

In Ballet, Women Rise by Stepping Out of Line

Classical ballet is dominated by women, yet few lead American companies. We talked to female artistic directors to find out why.



By Jesse Chase-Lubitz



Cincinnati Ballet Artistic Director and CEO Victoria Morgan with Maizyalet Velázquez, Sirui Liu and Courtney Connor Jones (Credit: Aaron M. Conway)

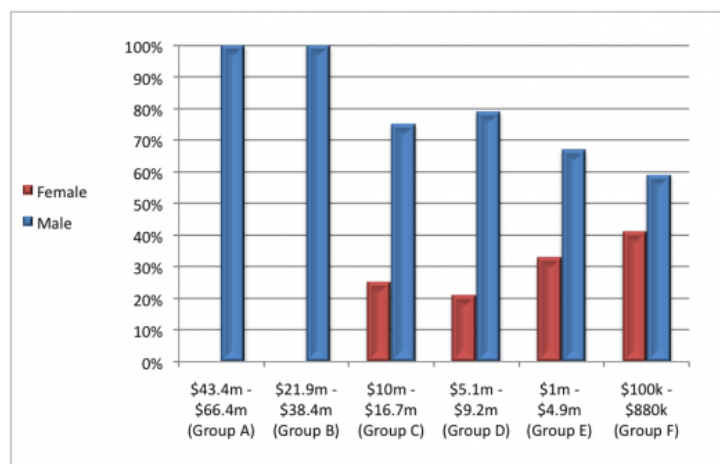
When Christine Cox became artistic and executive director at BalletX, the company she co-founded with former head, Matthew Neenan, she had to prove to the board, the public and the dancers that she could lead. Cox, a former principal dancer with

Pennsylvania Ballet, had worked mainly behind the scenes, while Neenan was the choreographer and face of the company.

“There was doubt when I took over about how we would continue, even though I was helping to the run the company before,” Cox says. Some insiders thought she would sink without Neenan’s choreography and prestige. “I didn’t doubt whether it was going to do well, but you always struggle when people question your leadership.”

In a field like classical ballet so heavily dominated by women, you would think that a woman could rise to a position of leadership easily. Yet there are strikingly few female artistic directors at America’s larger ballet companies, a position that involves creative duties like choreographing, rehearsing and setting large productions, as well as organizational and financial leadership. Out of 53 companies in the U.S. with more than \$100,000 in total expenses, all nonprofits, only 20 have female artistic directors, one of whom shares the job with a man.

In fact, the data show a stark reality: The larger the company, the less likely a woman is in charge. With the exception of a small blip among midsized companies (groups D and C in our chart), the number of women leaders declines as company size grows.



Source: Companies’ 2014 990 tax-exemption data

Why? Some argue that the ballet world simply reflects the gender divide in the country. Others say that women choose to begin families once they are finished dancing. “Women in dance put their babies and marriage on hold to do what they love,” says Tracey Alvey, artistic director of Alabama Ballet. Yet many directors say women aren’t allowing motherhood to hold them back any longer. “Having children doesn’t make a woman less ambitious,” says Cox.

The answer, ironically, lies in the overwhelming number of women in ballet, interviews with seven women artistic directors and three experts show. And the leadership gap begins both at the very beginning of a ballet career — and the very beginning of ballet.

The Prince and the Princess(es)

An average ballet class might consist of 20 girls and one boy. Boys are rare, girls are replaceable. “A boy walks into a ballet school and he is instantly a star because he is the only one... The girls are more a dime a dozen,” says Stoner Winslett, the founding artistic director of Richmond Ballet and a pioneer for female leaders in ballet.

Boys’ ballet education is usually paid for, and their value to the school allows them to pursue other interests. Even so, they are also incredibly hard workers. Unlike girls, they had to break a mold to follow their passion. Wendy Perron, the former editor of Dance Magazine, founder of her own company and former associate director at Jacob’s Pillow, argues that ballet boys develop a sense of individuality just from making that decision. “Men who do enter the ballet field already have a mind of their own,” she says. “They are not becoming engineers like their parents wanted.”

Boys begin as royalty among a crowd of peasant girls, and they become the heroes who save the damsels. With freedom, encouragement and projected heroism comes

confidence. And in turn, ballet boys, unlike ballet girls, develop a voice in this silent sport.

“Women should have just as much of a chance to be mediocre as men,” says Lynn Garafola, a dance historian and professor at Barnard College. But if a girl lags behind, she is either cut or ignored.

“Young girls feel the need to be really perfect, disciplined, structured and orderly,” says Victoria Morgan, artistic director and CEO of Cincinnati Ballet. Consider the corps de ballet, the large group of women who dance as a single element. For young dancers, a corps position is the first step in reaching their dream of becoming a professional dancer.

Morgan says this artistic requirement and desire to conform develops into what many call the “Swan Corps mentality.” “There’s something so satisfying about being a part of an entity with a sense of harmony and support and confirmation. But I think that exactly what makes our art form so magical also prepares our minds to conform,” she says. “The act of being a leader requires some defiance and fierceness and some stepping outside the lines.”



Richmond Ballet founding Artistic Director Stoner Winslett teaching a Richmond Ballet student
(Credit: Aaron Suttten)

A Fairy Tale World

“When you look at dance history, it’s always been a man at the top and the woman as the inspiration, the catalyst or the nemesis of change,” says Karen Gibbons-Brown, the artistic and executive director of Fort Wayne Ballet.

The classic ballets, such as Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Coppélia and Giselle, center around a helpless woman and a heroic man. “The woman as ethereal, out of our reach, beautiful and soft, while the men can take this soft being and mold her,” says Nell Shipman, artistic director of Portland Ballet, ballet ideals that she believes make it more difficult for women to see themselves in leadership positions.

Unlike Odette, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella or Swanhilda, the role of artistic director tends to fall in the men's category of opportunities. "In this country, our girls in ballet are not taught to imagine themselves in those roles," says Celia Fushille, artistic director of Smuin Contemporary Ballet. "Boys are encouraged to be fearless and unique. If a girl does that she gets kicked out."

Finding a Voice

To fully understand why there are fewer female artistic directors in ballet, it is important to consider another position of power: the choreographer.

People tend to think of George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Robert Joffrey and more recently Benjamin Millepied and Justin Peck as the greats in ballet choreography. Yet in modern dance, women like Twyla Tharp and Martha Graham are seen as equals to Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor.

But unlike modern dance, "in ballet training you never do any compositional training or choreography," Barnard's Garafola says. "Unless a girl is quite extraordinary, she doesn't come into a ballet class with very many tools for choreographing."

While this applies to male ballet dancers as well, choreographing also requires confidence, exposure, risk and trust — all qualities that men in ballet have, and women lack.

At the same time, most women focus foremost on their technique in order to compete, Perron says. "It's not like Jim Crow where there are laws against them" pursuing choreography, she says. "I think, mostly, in the ballet culture ballet girls want to have the right kind of feet, the right weight and the versatility."



Smuin Contemporary Ballet Artistic Director Celia Fushille in rehearsal (Credit: Scot Goodman)

While this may be true, many women artistic directors recall feeling intimidated by male choreographers and dismissed by boards. At first, “I felt so revealed and vulnerable,” Cox says. “I didn’t have the resources to push my artistic voice as a choreographer.”

As Perron points out, “the ballet culture has a lot to do with looking at her, not listening to her.” So while men develop relationships with other directors, many women do not.

Proving a Woman's Worth

Artistic directors interviewed by The Story Exchange took one of three routes to the top: They were either mentored and appointed by the original founder, hired by the company board or founded the company themselves.

Cox and Fushille were both groomed by male founders — and both felt pressure to show they could succeed. Fushille managed to bring her company through the economic downturn by bridging its artistic and executive sides. Dancers helped with administrative duties during down time, and office staff was inspired by the dancers' dedication and passion for the art to raise more money. Fushille says that fostering this mutual appreciation was crucial to the company's survival.

Portland Ballet's Shipman was mentored by a female founder. "It wasn't a big shift," she says. "In that sense it was kind of nice because I didn't have a big challenge in proving a woman's worth."

Others have not been so fortunate. Gibbons-Brown, who aspired to be a teacher more than a performer, remembers a board member exclaiming, "you're a woman you should be at home," when she applied to become artistic director. Her second interview question was: "What do you wear to performances?" Yet Gibbons-Brown ultimately became a star at Fort Wayne Ballet. She re-built the organization by letting go of the company and re-starting with a school only. Now, it has a full company, rehearses in an arts complex with a black box theater, and performs in a main theater across the street.

Several artistic directors say they also faced challenges from their boards. "When a board of directors is doing a search, I think they are going to feel more comfortable with a male artistic director," says Perron. "They have to deal with the money and deal with who is going to be fundraising. A lot of people feel that they can trust a male more."

This bias can mean that opportunities for women to rise when a founder leaves a company can fizzle when the board, which typically has no background in ballet, is left to find a new artistic director, Richmond Ballet's Winslett says.

"They look at the decision differently," she says. "There was a period where they were turning to ballet stars," for instance Helgi Tomasson, who became artistic director of San Francisco Ballet and Mikhail Baryshnikov, who directed American Ballet Theater. "A boy walks into a ballet school and is instantly a star. But the best baseball player doesn't always make the best baseball coach."

Winslett sidestepped this issue by creating her own company. She took Richmond Ballet from a small ensemble group to a professional company in 1984 and has built it into a nationally and internationally recognized organization. Winslett places art at the center of her "circular model" for the company. Administration, finances, fundraising and the board all revolve around the art, an approach she says creates unity around a common goal.



Fort Wayne Ballet Artistic and Executive Director Karen Gibbons-Brown with dancers Caitlin Quinn and Ernesto Lea Place (Credit: Jeffrey Crane)

Making Change

In the past few years, more female artistic directors have gotten the tap, including Lourdes Lopez and Julie Kent. And women choreographers like Crystal Pite and Melissa Barak have gained momentum.

Many women leaders are trying to pave the way for the next generation. Victoria Morgan, who created a unified vision for Cincinnati Ballet as both the artistic director and the CEO, has dedicated one showcase to female choreographers each season for the last four years. Winslett commissions multiple female choreographers throughout the year, many of whom have gone on to found their own companies. Fushille and Cox both try to ensure at least half of the lineup in their annual choreographer's showcase are women.

Almost every artistic director interviewed encourages young girls to express their interests, seek out mentors, ask questions and acquire skills outside the studio. The Portland Ballet School, Shipman says, offers a choreography class to all students, who each create a piece for the year-end showcase.

"I always challenged my students to remember that uniformity does not serve them in the long run," says TaraMarie Perri, founder and director of The Perri Institute for Mind and Body in New York. "I ask them to recall that it was the sirens, the rebels, the confident performers that have always made it big in the field of dance."

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