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AUTHORS: Anna LEON

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Reverse-Engineering the Sylph: Reclaiming Female Ballet Bodies in Florentina Holzinger's TANZ

Anna LEON<sup>1</sup> 

### Abstract

Florentina Holzinger's 2019 *TANZ* critically relates to ballet history's disciplinary treatment of female bodies. Based on the case study of *TANZ*, this article identifies choreographic and performative strategies through which contemporary dance work reclaims the agency of female dancing bodies; and contributes to a practice-based macro-history of ballet, in which contemporary works become springboards for re-writing historical narratives. The article approaches dance in a methodological framework influenced by gender studies, cultural studies and critical theory. It uses macro-historiographic concepts to analyze interviews with cast members, observations of rehearsals and the resulting performance. It argues that Holzinger's work reclaims female ballet bodies through five interconnected strategies: the diversification of the homogeneous ballet body; the de-essentialization of romantic femininity; the reversal of the male gaze by an all-female group of performers; the development of trans-human, techno-ecological alliances; and the *détournement* (subversive repurposing) of bourgeois-driven romantic spectacle. It further argues that through such strategies *TANZ* points to under-acknowledged aspects of a ballet history that subverts its very own norms. It thus presents contemporary feminist dancemaking in a common framework with the under-acknowledged struggles of historical female dancers.

### Keywords

Florentina Holzinger, Romantic Ballet, Feminist Ballet History, Macro-Historiography in Dance

<sup>1</sup> **Corresponding author:** Anna Leon, Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria, Schillerplatz 3, 1010 Vienna, Austria, E-mail: annaleon@tutanota.com ORCID: 0000-0001-6734-7525

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## Introduction

Florentina Holzinger's *TANZ* (German for 'dance') is the third work in a trilogy in which the Austrian choreographer engages with Western choreographic history, and more particularly ballet, interrogating its disciplinary formation of bodies. *TANZ* starts with a ballet class led by Beatrice Cordua, a long-time ballerina now in her eighties. The class is a snapshot of the ways in which the ballet body is modelled; as the piece progresses, it becomes a journey towards conquering – both achieving and occupying, overturning – ballet's disciplinary formation of female bodies. Nudity and body waste, humor and sexuality, stunts and CrossFit participate in a work that looks back to 19th century – mainly French – romantic ballet and critically juxtaposes it with forms of discipline that female bodies in dance and performance still face today. Focusing on the mysterious, ethereal, quasi-disincarnated femininity of romantic ballet (rather than on its exoticizing aspects), Holzinger offers a raw, fully incarnate response to past choreography. This article draws from my work accompanying the choreographer as historiographic/research advisor, interviews with cast members, and detailed observations of the ensuing performances, to frame *TANZ* in feminist ballet history: as an embodied and enacted feminist manifesto about ballet's bodies.

*TANZ* premiered at Tanzquartier Wien (Vienna, Austria) in October 2019. It is a budget-heavy production that received wide support in the form of co-productions from major European dance institutions. *TANZ* toured extensively and continues to do so almost four years after its premiere. It was invited to the Berlin *Theatertreffen* festival in 2020, a significant marker of recognition for theatrical work in the German-speaking world. It puts on stage twelve performers (including the choreographer and an on-stage camerawoman).

The piece's introductory ballet class soon deviates from typical training. Both Cordua as the teacher and the other performers as her students gradually take their clothes off, their actions and words becoming increasingly sexually explicit, culminating in a scene where Cordua inspects her students' vulvas and describes them to the audience. *Pliés* and *tendus* give their place to stunts, lifts and strength-based feats: performers climb on motorcycles hanging from the ceiling or suspend themselves from a loop thread into their hair. A witch on an electric broom punctuates the piece with comic interludes; a camerawoman follows the performers, selecting perspectives inaccessible to the audience and projecting the material on screens to the side of the stage in real time. Halfway through the piece, the stage backdrop shifts from neutral to artificial nature imagery: green, leafy, slightly menacing. The actions that follow confirm the darker ambience: a performer imitates a birth scene, producing a tiny animal; a wolf's body is pierced by a metallic pole; a body suspension scene forms a triumphant, if bloody and intense, climax. Cordua's presence becomes a red thread throughout the piece,

voicing ballet's internalized, disciplinary and sexist superego but also its undisciplined, revolt/ing subconscious.

My first hypothesis is that Florentina Holzinger's contemporary piece *TANZ* employs and exemplifies performative strategies that allow the reclamation<sup>1</sup> of female bodies from disciplinary, dispossessing and agency-reducing practices present in historical as well as contemporary dance. This analysis of *TANZ* is situated in a context of feminist and gender-theory-informed ballet scholarship. This field of research notably includes Lynn Garafola's (1997) *Rethinking the Sylph*, a revisionist history of romantic ballet that critically undermined the idealization of romanticism, revealing its contributions to dominant ideologies about gender and nation (among other themes); as well as Garafola's more recent (2022) study on Bronislava Nijinska, in which the author examines gender-critical modernist choreography by a female choreographer and names sexism as a parameter influencing her career; Adesola Akinleye's (2021) (*Re: Claiming Ballet*), a collection including case studies and self-reflections in feminist, queer and intersectional ballet experiences; Peter Stoneley's (2007) *Queer History of Ballet*, which identified evocations of queerness in only-apparently-straight ballet history, a silent and silenced presence to be read through the lines of heteronormative ballet narratives; Susan Leigh Foster's (1996) *Choreography and Narrative*, which culminated its history of narrative ballet with a critique of dance romanticism's staging of muted, sexualized female bodies; and Deidre Kelly's more journalistic *Ballerina* (2012), which contributed to undoing the idealized image of the ballerina, replacing it by a critical analysis of the exploitative, physically dangerous and sexualized conditions in which female ballet dancers have long worked. Complementing such research, this article aims, through the example of *TANZ*, to show how contemporary choreographic practice can also contribute a feminist perspective on ballet history.

The second hypothesis motivating this article is that in the process of reclaiming the agency of contemporary female dancing bodies on its stage, *TANZ* also invites a re-reading of the historical (primarily French, early 19<sup>th</sup>-century) ballet history that it refers to. It thus allows identification of subversive aspects within romantic ballet's highly disciplinary and sexist history, developing a transhistorical sisterhood between early 19<sup>th</sup>-century ballerinas and contemporary performers. Through this re-reading, critical perspectives on *TANZ* itself may be developed. This axis of my research is related to ongoing macro-historical work in dance studies, which draws connections between chronologically disparate pieces and practices. This includes comparative approaches, such as Frédéric Pouillaude's (2017 [2009]) study of the notion of 'work' in dance with examples ranging from ancient Greek theatre to *ballet d'action*. It includes concept-based diachronic histories, such as Susan Leigh Foster's (2011) analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> For another argument towards reclaiming female ballet bodies against the erasure of female desire on the ballet stage see Foster, 2005 [1996].

choreography, empathy and kinesthesia in a period spanning several centuries and Nicole Haitzinger's (2009) examination of the notion of effect (*Wirkung*) in dance from medieval to 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. It furthermore includes historiographic narratives that revisit dance history through reference to contemporary works and concepts, such as Anna Leon's (2022) macro-history of expanded choreography. The extensive literature on dance and re-enactment (e.g. Franko 2017) finally points at how contemporary choreographic practices themselves also re-work and re-process dance history. My aim in this article is to contribute to such macro-historiographic perspectives in dance by identifying, in the example of *TANZ*, how contemporary practices can rewrite and disrupt historical ballet narratives. In doing so, I underline the import of placing contemporary works in diachronic planes, removing them from modernist isolation in a future-seeking present.

Weaving these two hypotheses and corresponding research aims together, this article sees *TANZ* as a contribution to a feminist history of ballet: both a new performance defying its historically entrenched gender norms and a contemporary invitation to rewrite the history of ballet-dancing female bodies.

### Sources and Methods

As a researcher giving historiographic input to the choreographer, I was part of discussions with Holzinger and the cast about how their work related to ballet history and observed certain working sessions during residencies and rehearsals. My presence during parts of residency periods provided glimpses of working processes and choreographic research. One significant way in which these developed was a collective engagement with specific cast members' skills: Cordua giving a ballet class or a circus artist giving a body contortion class, for example. Another significant aspect was invitations to experts from diverse fields (notably stunts, singing and dance history) who worked with the performers on specific skills that Holzinger was interested in using. The piece therefore developed through a combination of already-existing expertise within the cast and in-process learning. In some of these sessions (e.g. stunt training) my position was that of an observer; in others (e.g. ballet class) I was a participant. My presence during final rehearsals provided glimpses of how the piece was refined and details set. Observing these sessions provided important insights into the negotiations between performers' bodily needs or limits (including healing times) and choreographic imperatives of polishing the work for its premiere. Throughout the process, observing interactions during breaks and meals provided an understanding of the cast coming together as a group. Interviews with members of the cast, especially two body-suspension artists, offered additional insights. Their views often diverge, pointing to the diversity of readings that the cast has about the piece; their partiality is complemented by insights from informal discussions with multiple cast members.

Among the work's multiple performers, the suspension artists were selected because they are particularly relevant to the problematics of body modification and feminist reclaiming of bodily actions at the core of this research and because they are iconically connected to romantic ballet figures which they actively rework and transform. The interviewees were self-selected, by responding to my call to discuss their work with Holzinger. The interviews took place online, following a script of open-ended questions that allowed us to delve more into topics raised by the interviewees themselves. Finally, my analysis is based on watching multiple performances of *TANZ* and focusing on the work's selection and use of movement material, staging choices and dramaturgical structure. In analyzing these materials, I consider dance as a socially-inscribed practice and as part of a wider bodily culture, rather than in a modernist conceptual framework of artistic autonomy.<sup>2</sup>

Assessment of my first hypothesis, namely that *TANZ* develops strategies of reclaiming female ballet bodies, draws on methodological tools and concepts from (queer-)feminist theory. This involves acknowledging, on the basis of the fundamental writings of Judith Butler (2006 [1990]), gender as a non-essentializable category that can, beyond its social constructability, be actively rewritten, including through artistic practice. It implicates considering gender, including 'womanhood' or 'femininity', as categories always and already inscribed in specific historical and cultural frames, with subjects embodying, enacting and experiencing gender in a complex interaction between societal expectations, material constraints, and agent-driven choices. Finally, it involves an intersectional approach – in this case in particular between gender and class – which points to the shortcomings of addressing singular forms of dominance (or resistance) and rather proposes to examine them as compounding factors. Against this background, a terminological clarification is needed. I extensively use, in this text, 'women', 'womanhood', 'femininity', 'femaleness' and related terms. This choice is a descriptive one, as it reflects Holzinger's own decision to perform with an all-female cast, and the absence of explicitly queer bodies in *TANZ*. Nevertheless, in this article these terms refer in an inclusive, non-cisgender-assuming way, to a socio-political positionality predicated onto plural bodies.

Discussion of my second hypothesis, namely that *TANZ* allows a re-reading of ballet history through a contemporary lens, employs two concepts that methodologically frame historiographic transfers between ballet romanticism and contemporaneity. First, I draw from Ramsay Burt's (2004) use of Mieke Bal's proposal for a 'preposterous' history, which she developed in her study of contemporary perspectives on baroque art. Bal writes

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<sup>2</sup> In the French dance-historical context more particularly – which serves as a reference point for this article since Holzinger's work looks back mainly at French romantic ballet – a significant methodological shift towards a cultural study of dance has occurred through the work of the Paris Atelier for Research in the Cultural History of Dance, whose work is "a reflection on the methodologies of cultural history as applied to the study of dance" (Atelier d'histoire culturelle de la danse, undated).

Like any form of representation, art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that engagement is an active reworking. It specifies what and how our gaze sees. [...] re-visions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with 'the past today'. This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*. (1999, 1, 6-7)

In what follows I 'preposterously' look at romantic ballet history through the lens proposed by Holzinger's contemporary work. Secondly, I refer to Hal Foster's (1996: xii) notion of the parallax, which he defines as "the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer. This figure underscores both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings". Through this notion, Foster invites consideration of the bidirectional relationship between past and present, whereby a 'preposterous' contemporary re-reading of the past in its turn colors and influences our understanding of the present. These methodological tools are used descriptively but also programmatically: as a proposal for a critical historiography that draws from choreographic practice.

## Results and Discussion

A feminist perspective on Holzinger's work identifies five interconnected, mutually supporting strategies reclaiming choreographic command on the female ballet body. Through each of these strategies, *TANZ* appears to counter a disciplinary ballet history. If, however, we avoid a modernist reading of the work as a progress-driven break from a uniform past, but rather approach it as an invitation to seek links between past and present, it becomes possible to see Holzinger's strategies as reminders of ballet history's niches, in which (female) dance artists have always and already resisted regulatory and disciplinary norms. In the following discussion I analyze each identified strategy in turn, explaining how it responds to historical ballet norms, but also pointing out historical instances of resistance to those same norms.

### The Diversification of the Often-Homogeneous Ballet Body

Historically and in contemporaneity, ballet dancers have been subject to strict constraints regarding their appearance, accompanied by selectivity from a very early age based on anatomical traits. The romantic ballet body was not subject to the same norms as later 19<sup>th</sup> century or contemporary ballerinas' bodies (cf. Thomas 2003: 111; Garafola 2007: 155; 1997: 2). Nevertheless, romantic ballet dancers were still selected and evaluated to the point of objectification and their bodies had to be transformed into instruments of their art. Technical requirements have evolved, but skill and virtuosity,

especially in the frontal body opening of turnout and in that high art of defying gravity, were already necessary (cf. Jowitt 2010 [1998]: 217). This normative curation of bodies happened in a framework where the whiteness of ballet was also taken for granted. For the vast majority of dancers in the *corps de ballet*, homogenization also meant synchronicity and uniform motion; self-same costumes and hairstyles; undifferentiated and unnamed roles.

The bodies of Holzinger's performers are much more diverse. Their appearance varies in height, muscularity, weight, as well as through the use of body markings like tattoos and piercings, countering the homogeneity of the *corps de ballet*. Even though they are light-skinned and the overwhelming majority remains white, not all conform to the idealized whiteness of ballet. And contrary to ballet's youth cult, the cast of *TANZ* ranges from around 20 to around 80 years old. This also results in vastly different degrees of mobility and physical ability, accompanied by varying types of skill and training background, from weight training to pointework. This is consistent with Holzinger's previous works, which has involved collaborations with practitioners ranging from sideshow performance (*Apollon*) to boxing (*Inside the Octagon*). Contrary to the identical performance of *corps de ballet* dancers, Holzinger actively adapts to her performers' diverse skills, whose actions correspond to their training background and who each bring different practices to the work.

The diversification of the homogeneous ballet body that Holzinger's work proposes may seem like a contemporary undoing of ballet history's imperative of uniformization. Nevertheless, if one follows Bal's (1999) motion towards a preposterous history troubling historiographic linearity, and thus takes Holzinger's contemporary creation as a lens through which to look at the past, it appears that historical ballet bodies did not always and fully conform to such an imperative. Sources like Danish romantic ballet choreographer Auguste Bournonville's *Letters* (1999 [1860]: 36) speak of the French Opéra's *corps de ballet*'s small gestures of indifference and resistance to the uniform performance expected of them: "[t]he little conversations, the quick glances into the auditorium, the apathy displayed during scenes of enthusiasm, the witty remarks and the derisive laughter during tragic scenes, have always been a particular and distinctive feature of the corps de ballet at the Académie royale et impériale de musique". Beyond romanticism, several voices illuminate the presence of non-white, non-gender-conforming and mixed-abilities ballet dancers both historically and in contemporaneity, while acknowledging the structural conditions that have led to severe under-representations of non-conforming bodies in ballet. Selby Wynn Schwartz (2021: 189-190) quotes several dancers, both cisgender and gender-non-conforming, who have in recent years questioned the rigidity of gender distribution in training and casting, while reminding that genderqueer dancing has historical precedents as well. Joselli Audain Deans (2021) provides a history of Black dancers in U.S.-American



ballet, countering pervasive ideas about African-American ballet's purported absence and thus establishing a genealogy for contemporary African-American ballet. Kelsie Acton and Lindsay Eales (2018) discuss possible transformations of ballet class for mixed-abilities groups including wheelchair users; such transformations illustrate that while professional ballet was and is a field that excludes many bodies, ballet technique and the sociability of a ballet class are amenable to diverse bodies. Such work draws attention to those bodies that do not fit into the dominant historiographic narrative of ballet but that nevertheless constitute a significant part of its history. Holzinger's diversification strategies can be seen as 'incomplete': the majority of the cast is white; nakedness is omnipresent and therefore partly homogenizing. But this incompleteness places her work in the continuation of historical dancers' unfinished struggle, rather than on a contemporary pedestal of successful and complete revolution.

### **The De-Essentialization of the Idealized Image of Femininity Staged By Romantic Ballet**

Romantic ballerinas had to look ethereal and light to embody largely male-defined aesthetics of fragility relating to storylines placing them on the verge of death, as ghosts and spirits, victims to unhappy endings. At the same time, their performance work required strength, tolerance to pain and significant risk taking: stepping onto pointe, hanging from suspension wires, jumping into trap doors, risking accidents that happened all too often, to the point that they were paid extra to compensate for the danger, at the Paris Opéra at least (Kelly, 2012: 84). The illusion of ethereality and otherworldliness required by the romantic aesthetic was further grounded upon other dangers like costumes catching fire in the gaslights used to create the mystery-laden atmospheres of white acts (cf. Kelly, 2012: ch. 3). Gracefulness, ethereality and lightness were aesthetic goals realized through training and stage technology; but they also hid the means that made them possible. The significant amount of physical discomfort and risk-taking tacitly underlying the embodiment of ethereal romantic femininity is paradigmatic of painful and risky procedures that female bodies are still expected to endure but hide. These can range from normalized, low-level pain (eyebrow plucking) to significant body modification that may have health consequences (certain types of plastic surgery). In this vein Garafola (1986: 35) sees romantic ballet as an artistic practice reflecting but also modelling wider norms of female appearance: "even when [the 19<sup>th</sup> century ballerina] turned into the fast, leggy ballerina of modern times, her ideology survived. [...] Like her nineteenth-century forebear, today's ballerina, an icon of teen youth, athleticism, and anorexic vulnerability, incarnates a feminine ideal defined overwhelmingly by men".

Against a heritage of women literally dying on stage to embody the romantic ideal, *TANZ* involves physically demanding feats as well as painful and potentially dangerous

practices. The climax of these tasks is an act of hook suspension, whereby a piercer passes hooks underneath the skin of a suspension artist who is then lifted in the air from ropes attached to the hooks, literally embodying the romantic ideal of defying gravity. In the case of *TANZ* the hooks are inserted on the back, at the level of the shoulder-blades, a wink to the Sylphide's tragedy-bearing wings. But here, contrary to historical ballet, the pain, risk and strength required to complete these actions are not concealed to create an illusion of frailty. They are rather presented in a direct and empowered way that for some spectators is troublesome. In other words, the flying bodies in *TANZ* actively draw attention to the psychological and corporeal energy and effort put into the act of defying gravity, rather than conceal it under a veil of gracefulness. To borrow philosopher and queer theorist Paul Preciado's (2003) terms, *TANZ* *des-ontologizes* female ballet bodies: it counters the naturalized affirmation of their existence *as such*. It replaces their appearance of otherworldliness, one that grounded an essentialized view of mysterious femininity, by a confrontation with their constructed-ness – and the effort, pain, and risk implicated in that process of construction.<sup>3</sup>

The de-essentialization of the idealized image of femininity staged by romantic ballet that Holzinger's work achieves may again seem like a counter-image to the light, ethereal, seemingly effortless aesthetic of romantic ballet. However, the raw depiction of pain, effort and risk in *TANZ* can also be read as a reminder of the strength, risk-taking and defiance of physical and mental barriers of the only apparently frail romantic ballerina. We know for example that dancers chose to be suspended by pulleys despite the risk of falling, in order to be paid extra; or that they chose to wear flammable materials because they deemed them more beautiful (Kelly, 2012: 84, 86). These were decisions made in a context where financial pressure was such that choosing did not represent a freedom to navigate meaningful options; they nevertheless still were decisions that subjects faced with the force and determination required to enact them. Crucially, the (however constrained and un-free) decision to risk accidents and fire was not actually fully compatible with the imperative of concealing the grueling construction of an ethereal, Sylph-like quality. Ballerinas dangled from wires, fell and caught fire in front of their audiences; theatre directors as well as patrons were well aware of these dangers (Kelly, 2012: 85-86; Adair, 1992: 95). In other words, the accidents were not just the price to pay for concealing femininity's constructed-ness; they were the rupture of grace, breaking through its surface to betray its secrets. Holzinger's audiences, facing actions that they at times find excessive, provocative or disgusting, are catching glimpses of 19<sup>th</sup>-century spectatorship, tense with apprehension that tutu white would turn into blood red. Looking at this connection through the lens of Foster's (1996: xii) parallax, the stunts and body modifications of *TANZ* appear as contemporary responses

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the image of the ballerina as both elegant dancing figure and poverty-marked worker, see Sabee (2022). For an overview of the disparity between the myth and reality of romantic dancers, see Jarrasse (2018).

to a dance field that still modifies and curates female bodies through pain and effort, with performers still negotiating the forms, extent, and decision-making of that pain and effort. On a less gory note, romantic ballet dancers may have in any case been more aware of gender's constructed-ness than many of their contemporaries, because they were called upon to embody male roles too. In what is referred to as the phenomenon of female 'travesty dancers' (cf. Garafola, 1986; Foster 2005 [1996]: 11-12), ballerinas donned male costumes and played male parts – and therefore circulated between gender embodiments in a de- and re-construction of gendered appearance, as historical agents prefiguring contemporary gender-critical performance.

### **The Reversal of the Male Gaze By an All-Female Group of Performers**

The figure of the romantic ballerina was modulated in order to satisfy male patrons who exerted influence as paying customers. This was once again most notably so at the Paris Opéra, which from 1830 onwards started functioning, despite continued state support, following the model of a privatized, profit-seeking business (Kelly, 2012: 54; Garafola, 1986: 35). Susan Leigh Foster (1996: 229) explains:

At the same time that audience members exercised a masculine and heterosexual role in viewing the ballet, they also identified as consumers. The arts, including dance, no longer set standards of aesthetic excellence through which the state partially defined itself; rather, they offered an array of aesthetic experiences for spectators to select. Viewers at the ballet elected to purchase what it offered. The production team at an institution like the Opéra, which included administrators, artists, artisans, and even the *claque*, manufactured an event that critics evaluated for viewers' consumption.

A mainly male customer base played an important role in influencing aesthetic choices on the stage and curating the appearance of female dancers, turning them from professional agents making decisions about their public-performative image to often objectified elements in a profit-seeking spectacle.

*TANZ* subverts the external gaze of the audience as an authority wielding power over performers' bodies as objects of desire. Purposefully and consciously acknowledging a history of male gaze, the cast is naked throughout most of the work, in full awareness and engagement with the exposure of their bodies. Indeed the perception and reception of their bodies, the way in which different audiences react to them, are recurrent topics of critical discussion among the cast. The male gaze objectifying ballerinas is even symbolically replaced on stage by the (female) performer filming live material. The hook suspension is one of the practices that most strongly encapsulates the performers' hold on their on-stage actions: while certain audience members may see the practice as not-only-literally scarring, the performers explicitly associate it with empowerment. Suspension artist Luci Fire Tusk, for example, recounts that her early suspension practice troubled and interrogated gender hierarchies of submission/

domination; and engaged with pastiche acts of burlesque dance and striptease leading to euphoric, triumphant experiences of freedom. In Holzinger's work, she considers that suspension is used in a controlled, minimal, non-crowd-pleasing way akin to body art. Luna Duran practices suspension as a profession but also as a spiritual exploration, that she approaches through a postcolonial and feminist lens, insisting on body modification (in this case piercing) as an act of reclaiming agency and control over one's own body. The agency of the performers is also sustained by a frequently-referred-to and prominent sense of solidarity between them, communicated through the concept of sisterhood, that several members of the cast mentioned to me in informal discussions. This becomes evident on stage, most forcefully so in the intense scene of the suspension. When that moment comes, the whole cast is concentrated on the suspension artist; some performers manipulate the ropes, others look up to the suspendee, their engagement palpable to spectators. The piercer, Suzn Payson, is fully dedicated to being-with the suspendee. Duran describes this as a commitment from Payson that "your pain is safe with me" and that she will "hold the space" for the suspension to happen in a caring way. Tusk also speaks of trust, care and looking-after as characteristic traits of Payson's approach to their work together. This on-stage community of care can model reception attitudes, proposing to spectators a position of responsibility (that not all take) to "hold the space", countering the passive reception of entertaining female figures.

The shift of the male gaze by an all-female group of performers in *TANZ* invites a corresponding shift in historiographic approaches of romantic ballet performers. The very prominent position that nudity and sexuality have in *TANZ*, and the self-assured way in which the performers inhabit nudity and relate to sexuality, invites a reconsideration of the idea that the sexualized ballerina was, uni-dimensionally, only a disempowered victim of the male gaze. Indeed despite the certain difficulties and the disadvantaged socioeconomic position from which romantic ballerinas were called upon to expose their bodies for male visual pleasure, one can also see on the romantic stage a space for the embodiment of transgressive femininity. To be a low-ranking dancer, an identity loosely entangled with that of a sex-worker, meant that dancing was an occupation that placed practitioners beyond the limits of propriety; but it also meant that being a dancer allowed access to experiences not limited by the norms of bourgeois femininity. Indications furthermore exist that romantic ballerinas were aware of the way their image participated in an uneven power game with their male audience and could (at least those in protagonist roles) to a certain extent manipulate it. Bournonville (1999 [1860]: 42), for example, interpreted the female 'travesty dancer' phenomenon in France as a strategy by female star dancers to not compromise the imaginary unbounded-ness of male spectators' desire for them by dancing with another man:

It was, so to speak, a battle of love between the actress and the spectator, who, thinking of himself as the only one favored among the crowd, would have hated any man performing at her side as the object of her coquetry. All this imaginary jealousy was perfectly well understood by [star ballerina] Fanny [Elssler], and in order to reassure her worshippers, she created special engagements for her sister Thérèse [...who] even condescended to dress as a man so as to withhold any masculine attention from the enchantress.

Garafola (1986: 39) also points to the sexual suggestiveness of female-female on-stage action, of which dancers would have been well aware. Holzinger's performers' discussions about nakedness and exposure, empowerment and attrition constitute a reminder that their romantic colleagues were agents navigating margins of freedom afforded by, precisely, the margin. At the same time, they are reminders of the fact that women performing still negotiate a male gaze that has, over centuries, impregnated ways of seeing of more subjects than men alone. Finally, Holzinger's cast's insistence on sisterhood also invites us to look for indications of solidarity among female romantic dancers, which historical work has identified among members of the *corps de ballet* (Kelly, 2012: 60) as well as in 'para-formal' training and invisibilised knowledge transfer between generations of female dancers, as described by Vanina Olivesi on the case of Marie Taglioni (2017, 47). Male-exclusionary sisterhood haunts romantic ballet plots as well: Giselle may sacrificially save Albrecht, but Hilarion is still killed by a group of women living in the woods without men. Stoneley (2007: 31) invites us to consider such sisterhoods not only from the possibly voyeuristic perspective of their male libretto-writers, but also from that of non-heterosexual women watching a powerful, women-dominated-world unfold before their eyes. It is such a perspective that Holzinger's performers adopt – and invite their audience to adopt.

### **The Development of Trans-Human, Techno-Ecological Alliances**

Romantic ballet developed in a post-Enlightenment period where the human subject was tacitly considered to be white, able-bodied and male. Women and people of color (as well as animals and other non-human beings) were in this context excluded from the status of fully-fledged subjects. As Rosi Braidotti notes (2013: 1), "not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history. Not if by 'human' we mean that creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy". The hegemonic human subject controlled and had already started exploiting nature, as well as those humans that did not fit into its purported neutrality. An association between femaleness and nature, both Othered, was correspondingly staged in romantic ballet. The iconic figure of Giselle (1841), after her death, joins a group of female ghosts that haunt a forest at night; the Sylphide (1832), the tempting spirit choreographed by Filippo Taglioni, lures the male protagonist to a forest landscape; the '*Fille du Danube*' (*Daughter*

of the *Danube*, 1836) is found as a child next to a river and throws herself into one as an act of love and desperation. Many romantic ballets were structured in two-part dramaturgies following a dichotomy between a real, tangible, 'human' world and a mysterious, natural world inhabited by exclusively feminine creatures. As Garafola (1997: 2) writes, the romantic ballerina "inhabited a world remote from home and hearth, the secluded valleys, misty lakesides, secret glades, and wild heaths that in ballet as in fiction, poetry, and opera extolled a Romantic idea of nature even as they coded her as an exotic dwelling on the periphery of European civilization."

*TANZ* promotes an ecological alliance of its female cast with nature. The performers impersonate and give birth to animals, while, in a humorous wink to romantic ballet plotlines, Holzinger asks the audience to donate money for an apple tree orchard in Austria, where romantic fairies and sylphs can live happily ever after. At first glance, one can here identify a strategy of reappropriation: reworking the association between women and nature in a positive way that turns their relegation into an empowered statement. But Holzinger goes one step further, to de-essentialize the 'naturalness' of nature, just like she de-essentializes femininity, making its construction visible. She does this by making evident the use of technology in her staging of nature and its links with her female performers. Nikola Knezevic's set, in particular, follows the romantic dramaturgy's two-part structure, with the second set in a nature-like realm: the backdrop shifts to an image of sprawling tree roots and leaves referring to Sylphic forests and immersing the stage in shades of green and turquoise. The naturalness of this nature is nevertheless denied, since the set makes the technical means used to create its 'natural' setting evident. The backdrop's realism reproduces the artificial precision of computer-generated imagery; its colors shift the green palette to colder shades not corresponding to natural illumination. Screens on the side of the stage, the perpetually-hanging motorcycles and an operating table on which the preparations for the body suspension are taking place (the piercing happens live and is transmitted on the screens) trouble, by juxtaposition, any possibility of immersion in naturalness. Throughout *TANZ*, non-human equipment (motorcycles and ropes, hooks and sterilizers, pointe shoes and video cameras) extend the female body into post-humanist assemblages. The witch, an iconic figure of Othered femininity in Western Europe who was often also related with a mysteriousness of nature, is present in *TANZ* on her electric broom, in a comic, technologized reappropriation of a stigmatized figure. In these ways, Holzinger's work goes beyond the reappropriation of a naturalized femininity or feminized nature towards a staging of their (technological) construction as ontological categories.

The trans-human, techno-ecological alliances that Holzinger stages provide, at first glance, a counterpoint to romantic ballet's staging of nature, as they contaminate its image of the natural world with the presence and function of machinery and technical



equipment. From the perspective proposed by Bal's (1999) preposterous history, however, by simultaneously blending her performers into technological assemblages and human-animal figures, Holzinger points to how romantic ballet also deviated from clear boundaries between the natural and the technological. Indeed in order to create the illusion of a natural and mysterious realm, romantic ballet extensively used technological innovations. These included new forms of set design and special effects such as trap doors, pulleys, suspension wires; the use of industrially-produced materials like cotton as driving forces in costume design (Kant, 2007: 187); and the use of gas lighting for the creation of effects like moonlight (Garafola, 1997: 2). Romantic ballet therefore employed the technological tools of a rapidly mechanizing modernity in order to stage a natural-feminine realm excluded from that very modernity. Bruno Latour extensively wrote about the technological-cultural, human-non-human hybrids on which the unfolding of modernity depended but that it did not admit (Latour 1993, 12). Romantic ballet's staging of an Othered natural world through deeply technological means – a technologically mediated cultural construction of nature – can be seen as one more of modernity's attempts to negate its own hybridizations. Through a triangulation of the human, technology and nature, *TANZ* troubles the demarcations of nature and culture, the natural and the technological and stages the interpenetrations that modernity did not, in Latour's terms, admit. It thus acts as a contemporary reminder of how female romantic figures also put into question the binaries on which the Enlightenment's conception of the human subject rested. In this sense, Holzinger's work aligns with current critical theory looking at choreography as a practice participating in cultural constructions of nature. Felicia McCarren's (2020) work on late romantic ballet (more precisely *La Source*, 1866) is particularly important in this respect. Beyond explaining how choreography engaged in processes of staging nature, she underlines, just like Holzinger invites us to do, that romantic essentializations of femininity and nature may have failed to dupe their audiences, who understood them *as* cultural commentary (e.g. McCarren, 2020: 51).

### **The *Détournement* (Subversive Repurposing) of Bourgeois-Driven Romantic Spectacle**

Romantic ballet is still widely regarded as a 'high art' dance form. The historical construction of that hierarchical position needs to be understood as a gender- and class-bound process. Romantic ballet was part of a world where a male-dominated bourgeoisie was a strong socioeconomic force that influenced its dramaturgy and aesthetics (and the legitimacy thereof) as well as the conditions of its material production and consumption (cf. Garafola, 1986: 36). Romantic ballet developed a star system that is understandable in a context of privatization and commercialization, concurrent with the early-19<sup>th</sup>-century-height of the Industrial Revolution and the capitalist modes of production that it entailed. At the same time, ballet depended on the

cheap labour of working-class ballerinas, prototypes of workers who only had their body as available capital (cf. Foster 2005 [1996]: 7, 16-17). When the Opéra turned towards profit-seeking business models pleasing a mainly bourgeois audience, not only did it engage in a commodification of female-dancers-as-spectacle, but also kept those dancers' salaries low and expected them to work in particularly harsh financial conditions (Kelly, 2012: ch.2, Garafola: 1986: 36). In opposition to *étoile* (star or principal) dancers, the anonymous dancers of the *corps de ballet* were not perceived as artists, but as members of a working class, on par with other professional groups performing physical labour (Sabee, 2022: 557, 575). This labour was both performative and sexual. The dire working conditions of the Opéra's *petits rats* (students of its ballet school, subsequently low-ranking young dancers in the company) were associated with backstage arrangements such as paid access to the *Foyer de la Danse*, where wealthy patrons, notably members of the private *Jockey Club*, could meet and engage in affairs with them. In parallel with confirming the gendered socioeconomic distributions of bourgeois society, romantic ballet narratively and dramaturgically confirmed its values and mores. Even if ballet's storylines provided entertainment by hinting at transgressive (in most cases, extramarital) adventures, they ultimately confirmed bourgeois morals of class belonging and sexual norms and the place of women therein (cf. Banes & Carroll, 1997: 92).

*TANZ* is a clearly spectacular piece: it is a production-heavy and large-budget-necessitating multimedia work playing with impressiveness and illusion. However, its use of the means of spectacle involves the staging of often difficult-to-watch acts that deviate from the pleasing aesthetic and bourgeois ethic characterizing romantic ballet. Excreta (buckets are available on stage), blood (both real, in the suspension scene, and make-believe), sex (through overt positions and explicit texts spoken by the performers) and money (that the audience is asked to contribute to support the fairy forest) take centre stage. This is compatible with Holzinger's long-term interest in trash aesthetics and non-artistically-legitimized practices like sideshow performance, which engage with disgust, perceived strangeness, pain, humour and/or fear. The strategy of using spectacle to subvert its bourgeois-driven historical aims can be characterized through the term *détournement*, which finds its sources in situationist discourse. In these avant-garde practices, especially in the perspective of Guy Debord (cf. Debord & Wolman, 1956), *détournement* consisted in de- and re-contextualizing cultural products or fragments thereof, changing the meaning of the recontextualized element through its new semantic context. This can be utilized to repurpose a work from a commercial-commodified status to a critical perspective upon that status. In this perspective Holzinger re-employs several of the characteristics of romantic spectacle while performing a *détournement* of its purposes of pleasant entertainment confirming bourgeois values. In doing so, *TANZ* transforms the women on stage from commodified, pleasing figures to daring, at times even scary presences; and from financially exploited workers to professional



artists. Indeed the aesthetic *détournement* of romantic spectacle is accompanied by a material one, as Holzinger's performers have a say in their conditions of work. This reflects the contemporary dance field's ongoing negotiation of decent pay, working hours, insurance, pension and recognition – struggles that still need to undo the heavy heritage of underpaid and mistreated dancers to which romantic ballet contributed.<sup>4</sup>

The *détournement* of bourgeois spectacle's aesthetics and working conditions in *TANZ* deviates from ballet as bourgeois-driven spectacle by re-contextualizing elements of romantic ballet in order to transform or even entirely subvert their goals. But contemporary research also shows that romantic ballet was itself subject to *détournements* of its status as a high art form. If bourgeois culture managed to establish its own cultural creations, including romantic and post-romantic ballet, as 'high' culture, Holzinger's deviation from the perception of ballet as refined *divertissement* hints towards the fact that historical ballet and its artists circulated towards 'low' art forms like vaudeville. Crucially, in these circulations, historical ballet subverted the bourgeois morals that it upheld on legitimized stages. As Sarah Gutsche-Miller (2015: 85-86, emphasis added) notes, when ballet migrated into the music-hall format of romantic comedy,

[t]he one constant, regardless of a ballet's story line, was a propensity toward sensuousness. Romantic comedies tended to rely on the timeworn premise of two young lovers uniting after overcoming an obstacle, but the standard trajectory of lovers separated, then betrothed, served as a backdrop for scenes of flirtation and seduction *rather than as a mirror of bourgeois values*.

Contemporary research on romantic ballet moreover indicates that its classification as 'high art' is partly retroactive. Geraldine Morris' (2017: 237) illuminating analysis of *Giselle*, for example, argues that 20<sup>th</sup> century discourse over-stated the ballet's romantic aspects in order to make its Gothic aesthetic less prominent, which would have associated it with popular culture and mainstream taste. In other words, the *détournement* of ballet towards Holzinger's habitual trash aesthetic is rather a *détournement* of its dominant history; a history all too keen on entrenching but also concealing the socioeconomic factors that determine 'high' and 'low' art classifications.<sup>5</sup> That Holzinger's work needs to operate a *transfer* of practices such as sideshow performance *into* contemporary dance nevertheless reveals the pervasion of 'high' and 'low' hierarchies that differentiate these practices in the first place. From a more material perspective, the contemporary

<sup>4</sup> In *TANZ*, the hook suspension constitutes a particular manifestation of how the ecology of production and touring needs to adapt to the healing needs of the body, with performers rotating until they can be safely suspended again. Luna Duran spoke to me about negotiating good conditions for her suspension practice (and not entering the cast until those were granted); while Luci Fire Tusk spoke of enjoying performing in *TANZ* partly because of the good working conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Discussions with cast members also challenge the dichotomy between ballet's stereotypically graceful appearance and other, less artistically-legitimized physical practices' association with body modification: Luna Duran for instance considers hook suspension, bodybuilding, scarification and classical dance as different types of body modification on par with each other.

negotiations of working conditions that *TANZ* is part of relates to romantic dance artists' efforts towards professional recognition, responsibility and pay. Historical work in recent years has increasingly focused on the creations, ambitions and strategic decisions of female dance agents. On late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century France, prominent examples are Sarah Gutsche-Miller's work on Madame Mariquita and Hélène Marquié's work on Madame Stichel. Mariquita was a prolific creator who navigated diverse institutional and artistic contexts ranging from boulevard theater and music halls to the Opéra-Comique, and who integrated significant modernist tropes in her choreography (Gutsche-Miller, 2021); Stichel was the first principal female ballet mistress of the Paris Opéra; her work encompassed choreographing, dancing, teaching but also pursuing significant legal battles for the recognition of (women's) choreographic work (Marquié, 2015). Garafola's study of Nijinska (2022), filtering out her authorial innovations from the overshadowing presence of the Ballets Russes, furthers such work. Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vannina Olivesi's (2017: 59) re-reading of Marie Taglioni's biography provides hints towards the extra-canonical work of women consciously and strategically "mobiliz[ing] a patiently constructed symbolic capital and professional network". From a parallax perspective, their strategies illuminate the still-necessary work required to 'untaint' dance from historically gendered and classist connotations resulting in low pay, but also the ways in which contemporary action for better working conditions relates to a heritage of struggle for the amelioration, against the diaphanous image of the Sylph, of the very material conditions dancers worked in.

## Conclusion

Holzinger's work in *TANZ* achieves the reclaiming of female ballet bodies through a combination of five interconnected strategies. This reclaiming is not complete: the cast is still overwhelmingly white; its dancers engage in subversive but nevertheless rough corporeal discipline and body modification; despite ongoing discussions and staging decisions, they cannot fully control the sexualizing gaze of certain audience members; the work uses spectacular means rarely accessible to critical contemporary dancemaking. In her essay *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde (2018 [1984]: 17) writes: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable." Is Holzinger engaging in a change whose parameters are too narrow? Is the re-engineering of the Sylph in *TANZ* the formation of a new, 21<sup>st</sup>-century sylph?

It is possible to consider that it is so; but it would also be historically short-sighted to consider that the 'Master's house' of ballet is only built of discipline, bodily formation and spectacle. In an interview titled "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom", Michel Foucault (1997 [1984]: 292) notes that

power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides. (...) if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all.

Through each of the above-enumerated strategies Holzinger does not only *counter* the gendered norms of ballet. She also points to under-acknowledged aspects of ballet history that subvert its own norms, revealing its practitioners as active agents in relations of uneven power distribution, rather than as figures defined by victimhood. In a parallaxic (Foster 1996) move, this re-reading of the past suggests that *TANZ* does not *undo* ballet's disciplinary history but itself forms part of a long-ongoing process of subverting it. If the bricks and stones of ballet's 'Master house' are discipline, homogenization, or the objectification and commercialization of bodies, its mortar contains traces of female agency and strength; non-bourgeois, pop culture influences; more-than-human assemblages and very real, not always homogeneous women. It is to these histories of ballet that *TANZ* points to and invites us to focus on – and it is to the agents of these histories that it pays tribute.

In her history of un-named, silenced female agents of color, Saidiya Hartman (2019: xiii) writes:

Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.

This article has argued that Holzinger's cast act as pointers towards romantic ballerinas as historical actresses. An open question in the form of a shadow still, nevertheless, persists. In my discussion with *TANZ* suspension artist Luna Duran, she mentioned valuing the historiographic input in the process, which provided her with information about romantic ballet history and therefore helped her make sense of the reasons why Holzinger had included hook suspension in the piece. The Sylphide's dead body, limp without its wings, as well as romantic dancers' bodies, burnt or broken or exploited, give a reason to contemporary bodies to rise and (literally) scream empowerment while suspended from the skin on their backs. But for this connection to be established, ballet history knowledge is necessary: ballet as a central aesthetic and historical paradigm remains a necessary reference point for the piece's trans-historically emancipatory politics to take effect. The 'Master's house' of ballet may be destroyed, but the Master's presence is still haunting its ruins. Florentina Holzinger's *TANZ* is not an emancipation from an all-consuming victimhood; like feminism itself, it is an always-incomplete, always-ongoing, always-to-be-continued part of an emancipatory process.

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