



ANNA MORGAN (she/her)

MA: Rambert School

INVISIBLE BARRIERS, VISIBLE CHANGE

**A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE
FOR TEACHERS ON
GENDER IN BALLET**

**INFORMED BY NEW
UK RESEARCH**

September 2025

AIMS OF THIS RESOURCE...



Explore **what** the current picture of gender in ballet leadership looks like



Explore **why** these imbalances exist



Explore **how** we can work towards change



Hello!

My name is Anna Morgan, and for the past two years I have been researching **gender equity in ballet's artistic leadership** as part of my MA at Rambert School.

Within ballet I am a teacher, creative, journalist and researcher.

I love ballet **and** I envisage a future where it is just as excellent while also being **inclusive, transparent and progressive.**

As teachers and leaders we hold huge influence over **individual journeys** and the **collective future** of our art form.

I hope you will find this resource both informative and empowering. When we work together, I truly believe we can build a **bright future for ballet.**

Anna x



A note on language...

Throughout this resource, I use the terms **women** and **men** to encompass both *cisgender* and *transgender* individuals who identify as such. Where distinctions are necessary for context, I have specified using the prefixes **cis** or **trans**. I have adopted this approach rather than using the terms *female-identifying* or *male-identifying*, (except when quoting others verbatim) as these modifiers can be perceived to undermine the legitimacy of trans people as women or men.

(Language, Please, no date; Seed&Spark, no date; Seattle Riot, 2019; University of Oxford, no date).

HOW THIS RESEARCH WAS BUILT...

I gathered brand new UK data and combined it with existing research to reveal the current picture of gender equity in UK ballet...



I surveyed 207 dancers & former dancers...

...to find out about their experiences in ballet training.



I surveyed 102 ballet teachers...

...to find out the gender ratios of the 7555 students they collectively taught.



I reviewed existing research & statistics...

...to give context to my findings.



I analysed data from the UK's largest 5 ballet companies...

...to see gender ratios of artistic directors & choreographers



I held a focus group

...to delve deeper into lived experiences.

Here is what I discovered...

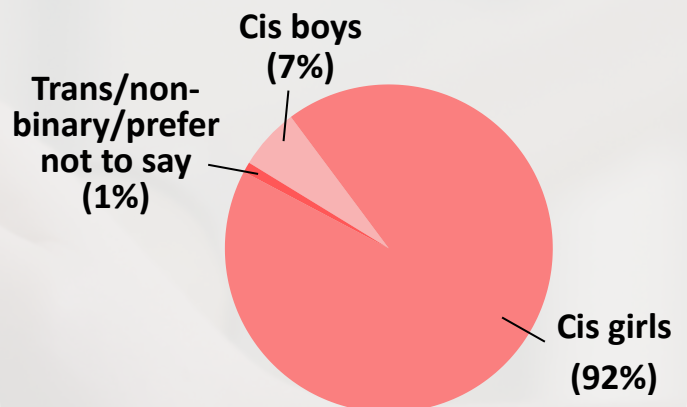
THE CURRENT UK PICTURE...

*In 2025, boys make up just **7%** of UK ballet students...*

Percentage of UK ballet students under 18 who are cis boys:

7%

% of UK ballet students under 18 by gender identity:



*Yet our largest five ballet companies are all **led by men**...*

(The Royal Ballet, English National Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Scottish Ballet, Northern Ballet)

Percentage of artistic directors who are men:

100%

% of artistic directors in UK's 5 largest ballet companies by gender identity:

**Men
(100%)**

(No openly trans, non-binary or other gender-diverse individuals were identified in this data)

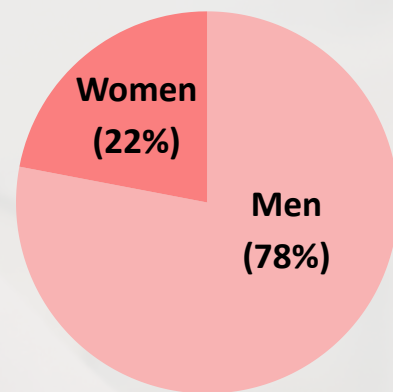
THE CURRENT UK PICTURE...

*If we look at the choreographers for the past four seasons in those same companies, the majority were **men**...*

**Percentage of
choreographers for
the past 4 seasons
who were men...**

78%

**% of choreographers whose
work featured in the past four
seasons, by gender identity:**

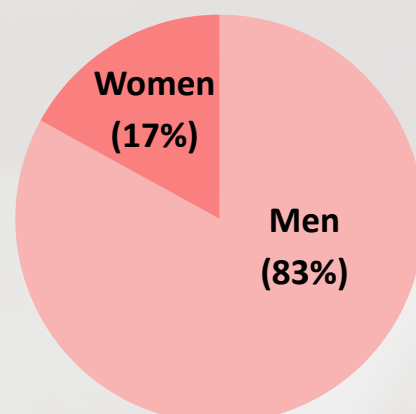


*But counting choreographers alone misses something... Men are credited more often **and** they're more likely to create full-length works. When we break productions down by act, the gap grows even wider:*

**Percentage of acts
choreographed by
men in the past 4
seasons...**

83%

**% of choreographers of each act
featured in the past four
seasons, by gender identity:**

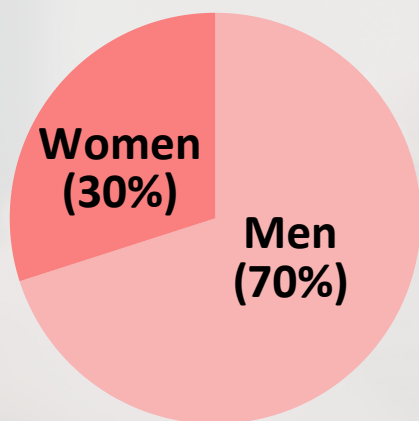


(No openly trans, non-binary or other gender-diverse individuals were identified in this data)

IS IT JUST THE UK?

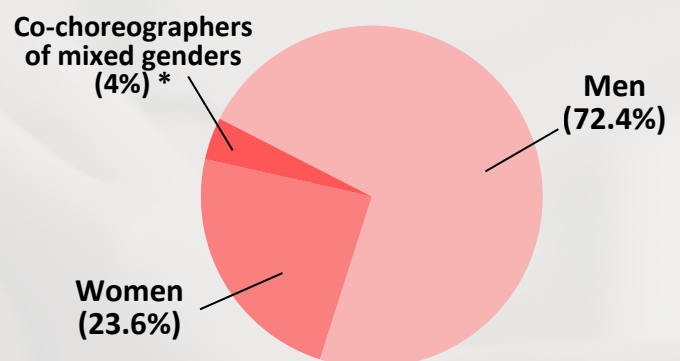
*No, statistics from the Dance Data Project show us this is a **global issue**...*

% of artistic directors globally by gender identity:



Dance Data Project - Global Leadership Report 2025

% of choreographers in English-speaking countries by gender identity:



* I.e. a collaboration between a man and woman

Dance Data Project - English Speaking Company 2023/2024 Season Programming Report

“Female audiences, donors, and students continue to support an art form that routinely marginalizes women in all respects.”

**Liza Yntema,
President and Founder of
the Dance Data Project**

(Yntema, quoted in Women's Media Center, 2019, para. 15).

(Image courtesy of the Dance Data Project)

But why?

We can see that ballet classes are predominantly filled by **young girls**.

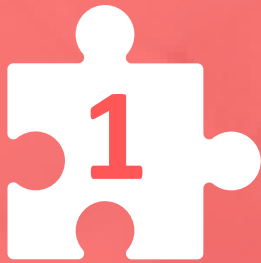
Audiences and donors, too, are mostly **women**.

So why are most artistic leaders **men**?

The vast majority of artistic vision and creative output we see on UK ballet stages is through the **male lens**.

So what's causing this? The data I gathered, and the research that's already out there, reveal some clear patterns. Let's take a look...

THERE ARE 3 PIECES TO THIS PUZZLE...



**DISPROPORTIONATE
PRAISE, OPPORTUNITIES
& EXPECTATIONS**



BINARY GENDER NORMS



**THE NEED FOR
PEDAGOGICAL &
CURRICULAR REFORM**



1

**DISPROPORTIONATE
PRAISE,
OPPORTUNITIES &
EXPECTATIONS**



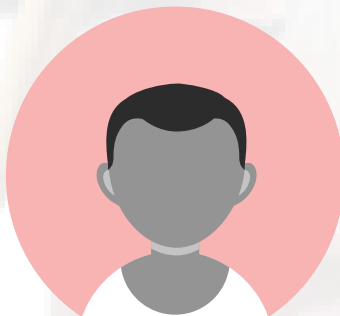
LET'S QUICKLY MEET MY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS...

...because we'll be hearing about their lived experiences in ballet training...

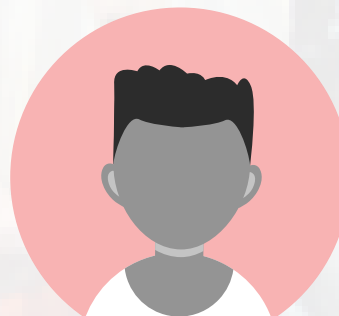
(These are pseudonyms alongside self-identified pronouns & gender identity)



Billie (he/they)
Gender
questioning



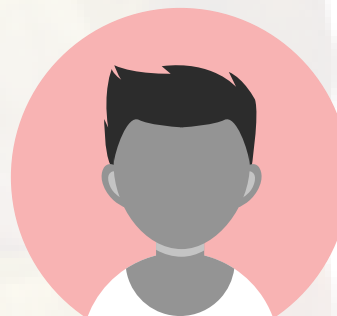
Craig
(he/him)
Cisgender man



Dylan
(he/him)
Cisgender man



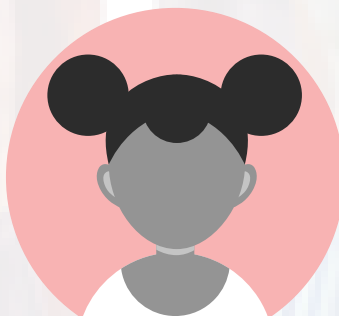
Jamie
(he/him)
Cisgender man



John
(he/him)
Cisgender man



Olivia
(they/them)
Non-binary



Rebecca
(she/her)
Cisgender woman



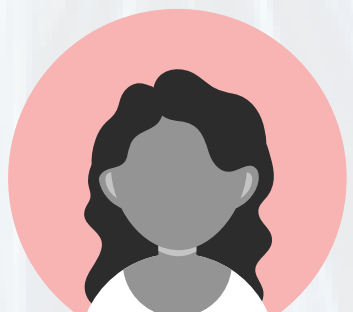
Ruby
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

PARTICIPANTS WERE...

- ▶ Aged 20 - 21 years
- ▶ All in full-time training with a curriculum which includes ballet



Tess
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

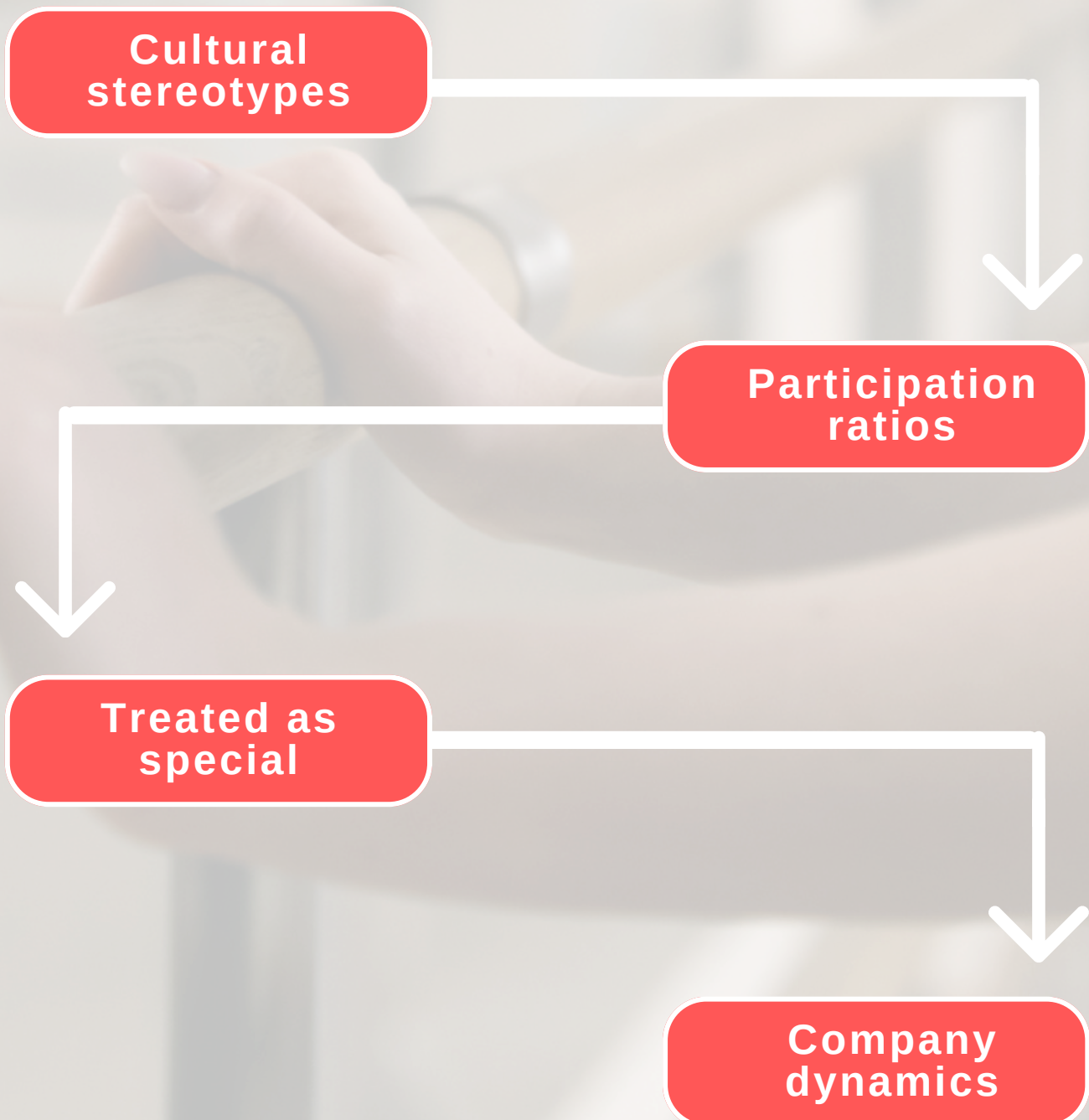


Seren
(she/her)
Trans feminine

THE DISPROPORTION PIPELINE...



We can trace *leadership outcomes* back through a clear *pipeline* which starts before a child steps foot in a ballet class...



CULTURAL STEREOTYPES...



I think every boy or man I've taught or known has faced negativity for doing ballet. Western society is both homophobic and misogynistic. In its eyes ballet = feminine and feminine = bad/weak.

“

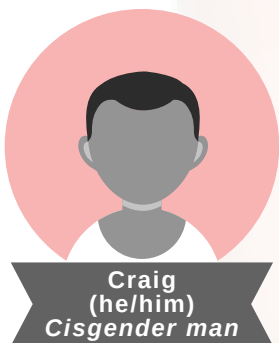
Dance is often considered a feminised activity which can lead to boys who engage in dance being bullied and having to manage the 'gay male dancer' stereotype.



”

(Clegg, Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2017, citing Polasek & Roper, 2011; Risner, 2014)

This was reflected by the men in the focus group...



“

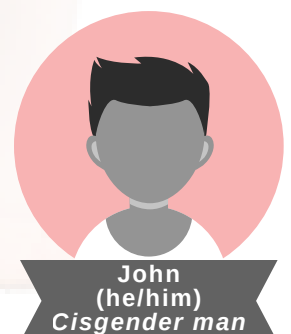
...in secondary school I was really, really badly bullied... like people pushing me around the corridors and stuff for doing ballet.

”

“

...because I danced I was therefore gay, and therefore that's not a good thing. It was very homophobic.

”

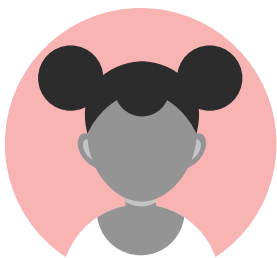


FROM RARE TO SPECIAL...



Ballet is seen as less culturally acceptable for boys, so very few take part. Often, minority groups are poorly treated, but in ballet, the boys' rarity makes them a precious commodity...

The women in the focus group sensed this dynamic...



Rebecca
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

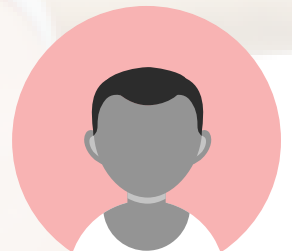
Particular teachers would praise the male-identifying students more often... I was doing just as well as, if not better than [them], and... we wouldn't get seen.

But the men, and participants assigned male at birth, were also aware and uncomfortable with this treatment...

“

It's hard to be the only one getting praised...

I don't need the ego boost, I want the teachers to go 'fix this fix this fix this'... rather than going 'Craig you're great'



Craig
(he/him)
Cisgender man

”



Billie (he/they)
Gender questioning

I obviously wanted to be told I was doing well, but only for my actual technical ability... not just because I was the only boy.

”

DIFFERENT STANDARDS...



Outside the studio boys often face stigma or bullying for doing ballet. But inside, the dynamic flips: girls are held to stricter expectations while boys have more freedom...

“

You have to be perfect, not only in class but in attitude and decorum and you have to fit in and be quiet. And the boys in some cases are allowed to just get away with murder... allowed to be creative... allowed to try things... They can just do whatever as long as they keep showing up.



”

Ashley Boudier
(former NYCB Principal)

Angyal, C. (2017) Behind the tutus, ballet is a boys' club, this ballerina wants to fix that., HuffPost. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/behind-the-tutus-ballet-is-a-boys-club-ashley-boudier-wants-to-fix-that_n_58c9302ee4b01c029d77a81f (Accessed: 11 March 2024).

The focus group participants agreed...



Rebecca
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

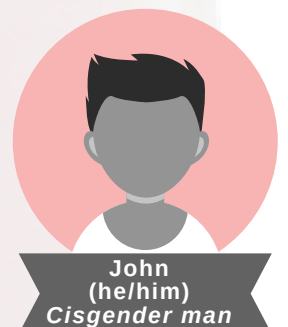
“

Overall, a female having a bit of personality & having the same fun as a male-identifying [student] would be classed as disrespectful... I've rarely seen someone be called disrespectful as a male-identifying person.

”

“

I'm able to get away with so much more than a female in my class... it would be 'ahh it's just John he's being cheeky'. I feel like I can get away with a lot of things just because I'm smiling at the teacher.



John
(he/him)
Cisgender man

”

COMPANY DYNAMICS...



These patterns continue in professional companies. Women are expected to conform, men are encouraged to be individual. Men aspire to create, women are considered muses...

“

The conformity of the corps comprises a system of institutional control that constrains the creative agency of female ballet dancers.



”

Kelly, C. (2015). 'Dancing up the glass escalator: Institutional advantages for men in ballet choreography', Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal, 2, doi: 10.52214/curj.v2i1.4113.

In many companies, leadership works like a boys' club. The men in charge handpick their protégés to succeed them...

“

For these men, the path to choreographic success had a logic; it was clear, well-lit, and supported by those in charge (such as Peter Martins).

”

Kelly, C. (2015). 'Dancing up the glass escalator: Institutional advantages for men in ballet choreography', Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal, 2, doi: 10.52214/curj.v2i1.4113.

@annamorgandance

COMPANY DYNAMICS...



The same behaviours and character traits criticised in women are often celebrated in men...

“Men are in alignment with their agentic gender role when they act as leaders. However, when women use the same agentic strategies, they are often seen as not being feminine and not acting according to their gender roles.”

DeFrank-Cole, L. and Nicholson, R.K. (2016). 'The slow-changing face of leadership in ballet: An interdisciplinary approach to analysing women's roles', *Leadership and the Humanities*, 4(2), pp. 73–91.

“We are still training women to be pretty and nice instead of being exceptional and beautiful leaders.”

Helen Pickett, world-renowned ballet choreographer

Kelly, C. (2015). 'Dancing up the glass escalator: Institutional advantages for men in ballet choreography', *Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2, doi: 10.52214/curj.v2i1.4113.

@annamorgandance



Photo Credit: Mihaela Bodlovic



Joining the dots...

From **childhood** right through to **company life**, **boys** are treated as **special** and encouraged to be **creative**, while **girls** are treated as **replaceable** and expected to be **obedient**.

If men have been consistently praised, supported, and promoted, is it any wonder they feel **more empowered** than women to aspire to **artistic leadership roles**?

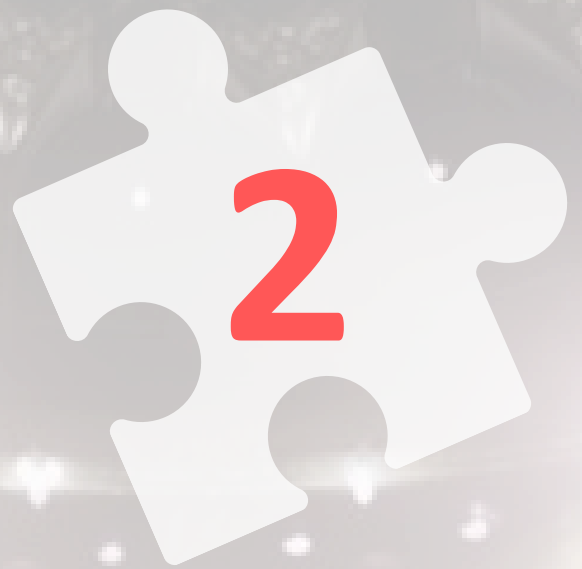


1

Reflection moment...

*Can I recall any moments in my own teaching where I've unintentionally given more **praise, attention** or **freedom** to some students over others?*





BINARY GENDER NORMS

BINARY NORMS...



Ballet has clung tightly to rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity. These binary expectations limit dancers and determine who feels they belong, and who doesn't...

For trans, non-binary or other gender-diverse people, ballet can be a hard place to feel welcome...



Olivia
(they/them)
Non-binary

“...it does war with my gender expression... it's really tricky to feel like a whole person in ballet.”

“...having to wear tight clothing, especially for me is very dysphoric.”



Seren
(she/her)
Trans feminine

BINARY NORMS...



Bauer, C. (2024) 'Leroy Mokgatle lives her dream at Staatsballett Berlin', Dance Magazine, 01/12/2024. Available at: <https://www.dancemagazine.com/leroy-mokgatle/> [Accessed: 24/02/2025].

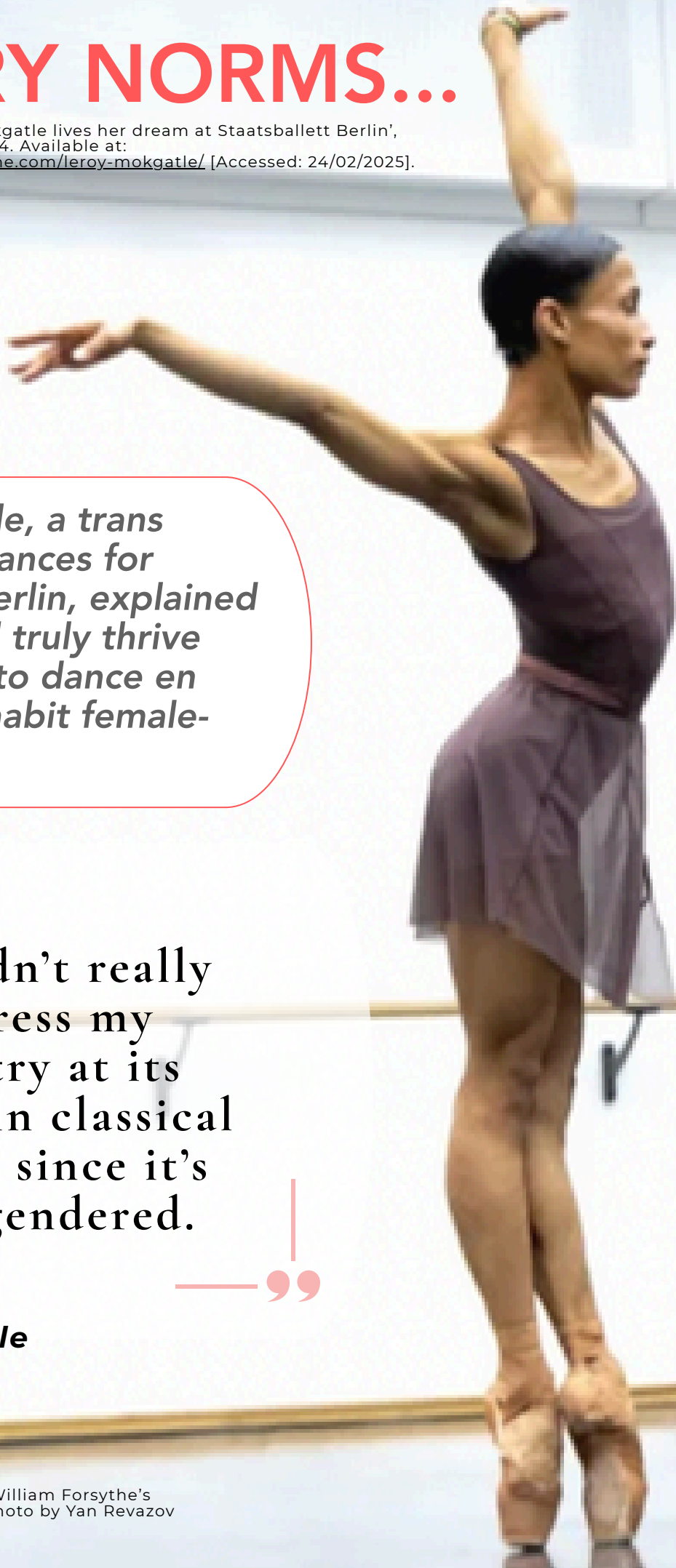
Leroy Mokgatle, a trans woman who dances for Staatsballet Berlin, explained how she could truly thrive once allowed to dance en pointe and inhabit female-coded roles...

“ I couldn't really express my artistry at its fullest in classical ballet, since it's very gendered. ”

Leroy Mokgatle

Leroy Mokgatle rehearsing William Forsythe's Approximate Sonata 2016. Photo by Yan Revazov

@annamorgandance



LIMITS FOR CIS DANCERS...



It's not just trans, non-binary and other gender diverse dancers who are disadvantaged by the binary approach. Cis dancers are also limited...

Throughout the survey and focus group, dancers said they wanted opportunities to explore vocabulary and qualities not traditionally assigned to their gender identity...

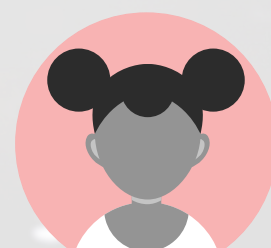


Ruby
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

I would love to just get the chance and get encouraged... to try maybe something a bit more masculine.



I do it to prove a point! In my pride, 'ok you can do four pirouettes, so can I!' Seeing [name] flicking his head around doing two tours, I can do that much neater, much tidier, much better than you.



Rebecca
(she/her)
Cisgender woman

Throughout the data, women commonly said they wanted to try traditionally masculine vocabulary. Men also reported wanting to try pointe work or explore qualities generally considered too feminine.

OK, BUT WHAT ABOUT PARTNERING?



This is one of the most common questions I'm asked when I talk about approaching gender in ballet...

Dancers across gender expressions felt pressures to conform to the binary physicality required in ballet partnering. Women discussed the pressure to be thin and light...



“...they're going to think I'm so fat if they lift me”

Men reported feeling pressure to be strong and muscular...



There's so much pressure about like, sh*t, they've all got to be the same height, my arms were shaking, and I was like, what if they go out and laugh at me because I'm weak?



*Partnering is not only about **men lifting women overhead**. Modern choreography increasingly uses **fluid partnering** and **weight sharing**. Understanding both roles makes all dancers better partners.*

AESTHETIC PRESSURES...



Ballet clings to rigid ideals of the '**perfect ballet body**'. Men tall and muscular. Women shorter and ultra-slim.

Women ballet dancers continue to be at disproportionately high risk of **eating disorders**.

This further disempowers women dancers from achieving leadership roles: being **chronically under-fuelled** undermines health, capacity to self-advocate, and ability to take up the physical and metaphorical space necessary to become a leader.

There is an **accepted career pipeline** whereby choreographers and artistic directors must first perform in professional ballet companies. Therefore, any dancers whose bodies or identities do not conform to the **binary ideal**, are excluded from professional ballet. **Without professional experience, leadership roles are unattainable.**



Joining the dots...

All dancers are restricted by ideas of who can explore which **techniques, vocabulary and qualities.**

Ballet's rigid gender ideals discourage and exclude **trans, non-binary** and other **gender-diverse** dancers at both training and professional level.

These **narrow ideals** exclude many **cis** dancers too. A tall, muscular, cisgender woman or a short, slight, cisgender man, regardless of their **choreographic talent or artistic vision**, are unlikely to reach leadership roles due to being **excluded** from professional ballet in the first place.



2

Reflection moment...

Can I think of ways where I might be **reinforcing binary ideals** of what it means to be masculine or feminine within my ballet classes?





3

THE NEED FOR PEDAGOGICAL AND CURRICULAR REFORM

PEDAGOGY PROBLEMS...



Lasting change at the top can't happen without us first reforming the way dancers are trained...



A Brazilian philosopher named Paulo Freire created the concept of...

'the banking model'

Ballet training has long-operated in line with this model.

*Freire explained teachers cannot simply **deposit knowledge** into a student as though they're a **passive vessel**, like depositing money in a bank. Instead, students must become **active participants** in their own learning.*

Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.

Young girls tend to start ballet classes many years earlier than boys, and are trained to be...

“
| **good girls who do what they're told.** |
”

Stinson, S.W. (2005). 'The hidden curriculum of gender in dance education', *Journal of Dance Education*, 5(2), pp.51-57.

When boys enter ballet, they are encouraged to be...

“
| **challenging, energetic and daring.** |
”

Clegg, H., Owton, H. and Allen-Collinson, J. (2017). 'Challenging conceptions of gender: UK dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls in the ballet studio', *Research in Dance Education*, 19(2), pp.128-139.



Joining the dots...

Ballet's long-standing use of the banking model creates a learning culture of **obedience** and **hierarchy**.

This is bad for all dancers, as it stops them from being able to **critically engage**, **question**, be **creative**, and **lead**.

But it's girls who are often exposed to this style from an **early age**, training them to be **quiet**, **disciplined** and **compliant**.

This means the majority of dancers in the training pipeline are discouraged from the very qualities required to be a leader - **confidence**, **assertiveness**, **boldness**, **creativity**, perhaps even a **rebellious streak**.



3

Reflection moment...

How much of my current teaching reflects a model of **hierarchy** and **obedience**?
What could I do to encourage dancers to have more **voice**, **agency** and **creative freedom**?





A TEACHER'S TOOLKIT FOR CHANGE...

Recommendations for a
best practice approach to gender
for ballet teachers and schools...

**DRESS
CODES**



**GENDER
NON-SPECIFIC
TRAINING**



**FEMINIST
PEDAGOGY**



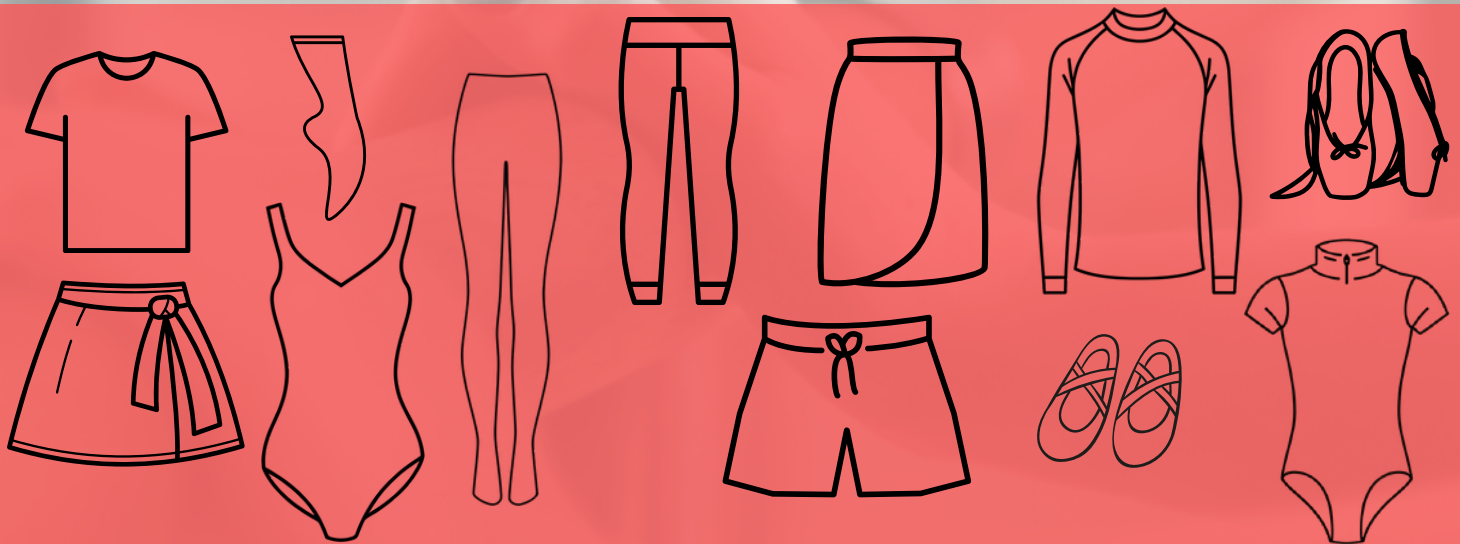
**LEADERSHIP
TRAINING**



DRESS CODES



*Traditional ballet dress codes present binary options of a **masculine or feminine uniform**. A modern approach is to offer a **capsule collection**: a small, versatile set of items that dancers can mix-and-match...*



THIS APPROACH...



Ensures dancers are dressed safely & appropriately for training.



Offers flexibility for body confidence, identity, and preference.



Encourages individuality and agency rather than conformity and obedience.

GENDER NON-SPECIFIC TRAINING



*Traditional ballet training often separates ‘**male**’ and ‘**female**’ technique, methods & qualities. Instead, a **skills-based training approach** expands each dancer’s training experience. Here’s how that could look...*

1 FOUNDATIONAL TRAINING (Recreational level, or early stages of vocational)

All dancers explore...

- ✓ Fundamental technique
- ✓ Co-ordination
- ✓ Artistry
- ✓ Musicality

Gender does not need to affect training content.

2 SPECIALISM ROTATIONS... (Vocational/pre-professional training)

Like medical students training as generalists before doing rotations & selecting specialisms, dancers try it all...

- ✓ Pointe/pre-pointe
- ✓ Virtuosic turns/jumps
- ✓ Choreography
- ✓ Basic partnering (in both roles)
- ✓ Repertoire



GENDER NON-SPECIFIC TRAINING



3 PERSONALISED PATHWAYS... (Latter years of vocational/pre-professional training)

Dancers work with mentors to build a training path based on...

- ✓ Strengths
- ✓ Identity
- ✓ Interests
- ✓ Career goals

THE BENEFITS OF THIS APPROACH:



All students can explore the vocabulary, skills, qualities and expression which best suit their **physicality** and **identity**



Ballet companies benefit from employing a **diverse range of dancers** who are versatile technicians, nuanced artists, and represent a range of identities who are more **relatable to a modern audience**.



Dancers who choose to pursue careers in ballet **beyond performing**, e.g. teachers or future artistic leaders, will have a **broad overview of skills**.

FEMINIST PEDAGOGY



*Ballet has long relied on **hierarchical teaching** styles which train **passive rule followers**. A move towards a **feminist pedagogical approach** will empower a generation of dancers who can **think, question, & lead**...*

KEY PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST PEDAGOGY...



Re-thinking teacher/student dynamics...

No more all-knowing teacher and passive, silent & ultra-obedient student. Shift to a focus on shared power and a learner-centred approach.



Empowerment...

Uplifting all dancers, not just those who would traditionally 'fit' in ballet.



Building community...

Creating safe spaces for connection & collaboration.



Valuing individual voice...

Knowing each dancer's perspective is important.



Respect for diversity...

Celebrating differences & centring lived experience.



Challenging tradition...

Never justifying decisions with 'that's the way we've always done it'.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING



*In traditional ballet training models, leadership skills are rarely taught. **Embedding leadership opportunities** into curricula prepares dancers to aspire to, and succeed in, **roles beyond performance.***

INSIDE THE STUDIO...

*With a **feminist pedagogical approach** to ballet classes, leadership skill-building will become **embedded** into their training...*

*Students will **take charge** of their own learning, focus on **collaboration**, engage **critically** with material and concepts, offer their **opinions**, **lead** tasks, explore their **creativity**, and more.*

OUTSIDE THE STUDIO...

Whether you teach in a local dance studio or a full-time vocational school, leadership skills can be nurtured in big & small ways beyond the studio...

- Mentorship opportunities (e.g. teachers, alumni, professionals)
- Careers sessions
- Attending guest talks/panels
- Exposure to leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds
- Work experience opportunities (e.g. choreography, fundraising, event planning)



Reflection moment...

*Based on what I've read today, can I think of **three changes**, big or small, that I might put into practice moving forwards?*





Thank you!

for taking the time to
read and reflect.

**This resource is just a small snippet of my
research, there's so much more I wish I
could share with you!**

**If you want to join me in geeking out on
this topic even more...**



**(A full
bibliography
can be found
here)**

Head to my research website

Or get in touch via socials!



TikTok