



Moving Forward: Women Ballet Choreographers

by Kathryn Roszak

When we look at a Degas painting we are entranced by beautiful ballet dancers, but take a look behind the scenes and a different story is revealed of these women's 19th century lives – one of disturbing misogyny and of women artists surviving as mistresses of male patrons, in relationships resembling outright prostitution (1).

Fast forward to the present day. The dance scene is filled to the brim with women artists and some are famous: Twyla Tharp, who is equally at home in ballet and on Broadway, and Misty Copeland, the first African American Principal at American Ballet Theatre. But how has the situation changed for women in ballet today? AGMA, the dancers' union, now guarantees salaries in professional companies, but women choreographers, particularly women ballet choreographers, are far less visible and much less funded than their male counterparts (2). Check the season brochures for San Francisco Ballet and New York City Ballet and decades go by without a woman choreographer in sight. The Royal Ballet (England) announced a discomfiting way they are addressing this issue: instead of selecting an established woman choreographer, they announced that 19-year-old Charlotte Edmonds will be mentored by male choreographer Wayne McGregor. She states, according to the Evening Standard, "there were more girls choreographing as students than boys and they were always encouraged." Possibly it's due to Edmond's youth and inexperience that she can't

explain why that hasn't translated into choreographic careers or that there is a long tradition of women being held back.

I am a woman ballet choreographer and have been creating dances for 25 years. The truth about my situation hit home when I couldn't encourage my own teenage daughter to pursue a dance career, as there's so little opportunity for leadership. I decided my legacy project would be the creation of a Women Ballet Choreographers Residency. I can create a better dance world for my daughter and others like her.

I chose the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, California, to hold an in-depth conversation about the issues in ballet of women's access to leadership. Djerassi has a reputation for supporting a variety of artists and in the 1990's I was invited to enjoy a two-month residency in this spectacular setting attended by artists from around the world. I've also served on the program's choreography panel.

The idea is to gather women choreographers, giving them space to exchange ideas, and then follow this in the future with public outreach activities and performances, all resulting in greater visibility and hopefully more support and opportunity for women.



Kathryn Roszak with SF Dance Film Festival's Greta Schoenberg & AileyCamp's Priya Shah, photo by Bari Lee

The inaugural residency launched this past May with open rehearsals, screenings, and panels in Djerassi's rich natural environment in the rolling California hills filled with unique sculptures created by artists attending the program.

Following a brunch, women choreographers fill Djerassi's Art Barn with new works and films. In the dance studio, Dalia Rawson, formerly of Silicon Valley Ballet and now Director of the New Ballet School, San Jose, experiments with a kinect camera filming the dancer's movements, which in turn affects sounds, played live. "I am working with programmer Tim Thompson and musicians Cliff Rawson and Matt Davis," says Rawson. "The camera follows dancers' height and depth and this affects the music," so that the piece renders differently each time. Her talented young dancers Mesa Brudick, Aine Chaterjee, Katelynn Hospetalier, Naomi Sailors, Ryan Walker, and Brennan Wall clearly revel in the process.

East Bay choreographer Lissa Resnick delves into the urgencies of living with diabetes in a rehearsal of her newest work. My own company, Danse Lumiere, presented my contemporary ballet performed by the dancers from San Jose. The ballet, Reverse Flow, traces the reversed path of the Amazon River over time.

In the Djerassi composer's studio, choreographer Julia Adam screens her edgy, bucolic ballets created for boathouses and the woods of West Marin while visual artist Deborah O'Grady shares her stunning photographs designed to make a kind of choreography for orchestral performances.

Choreographer Amy Seiwert, Artistic Director of Imagery, screens her film Barn Dance(created with film-makers John Haptas and Kristine Samuelson). The film is shot entirely at Djerassi featuring a lush dance taking place in a fantastic old barn.

The women mix and mingle in the Art Barn discussing their latest projects while soaking in the atmospheric views. It is rare to have women artistic directors of ballet companies. We are able to pay honor to two. Choreographer Myles Thatcher (San Francisco Ballet/New York City Ballet) presents honors to Celia Fushille, Artistic Director of Smuin Ballet and Lauren Jonas, Artistic Director of Diablo Ballet. Both directors are recognized for presenting works by women while keeping their respective small

chamber companies alive. “We are all so busy working on our own projects that it is great to gather together like this and realize that we are a community,” says Fushille.

Women ballet choreographers represent a fairly specialized niche, so the afternoon multi-disciplinary panels are presented to allow conversations across disciplines about challenges faced by women artists.

AileyCamp instructor Priya Shah speaks of approaching the teaching of choreography in the educational setting, while filmmakers Greta Schoenberg (Founder of San Francisco Dance Film Festival) and Kate Duhamel point to new platforms for women through the creation of dance films. Former Royal Swedish Ballet dancer Katja Björner reports on the advantages available to dancers in Sweden where generous family leave is provided to both men and women.

The panel discussions question how each artist can effect change. For my part, I vow to have honoraria for women participating in this gathering next year and to focus on documenting women’s dances by involving talented young women filmmakers from Berkeley High School.

Choreographer Myles Thatcher joins the conversation as a male ally. “I am a feminist and we should all be feminists,” says Thatcher. “There is a lack of female choreographers and I am happy that we are finally acknowledging this. It’s the responsibility of our generation to be aware of how we are treating women in ballet. Balanchine said, ‘Ballet is Woman,’ but then a woman is being admired and this takes attention away from her having a voice. We are asking girls to become smaller and fit the corps de ballet mode. I am wondering if we could be more empowering to people individually in ballet.” Thatcher would like to see choreography classes included in ballet schools to encourage girls, and to have grown-up male and female dancers no longer be called boys and girls by directors. As for his own steps toward creating change he says that he avoids creating “victim” roles in his dances.

Rawson asks: “How do we inspire young women to see themselves as choreographers?” Even as a child, Rawson was always making dances and she had notebooks full of choreography. “There is no time in ballet school for girls to make

dances due to the perfection required of females,” says Rawson. “Opportunities to learn skills like improvisation are very important.” At the New Ballet School, Rawson hired Seiwert to teach choreography. Seiwert asks, “If we aren’t hearing from 50% of the population, then we should ask ourselves what are we missing?”

The panels reveal that women choreographers’ needs are diverse. While one woman requires space and dancers, another needs childcare; while Seiwert hopes to be commissioned for a full-length ballet, this is something other women choreographers might only fantasize about.

As the day comes to a close. Djerassi Director Margot Knight guides some of the participants on a walk. Sculptured faces gaze out from inside giant redwoods and unusual forms carved from nature appear in bends on the trail. Djerassi has a special magic and it’s easy here to imagine utopia with women and girls (younger and older) finally finding a way to leadership in dance.

Danse Lumiere’s Women Ballet Choreographers Residency will return May 6-7, 2017 at Djerassi Resident Artists Program with public outreach performances one week prior: April 28 and 29 at the 92nd Street Y in New York City.

(1) This history is well-documented by several recent art exhibits (including Edgar Degas, *A Strange New Beauty*, Museum of Modern Art, NYC), by scholars, and by feminist writer Germaine Greer.

(2) nytimes.com/2007/08/05/arts/dance/05laroc.html