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Introduction: The Classic and the Offending Classic



William Blake, Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing. (circa 1786). Pencil and watercolor, 1'7" x 2' 3" [From William Shakespeare's A Midsummer's Night Dream]

Last year, dance historian Mark Franko published an essay in the *Massachusetts Review* on Jerome Robbins's *Opus Jazz*, where he argued that Robbins uses Black aesthetic forms to create an American classic. In a moment where our society is splintering along racial lines, Franko has reminded us that American art is hybrid and can point to another reality—one of unity. Within this ballet, however, there is a scene of rape. Franko speaks briefly about it. Not surprisingly given #MeToo, our readers were intrigued. We decided to pose the question to other scholars and critics of dance, as well as a dancer: What should we do with representations of violence against women in the classic works of dance? To use Franko's language, ought a classic offend? Juan Ignacio Vallejos writes of such representations as the "intolerable," complicating the question with the ethical and the political, and per-

haps grasping its core.

The essays we received in response explore the issue in myriad ways; they also go beyond #MeToo to encompass our unceasingly chaotic reality. Could such a question cause consternation or controversy? Absolutely. In an expanded sense, think of ballet's *La Bayadère* or opera's *Aida*. In his formidable critique of power, Edward Said showed us how cultural representations act as the handmaiden to imperialism. His work has transformed the university in unimaginable ways, yet his objections to *Aida* for its offensive Orientalism have been met with a veritable silence in the opera houses.[1] *Aida* remains an international warhorse, as does *La Bayadère*. To introduce these essays on the offending classic, I would like first to revisit briefly, from today's perspective, the question of the classic.

Back in 1944, T.S. Eliot gave an address to the Virgil Society entitled "What Is a Classic?" He already observes, "It is not a new question." Yet, he argues, it is an urgent question. It remains so still. The classic work is not only linked to the past, but to "a belief in what it may still accomplish in the future."[2] For Eliot, in that time of war, the stakes were high. He writes, in concluding, "the maintenance of the standard [of the classic] is the price of our freedom, the defense of freedom against chaos."[3]

What is at stake for us today in asking this question? The classic is understood to have enduring value over time. At its foundation, the classic deals with the problem of permanence and change.[4] The work lasts because of its openness to reinterpretation, making it meaningful for new ages. Foremost are not the thematics of the work, but rather the questions that are postulated and resonate with succeeding generations. Less about an individual author or artist, the voice of a people and an historical consciousness emerge from the classic text. Together, the works create a tradition to be passed down—not static and unchanging, but alive and constantly changing. Eliot argues that without the safeguarding of the classical ideal, society breeds a provincialism that leads to intolerance (rather than to historical awareness) and a distortion of values (Saint-Beuve's moral truths which explicate conditions of wisdom and reason) by which it should rather measure itself and hope to achieve.[5] By looking at the category of the classic through the perspective of the work of art, we delimit the broader category in a specific manner. Aesthetic form marks the artwork's difference from other historical documents. Though inextricably tied to-

gether, two competing definitions of the classic emerge: one ideal, the other bound to the political structures of society.

The ideal has much in common with the answer to the question "what is art?," a topic many have addressed: Emerson, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Tagore, Du Bois, Woolf. Before our age of skepticism, the shared conceptualization between the true work of art and the classic included the singularity of the work, universality, being immortal or eternal ("that eternity which lies not outside time but within it,"[6]) and enabling the transformation of consciousness and the betterment of society. The work of art reveals beauty and truth and helps us find meaning in life; most significantly, it offers us the experience of community, of shared meaning—the particular aim, of course, of live performance, of music and dance. For philosopher Stanley Cavell, the answer to what is art? is tied to why we treat, "how we *can* treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons."[7] The experience of art signifies a relationship to something as valuable as another person; through its encounter, we recognize ourselves and also delight in the other's perfection. In many ways, art is the preferable term, given that it does not enlist us in the cult of genius or authority, whereas the (less ideal) classic often does. However, in our cultural imaginary, it is the classic that assumes an awesome power, which in no small part deals with its relationship to the canon, a category of importance for this set of essays.

How does a work of art become a classic? This question takes us straight to the mundane definition. For new work, the path to classic is often dependent upon cultural, economic, and political forces (for example, dominant aesthetic forms, awards panels, financial backing, and access to elite institutions and archives). The adage that time can tell is meaningful here. Often highly celebrated new works are forgotten by history; they fail to capture what is needed of the true work of art: notably, the expression of an enduring idea, the reflection of society, the innovation of aesthetic form, and the ability to invite reinterpretation and remain contemporary. At the same time, some of the most visionary artists, like William Blake, get banished to the waiting room of history. Some work is too uncomfortable in its contemporary moment, like Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, it is "for a later age."[8] Beethoven's fugue audaciously anticipated modernism; Blake's moral and political critique against injustice could have, and should have, toppled the pillars of Parliament—hence its banishment.

The classic work of art explicates a relationship to history: including, its own transformations through re-readings over time. The classic makes historical understanding possible. It gives us insight into the past, it illuminates our present, and, as we have come to say, it imagines a future otherwise. Both the idea and form of the work emerge through its historical situatedness. Aesthetic form is a social phenomenon and carries a history of a people. The plurality of aesthetic forms creates a richness in art and allows for the representation of diverse cultures. Aesthetic form is neither singular nor universal, yet why is it that currently dominant aesthetic forms are often misrecognized as exactly that, a universal? The borrowings and traces detectible within any particular form show how intricately interwoven humanity is, even if through colonial exploitation or slavery—the underside of art that reminds us of art's dialectical nature and simultaneously exposes it also as Benjamin's document of barbarism. Autonomous art is dialectical: separate from the world, yet responsive to that from which future worlds develop. In our era of late capitalism, when so few things have the power to critique society, there is added weight to Adorno's premise that formal autonomy maintains this force. We cannot afford to lose this idealism. Today, does not the classic work of art have a responsibility to uphold the values of our democratic state? Freedom, justice, equality, and the inherent dignity of all people.



Against this backdrop, we present a set of essays which examine the question of violence against women in classic works of dance. The essayists in our series have approached this question in a variety of ways, often using it as a springboard to discuss broader issues.

In "Sex and Death," Deborah Jowitt begins by looking at the fantastical representation of women in nineteenth-century ballets: *La Sylphide*, *Swan Lake*, and *Giselle*, as well as *La Bayadère*. She discusses the idea of the chaste or virtuous woman in these classic ballets, and the dichotomy between the reality of the dancer's strength, determination, and training and the image of the ethereal being and the fiction of woman. Jowitt shows us how these nineteenth-century ballets have changed through time, most notably through the virtuosity of the dancer. She negates the idea of a static, unchanging ballet and fidelity to it, asking, what is an "original"? Jowitt's essay sparks a wealth of questions for further contemplation: Were these ballets reflective of

their contemporaneous society? If so, how? Did they create an imaginary space that simply spoke of and for the fantasies of an elite, where the Western woman was virtuous, benevolent, just and symbolized an imperial culture? In contrast, *La Bayadère*, a nineteenth-century Orientalist ballet, performs an epistemic violence which constitutes "the colonial subject as Other."[9] The ongoing performances of *La Bayadère*, which at times also include blackface, fly in the face of the global demand to stop imperialist and racist representations which demean entire civilizations. In the United States, blackface minstrelsy was used to denigrate and mock Black people, while at the same time it was manipulated to mask the white appropriation of Black culture, especially in music and dance. Must the ballet continue such violence in the name of the "classic," or of "tradition"?

In "On the Intolerable in Dance," Juan Ignacio Vallejos examines choreographer Angelin Preljocaj's reinterpretation of *Rite of Spring* (2001), where the Chosen One is not only sacrificed but raped beforehand. Vallejos uses the idea of the "intolerable" to refer "to a specific moral configuration that emerges when the transgression of a limit becomes impossible to assimilate": it "designates a terrain of dispute." With neoclassical technique, Preljocaj transforms a violent act into something beautiful. Vallejos discusses the paradox of art: of both having the responsibility of bearing witness to horror, while making sure the violence is not glorified or made pleasurable when it is aestheticized. With the works by Preljocaj and Pablo Rotemberg, the Argentinian choreographer of whom Vallejos also speaks, one wonders if the representation of rape on stage is more for shock value (without any clear political intent) than a deep engagement with the meaning of such violence. Do Kenneth MacMillan's ballets pose a contrast, when after the Second World War, MacMillan wanted to upend the fantasies inherited from the nineteenth-century ballet, by bringing a severe realism to his choreography? *The Invitation* (1960) stages rape, as do some of his other ballets. *The Invitation*'s pas de deux explicitly depicts the rape, yet the choreography is beautiful and renders an ethereal fragility to the ballerina. Does it anesthetize us to the horror of rape? Can brutal realism be staged through beautiful form? As Vallejos argues, and to use Benjaminian language, there is a fine line between the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics, with form playing a pivotal role. A few questions emerge: Why does society continue to celebrate and circulate new works that place us within the

sphere of the intolerable? Many new works never find a stage, a gallery, a publisher; why these?

In "Against Orthodoxies," while Joellen A. Meglin does not address the issue of the classic, she does pose basic questions about the peer review process and reception of dance scholarship. As editor-in-chief of *Dance Chronicle,* she wonders whether or not we have a responsibility to give a forum to a variety of points of view and political stances. Using MacMillan's *The Invitation* as an example, she finds an essay that historically contextualizes the ballet within the working-class politics of post-war Britain resonant and insightful, in spite of the fact that it does not engage with today's #MeToo movement. She brings up the issue of "presentism" and asks that, if scholarly work has historical insight to offer, is it not valuable whatever one's politics? Meglin turns a well-needed critical eye toward the university. While political orthodoxies (on the left and right) abound in our society, she asks if political polarization in academia risks crushing independent thinking in the very place that is supposed to be a bastion of clear thinking and scientific skepticism. Her call for tolerance rings out clearly and urgently. Meglin writes, "Older models suggest tolerance as an abiding value. Today, the ferocity of our political beliefs seems to enshrine intolerance: some positions are so wrong as to require stamping out. Are we moving toward censorship and thought control?"

We return to the classic. The foundation of the canon—classics are the works that create it. Seen in this light, the classic is distinct from the idea of art. If the work of art speaks to, and perhaps imagines, a common humanity, the classic/canon nexus is tied to nation building, national identity, and tradition. As Nicole Duffy Robertson points out in her essay, "Classic Sin: Ballet, Sex, and Dancing outside the Canon," the classic in ballet it is also inseparable from institution building, critics, and donors. She examines Robert Joffrey's *Astarte* (1967) and Gerald Arpino's *Light Rain* (1981), works by the founders of the Joffrey Ballet that oscillate between recognition and disregard. Robertson asks how we even classify those works which have been disparaged by critics and overlooked by more powerful institutions or even its own, but are beloved by dancers and audiences. Robertson argues for the worth of both *Astarte* and *Light Rain*. She addresses the question of sexual violence and argues why some works should find a space of prominence in the history books, while others live on in the performance repertoire.

In "The Offending Classic," Mark Franko considers the elements of a classic work in ballet and debunks the idea that many of the nineteenth-century ballets are worthy of the title. He argues that the category of the classic in ballet needs to be historicized. The idea that the nineteenth-century ballets are the foundational texts of ballet as an art form is a myth and an invention of early twentieth-century dance criticism. This illusion enables institutions, donors, and audiences to invest in having these "classics" perpetually performed. Examining *La Bayadère*, Franko maintains that when a contemporary public encounters a work as prejudiced, we need to re-evaluate why and how it retains the status as classic, and performed as such. Why, he asks, is ballet being treated as a permanent work of art, like a painting, as if it were invulnerable to adaptation as a theater work? Franko offers a brilliant plan for how to restage these ballets and make them relevant to our time. One hopes ballet will heed his call.



Franko's earlier essay on Robbins's *Opus Jazz*, "What Is a Classic?," precipitated this set of essays. In it, he argues that Black dance was integral not only to this particular ballet, but also to an understanding of American concert dance.[10] Hybridity speaks to who we are as a nation. It also speaks to how we can envision the mutual composition of the classic and the canon. Neither can be only about a reflection of the past; both need to illuminate our present, and, as Eliot insists, to hold on to "a belief in what it may still accomplish in the future." As our society continues to grow more diverse, including the public for the arts, when scenes of violence against women or a discomfiting Orientalism mar the experience, do the works speak to our time? Can a work hold on to the title of classic and be circulated as such, when it violates the criteria and qualities of the classic? At the end of her remarks on *Opus Jazz*, Meglin muses that perhaps the unchanging showcasing of works has to do with the lack of representation of women's voices as choreographers—and we can add choreographers of color. Meglin speaks forcefully of this as a "social rift or open wound."

The historical and pedagogical value of the ballets of which we have been speaking is uncontroversial. If something shocks or offends, we have a responsibility to understand why, not to erase all remnants of it. Perhaps such ballets could be discussed in the classroom or through

exhibitions, for example at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. In the mix of the different art forms, live performance is unique. While literature can circulate pedagogically in the classroom, and to a lesser extent the visual arts circulate similarly, in the museum with its endless rooms, performing in front of a live audience changes the dynamics of how we encounter the work of art. Whether because it is a space of immediate shared meaning, of vulnerability and trust between the performers and audience, the format of the performance, or a celebration of virtuosity and the aesthetic, performance in the concert halls tends to foreclose the space of discussion that pedagogical spaces open up. When staged, especially in elite institutions with high production values, ballet takes on the aura of the unassailable—the classic.

The essays urge us to reassess the canon of ballets. Perhaps we need to adopt Robertson's idea of "for the history books" or, following Franko, rework the ballets for our age in a manner which highlights their importance to the ballet canon. Either idea would create space for new works and new voices. Realizing what is included necessarily implies exclusion. Rather than only dominant names and forms being performed, new works—hybrid works—might instead address our political world profoundly. Dance—ballet—is a powerful art form: let it speak to our time and show us in our heterogeneity as both creators and performers. For Eliot, writing during an earlier time of war, the maintenance of the classical ideal with its reach to the highest values of society was "the price of our freedom, the defense of freedom against chaos." The similarities between the times cannot go unnoticed. What is at stake now is no less.

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Notes

[1] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1994), 111-132.

[2] T.S. Eliot, *What Is a Classic?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), 12.

[3] Eliot, *What Is a Classic?,* 32

[4] Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 42-44

[5] Eliot, *What Is a Classic?* and Charles-Augustin Saint-Beuve, "Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?," in *Causeries du lundi*. 3rd ed. Vol. 3. (Paris: Garnier frères, 1858),

38-55.

[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (1843; London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 61.

[7] Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 189.

[8] Beethoven described the "Razumovsky" Quartets, Op. 59, as "music for a later age." See Edward Dusinberre, *Beethoven for a Later Age: Living with the String Quartets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[9] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea,* ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 35.

[10] This builds on work by Brenda Dixon Gottschild and others. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Connecticut: Praeger, 1996).