cited in Krouse, 2000).

I can’t not work with that. I do this with all dancers. We talk and play [...] I throw people into the problem and it becomes about what they see in the world (Orlin, 2012).

I want them to take responsibility of the piece in as much as I have to take responsibility for the piece. I want it to be as much their vision as it is mine (Orlin, 2013).

Accordingly, Orlin does not get too attached to her initial plans and often even tries to approach a new project with as few ideas as possible, although she admits that this does not always practically work out (Orlin, 2013).

In line with her critique of the docility of the normalised, albeit exalted, body, Orlin challenges the idea that the body is a well-oiled machine that should be constructed to appear as a visually beautiful, sculptural object of art. Furthermore, consistent with Lakes’ (2005) argument relating to the authoritarian pedagogical legacy in Western concert dance technique training and rehearsals, Orlin interrogates the process whereby this beautifully sculptured object comes to be defined by the positions and movements of the choreographer – positions and movements which demand exact duplication in production by an efficiently neutral technician. In dance, states Lakes, “all these metaphors diminish the totality and complexity of the dancer as artist, whose art results from the interplay of affective, cognitive, social, and sensory/kinaesthetic stimuli” (2005: 10).

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<sup>63</sup> Record of this statement exists as a personal note made during a panel discussion titled *Light Bulb Moments*, from the colloquium *here for the duration: deconstructing the archive/reconstructing history*. This colloquium, hosted by The Ar(t)chive at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, took place on 16 August 2013.

One can of course argue that, in order for Orlin to produce a 'Robyn Orlin work' which, typically, will be featured as a season of performances at a particular venue and for which tickets will have to be purchased, she is likely to filter, edit and 'clean' the performer-generated material according to desired specifications. This raises questions that resemble the ruminations of Lavender (2013) in his paper *Patriarchal Dualisms in Dance* (2013) in which he writes about the same kind of procedural and performative deployment of improvisation as is discussed here. Such questions may include: Are these dancers or performers not, despite their widened options, still assigned to live within the preferred code of movement permissions and prohibitions of the choreographer or author? Are they not still required to correctly enact the rules of someone's score or choreographic patterning? Does the utilisation of improvisation as a tool not invariably bind these movers to choreographic desire whereby they continue to serve the interests of the danced-choreographic? And, lastly, how does this obedience to the danced-choreographic affect the content of the work?

There is no doubt that Orlin is critical of the standardised bodily behaviour that Western concert dance, or what Lavender (2013) calls the danced-choreographic, requires. At the same time there is no evidence that, in a work such as *Rock my tutu*, Orlin wishes to bestow complete body freedom upon the performers. Orlin might not be valorising authoritarian teaching and choreographic methods, but she does seem to surrender to the probability that, as discussed in Chapter Three, she will likely always be implicated in the power she hopes to oppose. In accordance with this, one could argue that, in some sense, Orlin's creative process both does and does not advance the content of the work: *Rock my tutu's* self-reflexive, deconstructive approach means that, like her process, its content perpetuates the ideas, constructs and ideologies that it aims to criticise. Orlin has positioned herself in such a way that requires of her to negotiate her role as the ultimate creator and the one who must relinquish creative authority. She cannot completely do away with either, but at the very least she can draw attention to the possibility that the Kantian conception of the artist is not sacrosanct – the choreographer does not have to be the sole source of a particular idea or vision "that should, gently or with force, be pressed onto the willing bodies of dancers" (Lavender, 2009: 381).

#### **4.4 Challenging the phallogocentric drive to stabilise, organise and rationalise**

Because Orlin liberates herself from rote adherence to object-level craft laws, and situates her production practices well outside of what Lavender calls "institutionally sanctioned 'art' contexts" (2009: 377), her work is often criticised for not being dance. This, however, does not perturb Orlin who does not care much for labels or categories. Many of her works incorporate dance, speak about dance and critique the anxieties and discourses around dance ("Daring, defiant, and ducky: 'daddy....'", 2000), yet "[c]hallenging the notion of comfortable genres or dance and theatre categories is, on many occasions, the central thrust of her performance pieces" (Waterman, 2000).

Similarly, Orlin does not care to label or not label herself as a choreographer. She says:

I am who I am [...] if people want to call me a choreographer, I won't say "I'm not a choreographer". They can do what they want to do. I don't care [...]. Exactly how they want to express it. It's fine (Orlin, 2012).

Also, with regard to the performers in her work, Orlin disregards categories such as 'dancer' and 'non-dancer'. Her encouragement of audience participation and her distortion of the physical and psychological divide between the performers and audience members substantiate this observation. In light of this, however, one cannot help but wonder about the supposed audience member in *Rock my tutu* who volunteers to go onstage but who turns out to be a stooge. Does Orlin feel it necessary to have a back-up plan in case none of the real audience members volunteer? She appears to be traditionalising anarchy by recoding an experimental technique. Albeit an insubstantial trick which seems to be a way of 'playing-it-safe', it does draw ones attention to Orlin's anticipation of a potentially reluctant audience – in itself an interesting point to consider. It reminds one of the time-honoured boundaries that regulate who is and who is not equipped to perform on a theatre stage – a formerly sacred space reserved for those who have trained for years to acquire the skills that permit them access to it.

Although Orlin might anticipate a reluctant audience, potentially concerned with making 'fools' of themselves, it is not necessarily her intention to expose their inadequacy by comparing their skill (or lack thereof) to that of the trained dancers of *Ballet de Lorraine*. On the contrary, it seems that, through the intermingling of performers and spectators (by bringing spectators onto the stage and performers into the auditorium), Orlin is able to give expression to her desire that everybody should be able to dance and dancers should be able to be everybody (Orlin, n.d.). This desire is also evident in her employment of performers that are not formally trained dancers, as is the case with the majority of the cast in *Daddy...* Orlin explains that she regularly casts people who would not traditionally be seen as dancers.

They don't necessarily have trained bodies and I work with them. They're fantastic. They don't train every day and dance every day, but they move incredibly (Orlin, 2012).

On the one hand this exploration of the tension between 'vernacular' bodies and the 'elitist' bodies of ballet dilutes the exclusivity of the stage and questions the superiority of the trained dancing body, with the ballerina occupying the highest rung. It also emphasises and compliments Orlin's evocation of a plurality that disrupts the sense of a unified or singular body, generally achieved through its obedience to a unified technique. On the other hand, however, it raises a number of questions related to economics: If the dancers are being paid for their performance, why are the volunteers from the audience not also receiving some monetary compensation? What would be the point of committing time and money to years of formal training if anyone – trained or untrained – can step on stage and call whatever it is that they do 'dance' (even though Orlin might or might not identify it as such). Why would people spend money to see their fellow audience members do something that they are equally equipped to do? How sustainable is a career in dance to people with little to no training?



Nevertheless, despite these potential difficulties, Orlin states: “I’m not scared to work with that. And I’m not afraid to call that whatever it wants to be” (Orlin, 2012). It is significant to note that, if Orlin were to be rigid with regard to the classifications of dancer versus non-dancer, she would contradict an *oeuvre* which is essentially about the suspension of classification. In line with the writings of Ana Sanchez-Colberg (1993) on the work of Pina Bausch, Orlin’s negation of categorisation is a methodological choice which serves to resist Western society’s phallogocentric desire to stabilise, organise and rationalise its conceptual universe. It is a mode of critique that works to impede the perpetuation of binary oppositions such as male/female, culture/nature, science/art, objective/subjective, active/passive and self/other.

#### **4.5 The pleasures and responsibilities of a collectively created, socially fluid doing**

Orlin admits that power is a topic that often grounds her work (2013a). To summarise the above discussion: Orlin is reluctant to allocate particular, socially constructed roles which, as explained by Lavender, aids Orlin’s desire to “deauthorize” [sic] (2009: 377) herself as the individual creator of the work. She relinquishes the institutional hierarchy which, in the educational environment, posits the student as an empty vessel that must be filled with the knowledge of the teacher, and which, in the vocational environment, conceives of the dancer as the raw and inert material with which the choreographer can mould and wield his or her individual artistic vision (Lakes, 2005). Orlin similarly cedes control of a work’s absolute creation and meaning to the spectators by leaving it unresolved. The world that Orlin creates is in constant flux – changing and most importantly changeable – and the work thus eludes a classical hermeneutic approach to meaning. This enables the audience members to find and develop their own personal and individual solutions. In the process, as Lavender (2009) explains about this kind of work, Orlin fosters communicative exchange between and among all of those who come into contact with the work. Through the activation of artist, performer, and spectator Orlin cultivates, through the experience of art, a greater agency for all (Lavender, 2009).

Through difference and diversity Orlin’s work decentralises absolute institutionalised truths – about the mind, the body, the male, the female, high art and low art – thus allowing it to assume not only a politically ambivalent but also a politically subversive position. As Sanchez-Colberg says, “[d]ecentralise truth [...] and you decentralise power. The possibility of a discourse other than patriarchy begins to take shape” (1993: 161).

## CONCLUSION

Emilyn Claid's (2006) autobiographical account of her experiences as a young and dedicated ballet dancer and her contribution to why ballet dancers cultivate unattainable expectations in their striving towards perfection, resonated with me. As this project nears its end – not only the many pages of documented words, but also the nearly three years of reading, discussing and writing – I would also, following Claid's example, like to permit myself the opportunity to reflect on this excursion on a more personal level. It is not easy to pinpoint a particular moment when this journey started: Was it when I was introduced to Orlin's work three years ago? Was it when I began my postgraduate studies as an exchange student at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro? Was it when I attended my first ballet class at the age of four? Or was it the moment when my parents found out that I was a girl, and expectations of who Cilna would one day be, were born?

Interesting as it might be to consider these different possibilities, I choose to look back to the start of my career as a professional dancer in 2009 after completing my undergraduate studies in dance. I thought my ambitions had been fulfilled when I was appointed by a Cape Town based dance company, but it was not long before dreams turned into drudgery. The physical exertion of a nine hour day in the studio was arduous, but considerably more difficult was coping with persistent feelings of inferiority – the result of constant self-comparison to my colleagues and the belief that I did not measure up. The unrelenting self-criticism of the ballerina – my body is not slender, light, muscular, strong, stable or flexible enough – was not new for me, but in the professional arena these thoughts intensified dramatically. While my body was in constant pain from over-exertion, I was being paid a salary that barely covered my living expenses. I silently learned to accept that my passion had resulted in my body merely being a cog in a large machine of artistic production.

After two years at the dance company I decided to pursue my postgraduate studies in dance. The first semester of my Honours year at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro sparked a new enthusiasm for dance. The practical classroom atmosphere, which was encouraging and respectful of the capabilities of individual and differing bodies helped me to reclaim my confidence. More importantly, the challenging theoretical courses introduced me to ideas, theories and concepts which helped me to grapple with the experiences I had had as a professional dancer. I came to understand better the Western concert dance world's obsession with the shaping of the ideal body that ballet requires. It is but one symptom of a culture in which an active preoccupation with the body camouflages an ideology that situates the mind as superior to the body, which is generally regarded as a primitive bundle of desires that must be mastered and controlled. The unquestioned reality of the feeling that the physical feminine ideal was always just out of reach was positioned within theoretical discourse. I was exposed to the writings of the post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault which

allowed me insight into the body as a locus of patriarchal control. I related especially to his concepts of hierarchical surveillance and self-surveillance and its role in creating a docile body and the illusion of pleasure in disciplining the body according to a normative ideal. The Western concepts of dualism and binary opposites, which maintain the existence of a correlation between women and the body, enabled me to recognise the vulnerability of women to cultural manipulation. As an art form that is female populated but not female dominated, classical ballet serves to perpetuate the cultural tendency to disconnect the body and the mind. – to regard the body as something separate from the self. The ballerina’s ability to create the illusion of being free from corporeal qualities – gravity, hunger and pain – is what makes her an icon of femininity within our patriarchal society. The desire to acquire such a body that appears to be free from lustful appetites enforces the idea that the body is an objective mechanical entity. I came to understand that the dominant representations of femininity in ballet, largely informed by the highly codified movement vocabulary, renders ballet an institution that supports gender as a power system.

With these insights I began to better appreciate the critiques that a number of choreographers have levelled at the ballet canon and other forms of codified concert dance. When I came into contact with the work of Robyn Orlin, who pays no regard to the attitude of “this-is-the-way-it’s-always-been-done”, or to the primacy of the canon, I wanted to know more. I was astonished by the rich layers of her work, the many ways in which she addresses the topics of power, status, authority and narcissism and the many entry points into discussions on her work. Much reading, thinking, talking and agonising directed me back to the theme that had rekindled my interest in dance in my Honours year, namely the (female) body. I considered the kinds of bodies one would normally not see on the dance stage, keeping in mind that Orlin does not care to categorise her work necessarily as dance. The question of how to interpret the use of untrained bodies in a work that one might call dance became the catalyst for my research.

From this initial question various other questions emerged, particularly after exposure to Orlin’s *Rock my tutu*. These include: How does one question the notion of an essential femininity when using bodies that conform to the ideal that captures that essence? How does one prevent the ballerina’s body from being eclipsed by the pre-established meanings of subordinate, passive objects of the male gaze? Is it possible for female dancers to resist co-optation by patriarchal conventions and to give expression to voices and narratives different to those dictated by master narratives? How does one change the allowable pleasures of female viewers and artists? I approached these questions knowing that there are no simple answers. What one can safely say, however, is that Orlin rejects essentialist ‘truths’ about the body – in an Orlin work such as *Rock my tutu* there is no essential femininity, no essential masculinity and no essential dancing body. Her work serves to emphasise the ways in which gender within Western culture is learnt and embodied. She challenges the notion of the ballerina’s body as

the epitome of an ideal femininity and of ballet as a superior dance form expressing an idealised beauty within Western culture.

My investigation prompted me to question my own beliefs and preconceptions about dance, the bodies that dance and the movements that supposedly constitute dance. At first my reaction towards classical ballet was one of disdain and I was ready to turn my back on ballet. However, as I caught myself longing to do a ballet class, I quickly came to understand and appreciate the complexity of the issues at hand. When taking class I would catch myself not only enjoying it, but also admiring the beauty of the lines, the lightness of the jumps, the intricacy of the footwork and the virtuosity of the *pirouettes*. Gradually, I came to appreciate what I would call my love-hate relationship with ballet and other manifestations of the danced choreographic and I realised that this new relationship is in fact preferable. To quote Lavender:

Reversing the direction of power in dualism is useful to reveal the politically pernicious reasoning intrinsic to dualisms, but it is no actual remedy, for it further entrenches the underlying logic of dualism (2013: 18).

Just as Orlin chooses to be complicitous in order to level a critique at classical ballet, I should perhaps also choose to be politically ambivalent. I refer again to the statement made by Butler (2002) who believes that it is often necessary to recognise the extent to which one is already implicated within the power one wishes to oppose in order for critique to be possible. As Burt (2004) explains, such a complicitous understanding cultivates a discourse around Western concert dance that allows for the perceptibility of presences that might exceed the literal meaning of the acts that performatively create them. Lavender (2013) reinforces this claim when he states that an examination of how we use and are used by the workings of power that are ideologically founded upon the ancient dualisms, can activate emancipation from dualistic power and its logic. Ultimately, it is the underlying logic of domination that needs to change.

Although neither Orlin's deconstruction of ballet, nor this dissertation's critique can completely destabilise this logic, they can at least open spaces for the reimagining of sacrosanct territory. A particular direction in which this study takes my imagination is towards a more pedagogically focused interrogation of the body in training (as opposed to the body in performance). Could the application of somatic practices, such as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, the Bartenieff Fundamentals and the Trager approach, find its way into dance training and practice? Future research might investigate how classical ballet training can be complemented by such a somatic practice, aimed at facilitating the development of acute sensorial awareness and the sharpening of cognitive faculties (Fortin and Girard, 2005). With the inevitable demand of classical ballet to create the illusion of transcendence, it may be viable to ask whether there can be a way for the dancer to be embodied despite having to create the illusion of disembodiment. Could ballet training, in conjunction with a somatic practice, cultivate an increased efficiency of movement, a greater expression through

movement and decreased susceptibility to injury? What would the implications be of introducing such practices to ballet training in South Africa, where funding for the arts is an increasing concern? Facilitators in many of these methods, perhaps with the exception of Alexander Technique, are in short supply in South Africa. They are specialist, and therefore exclusive and expensive practices to participate in. The South African dance community has made great strides in making ballet training accessible to students across various class and social divide. Would the application of such methods not reinforce the exclusion of particular social classes and (by implication) racial groups from gaining access to high-quality training?

Part of the value of this dissertation and its focus on Robyn Orlin's work must lie in the fact that it serves to remind us about that which has come to seem natural and immutable – that which in the process of normalisation we tend forget or ignore. Such a reminder should serve to confront dominant social structures, for the act of forgetting – resulting from the apparent normality – is what enables certain social structures to maintain their dominance. These reminders should in turn inspire ideas, mind sets and actions that promote non-hierarchical notions of difference – that seek to look beyond the otherness of radical exclusion sitting at the heart of dualistic thinking. When we recognise and acknowledge that there are differences between things in the world, we will be better able to foster more pluralistic conceptions of culture, of gender and of ways of looking.

# ADDENDUM A

Extracts from an interview conducted with Robyn Orlin by the author in Newtown, Johannesburg: March 2012.

[...]

**CK:** *I want to know if you feel like you can or want to put your work into a specific genre. In some of the things that I've read people have called you a performance artist, people obviously call you a choreographer, but my supervisor said he doesn't think Robyn has ever called herself a performance artist. So I want to know how, if at all, you would classify your work?*

**RO:** Well, there's a great debate going on at the moment, and it's not called performance art, it's called live art. There's a very distinct discourse at the moment in live art at the moment about what it is. (**CK:** *But hasn't that been going on since it first started?*) Yes, totally, totally, totally! And the reason it's going on even more now, is because people in theatre and dance are trying to work in the genre of performance art, or live art. I'll call it live art. But you know the whole question is that live art comes out of the theory of fine art, of the plastic arts. And it's to do with theory and it's to do with performative theory. 'Happenings' is live art. And it's to do with art as medium to deal with the discourse of art discourse – which I studied. I did my Masters. But I very definitely work in the theatre. Sometimes not – I mean, *Daddy...* can be performed anywhere, it doesn't have to be performed in a theatre. I mean, I work with dancers, I work with actors, I work with composers, I work with film makers. I don't choose to... you know, the dance world keeps on inviting me. But I've made operas, I've done the opera. I am who I am. I prefer not to be... but if people want to call me a choreographer, I won't say 'I'm not a choreographer'. They can do what they want to do. I don't care. If people want to spell my name with an 'i' not with a 'y' that's fine. It's really fine. Exactly how they want to express it. It's fine.

[...]

**CK:** *One thing that grabbed my attention in 'Daddy...' was your use of humour to address very serious and often very sensitive issues. This observation was verified in an online filmed interview in which you talk about the humour in South Africa and South African culture, and your use of it in your work. Can you please elaborate on this juxtaposition?*

**RO:** I think serious and sensitive things are very difficult to talk about. They're very very difficult to talk about. One thing I have learnt in South Africa.... [some words are inaudible]... is that we know how to make fun. We know how to laugh at ourselves, and that's a very good weapon. It's a very good device to hold on to in terms of making work. Choices of my people... I mean Gerard is excellent, and Toni is excellent and I use them very divisively. And they use their roles very divisively. They make sense of their roles through the humour. And Dudu as well. I think, you know ... it's a weapon. (**CK:** *Do you think it's a weapon for the performers, or the choreographer, or both?*). Everybody... the audience... everybody... everybody.

**CK:** *Would you call yourself a satirist at all?*

**RO:** I don't call myself anything. You know, I mean, I don't label myself as anything. You know, you have people who constantly label you, but I don't really care. So you can label me absolutely anything.

**CK:** *Well, I guess I'm curious about whether your reason for using humour is to be satirical, to try, as they say, use humour to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved.*

**RO:** Well, I'm hoping. You know, you throw the dice out there. You don't know if you'll always get two sixes. I can't control, I have no control, and I don't want to control. I have absolutely no desire to control. You know I get hurt when people walk out of a performance. (**CK:** *Does that happen often?*). Oh ja! (Laughs) I mean, *Daddy...* not so much. But often I put stuff out there that people just don't want to deal with, or look at, or laugh at. And they leave. I feel sorry for them actually, because they actually... I mean, I think what I try to do is self-reflection. I would like my public to self-reflect. I don't have to change them. They don't have to start believing in God or not believing in God. But a shift... a subconscious shift. (**CK:** *They should at least think about something that they haven't thought about before...*)... [some words are inaudible]... That's fine, I don't mind, but I would prefer then... even if they are saying that, then at least then they have an opinion. It's better than a lot of us here in South Africa where we just accept. (**CK:** *Ja, that's very true*). And in the world, it's not just only in South Africa.

**CK:** *Would you describe your use of humour as a strong characteristic of your work?*

**RO:** I think it's a strong characteristic. I mean, even if I'm making a serious work I work with humour. I'm not sure that it's humour. I think it's irony. I think it's more irony than humour. (**CK:** *But inevitably it's funny to the people watching...?*). It could be; it doesn't have to be. (**CK:** *Have you ever received any criticism for the way in which...*). I receive criticism all the time (laughs)... (**CK:** *...but specifically for the way that you are dealing with serious issues?*). Absolutely! I mean I work with a lot of humour and I work with very serious topics. For some people it's quite violent and they think "how can you laugh?" I mean, if you like it you can come and see it, and if you don't like you don't have to come and see it. I think. Some people don't agree. And that's okay. But that's what I feel.

[...]

**CK:** *You have trained at the London School of Contemporary Dance, and at Laban, and you also have formal ballet training through the RAD (Royal Academy of Dance). Yet, in your dance pieces, you seem to deliberately veer away from technicality and virtuosity, and from showing off the skill of the dancer's body. Can you please elaborate on this?*

**RO:** Well, I mean, I think dancers are very valid. I think they're very valid. All the time they have to grapple with perfection and I think that's very hard... I think that's very hard. (**CK:** *Because it is really an ideal that you're never going to achieve?*) Well, you know, okay maybe you can do 32 *fouettés*, okay? But there's going to come a time when you can't do 32 *fouettés* and a lot of dancers don't have the emotional equipment to cope with that. And, you know, I think... I don't know if I'm going to make sense now, but I think a lot of the perfection in dance is also involved with a certain form of narcissism, and I'm not sure that that narcissism is healthy. And I think that one of the reasons that there are a lot of obsessions and obsessive behaviour that starts surfacing for a lot of dancers, because it is very difficult to cope with those perfectionistic inclinations.

[...]

**CK:** *You have mentioned a number of theorists that have influenced you. Are there any particular choreographers that you would say have influenced your work?*

**RO:** I think the work of Pina Bausch is very important. I think to a large extent there was a point where she stopped making interesting work... her work was still lovely, but it stopped being interesting to me. For me it stopped with *1984*. She made a piece, *1984*. After *1984* I felt... she made some good things after that, but she turned into a factory, with having a company, and visiting other countries... [some words are inaudible]... I don't know... I don't really... I mean, I'm more... I really am more of a theorist; I am more stuck in theory in my own head... [some words are inaudible]... I have to kind of keep my own head alive with theory. A lot of film makers have influenced me... (**CK:** *Okay, like whom?*) Like... Godard. (**CK:** *In terms of aesthetic?*). In terms of theory... [some words are inaudible]... I mean I haven't done a lot of reading in a long time, I'm too busy working. But ja, you know, I think also theatre directors – Peter Brook. His early work was very interesting. I don't like his work now. Barney Simon was a very big influence on me. He was also a theatre director. A very big influence on me. He was a mentor for me for a long time.


[...]



## ADDENDUM B

Texts without sufficient bibliographical information, accessed through The Ar(t)chive at the University of the Witwatersrand.

1. Article by Anthea Bristowe in *The Sunday Times Metro*, 12 October 1997. Page number unknown.



### Biennale takes off today

ANTHEA BRISTOWE

THE Second Johannesburg Biennale opens at the Electric Workshop in Newtown this afternoon with a dance performance by Robyn Orlin.

Orlin's work is based on the Greek myth of Icarus, the young man who — in escaping from Crete with his father, Daedalus, on wings made of leathers and wax — ignored warnings not to fly too close to the sun. His wings melted and he fell into the Aegean Sea and drowned.

But Orlin, who will be swinging through the air on a harness, has given the tale an anarchic feminist twist.

Artistic director of the Biennale, Nigerian critic and curator Okwui Enwezor, also has a few anarchic traits.

When questioned at a media conference about the lack of art venues in Soweto, Enwezor said he hadn't come to South Africa to build houses. "The issues that affect the townships in South Africa are not unique," he said. "They could be found anywhere in the world."

"Welcome to the world, South Africa," snapped the curator. "Art is an aggressive substance that rubs against the world. Art is about an imperfect fit."

The Second Johannesburg Biennale will include six exhibitions, two of which would be held in Cape Town, all under the general title, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. Workshops, seminars and films will run concurrently.

The French, under the auspices of the French Institute and its director Laurent Devèze, launched their Biennale programme at the Granadoelas restaurant on Friday night — and every artist in the city seemed to be there, drawn in part, no doubt, by the free food and drinks.

The French programme kicks off with a free performance of *St Georges*, a contemporary ballet by Régine Chopinot, which takes place tomorrow at the State Theatre in Pretoria.

WINGS OF WAX: Dancer Robyn Orlin, who performs today Picture: JULANI VAN DER WESTHUIZEN

2. Interview with Robyn Orlin in a programme for the Winter School's Festival, 2000. Author unknown. Exact date unknown.

**T H I N K !**  
**What are the rituals most important to you in your culture? What are the ones of which you are most critical?**

*Bending THE Rules*

YOURSELF BECAUSE OF YOUR GENDER?  
 > WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO YOU HOLD OF OTHERS BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDERS?  
 > ARE THERE CERTAIN THINGS YOU CAN DO BECAUSE OF YOUR GENDER?  
 > ARE THERE CERTAIN THINGS YOU CAN'T DO BECAUSE OF YOUR GENDER?  
 > HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOU THAT SOCIETY RETAIN TRADITIONAL ROLES FOR MEN AND WOMEN?  
 > WHAT PLACES, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EXPERIENCES HAVE TAUGHT YOU TO BE A WOMAN OR MAN, AND HOW HAVE THEY DONE SO?  
 > HOW HAVE YOU EXPERIMENTED WITH THE GENDER ROLE YOU'VE BEEN ASSIGNED?  
 > HOW CAN YOU START A DISCUSSION OF GENDER ROLES IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

(Inspired by My Gender Workbook by Kate Brantford)

**'daddy...'**  
*cradley...*

*yast*  
 Natalie...  
 Tom M...  
 Gerard...  
 Pala M...  
 Rudi M...

**Daring, Defiant, and Ducky:**  
**' d a d d y . . . '**  
 'daddy, i've seen this piece six times before and i still don't know why they're hurting each other...'

Robyn Orlin and I met one morning and here is an excerpt from our conversation. If you have more questions when you finish reading this interview than you did when you began, you're on the right track.

**D:** 'daddy...' defies labels. What kind of labels do you use to describe the piece and your art [in general]?

**R:** Well, I mean, I don't know if there is a label for the piece. I think a lot of people have been calling it stand-up comedy, which it's really not. I mean, it's very structured, but I think it's critiquing on lots of levels the present situation in South Africa... and now that we're in the Market [Theatre], we're going to actually critique more downtown Johannesburg and the arts scene here.

**D:** Are you changing the shape of the piece?

**R:** I'm not changing the shape so much as I'm changing a little bit of the dialogue. Because of the main theatre and because the seats aren't moveable, we'll be working on the stage [instead of working in the round]. We won't be performing it the way we did in Grahamstown and Montpellier, which for me is quite a nice change... I just love the main stage. I've never really had the opportunity to work on the main stage. I've always worked in small theatres. I'm curious to see how people feel about sitting and seeing it only from one end! [daddy...] is a piece that really does make use of whatever it's got.

**D:** In the Grahamstown catalogue, you were categorized under dance, which caused a lot of people to scream and shout. I actually had people approach me and say, "I feel it's really unfair because people buy their tickets and they expect to go see a dance performance, but what they get is something else."

**R:** That's been the story of my life...I think that if [my work] has to be put in any kind of category, I'd put it in the category of live art, of performance art. I wouldn't really put it in dance, although it is critiquing a lot of the dance anxieties and discourses that are happening at the moment here in South Africa and pretty



Robyn Orlin

much in the rest of the world. A lot of people in France react to the work because they're shocked that there's no dance in it.

D: What about 'daddy...' is peculiarly South African?

R: Everything about it is peculiarly South African... It's quite difficult to really talk about this and I don't want to get too intellectual about it. One of my thrusts for the last few years since I've been working back here has been how to empower the artist and so the way I work is that my performers take complete control and responsibility for everything that happens on stage. That's from the lights to sound to [mess-ups] to whatever happens, they have to take complete control of it. There's a point at which I have to put myself outside [what's happening on stage].

D: To what extent does that manifest to the audience during a performance? Can they tell?

R: It happens all the time. There's always a problem... a lot of the time the power cuts. I did a [production of] Faust this year at the Wits downstairs theatre, working with power just off the stage and there was a power failure. We had to somehow keep the show going until they found out what the problem was.

D: Do you think [the audience] knew the power failure was unintentional?

R: Well, they didn't, but when we told them afterwards, they were quite amazed.

D: It seems to me that a lot of 'daddy's...' commentary on crime in Jo'burg is extremely satirical. What do satirizing and laughing about crime do about the problem?

R: I really am not interested in trying to save the world or change the world, but I'm interested in commenting on it. The violence is very much a commentary. People in Johannesburg... [know] that crime is so close to them that in order to survive, they have to become immune [to it]... The problem with the violence here is that life is cheap and in most major cities, barring a couple in the Third World, you won't get killed for R20... I think that I'm commenting on that more than anything else.

D: Tell me about the title.

R: A friend of mine went to see Les Miserables on Broadway and he was sitting behind a little girl and her father and there was this incredibly heightened moment where there's a whole fighting scene. The little girl turns to her father and says at the top of her lungs, 'daddy, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other!' and I thought, "My God, that's such a great story!" For me, though, that commentary just says so much about the way violence is perceived here.

D: Is there anything that you don't touch in your work? Any topics that are off-limits?



R: No, I don't think so (besides the things I'm not interested in). I think we might get into a little bit of trouble at the Market because we're going to talk about Dr. John Kani and about the closing of the State Theatre.

D: What does the closing of the State Theatre signify to you?

R: I wish it would have closed 20 years ago...it costs R32 million just to switch the lights on. I think it should be turned into a casino joint. Let all the gamblers in Pretoria gamble their money away. The question is, what are they going to do with all the money they're now saving... I wouldn't mind getting my hands on some of the tutus, but it should have closed a long time ago. A lot of the people that have been working there for years and years probably didn't get the kind of [severance] packages that the directors probably walked away with. And I'm talking here about the cleaners and the menial workers. I'm sorry for them and I'm sorry for the artists...

D: You said you wouldn't mind getting your hands on some of the State Theatre's tutus. Now I have to ask you about the leopard print undies in 'daddy...' Where did those come from?

R: They're Diagonal Street specials. You can't get them anymore, they're actually becoming a collector's item.

D: That's one of the things in daddy... that makes me laugh the most. The image of the entire ensemble wearing leopard print underwear, dancing around on stage, and screaming at each other is completely hilarious to me. Is your work fun for you? Is there any part of your work that isn't fun?

R: The part that isn't [fun] is keeping everything together, finding money, and when we tour it's very hard. Keeping the work together is difficult because [the performers] are freelance artists and when we're not working, they've got to find other ways of surviving.

D: Why did you feature ducks in 'daddy...?'

R: Why not?

D: Well, why not wind-up kangaroos or frogs?

R: Ducks are very controversial here in South Africa in terms of the arts. All the funding for a

long time has gone into white, colonial, First World aesthetics, and that's crumbling. So I use [the ducks] as a metaphor.

D: What kind of process of theoretical engagement did you and the actors go through before putting 'daddy...' together?

R: I take my people through quite a lot of stuff. Some of them are getting used to the way I work. But there are new people in this group. Dudu and Nico were students of mine. Toni and Gerard have been working with me for a while. Neli has been working with me for a while.

D: Do any of your actors ever say to you, "what you're talking about is complete [nonsense!]" or "that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!"?

R: Well, if they do, they're out. I'm not interested in working with people who want to become rich and famous and beautiful. That's not in my vocabulary.

## Nelisiwe Xaba



REVIEW

"Dancing into Darkness" is weird, the product of minds — Robyn Orlin and Chris Pretorius observing bourgeois rituals with irritated fascination, mimicking them like an entranced child watching a parent's lips move in speech.

The child analogy is misleading, to the extent that it suggests that the vision of "Dancing into Darkness" is childish. It isn't. Rather, it is knowing, calculating, insinuating and dangerous, but very, very clear-sighted and therefore funny. In a Katzenjammer Kids fashion.

"Dancing into Darkness" uses mime, parody and gross caricature to make its points. The work has been called Expressionistic, after the anti-realistic German movement of the Twenties; the term is flabbily useful.

The German Expressionists saw the machine and mechanised life as the dehumanising villain; Orlin and Pretorius are too sussed out to go for heroes and villains.



MIMICKING THE MEDIA ... Robyn Orlin and Chris Pretorius

Clear-sighted fun

THEATRE/REVIEW

training and one of the fascinating parts of the second sketch — "Have you seen the countryside around Johannesburg lately?" — is her subversive use of classical pas de deux choreography.

Audacious lifts and turns are used, not as emblems of extravagant passion, but as contortions of male-

DANCING INTO DARKNESS

female aggression. By contrast, the same work takes a campy pleasure in the popular forms of the world it attacks. It uses the inanities of radio serials as a score; the fervid niceness of people in television commercials as a symbol of insanity and covert aggression; and the violence of the Katzen-

jammer Kids as a literal depiction of family relations. In "Have you seen the countryside ... the typical family all smile relentlessly — they live on snow — while performing the most alarming atrocities.

What is engaging about the work is its lack of point-making and dramatic climaxes — all the ticks of narrative performing art. The works are sculptural; the value-system of the work is in how things are done, not what is said.

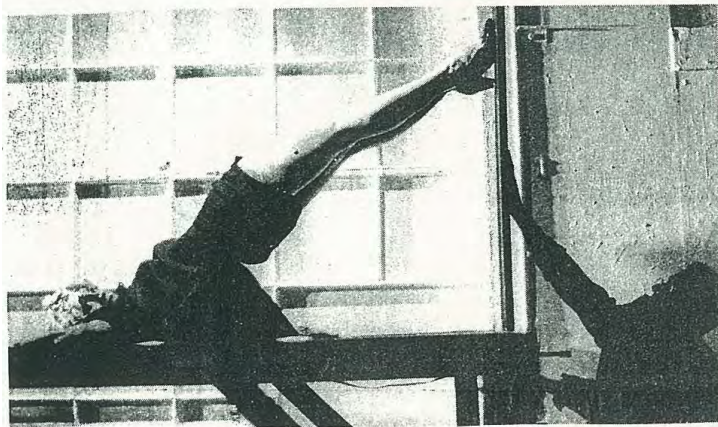
This is even more so in the title work, a solo piece by Robyn Orlin where a dancer-figure runs up against the recalcitrance of space. It's a piece of hard-hearted comedy, with the dancer's body doing its own thing, obeying invisible commands, or getting stuck in repetitive movement — a sort of physical stutter.

Implicitly, the performance makes a comparison with the suave performances of classical works, challenging the illusions of control and order, elevating chance and accident as principles of order.

I found "Dancing into Darkness" bracing and different. It seems to be exploring with determined energy and cunning.

My chief misgiving is about artistic works which feed off other media. In this case, I had a mild suspicion that many of the insights were received wisdom, not worked for or discovered.

ROBERT GREIG



ROBYN ORLIN . . . startling imagery.

# As Orlin is now

**SHOW:** Whoops . . . A Retrospective (Upstairs, Market)  
**PERFORMER:** Robyn Orlin  
**By Marilyn Jenkins**

THIS double-bill is far more of an Orlin "where I'm at now" than a retrospective, so those hoping for a *deja vu of pillows, elastic band headgear, chickens, curtains and supermarket trollies*, will be in for a disappointment.

But the shoes are still around . . . lots of them; mainly highheeled and gold but also large, black and male.

In A Corner The Sky Surrenders . . . was performed at Dance Umbrella and Grahamstown this year, but it has undergone a seachange. It's tighter, better lit and re-worked to include a different tunnel vision. This time it's red plastic plates set out with beer cans inside the large box which serves as a pri-

mary prop.

Life puts us all in "little boxes, which are all made out of ticky-tacky and which all look just the same" and much of our view of life is shaped by the boxed TV and the square cinema screen. By isolating moments which are bizarre to the point of surrealism, Orlin focusses on the isolated images which film highlights for our easy digestion. And round it all runs an endearing clockwork elephant, which is finally brought to a standstill by a heap of shoes.

Less illustrative of life, in more ways than one, is the second work called Upsy-Daisy. First staged in America, it begins with Orlin blowing self-made kisses off the walls on which she has stuck her lipstick-smeared papers.

Narcissistic Hollywood is definitely on the prowl — or maybe that should be crawl — for in there somewhere is definitely that queen of the water ballet, Esther Williams.

The images are startling: Goldfish in plastic bags of water which double as boobies, and then are

left floating and isolated in their small world within a wider world in a fish-tank full of gin.

Small clockwork ducks, peeled back layers of bathing caps and shoes . . . which are discarded, replaced by The Man Underneath (Michael Stumm), sent walking the plank and finally made to come in handy for some seduction: They all have their turn, but there isn't any clear and cohesive progression of thought.

It looks like animated Dali, just for the sheer fun of the anomaly of imagery. That's one thing that hasn't changed in 15 years. Orlin still loves to provoke.

# Robyn Orlin - 'artistic tsotsi'

NO one can send up the works of Robyn Orlin, and a great deal else on Dance Umbrella, better than ... Robyn Orlin.

As she commented afterwards in the Face-2-Face discussion, even performing in the Downstairs at Wits made a deliberate statement. "I wanted desperately to move away from what Dance Umbrella has become and into a different space," said this multi-award winning artist, who describes herself as "an artistic tsotsi".

She fielded barbed questions from Johannesburg artists with disarming frankness, as well as questions put to her by visiting choreographers from Sweden, Denmark and London (where the issues faced by black dancers are apparently little different from here), all of whom must have been somewhat overwhelmed by a work which was really one long in-joke and a

FNB VITA DANCE UMBRELLA: Programme 7  
and Face-2-Face open forum (Wits Theatre)  
CHOREOGRAPHER: Robyn Orlin

By Marilyn Jenkins

calabash of deliberate clichés.

And while she explained her attitude to classical ballet, an art form which she described as "crass and perverse" in the South Africa of today, she admitted to a love/hate relationship with it.

It was hardly surprising, then, that her commissioned piece for programme seven with the totally irrelevant title of daddy, i've seen this piece six times before and i still don't know why they're hurting each other, should be a rampant parody which included tutus and the image of Nelisiwe Xaba sieving icing sugar to create carefully turned-out footprints around the raised stage before turning her whole body white with the stuff. (Is there no future for the black ballerina?)

The show was a case of If You Can't Change the World, Change (no, not your curtains) the Lightbulbs (in hand-held lamps, of course).

Images from Polka Dot and a myriad other works were scattered around by the wonderfully dry-witted Gerard Bester (who rueful-

ly pointed out that "It's not easy doing Orlin, not for any of us"), aided and abetted by the airborne street-thief of Moeketsi Koenà who kept pinching the props, a physically articulate Nico Moreni and the spirited Toni Morkel who was in charge of the mechanical toys (ducks, this time) and some very funny dialogue muttered in frantic asides.

The work had its *longueurs* and moments when invention flagged, but saying it all was the hijacking of the stage by an Upper Five (or "Apple Pie group") of dusky ladies in black tutus who insisted on doing some indlamu stamping of their own, Bester dressing in the brown chiffon he'd worn at the Umbrella 10 years ago and spraying himself with deodorant from top to toe, images of roses scattered among the familiar plastic plates of street vegetable sellers, and TV cameras focusing on an over-view ("this is another Orlin classic; watch the screen" encouraged Bester).

No, there weren't any supermarket trollies, pillows or pointe shoes - or chickens, or goats' entrails for that matter - but the barbs shot home.

In the forum afterwards, Orlin reminded dancers how lucky they were to have a free platform provided by FNB Vita, even though she felt the most rewarding facets of the festival were now the Stepping Stones and New Moves presentations "where some really interesting stuff is happening".

With excellent chairmanship from Wits University's Dr Fred Hagemann, discussion ranged quite widely.

Understanding what is happening today, culturally and historically, was vital, and so was working with a "mixed" company, said Orlin.

"Resolving the collisions between European notions and African feelings" was part of the challenge. She sees her work as more a case of "deconstruction" than "post-modernism" because "contemporary dance is like a tortoise, taking its time to move away from the classical".

So Robyn Orlin moves along her own path, still impossible to ignore.

# Going with Robyn Orlin

By MARILYN JENKINS

WHAT do you need as a performer to be able to work with Robyn Orlin? It's an uneasy question for the six characters (in search of an author?! ...) now appearing in the dance theatre production *"daddy i have seen this piece six times before and i still don't know why they're hurting each other ..."* at the Market Theatre.

Three of them – Gerard Bester, Nicodemus Moremi and Dudu Yende – boldly try to answer.

**GB:** It's an advantage to have an idea of Robyn's aesthetic and her kind of anarchic vision of the world, because in the way she creates her work there's a fair amount of neurosis. It's also a workshop process as she asks the actors to bring their own material on certain themes.

**DY:** You have to be creative. She gives you space to improvise, and objects change identity. A cellphone, for example, is used for something else. Because of it, I

now feel in a position to create my own work and also use objects for different purposes.

**NM:** For me, it's an honour to work with Robyn because she taught me at the Market Theatre Laboratory. She gives you a platform to be yourself, and a lot depends on what you, as an actor, offer.

As for the meaning of *"daddy ..."*, that, apparently, is entirely in the eye of the beholder. As Nico put it: "The piece is about whatever the audience thinks it's about."

**GB:** It plays quite a politically incorrect game. It raises issues of race, power and the politics of theatre in general. But as we've performed in different spaces and different countries, the tensions have changed. Nico, for example, was silent. Now he's much more vocal.

So it works as a kind of empowerment process, even if that most threatened of the species, the white male (Bester in this instance), is being disempowered.

**DY:** When my character storms the stage, there's a whole power shift. Everyone wants to be in power, but for a black woman to rape a white man... it's a violent moment, even though played in comic terms.

It was so empowering for one particular French woman who watched the piece at the recent Montpellier Dance Festival that she went up to Dudu, pouring out a torrent of French (which Dudu couldn't understand) and crying. It turned out that she felt her whole spirit had been lifted by what she had experienced.

**GB:** A huge amount of trust is needed here. It's so exciting to be part of it. It's hard and it's a mystery. But when you believe in the process, you just go with it.

Audiences are certainly "going with it" down at the Market Theatre, but note that the run ends on Saturday, September 16.



# ROBYN DANCES HER WAY THROUGH LIFE

SHE'S A DANCER — yes but not the average ballet or contemporary dancer. She's Robyn Orlin and she doesn't fit into any dance category or ANY category at all for that matter. When she appears on stage, you may notice that she is genuinely tiny but you will definitely be struck by her masses of long curly hair. You'll get used to that but how many of you will get used to the fact that this lady is a feminist. You may be wondering why I feel this is an issue but when you see her on stage you will either admire her for her courage or feel totally uncomfortable when you notice that unlike the usual smooth and prettily dressed dancer, Robyn exposes her hairy armpits and legs.

"Most of the dance world in this country have difficulties in coping with hairy armpits and legs and my dance behaviour on stage, however, there are some dancers who really enjoy it," observed Robyn. "It seems to me that SA dancers, in Johannesburg in particular, are very limited because of the lifestyle they are geared towards."

While the dance world focuses on the body beautiful and how to please this in dance, Robyn deals in areas which are not necessarily aesthetically pleasing. "I take the body and put it in a cynical context which in itself is a political comment," she explained.

"The core of my work is to challenge the individual's subconscious." She carries this off well with the exceptions — "One concert I did for the End Conscription Campaign, didn't go down as I had expected it to as people did not understand what I was trying to say."

Having mentioned that her dance borders on the political, I questioned her as to her view of the SA situation. "I am very concerned about what's happening here but I don't know if I want to stay and be a part of the mess," Robyn stressed. "I've got to a stage where I feel its not my struggle and I am sick and tired of making political art. But I firmly believe that change has to come very soon otherwise... I shudder to think of the consequences."

This tiny woman sitting up under her as we sat drinking coffee and chatting quite obviously had her heart and soul in dancing. However it may surprise you to know that Robyn is in fact noticeably shy.

"Dancing is my life but



Robyn Orlin

I looked around the magnificent huge house we were in and knowing that Robyn is not in the field of dance where the money comes pouring in continuously, I wondered how she made her money. "Oh, her money, her money, her money," she laughed. "This isn't mine. It's my parents' house. I have a flat in Yeoville for which I can barely pay the rent. Making a living is not the easiest, I choreograph the odd commercial and do some work for NAPAC but right now I am concentrating on my own performance. To be honest, I live from month to month and I don't know how I make it."

Money does create pressures in Robyn's life as she went on to tell me of her ambition to be an artistic director of her own dance company. "My problem is that nobody with money seems to think its the right thing to do at this time and although I think it is, I can't do a thing without finance."

"I want to be rich and famous with houses in London, Paris, and New York and still live in Yeoville," she let her fantasies run wild so I thought until she corrected me. "No serious takes over my life. I'm really quite content just as I am." She added, "Besides its no big deal to be rich in South Africa, in fact, its embarrassing."

As for fame, it was not long ago when Robyn was first publically recognised for her talent. "I don't know about fame but I was first recognised when I did my first one woman show at the Market in 1983," she noted.

She chuckled, "People often recognise me on the streets but they are seldom sure from where, I suppose that's because I don't make a habit of walking around in my usual."

Somebody who did recognise her talent was her newly wedded spouse and producer Chris. Robyn explained that they work in a collaborative way both in private or professional decisions. Robyn's obvious feminist approach to everything she



Peta Krost

touches is hardly conducive to the typical marriage relationship South Africans are so used to. "We have a mutual respect for one another which does away with many problems in the relationship." She grinned. "In many ways Chris is more of a feminist than I am. I could never have married a doctor or a dentist, they would never have put up with me." Confidentially she admitted, "I was surprised I married Chris but it works, although I love jolling and he loves to stay at home and paint."

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One of Robyn's greatest fears is children, her own that is. "I am afraid not being able to support them both physically and emotionally. You see," she added, "I am such an erratic person. Although I would like to have a child, I just don't want it to rule my life and I have a feeling children do. Children to me symbolise being stuck in the suburbs."

As she sat nibbling a piece of ginger cake, Robyn explained that she has to watch what she eats all the time. "All dancers are very strict with themselves, its the nature of a dancer. My worst is that I have given up smoking and I am going bonkers. Its a revolting habit but right now I would give anything to light up," she said as she carefully watched me puffing away on my cigarette which hardly made me feel very good.

"I love reading and I am a total movie addict but most of all I adore coming home from work and sipping a good whisky with my feet up and listening to a Verdi recording," she said with a self-satisfied grin.

Just as I'm about to leave so that Robyn can do just that, her mother stopped me and added a little to the conversation she had overheard. "You know, Robyn was the cutest little girl who was absolutely meticulous about her clothes, and just look at her now," she sighed connoting both a little despair and a great deal of pride.

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The Star TONIGHT! Wednesday April 22, 1987

**DANCE**



Robyn Orlin: "suffering, happiness, emptiness"

## Woman's place is in the dance

By ADRIENNE SICHEL

Match a flashy tutu to hairy armpits and a tin tub and what do you get?

Dancer/choreographer Robyn Orlin's comment on ballet and a woman's comment on ludicrous situations she finds herself in — as a woman.

Orlin says that her solo dance, "Shelved Selves" actually tackles all dance, because "Contemporary dance also contains certain structures and constrictions in contradiction to what it started out to be.

"Shelved Selves" and "I Have Studied the Art of Saying Goodbye" will be performed under the title "Dances Theatre Twofold" upstairs at the Market Theatre from Tuesday, May 5, to Sunday, May 10. Both pieces were commissioned for the 1986 Napac Dance Forum in Durban last October. A new work had to be

**DANCE**



Classical conventions help in "Dance Theatre Twofold" / Pic: Ruyhin Coudyzer

shelved because of lack of sponsorship. After months of serious fund-raising efforts, finance is "non-existent" apart from a contribution by Mary Slack. Mrs Slack also helped sponsor Orlin's first ever one-woman show "One, so many" in the Laager in 1983, "which actually launched contemporary dance at the Market Theatre".

The ad hoc company performing the two-week "Dance Theatre Twofold" season, directed by Chris Pretorius, is Gail Saul, Wouter, Frylink, Liz Magonoa and a male still to be named.

"I Have Studied the Art of Saying Goodbye" was workshoped and premiered by members of the Napac Dance Company. It deals with "moving temperaments and struggles in this country showing the breakdown in optimism which has always been so prevalent. Till now."

Booking at Compu-Ticket.

**DANCE**

## If you can't change the world, change your dance form

So you took it for granted that Spanish dance specialist Hazel Acosta would work to Ravel's "Bolero" and if anyone dared use "Nkosi Sikelele iAfrika" theatrically it would be Cape Town's Jazzart.

Wrong. Just the opposite proved to be true.

It's a case of fourth time very lucky for the final Dance Umbrella programme which offers a sterling standard of performance and inventive choreography. With one glaring exception — Debbie Rakusin's jazz dance piece "Attitudes". It's inexcusable that Rakusin, like Soetje Mayo, restaged previous work, robbing companies and choreographers, accommodated on the Fringe, of a sought after slot on the main programme.

The Dance Theatre partnership of Robyn Orlin and designer Chris Pretorius has done it again. Conceptually "If you can't change the work, change your curtains", created on the Pact Dance Company, has the clarity of Orlin's 1989 tour-de-force "Five Girls Screaming". Whereas "Screaming" grappled with the South African education system and conditioning, "Curtains" throws a wider net, or transparent curtains, over our society.

It's stereotype busting time again — here's the Boer/boos in the Safari suit (Johan Viljoen) who does combat bullfight style, with a punch bag, the Cool Dudes caught up in advertising hype while carrying the burden of apartheid (Lucky Diala has the Voortrekker Monument strapped to his back), the corollary beauty queens, the angst-ridden couples.

Each of the eight sequences is layered with articulate visual images, and subliminal codes, as the dancer/actors speak Orlin's language of contorted steps, barrages of body beating semaphores and physical attitudes and misdeeds. The lighting provides the effect of a slick monochrome fashion ad or pop video.

### Rejecting

One of the topical questions Orlin teases her audience with is — will classical ballet survive here? Yes, is the answer, as the traditional dancer in skins (Ellington Mazibuko) and white pumps, after rejecting the dying swan (Christopher Kinoo), tries out pirouettes and grand jetes he makes his own.

The final image of "Curtains" says it all. The black curtain concealing the cyclorama unveils hanging "carcasses" which the dancers, now in treacherous, late great pains to conceal with the white curtains on stage, that have dominated the rest of the action. This visual metaphor for covering up — corruption, death squads, a rotting society — and exposure, works brilliantly.

In the past year Soetje Thapedi has emerged as a bright hope for the future of South African dance. She consolidates this promise in "We have the Church in our Village", performed by Thapedi and her all female Soyikwa Dance Project students. Ideas and motifs have been used and clarified from "Amaqodaka" ("Migrant Labourers") to fine effect. The first of the series of vital dances begins with a striking spoken monologue and then Thapedi is joined by religious worshippers in a circle dance. The vocabulary, true to Soweto-based Soyikwa's artistic credo of Pan African dance, is drawn from West African, Caribbean and indigenous dance forms sometimes blended with a jazzy dynamic. It's a joy to see such expressive, superbly trained, confident young dancers.

**DANCE**... by ADRIENNE SICHEL  
PROGRAMME IV: Dance Umbrella 1990 (The Wits Theatre tonight at 8)

**CHOREOGRAPHERS:** Robyn Orlin, Soetje Thapedi, Helge Janssen, Grayham Davies, Debbie Rakusin, Hazel Acosta, Alfred Hinkel

Durban performance artist Helge Janssen goes solo with "Looking Back", an exercise in body control and loss of it, in which he moves — head and face painted half black and white — through waves of lighting and a wall of sound. As the gyrating figure is then stalked by his own shadow there's the danger of lapsing into cliché and losing choreographic momentum. Compelling nonetheless.

Over the past two weeks none of the choreographers have provided any form of reflection or contemplation. Grayham Davies proves the refreshing exception with "Circles on Still Water", which he performs with the Johannesburg Dance Theatre. This soundly structured, organically written contemporary dance work comprises arresting duets, inventive lifts which fold into body blends, and orchestrated ensembles centred by contemplative solos to an excerpt of Leonard Bernstein's haunting "Age of Anxiety". No tricks necessary — there's too much choreographic intelligence and finesse for that.

### Daring

"Relevant" Spanish dance? Well, that has a very negative connotation but Acosta's "Tierra Nuestra" ("Our Land") is certainly daring and goes a long way to extending the boundaries and vocabulary of Spanish dance. This "personal impression of the interaction of two groups of people in our country" uses a blend of orchestral compositions, percussion (provided by John Hassan) and the national anthem. The one faction, led by Rocio Granados, dressed in pastels moves with delicacy and strength and ends up in a laager formation. They are threatened by another group wearing brighter earthier colours. Led by Sylvana Gironi the dancing becomes increasingly aggressive.

The pattern of violence and resistance culminates in a confrontation in which Granados's troupe is destroyed. The conquerors stretch out their arms for a dance of reconciliation. All the dancers kneel front of stage, as in prayer. They begin moving to the strains of the hymn "Nkosi Sikelele" — "God bless Afrika". As the dancers travel the stage in a diagonal radiating grace, what could have been a sacrilegious or politically opportunistic gesture, becomes a moving incantation to reconciliation and hope.

Spanish dance and South African gumboot dancing have a lot in common — a percussive beat. Add foot rattles, and drums, as Jazzart has, and get set for a whole new experience. The ever popular "Bolero" was never like this! "Untitled", a workshop process directed by Alfred Hinkel, is a hypnotic, ritualistic juxtaposition of styles and techniques which results in a syncretic fusion. Western versus African equals new wave South African. The last segment is improvised but that doesn't deny that the whole process requires enormous performance skills and knowledge in "western" contemporary dance technique, for one.

If this is what democratic dance-making looks like, the future looks great. Jazzart is carrying a key (and the ramp card!) to a regenerative, flexible community dance prototype.

**An obsessive victim steps out from the image of a bloodthirsty villainess**

# UNVEILING SALOMÉ

BY ADRIENNE SICHEL

Salomé, she of the seven seductive veils who demanded John the Baptist's head on a platter, inspired writers Oscar Wilde, Gustav Flaubert and opera composer Richard Strauss to immortalise her artistically. Down south, in Johannesburg, choreographer Robyn Orlin has always viewed this sultry Biblical temptress as an obsessive victim. In 1993 while Orlin was studying in Chicago she performed a solo on this subject. It was called *How Beautiful is the Princess Tonight*. But this did not exorcise her obsession with King Herod's stepdaughter, it magnified it.

The result is *Naked on a Goat*, billed as a "post-apocalyptic interpretation of Salomé's dance of the seven veils", which premieres at The Market's Barney Simon Theatre on Monday April 30. In her exploration of who Salomé really is, and by implication the many facets and rituals of womanhood, Orlin is using performance art and a non-linear narrative. "To get a theatre crew to give me a waxwork of a head wouldn't work for me," she says. "My other alternative is to work with raw meat."

And dancers who don't ask why they aren't dancing. The non-dancing dancers are Pretoria Technikon Dance Department graduate dancer/choreographer Tania Herbst, Soweto Dance Theatre's Fikile Maswanganyane and dancer/choreographer Busisiwe Ngebulana, formerly of Cape Town's Jazzart Dance Theatre.

The music has been composed "via e-mail" from Chicago by Eric Leonardson who has collaborated with the South African artist on the Playhouse Dance Company's *the explosion of stars is not only reserved for ticket holders* and Soweto Dance Theatre's *The Polka Dot Lives On*.

The theatre space is being transformed in collaboration with designer Nadya Cohen and artist Stephen Hobbs, who has videored the slaughter of a goat. As for the veils: "There is seven of everything – not all just veils." Count in seven petticoats and seven steak-laden plastic plates.

**Meaty details ... Fikile Maswanganyane, Tania Herbst (centre) and Busisiwe Ngebulana (right) in *Naked on a Goat*.**

4. Article by Adrienne Sichel in *The Star*, 11 November 1997. Page number unknown.



Lighting up ... Robyn Orlin having conceptual birthday fun at the Market

PICTURES: MOTLHALEHI MAHLABE

## Haepie Berrrthdaey tuu yuu ... !

A string of lightbulbs dangled across the Market main stage's famous arches, dissecting *Mumbo Jumbo's* evocatively site-specific ox skull and crucifix from the aloes and soapboxes.

Oh, dear, muttered the nervous (remembering all those smashed reading-lamp globes at the Biennale), Robyn Orlin must be near.

Yes, there she was, lurking in the wings in pristine white tutu and tights. She appeared at the end of, in the words of booz John Kari, "an evening of remembering" to salute the Market on its 21st birthday. The reminiscing began with dancer Nomsa Manaka and drummer Zenzl Mhuli powerfully reinforcing the Market's African theatre dance connection with rhythmic elegance, ending with Manaka's trademark Venda bow.

This traditional gesture brought back memories of *Sego The African Calabash* with Manaka and her Soyikwa Institute of African Theatre Furdia Centre students in the Upstairs Theatre in 1988.

That season launched a wave of awareness of the development, and delights, of a pan-African fusion. Other memories flooded back of what emerged as the Newtown dance movement in the '80s, which fizzled out mainly after the departure of Mannie Mannin, who masterminded a choreographers' bursary fund. This wasn't a huge amount, but it was invaluable seed money, enabling Orlin, Marlene Blom and Tessa van Tonder to do cutting-edge work.

The Market's dance and performance legacy of that decade, pre-Dance Umbrella, is formidable. Who could forget Van Tonder's *Boksburg, O, Boksburg* (Upstairs, 1983) in response to David Goldblatt's photographs or her *Timeless Tangos* (1986) with Dieter Rebbe, which lived up to its time-testing title. Or Blom's cartoonish *All'Agore St Stylete*, skirting the old stage's decreed pillars.



Magic circle ... Nomsa Manaka anointing the Market Theatre's 21st birthday celebration

Or the multicultural explosion of Cape Town's Abamanyani doing the same in 1986.

A decade later Zimbabwe's Tumbuka dance company not only conquered the pillars but moved majestically along the precarious edges of the overhanging balcony.

But it's Orlin who has been a consistently dominating force, dating from 1982 with her soul-searching solo *One So Many* in the Laager. That same year the short-lived Pubs dance company, by all accounts South Africa's first black contemporary dance company, debuted on the hard, unspunged Upstairs Theatre floor.

Orlin was the artistic director of

this company, which also performed this particular daring programme of Orlin works in front of the screen on a horrendous surface at the Eyethu Cinema in November 1983. Among the cast were pioneers Carly Dibakoane, Lucky Dialo and Given Sebillo.

Subsequently Orlin, and later in collaboration with Chris Pretorius and performers like Andrew Buckland, performed in virtually every nook and cranny of the Market. On the windowsills of the Rehearsal Room with Dialo (and a garden spade) in *That Dream That Sleep* (1984), on the landing leading to the Gallery with *(emotional) chameleons*, with buckets of

powder paint with Andre de Villiers (now at Britain's Elmhurst School), and in the Warehouse.

Nowadays she is creatively at work in the Lab with Market Theatre Laboratory students. Amazingly Orlin has never performed in the main theatre. So, when she crawled onto Brett Bailey's *iMumbo Jumbo* set, pointe shoes strapped to her back like a beast of burden, this was her debut in this historic venue where her mentor Barney Simon's spirit still looms large.

The 20 suspended lights flicked on as she crawled by singing a 'distorted, and amplified, *Haepie Berrrthdaey tuu yuu ...* the 21st light only stubbornly obliged after much stamping of foot and threshing of tulle. There was much laughter and a sober thought or two. Maybe, with the choice of Manaka and Orlin, who both started out as professional artists in this market of dreams, executive director Kari and the management were indicating that dance and performance, rating as highly as music with South African audiences at the moment, will make a full-blooded comeback at the Market.

There are still spaces to be explored. But the roof has been taken. At the (terribly disorganised) Arts Alive International Street Theatre Festival on a Saturday morning in late September, the highlight was director Bailey and two *iMumbo Jumbo* Third World Bunfight actors, Nyeshe Hoboshe and Kola Mida, their bodies painted white, doing a Butoh performance on the roof above the theatre's canopy. The whitewashed men looked as if they'd been carved out of the sky as they moved, the way paint dries, taking half an hour to unfurl and close black umbrellas, before leaning forward and screaming, blood dripping from their mouths. The performers looked like synchronised spirits, rising from the soul of the theatre, as they continued a Newtown tradition of breaking the rules and forging new forms.

September 11, 2000

**TNIGHT** performance

# Dance is where theatre was



**Showdown ...**  
Neliswa Xaba and Toni Morkel confront each other in Robyn Orlin's spooky *daddy*. I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other. This well-travelled 1999 dance theatre piece received a standing ovation from the opening night Market Theatre audience. The season ends on Saturday

**Adrienne Sichel**  
Review

**WHEN:** *daddy*, I've seen this piece six times before and I still don't know why they're hurting each other ...

**WHO:** Gerard Bester, Pule Molebatzi, Nicodemus Morem, Toni Morkel, Neliswa Xaba, Dudi Yende

**DIRECTOR/CHOREOGRAPHER:** Robyn Orlin

**WHERE:** The Market Theatre Main Stage

**WHEN:** tonight to Friday at 8pm, final performance, Saturday at 6pm.

I really have seen this piece six times before - spread over several continents. What I still can't figure out is exactly why *daddy* ... has had the incredible impact it has and garnered the respect and acclaim that it continues to.

I mean, it is not Robyn Orlin's most substantial work. *Naked on Goat or Life after the Credits Roll* it's not. And its content, with its downtown Jo'burg sidewalk-inspired images of plastic plates, petticoats and perantois, is flagrantly local - not to mention the language and the stabs at local arts issues. It's so odd that this slangy match between a mixed bunch of South Africans, and a string of quirky solos, should have put Orlin on the international map.

Then again, in her quest for dealing with the politics of space, the realities of multiculturalism and the ongoing clash of aesthetics, Orlin visually and intellectually triggers universal issues.

You don't actually read Orlin's dance theatre as much as you surrender your senses, your heart, and your sense of humour to it. Part of the extended joke, especially when this work travels to Europe, is that Orlin and Co are saying (in your disbelieving face): "This is Africa dude!!!" Forget the digital technology, the bank of video monitors, special effects, à la vintage Hollywood musicals, are created with two monitors showing five bodies in ethnic underwear making patterns with kitsch tin trays.

The surprise element is key. What Orlin and the four actors and two dancers (and invading guests) evoke from audiences, wherever, is the initial incredulity that they are watching and bearing something so corny and ridiculous. This is matched with admiration for the off-the-wall creativity and the let-it-all-hang-out honesty of the performers, while the viewer is ambushed by subliminal messages about colonialism, xenophobia and cultural imperialism.

There's Neliswa Xaba, the sulky African madonna (and prima donna), peeling off gloves and dresses and layers of perception as she balances mineral water on her exquisite head. Xaba's three solos are brilliantly crafted gems, radiating a synthesised African-ness and a technical finesse. In all the mayhem, it is Xaba's arrival in a white tutu, sieving white flour over her legs, leaving a symbolically charged lattice of footprints in her wake - driving home Orlin's genius for transmuting political and cultural history. This is crystallised by the transformation of the ballerina to the strains of Tchaikovsky's obligatory *Serenade*. Her tutu adorned in chiffon Shangaan cloths, the dancer surrenders her pelvis to African dynamics.

There's the awesomely demented Toni Morkel, who is desperate to perpetuate her belief in classical ballet no matter what. There's Gerard Bester, who is equally desperate to keep the show (and the society?) going despite the fact that useless choreographer Robyn Orlin hasn't pitched. Bester sheds every shred of dignity to do his aerosol spray solo, which ends with a gawky pirouette on the floor.

What to say about the astonishing Dudi Yende? Orlin's investigation of the politics of the dancing body explodes into action as this spurned virago is ultimately seduced by the power of the stage. Tragically and pathos rule as the buxom one rewrites the rules on who belongs in the spotlight and what is beauty.

It's that frisson of risk - of contrived persona, nuzzling with the performers own (courageous) identity - that gives Orlin's work that unique edge. She also challenges the role of the choreographer as a simple maker of steps.

Seeing *daddy* ... which was created on an FNB Vita Dance Umbrella commission in 1999, on the Market Main Stage is further confirmation that SA dance is where SA theatre was in the 1990s. Against all odds, it's brave and it's inventive.

PICTURE JOHN HOGG

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