

The Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture, (ARC)
Fall Symposium: **BIOLOGY, Its Effects on Culture, Myths, and the Arts**
The House of the Redeemer, New York City
November 4, 2006, Margo Fish, Program Chair

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A female NYC critic writing for a well established dance journal called Attitude, wrote: *"It was heartening to see the gender dynamic in the dances Kelly presented at John Jay Theater, in New York City, opening night of her season here. Women were not dragged across the floor, and I left the performance without the feeling I had been to a bad party."* (Lori Ortiz)

This woman gets out and sees a lot of dance. That is her job. So the comment is equally about what this critic has been experiencing in the dance world these days. What are the questions it raises - about her expectations? Why this violence? Are we becoming sensitized to images of violence, and by choreography (safe acting out) of violence against women, which are being mainstreamed and mainlined into our culture?

I direct a 25-year old contemporary ballet company, named Rebecca Kelly Ballet, and also the early childhood creative movement program, Kids Co-Motion. My professional dancers are superb and gorgeous human beings. It is a privilege to cause them to move. We work on pointe, but there are no princes and we don't wear tutus --- Meaning I love and have *great respect* for the elite level of classical skill and refinement and the body of knowledge that comes with classical training, --and I use all that -- but **our stories** come out of our lives today, and from what we can imagine.

Rebecca Kelly Ballet took shape and revealed its profile in the era of Boy George, a band whose pan-sexual, multiracial makeup helped transform social attitudes in the 1980s. *Described by former band member Jon Moss, "The whole idea of Culture Club was multiculturalism, the spirit of tolerance, the spirit of all as one. The diversity in the band of men included a Jew, a black person, an English person from Essex, and a Catholic homosexual.* This was also the period when the choreographer Mark Morris was startling his audiences, and fascinating his critics for his "bad boy" persona.

As sole choreographer and female artistic director of a ballet company, married 26 years to another dancer, and a parent, puts me in a fairly unique category. There are other married couples who run *repertory* ballet companies, and there are plenty of women, many fresh out of college dance programs, and others, who choreograph and direct *modern* dance companies.

But here I am – a woman in the field of ballet. I have been a dance maker for 30 years. I deeply love what I do, but not with blind devotion. And I do not embrace the whole culture of dance, for there are not only glass slippers in the ballet world, but glass ceilings, and there are troubling double standards and conventions.

The Question: How has the biology of the human species affected the basis of culture?

Having been asked to consider and comment upon this subject, I held this topic in my mind for weeks. I reached no conclusions. I only have the various musings, and all the additional questions that came up along the way.

Of course anyone, certainly any female professional, is familiar with the topic, at least subliminally, and knows there IS an effect. There is certainly a gender difference at work in the field of dance and choreography. There is a difference in who prepares the soil, who sows the field, nourishes the

crop, who harvests, and who benefits in the marketplace. And I am only speaking of the Western tradition of dance.

After 9/11, with a monthly contribution and the exchange of letters, I participated in the sponsorship of three Afghani women whose lives and families were devastated by war and poverty, and whose hopes were thin broken threads. Iraqi-born Zainab Salbi, founded Women for Women International *“to provide direct financial and emotional support to women living on the margins of hope.”* WFW encouraged letter-writing to foster a healing sense of intimacy and concern. We were encouraged to share our lives and ask about the lives of our “sisters.”

It took me months to be able to mention what I did – I was reluctant to say I was a choreographer. How could I say to “my sister” I have been making dances for 30 years, knowing the concept of public dance was far from her life? And knowing near her part of the world a growing number of conservative university students consider the teaching of musicology and performing arts an attack on Islam, and want it banned from the curriculum? How would this foster the healing intimacy for which our letters were intended?

People react to the passion and the intensity of artists following their paths. Maybe they are attracted to the freedom they imagine we embody. 9/11 brought to my conscious attention that we are lucky to be born into a society where we the people, have choices: the luckiest ones get to choose the pattern and flavor of their lives. Nobody invites one to be an artist. We select ourselves and we become responsible for that decision. Sometimes we feel lucky to be artists, but there are periods when we do not feel so lucky.

But I was free to make the choice. The choice was mine. Over the years I grew to see how dance is a celebration of our humanity, bears witness to our state of being, and fosters community. It is also a forum. In teaching, I witness in students of every age, time and again, how deeply dance connects us. As an American artist, it is my privilege to live by the products and drive of my imagination. In a political context, dance can be seen as a larger emblem of our society’s freedom. Society did not restrict my movements. No one made me dress in a way that restricted my movements. But when you contemplate what it means when a society’ defines requirements about clothing, you quickly see the connection of obtaining power over women by restricting women’s movement.

Mulling over the topic made me ask more questions, starting with the most basic. What is dance? To me?

Dance is an experience. A dance performance only exists in a moment and quickly becomes a fleeting memory, like a sunset, or an accident. It is amazing that it takes such contemplation, energy, force of will and curiosity to bring a dance into being.

I thought about how dance functions in our society.

For some it provides social connections –it plays a role in seduction and conjugation

For some it is a physical outlet. It serves a purpose in releasing tension of body and mind

For others it is intellectual, stimulating – both in the making of dance, and in watching it as an audience member. Creating a dance fulfills the brain’s desire for ultimate stimulation on every level, as I’m sure is the case in the creation of all things.

For some it is abstract. It frees us from conventional thought and the limitation of language, and holds the possibility of uniting us in some other arena apart from everyday life.

Ultimately, it is useful in society in that it allows people to come together. Dance, like most art, works like a mirror of our times. And anything that brings people together is a powerful tool, for influence, as history has certainly shown us in politics, and in religious contexts.

What have I been doing for all these years in dance that keep me in the field? – It starts always with the dancing, but I was quickly drawn into choreography, the making of steps and ballets, and the ideas which provoked the steps – for the wonderfulness of it, the beauty, the power and eloquence of sharing thought and imagery, for the curiosity, to see what beautiful dancers could do, to transcend the spoken language, and --because I could. The choice was mine. And in dance, you are tested every single day about that choice.

When does Dance begin?

For many it starts - and ends - in childhood. For some, the practitioners, it continues from the moment it first ignites your being until you are released from its grip. For others, it is a well from which you dip from time to time.

Dance is – fostered by mothers and women in America. I am convinced that without them, there would be absolutely no dance. Maybe no art!

What is the creative process?

It is the making of something out of nothing, something which didn't exist before -- Innovation. To some, this is a most exciting, risky, compelling urge. An artist is not frightened by boundaries, or the unknown, or maybe I should say, *not deterred*, because of course always we are aware of the looming unknown. Not recipe followers, artists believe in the process of creation for its own sake and for the valuable experiences along the way. I think an artist decides or discovers not to be ordinary. In choreography, you can't do it *alone*; you need the dancers/ the company to be extraordinary.

Being feminine or masculine in dance.

There are many nuances to our sexuality. It has behooved me to notice different male and female energies in rehearsal and consider how best to use these resources constructively.

So you have to consider the process, the energy. How to make the creative process happen.

First, by nature it helps if you have associative tendencies, tending to unite people, or at least your own work force. Other processes or energies you also need include:

The ability to produce **synergy** – the combined action, cooperative action, when taken together increase each others effectiveness

And **synthesis** – the ability to form a complex whole from parts, the process of combining elements or abstract entities into a unified entity

Some people think creativity comes out of having time. In the west, do we believe leisure time releases creativity. Who has more time, do you think? Men or Women?

According to a recent Time Magazine, women, in addition to what they might do creatively or professionally, spend twice as much time caring for family and household. They appear to have 1/3 less free time. Are there 1/3 fewer female artists? I think creativity is a way of living. The button is permanently on. The output is, among other things, a reflection of priorities and the result of good time/management skills.

Culture:

Women in dance have to have the toughest constitutions, secure egos, strong muscles and bones. Yet the ballet culture and the myths it perpetuates through classical traditional dance requires that women appear fragile but not weak, nuanced, gentle, as well as athletic, strong. Women have to smile with grace under *the most extreme* physical conditions. Their supreme effort must appear effortless. I absolutely love this incredible contrast, control, and theatrical power and talent it takes to hold the dichotomy. Women in dance are so tough and so strong, and so flexible, and have such

endurance, that they would be absolutely terrifying to men if it were not for the cultural ballet requirement to appear delicate and soft, too.

If challenged, I find women respond resourcefully. They are malleable, adaptive. Female dancers have to be because they are a dime a dozen.

Men in dance like to revel in their effort, negotiate their worth in dance. And while strength, energy, prowess, coordination, *ballon*, stretch are all admired, we also don't require men to be able to show the nuance, the delicacy, the subtle things we also admire in theater. I find if challenged their egos and their personalities are more fragile, and then, they know they can pack up and go elsewhere and get another job.

My men – (of Eastern European-training) are macho; desire to be right, not so concerned with their effect on the group or another individual, and generally *presume* they are right. They want to impress more than please. They respond strongly to a strong point of view. They will compete more overtly with other males. My western born males are different.

My women – desire consensus. They want to please me, and to please the others, They are conciliatory, tolerant of males. They are aware of the culture of the company. I always speak to these "female" traits: exhorting dancers to notice your effect on those around you, always keep sights on the larger goal.

In dance I have to work harder in interpersonal relations than my art some days, only to discover that achievement in this area is also the art.

Myths

Adolescent girls still want to be taught by men and even in today's western ballet world, they first dream of being Clara in the Nutcracker, and later Cinderella in the ballet, roles where the female's insecurities and self-doubt are put to rest by being chosen and protected, taken out of poverty or isolation or danger, rescued by The Prince.

The Ballet Field – Contemplate this. A field populated by *thousands of thousands of* little girls all over America first fulfilling a parental or perhaps a marketed fancy in their baby ballet classes, then hundreds of thousands of dreaming pre-pubescent girls going to their regional ballet schools, so many young women navigating their teen years and college with the ideal of becoming a dancer, so many corps de ballet dancers, a smaller number of poignant, inspirational teachers, a few hundred international soloists and prima ballerinas, just a few dozen female ballet choreographers, and only the tiniest handful of female Artistic Directors. How has biology and gender affected my field? It has defined it!

Let's take a look at the males coming up in dance. Skip the first and second categories of baby dance classes and regional ballet schools. The boys aren't there, and they aren't dreaming of dance in any numbers. But they do turn up in their teens -- in a ratio of about 1-60, and then they get jobs! In the ballet corps the ratio becomes more even. But once established *inside* a company, it is the often the boys and men who are offered opportunities to move into powerful positions of choreography and direction.

Going back to my earlier metaphor— We can easily perceive there is a difference in the ballet world regarding who sows the field, who prepares the soil, who nourishes and harvests the crops, but *who* benefits in the marketplace.

Young girls who are often well taught by women, also long to have the opportunity to interact with males, either with a male teacher, or best of all, in a partnership called a pas de deux. Directions in dance are often terse and fast, and come with a huge amount of intensity. Dancers are expected to respond instantly, silently, showing only by their actions and energy that they have comprehended and are doing something about the exchange. Didactic teaching is common, but long winded explanations let the body cool down. It is intensely competitive in dance. Every *single* woman is easily replaceable and knows it. So she is focused 100% of the time on the project, makes informed decisions and adapts her behavior frequently to the situation, and pushes herself to learn faster and better than anyone else in the room. And most troubling of all, even accepts lower pay for superior work, to sustain the *privilege of dancing*.

One well known inequity in the ballet world is the Grand Pas – the big duet between Principal Dancers in ballet. Often in some of the traditional classical ballets still being done, and where the Guest Artists are imported to complement and market a regional production, the woman has the far more complex, strenuous part, yet the male porteur (carrier) and Poseur (male escort who stands around looking princely in correct positions), and who can even be an inferior dancer, commands the higher fee.

Women who work on pointe have to let men who are their choreographers, their partners, or their teachers go on and on about what they should be doing technically in terms of balance and strength. My experience is that most of the time these men are only guessing at what they are talking about, but the female dancer empowers these males with respectful attention and compliance.

Much of my work in my own company is advocacy for my female dancers, encouraging them to speak up for themselves, empowering them, given their usually superior skill and experiences, and helping our wonderful male dancers to realize that if they were as truly wonderful as any of my women, they would all be Baryshnikovs.

There is every reason to be cynical. But I am always, always entranced by the skilled dancer attempting to show perfection in dance. And when *two* people or more, are brought together in choreography -- *because* of their biology and their gender, that willing consensus – in spite of all the challenges and inequities, is in that moment sublime. And it is the more deeply moving and touching, in every sense, when you know out of what friction and differences, that harmony was born.

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