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How is the Ballet World Including Non-Binary Dancers?

A few pioneers have shown the way, but who will follow?

by Rebekah Lund

The holiday season wouldn't be complete to me without being involved with *The Nutcracker*, whether it's helping backstage, watching from the audience, or actually performing. One of my favorite sections from the production is the iconic Waltz of the Flowers scene. Having twelve to twenty-four women in pointe shoes with beautiful tutus waltzing together is a peak moment of choreographic art in the ballet. This past *Nutcracker* season, I was able to help out backstage at my studio back home. When I first watched the Waltz of the Flower scene, I noticed something slightly different than usual. I saw a dancer wearing a nude long sleeve liner leotard, instead of a spaghetti strap liner underneath the costume. I thought it was unusual for only one person to have a different undergarment.

As I looked further into it, I realized that it was a male dancer, and it was the only nude leotard that he felt safe wearing underneath the costume. This dancer wanted to be in this iconic scene of the ballet and was able to do that because of the safe environment that was provided. As I watched him dance in every show, I wondered if there are other dancers who identify as male who might want to dance in a female role and vice versa? Where have all the gender norms in the ballet world come from, and how are they still prevalent in today's society?

Through the centuries, some aspects of ballet have stayed very similar to the way it was presented back in the 17th century, like gender, with only two roles. In addition, people don't acknowledge non-binary people to be important or visible to the ballet community. The ballet technique starts with everyone taking barre and center together, though then they move to separate movement into gender-based categories. The boys have a separate "men's class" and the girls will focus on pointe work (Komatsu). This rigid divide leaves little room for flexibility or the inclusion of those whose gender identity doesn't fit within the traditional cisgender roles on which ballet is built upon. This divide in training prepares the dancers for arguably the centerpiece of classical ballet, the pas de deux. Traditionally, it features a man and a woman dancing together, each performing solos, and then coming together once more for a coda. When the two are dancing onstage together, the job of the man is to support and present the ballerina. Although the dance world has recently begun to feature same-sex duets, it's only in contemporary work.

Opportunity and inclusion of non-binary dancers in classical ballet are nearly non-existent, and the stark gender divide may be difficult to overcome for non-binary dancers. This is why I believe that all dancers should train in pointe, learn the big jumps, and be allowed to try partnering from both the male and female roles. There have been a few dancers who have broken the binary that they have been boxed into. One dancer, Chase Johnsey, performs classical ballerina roles as a freelance dancer who identifies as gender fluid and uses he/him/his pronouns. In 2018, he was offered the opportunity to dance female corps roles in English National Ballet's *The Sleeping Beauty* in London. In this performance, he made headlines around the world, which turned him into an activist for the cause—not to change classical ballet, but to open its doors to

artists across the full spectrum of human gender (Bauer). Johnsey put ballet's gender-exclusiveness on notice to reflect the world that we live in. In addition, Johnsey has been the star in the drag ballet company called Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, where his performances earned him a 2016 UK National Dance Award as Best Male Dancer. Regardless of his gender identity, Johnsey believes that his technical and artistic qualifications should make him eligible to dance in a traditionally female role at any ballet company. He stated, "If I were in the back of the corps, and nobody noticed me, then what's the issue? I'm not hurting anybody, I'm trying to open possibilities for dancers" (Bauer).

I think it's important to have someone like Chase Johnsey breaking the binary norm and dancing the roles that he would like to dance. Another dancer that has leapt over obstacles of gendered ballet roles and dealt through many hardships is Jayna Ledford. Ledford first started ballet as a male child, wanting to wear a leotard to class, but his studio wouldn't allow that. Seeing how the studio reacted to their child, Ledford's parents immediately took them out of that studio and enrolled them into another studio as a female. She continued dancing for many years, showing the natural ballet talent she had through each class and summer intensives. She was fortunate enough to go to well-respected ballet studios like the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater and the Kirov Academy in Washington D.C. After all her hard work in these intensives, Ledford was accepted as a student at the Kirov Academy, where everyone accepted her for who she was (Pal). Both of these dancers show a type of representation that matters in the dance community. This is because it shows their peers, but mainly the younger generation, that there are possibilities of crossing ballet gender lines and letting any dancer star in whatever role they would like to play.

Overall, it's time to embrace new definitions of both femininity and masculinity in ballet because dance is meant to be inclusive for all. Dance, just like any art form, is meant to be freeing instead of being confined in typical, regressive gender roles that choke out the fluidity of life and art. It's important to recognize what people can do, no matter what gender they declare. Dancers like Chase Johnsey and Jayna Ledford have furthered possible gender inclusivity in the ballet world through their accomplishments. Having these two role models, along with other non-binary dancers, can inspire the younger generation to be true to themselves as dancers.

Although a few in the ballet world have slowly accepted non-binary dancers and allowed them to dance the parts that they choose, not all companies and choreographers accept that things are changing, so they haven't chosen to start this transition. Hopefully, a new generation of dancers will not be afraid to step into the spotlight and be the dancer they want to be.

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