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The Politics of Dancing: A Study of Ballet as a Political Tool

ABSTRACT

During their reign, leaders of the Soviet Union relied heavily on art censorship as a tool to further their political agenda (Morrison 2015). Specific messages were intentionally woven throughout each dance piece. This research investigates the Soviet Union's use of ballet as political propaganda, popularizing Soviet ideals and lending expression to opinions that could not be voiced. By creating and utilizing a dance analysis chart, I will explain how dance choreographers attempted to shift, disrupt, and manipulate the perception of audience members, political leaders, and performers. Furthermore, this analysis of the political motives and intentions behind Soviet ballets will be used as a reference for creating a current political choreographic work. This new piece I choreograph will aim to uncover the role of dance in the current political climate, exploring the audience's perception of multifaceted attitudes surrounding modern controversies through demographic and opinion surveys.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

As an artist, I strive to tell stories. I believe there is truth and power in sharing stories that give people an understanding of humanity that can otherwise be overlooked. I aim to create and perform dances that share insight into other ways of thinking, living, and behaving. Art should promote compassion and appreciation for all walks of life. My dance background lies in classical ballet, where performances tell a story. When I was six years old, I was first exposed to a professional ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*. I was mesmerized by the performers' expressiveness. Even though I did not fully comprehend the meaning of the movement, I understood the characters' feelings and the story being shared. This later influenced my research methodology as both a performer and choreographer. First discerning the emotions of the characters being created or portrayed helps captivate audiences.

Every spring from the ages 8-19, I performed classical ballets at my dance studio. I always researched each ballet, because I believe in knowing the meaning and history behind the choreography. I searched for the choreographers, dancers, the number of past versions, and any other relevant information. When I was 13, we prepared to perform the ballet *The Stone Flower*. When researching the ballet, I found nothing regarding the production process or inspiration behind the piece. All I found was a minimal description of the story, that it was performed in the Soviet Union, and the names of a few dancers and the choreographer. The lack of contextual information piqued my curiosity and inspired my passion for investigating the historical, social, and political life of dance. Because I came up short with

finding background information, I performed *The Stone Flower* with an inadequate understanding of what I was dancing.

While taking the Elon College Fellows winter term course, “Paths of Inquiry,” I learned how to ask good questions. The first assignment was to brainstorm potential research questions. Remembering the lack of information I found years ago about *The Stone Flower*, I decided to focus on the lack of information surrounding ballet in the Soviet Union. I found a book titled, “Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia.” It discussed how the government used ballet as a political tool, in addition to highlighting the hidden resistance of choreographers and dancers. The Soviet government scrutinized choreographers’ work throughout the process of creating, rehearsing, and performing; The dances aided a political agenda (Ezrahi 2016).

Learning this made me regret not knowing the political significance of *The Stone Flower* when I performed it. It made me question how Soviet ballets can be authentically performed now. I also wonder how artists today can create politically driven work, without being discredited. Dance and the performing arts have always played essential roles in my life, but I am also a political and historical enthusiast. I stay up to date with current events and how they could potentially affect me. As I have grown as a dancer and creator, I have begun focusing on how art can challenge or reflect society. Fortunately, I live in a time and place where I can use art to make any political statement without fear of government repercussions, but that doesn’t guarantee absence of social backlash. How can I choreograph politically motivated dances that are not divisive? Is it possible to choreograph works with mixed political messages?

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In this project, I will explore the ability of choreographers to create art which both challenges and appeases social, political, and cultural forces. I will investigate the ways Soviet ballet choreographers abided by governmental artistic standards while creating work that expressed their personal ideologies, choreographic growth, and aesthetic. Studying ballet in the Soviet Union reveals the dynamic relationships between dance and politics, choreography and censorship, and intention versus perception. Throughout the Soviet reign, there was a cycle of dancers and choreographers who rose in popularity, only to fall due to their opposition to any political decision (Blumer et. al 2005). Prior to the Bolshevik revolution, ballet held an essential role in the Russian Tsarist regime. Directors of Imperial ballet companies were selected by the tsar. Dancers were seen as “Imperial servants.” Ballets, down to the curtain call, were dedicated to the tsar. Curtain calls were “arranged according to a strict pattern: first, the ballerina bowed to the tsar’s box, then to that of the theater director, and finally to the general public “ (Anderson 1992).

After the revolution, the new Communist regime expressed the desire to return ballet to the people (Morrison 2015). Ballet should, by design, speak to the people. This quickly led to ballet being used as a propaganda tool for the government (Morrison 2015). Directed by the communist regime, there were major censorship guidelines implemented on art (Wallach 1991). In 1932, the regime began enforcing new guidelines. Under the Social Realism Theory, there were four principles artists followed: *Partiynost*, being party conscious; *Narodnost*, ensuring storylines made for the Soviet people; *Ideynost*, emphasizing Soviet ideological content; and *Klassovost*, dictating stories must show the prior struggles of the classes (Ross 2015).

These guidelines only hinted at the power the government would later hold on artistic freedoms of ballet (Plamper 2001). Through this project, I will explore how the work of Soviet choreographers pushed the Soviet agenda. Alternatively, I will examine their promotion of their personal agendas while hiding it within the contextual layers of their choreography. This research addresses the creative liberties that were stripped from ballet and how it affected the way people viewed, related to, and danced the pieces. Also, by understanding the rebellious undertones and intentions within the choreography, I will apply similar choreographic skills to create a ballet piece with multiple messages. This piece will aid the study of creative processes of political dances. I will choose a political trend to outwardly support, but weave the opposing opinion throughout the choreography and other production elements. In this field, research is often conducted on the creative processes of famous works, but research is sparse in terms of investigating political implications and ideologies in dances and audience reception of different political messages.

This research process combines qualitative, analytical, and creative methods. There will be four steps to carry out answering my research question. To begin with, I will research art censorship policies implemented throughout different periods of the USSR and the primary choreographers in each period. I must understand why each policy was put into place and how it influenced the pieces created. Also, each choreographer had different dance training, backgrounds, performance and choreographic experiences, and political opinions that must be researched. This establishes an understanding of choreographers and how their personal lives influenced their work.

The second step in the process consists of creating an analysis chart, the Political Dance Analysis Method, or PDAM, that will be used to interpret every ballet I research and aid the production process. This analysis chart will help dissect the current form, structure, characters, costumes, and choreography of each ballet. Parts of the analysis chart will be inspired by the Laban Movement Analysis. Scholars across disciplines use LMA as “a method...for describing, visualizing, interpreting and documenting all varieties of human movement” (Laban Movement Analysis, n.d.). After creating PDAM, I will analyze the implementation of each of these elements and their promotion of either a Soviet political ideology or the choreographer’s personal ideology. Also, understanding the audience’s reactions to the ways movements and gestures told the story and created a political atmosphere is essential to the research. What movements passed along this message? What stage directions and choreographic structures influenced the audience’s perception and reception of each piece? Using the PDAM, I will address such questions.

Thirdly, I will select ballets from prominent Soviet choreographers in different periods and study their creative process. More specifically, I plan using the PDAM to research the difference between the original and final product, identify the surface meaning of the plot, and search for the deeper messages, as it is expressed through the music, gestures, choreography, costumes, and lighting/set design. In order to understand the choreography, I must watch it. To obtain video records of these Soviet ballets, I will travel to New York City and visit the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for archival research. The NYPL possesses performance recordings that are unavailable anywhere else. I have limited funds for travel and expenses through the College Fellows Program, but with additional funds would allow a more comprehensive archival research process of essential Soviet ballets. The overall goal is identifying and understanding the silent voice of the choreographer and how that voice was understood

and/or ignored by the audience. This step will also include reading material detailing the processes and opinions surrounding the selected choreographers and ballets.

The last part of the process ties everything together with final presentation, which will include political ballet performances, a concise lecture on political ballet analysis, and then gathering information from audience members regarding their understanding of each piece. I will present a piece I choreograph and an excerpt from a traditional Soviet ballet piece to an audience at Elon. After using the PDAM to document how Soviet choreographers conveyed meanings through the outward Soviet propaganda messages, I will choose a controversial political topic with two specific sides (i.e. gun control, immigration policy, LGBTQ+ rights). From there, I will conceptualize and choreograph a 15-20 minute piece of my own with a clear message surrounding the current political topic I choose. There will be a strong and clear surface meaning that supports one side of the issue. Within this political piece, I will use the same tools identified with PDAM to highlight the opposing view using choreographic gestures and themes, costume designs, etc.

Auditions for the cast will take place in the beginning of fall 2021. It will consist of Elon dancers (specifically those who dance en pointe). I will meet with them per week to teach the Soviet ballet pieces, along with their political messages and the choreographers' intentions. It is important to uphold the integrity of these famous pieces. Next, we will work on my original piece. The rehearsal process will try to emulate the mechanisms of the selected choreographers. The final product will provide insight into the politically motivated choreography of the USSR, as well as how political dances created today can influence and expose political views of audiences.

Finally, I will showcase the culmination of my research, with a lecture-demonstration followed by a formal paper, detailing my process and the audience survey responses to my production. For the final performance, the presented works will be excerpts from the Soviet ballets I studied, along with a discussion about the true meaning behind the pieces and how I created the PDAM framework for detecting choreographers' intentions. The second half will include a presentation of the politically driven piece I choreograph. Prior to the dance, I will request the audience to respond to the anonymous survey within their programs, which will concern basic demographics and their political opinions. It will not include specific biases toward a political party, because I want to receive as much audience feedback and participation as possible. Then, my piece will be performed. Afterwards, I will ask the audience to answer questions based on what they took away from the piece. What was the political message they received? Was it a strong political message? Did any parts of the work oppose what they thought the piece was about? These post-performance survey questions will develop as I create the piece. I want to see how political affiliations and demographics influence our perception of choreography and productions. This allows me to create a framework of creating politically driven work that connects with people deeper than the plot.

FEASIBILITY

A major part of my research will be gaining access to ballet performance films in the Jerome Robbins Dance wing within the New York Public Library, which are otherwise unavailable. There is a chance that

they will not have performance tapes of the specific versions of the ballets. In this case, I will either change the Soviet ballets I am researching or find similar versions.

A large portion of my budget would go to the final production. I want each piece performed to carry the look and feel of a full ballet production. The costumes (especially for the Soviet ballet excerpts) should lend authentically to this performance and will require a significant monetary investment. If I am approved to work with the Elon costume shop, the funds necessary may decrease. However, if I have to purchase costumes through an online retailer, the price could increase significantly. I would also like to provide a stipend to my dancers, as they will be dancing primarily in pointe shoes, which are expensive and wear out quickly. I don't want my dancers to be financially burdened by their participation.

BUDGET

Books and Materials

Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia by Christina Ezrahi

- \$ 35

Bolshoi Confidential: Secrets of the Russian Ballet from the Rule of the Tsars to Today by Simon Morrison

- \$ 22

The Great History of Russian Ballet by Evdokia Belova and E Bocharnikova

- \$ 26

On their Toes: A Russian Ballet School by Ann Morris and Ken Heyman

- \$ 12

I, Maya Plisetskaya by Maya Plisetskaya

- \$ 49

Diaghilev by Richard Buckle

- \$ 45

Diaghilev: A Life by Sjeng Scheijen

- \$ 35

Like a Bomb Going Off: Leonid Yakobson and ballet as Resistance in Soviet Russia by Janice Ross

- \$ 40

The Art of Dance in the USSR by Mary G. Swift

- \$ 20

Ballet's Magic Kingdom: Selected Writings on Dance in Russia 1911-1925 by Akim Volynsky

- \$ 25

Subtotal: \$309

Production Budget

Costumes

- Approximately 12 dancers, each with 2 costumes. 24 costumes X \$100 per costume
- https://tutu.com/collections/tutu-bodice?sort_by=price-ascending (price reference)
- \$ 2400

Photographer

- \$ 350

Videographer

- \$ 350

Program and Poster Printing

- \$ 200

Misc. Production costs

- \$ 600

Pointe Shoe Stipend

- Approximately \$80 per pair of pointe shoes X 12 dancers
- \$ 960

Subtotal: \$ 4860

Travel to New York City (5 days)

Airfare (Round Trip)

- \$ 500

Housing (\$150 per night)

- \$ 750

Food (\$40 per day)

- \$ 200

Dance Workshops and classes

- \$ 200

Commuting Expenses

- \$ 100

Attendance to New York City Ballet performance

- \$ 150

Subtotal: \$ 1900

Conferences

American College Dance Association Conference 2022

- \$ 160

Airfare (Round trip)

- Price is an estimate because the location is to be determined
- \$ 400

Food (\$40 per day X 3 days)

- \$ 120

Hotel (\$100 per night X 3 nights)

- \$ 300

Subtotal: \$ 980

Tuition: \$ 11,951

Total: \$ 20,000

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2020	Gaining professional performance experience at Theatre West Virginia	This summer will primarily focus on studying storytelling through dance. I will be working as a dancer for a theatre company, which will not only increase my understanding of different creative processes for creating dances, but it will also give me more
Fall 2020	LUM 498 (2)	This term would primarily focus on reading material about choreographers

		and their creative processes. I will start to create my method of analyzing their works. Also, I will be taking a choreography class focusing on choreographing for groups. By the end
Winter 2021	Travel to New York City	During the break after winter term, I plan on traveling to New York to begin research at the New York public library's dance division. I will spend the days watching Soviet ballets, transcribing the choreography for the proposed performance excerpts, and analyzing the choreography according to the chart I made the semester prior. This experience might be moved to the second summer term experience, due to class and potential abroad schedule.
Spring 2021	Travel Abroad to Italy	I will work on creating a solidified plan for auditions and rehearsals for the following fall. I want to have a detailed plan, which will help keep me on track with my dancers.
Summer 2021	Internship with dance company	This summer, I will complete the re-staging notes and create my personal choreography outline for the final presentation.
Fall 2021	LUM 498 (2)	I will be meeting with dancers for multiple hours a week. By the end of the semester, I would like to complete the Soviet ballet piece completely set on the dancers, almost all of my choreographed piece, and the costume designs.
Winter 2022	LUM 498 (2)	I will complete all choreography and have final preparation meetings for the production. I would like to have all of the costumes constructed before the end of winter term.
Spring 2022	LUM 498 (2)	Performances will be held at the beginning of spring term, hopefully the third weekend of school. A performance/research analysis and production booklet completed by mid-April.

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