



Women Ballet Choreographer's Residency at Djerassi

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By: Casey Gaiser

Today I attended the first of these annual residencies planned for the Djerassi Artists Residency Program out here in Woodside, CA. The goal of this program is to bring funding, visibility, and support to women creating dances in the ballet idiom. This is a subject that has been in the news lately, but it's been a topic of conversation in dance studies for quite some time (cf Lynn Garafola's *Where Are Ballet's Women Choreographers?*, circa 1996., for a terrific overview.)

Why ballet, you might ask? Aren't women also experiencing difficulties in other dance genres as well? I can't answer that, although the answer is probably "yes," but I can tell you that women in ballet face particular ballet-culture-specific issues. As choreographer Myles Thatcher, who attended the conference as an ally remarked, from the time they're young female dancers are told not to stand out, not to be an individual, and that there's always someone waiting to take their place if they don't like it. Men in ballet face a different set of challenges, but usually ballet schools are so happy to have them there that they get a greater sense of individuality and freedom as they go through school.

We need to tell our female ballet students that they don't always have to be such "good girls." They need to start thinking of themselves as artists, and we need to nourish their creativity. I think every young ballet student should watch some Karole Armitage from the 80s for a punky predecessor along these lines. (Who was also 100% acknowledging her tradition, too - her *Watteau Duets* is an homage to *Agon*.) You CAN be in ballet and be different.

Choreographer Amy Seiwert made a point that really stuck with me: what is the ballet world missing out on if women aren't choreographing? What perspectives are lost? With so much attention being paid here in the States in the years after Balanchine's death on the future prognosis of ballet, it strikes me that a more diverse generation of ballet choreographers is at least part of the answer to the somewhat floundering situation we face. Today, watching a piece by Julia Adam that featured a female protagonist with a bad back dancing to an ear-sawing rendering of Radiohead's "I'm a Creep," I felt like I saw some of those perspectives more clearly. And not because it was Radiohead and edgy, but because it was smart, honest, and choreographically interesting ballet.

Screendance, or dances on/with/through film, is offering a new platform for women to make work. Greta Schoenberg, who produces the SF Dance Film fest, stated that over 50% of their submissions are from women. When the institutions are slow to change, this new medium makes it easier for women (and for everyone) to get their work out there.

Some other nuggets. Many of the women mentioned how becoming mothers had really changed their perspective. I've noticed that about myself, too. Sometimes I find myself in the opera house wondering, why all this hoopla about romantic love? You want complicated, passionate, all-consuming relationships? Try being a mother. It's crazy intense. Why don't we have more dances that capture this aspect of human experience?

Kudos to Kathryn Roszak of Danse Lumiere for pouring herself into making this conference happen.