Where are the women?

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One of the hottest tickets at Dance Umbrella in 2009 was "Where are the Women?" a debate addressing the progressive disappearance of work by female choreographers. Appropriately reflecting the careful gender balance of the work in the Festival, it preceded a premiere by Shobana Jeyasingh – but, as if to prove a point, the autumn programming by established companies told a different story. All the new works from the Royal Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, and Christopher Wheeldon's *Morphoses* were made by men. Diaghilev gave Nijinska choreographic opportunities; but even in the recent centenary tribute to the great dance entrepreneur at Sadler's Wells, there was no comparable female presence.

In part the disadvantages of being a female creative artist have surfaced as a wider issue across the performing arts. In television and film, female roles, especially for older women, are seen to be lacking not only in numbers but in individuality and depth. In theatre 4 out of 5 plays programmed are by male authors. In a season where films on a range of subjects by women directors are attracting interest what chance is there of recognition at the Oscars? In 80 years only 3 women have been nominated for best director and none have won.

Within ballet the situation is acute and longstanding - female productions at Covent Garden reputedly average one every ten years. A female director, in place for the first time since de Valois over 40 years ago, has revitalised company performance. But as yet little change is seen in the gender balance of creative roles within the Royal Ballet or in qualifying for the company. The female dancer is implicitly required to conform to a body type, and to exhibit all round excellence as a technician. Men are not subject to these conditions: witness generations of male dancers (Bintley, Burrows, Tuckett, Scarlett) entering the company their choreographic talent having been marked out at the school. Despite evidence of special creative talent and females acquitting
themselves well as student dancers in the corps, the perception that a woman might graduate on similar terms to men has not shifted.

Panellists at the debate addressed different ways in which gender imbalance in dance affects practices and production; the perceived preferential treatment of men, how dance is marketed and covered in the media, and the imperatives of motherhood.

Judith Mackrell observed that pioneering women lead the art form in transition, and men step into power when the form becomes established, "sexy and remunerative". Recent history mirrors this pattern. Dominated in the 1980s by women such as de Keersmaeker, Siobhan Davies and Pina Bausch, the contemporary dance establishment now follows this trend; disparity of choreographic opportunity sets in after training, whether classical or contemporary.

In C21 ballet a woman’s artistic potential continues to be framed in terms of her creative contribution as a star dancer or muse, and once within a company, the repertoire demands and competition (no shortage of fabulous women) combine to shape her career within an allotted space. This subtle form of discrimination has bred a lack of imagination and confidence in women as creators. Finding so little evidence that she may flourish as a ballet choreographer, a woman tends to direct her creativity towards collaboration and dancing. She fashions her art in the service of men’s work and thus continues to be framed in terms of their male choreographic gaze. As John Berger identifies in Ways of Seeing, a woman’s “own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another”. If a woman is to fulfil her creative desires, her task in ballet remains a pioneering one. While her male colleagues move between dancing and choreographing in recognised pathways, she must challenge institutionalised practices.

Clearly manifest in the ballet world, to what extent does women’s different “social presence” play out in wider dance production? Nelisiwe Xaba spoke of the uphill task for women in the emerging art dance scene in Africa to
establish choreographic careers, amidst traditional pressures to devote their energies to home and family. And in the UK, women are arguably complicit in perpetuating the dominance of male choreographers' work by bringing old models of heterosexual relations into the workplace. From long experience Julia Carruthers drew attention to the phenomenon of the highly effective dyad of male choreographer backed by female administrator, in a funding culture where women negotiate with other women on behalf of their male protégées. Does the female instinct to nurture what one choreographer present dubbed "the puppy dog audacity in young men", lead women administrators to mother male choreographers – and ironically, by feeding already existing preoccupation with youth, does this further infantilise a profession perceived by many as lacking gravitas?

Emphasising a sense of entitlement in men, women further relinquish artistic control over those feminine values that arguably underpin the beauty of dance. Brendan Keaney noted that men who decide to make a career in dance, often come to the profession with the energy of "late converts", confident to argue their cause. Carruthers also observed the energetic networking of young male choreographers by comparison with their more retiring female contemporaries, a masculine ability to get others running round on their behalf. Female dance artists by contrast seem more tentative and self conscious about putting their work forward.
Writing about women’s absence in post war American literature, Elaine Showalter remarks that “serious women writers are much less likely to celebrate or advertise themselves …and are judged much more harshly if they are seen as self-promoting”. Similarly female choreographers voiced concern about negative reactions to their behaving decisively and thereby acquiring the reputation of being "difficult". Even in the studio, as Charlotte Vincent noted, women are more cautious to take risks or be funny.

Raising the status and profile of female choreographic work is tricky. Mackrell noted that she hardly reviews female choreographers nowadays; topics for review are editorially chosen for news and celebrity value, mainly covering larger glitzy works, venues and companies in London. Marketing primarily exploits the sexiness of the dancing body to attract audiences. Through such a narrow prism, dance audiences are acclimatised to accepting without question an aesthetic which objectifies the performer or glories in athleticism and essentially masculine ideals of aggressive musculality. Even the feisty Vincent, while warning against female self-censorship, seemed to have internalised media expectations of the female body and the view that mature women - and by extension their dances - were "not happening enough, middle aged, boring". By contrast men, with a scarcity value in dance, are prized as ‘exotic’.

The female biological clock was also discussed as a major inhibition. Just when a female artist has amassed the experience and confidence for ambitious choreographic projects, the time for starting a family is ebbing away. It was perceived that women who choose to have children then find it difficult if not impossible to commit to the forward planning of company schedules because of unpredictable family commitments. Few dancers have sufficient income for the necessary childcare to support choreographic work at such a level. Women are leaders in community, local and educational settings, arguably more compatible with family life and providing opportunities to sustain choreographic activity. But such contextually specific work is of its nature more problematic to disseminate, less well resourced and recognised.
Vincent's company had recently persuaded the Arts Council to accept allowance for childcare costs in a touring project budget. This was seen as a breakthrough in supporting women in their artistic career but controversial when arts funding is scarce. The question of whether women should accept that “they cannot have it all” hung in the air.

But why should women not shape choreography in a different public light and time frame? While an intensive physical performing career may well be limited, the blossoming of a creative body of work can take decades. The pressure to "fast track" to choreographic success would seem to favour male dancers; a culture which recognised lengthier artistic development might enable "slow burn" (to use Cathy Marston's phrase) women artists to develop a confident voice and take time out of the limelight for maternity, in the knowledge that art is fed by life’s experience. This might allow for mature work that reflects richly diverse life stories to emerge, rather than dances that foreground youthful physicality to satisfy a reductive consumerist entertainment culture.

Most elusively the debate barely touched on how ‘feminine’ values and subject matter are revealed in dance. ‘Traditionally’ masculine characteristics prevail on the stage and street, where hard, loud, aggressive and visceral are applauded as real and relevant. Critics may express dissatisfaction at the superficiality of some recent works, yet question little the values which inform them. Are quiet, subtle (traditionally feminine) concerns seen and heard? Where is there space for the reflective, kind, emotionally sexual, other dimensions of communication? No wonder audiences in 2005 overlooked Royal Ballet’s revival of Andrée Howard’s mysterious La Fête Etrange – at present too remote and strange to grasp.

Virginia Woolf thought that “women need to create a … style that is completely expressive of her mind”. High time to move on from Balanchine’s dictum "there are no mothers-in-law in ballet" and expand the limited range of relationships embodied in dance to explore across age and gender the
domestic, familial and intimate. The response to Common Dance, Rosemary Lee's moving, expertly made work for 8-82 year olds suggests that audiences can't wait.

The event provided a welcome opportunity to air difficult feelings, identify important issues and begin the deeper critical debate that might effect change. As Mackrell's introduction made clear, a glimpse at dance history reveals the innovative contribution made by women over the past three hundred years. De Valois established and nurtured the key relationships that would provide for the development of a national ballet. That the founding team, not de Valois the individual, is honoured in the memorial stone to the Royal Ballet laid in Westminster Abbey in November, perhaps aptly reflects women’s work in dance – collaborative, different from men and framed not by herself but by others.

What relationships, networks and initiatives might support the re-entry onto the current dance stage of more feminine voices and values? Here’s a list of ventures that may nurture such a space:

- The “Orange” Prize for Choreography
- Female choreographers’ platforms
- Support for young female choreographers by established artists
- Dance in the wider cultural debate
- Funding Women’s Work

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