Introduction/Prologue

The Sleeping Beauty as Ballet: Aurora's Reanimation across Time and Space

The Sleeping Beauty is perhaps the most magnificent of the classical ballets that emerged from the extensive canon of work produced during the late nineteenth century by Marius Petipa, in collaboration with Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Hailed as the jewel of the canon, *The Sleeping Beauty* is a ballet to which writers, dancers, and choreographers often refer as a stunning example of both the grand style and the academic form of ballet during that period.[1] The choreographic vocabulary of *The Sleeping Beauty*—the academic danse d'école—was expanded and perfected during the Petipa–Tchaikovsky collaboration in Russia, and the training methods and aesthetic qualities crystallized in this ballet have made their way into ballet schools and companies the world over. In *Dancing the Fairy Tale*, I argue from a dance studies perspective—a perspective focused on the work dancers do in the studio that is embedded in the physical practice of dance itself, which incorporates poststructuralist research methods drawn from American feminist theory—that *The Sleeping Beauty* is both a metaphor for ballet itself and a powerful case study for examining ballet and its performance in the twenty-first century.[2]

This book focuses on the important role of women in reanimating *The Sleeping Beauty*. It looks especially to the surprising stories of female directors and choreographers who staged and starred in the work in the United States at significant intervals during the twentieth century. Although significant contributions have been made by women such as Bronislava Nijinska (Diaghilev's choreographer and the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky), Dame Marie Rambert (founding director of the Ballet Rambert), Dame Ninette de Valois (founding director and choreographer of the Royal Ballet), Lucia Chase (director, principal dancer, and financier of American Ballet Theatre), Ruth Page (founding director and choreographer of the Ruth Page International Ballet and the Chicago Ballet), Celia Franca (founding director of the National Ballet of Canada), and Dame Peggy van Praagh (founding director of the Australian Ballet), I have chosen to focus on the significant and primarily unacknowledged contributions of Catherine Littlefield and Barbara Weisberger, two women who carried out the bulk of their careers in Philadelphia. In addition, I focus on the labor of more recent interpreters of the ballet who also worked in the city of Philadelphia.

The book revolves around the choreographic content of the ballet and the details of its embodied performance in the studio and on the stage. Seeking to remedy the situation for ballet dancers and ballet studies that Linda Nochlin chronicled so well for art history in her classic article "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" *Dancing the Fairy Tale* demonstrates how women shaped the trajectory of ballet and its establishment in the United States, doing so in their roles as producers and as performers of this particular ballet.[3] The field of ballet studies is several decades behind the breakthrough gender studies of art history and other disciplines. Despite recent contributions to this area of research, the efforts still are primarily theoretical and ignore the actualities of specific women doing practical work that has remained unknown and unexamined. *Dancing the Fairy Tale* intervenes in the usual practices of ballet history and places women at the center of a historical narrative. I chose to focus on women who are not necessarily internationally known ballerinas and who have either produced or danced in successful stagings of *The Sleeping Beauty*. This is a choice made to delimit the work to a specific geographic context that is often overlooked because of the

shadow New York casts over achievements in a city so close by yet smaller in size.

The feminist poet Adrienne Rich challenged scholars to engage in "re-vision: the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." She claimed that "for women this is more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival."[4] In keeping with this feminist charge to reformulate the methods with which we create academic knowledge, *Dancing the Fairy Tale* attempts to dismantle the entrenched hierarchy of mythologized male choreographers who are cited as singularly responsible for the canon of work that ballet companies and training academies across the United States and all over the world study and perform. My book therefore complicates the well-established ballet meta-narrative that traces influence directly from King Louis XIV to Jules Perrot and Jean Coralli, to Enrico Cecchetti, to Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, to Michel Fokine and George Balanchine, and to contemporary choreographers such as William Forsythe and Alexei Ratmansky. Instead, by researching female producers and performers of *The Sleeping Beauty*, and by looking at regional performances outside the U.S. dance and cultural center of New York, *Dancing the Fairy Tale* widens our understanding of the web of ballet influence. The book rejects a conceptualization of dance history as a river in which one influence flows directly into the other. Instead, it visualizes dance history as more weblike and as created by many mutually significant strands. This is a significant shift and new trend within dance studies, in which anything that ballets have produced outside New York (and the stark abstract ballets of Balanchine) is currently seen as a regional anomaly and therefore as having less historical importance.

Dancing the Fairy Tale also challenges the usual idea that female dancers are the tools of male choreographers. This is the standard view of ballerinas: that they are mere clay asking to be molded into objects meant for display. Drawing on both archival sources and the lived experience of coaches, performers, and teachers of classical ballet, *Dancing the Fairy Tale* underscores the ways in which women have been important as articulate producers, stagers, and interpreters of classical ballet and the reality that they are not just muses for men.

Heeding the feminist theorist Linda Alcoff's classic advice that

"anyone who speaks for others should do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive practices involved,"[5] I am transparent in placing my subjectivity at the center of this research and book, acknowledging that its field-shifting perspective emerges from my own experience and passion as both an academic and a classically trained dancer. Thus, this work is in a prime position to speak to both dance studies scholars and performers, a vast bridge that is rarely traversed. Alcoff urges writers to "interrogate the bearing of our location on what we are saying,"[6] and this is the very heart of this project. I write as not only a dancer with a career in professional ballet learning and performing canonical works but also as a scholar with academic training in the creative process and dance making, as well as world history, historiography, dance history, feminist theory, anthropology, and cultural studies.

From these combined vantage points, I create an argument drawn from a bricolage of sources, including my experiences performing, setting, and coaching *The Sleeping Beauty*; participant observations of rehearsals and performances; the archival evidence of clippings and playbills; and transcripts of interviews that I conducted with dancers and producers. This wider-than-usual array of sources for a book in ballet studies works to highlight the agency of female ballet artists and the contributions they have made to the perpetuation and evolution of the balletic genre in the United States and across the globe.

Overview

After this introductory section poses the question of why the study of ballet has not yet been reimagined using the critical feminist theoretical lens that has been applied to other disciplines, including arts-related disciplines, Chapter 1 expands on ballet and ballet history from the perspective of women on and behind the stage, shifting the critical discourse from the audience, where the critic sits, to the stage, where women dance, and from male to female bodies. These discursive shifts create the ground for associated others. Once women are brought more actively into the way that ballet history and ballet studies are executed, the usual ballet history meta-narrative about men's creativity using women's bodies as their muses or vessels falters—in

ways that are exciting for the discipline of dance studies. The fact that much of this history of female choreographers and producers of ballet took place not in New York but one hundred miles south, in Philadelphia, highlights not only the importance of regionalism in ballet but also the concept of the history of ballet as more than the transfer of the Western European tradition to New York.

I do not consult much of the literature published outside the United States. I also do not reference the developments of British ballet during the mid- to late twentieth century and make no claim to deal with ballet outside the United States during that time frame. I have chosen to focus on Philadelphia to highlight the multifaceted nature of dance history. Although scholars often envision history as a linear progression with important developments taking place in one single cultural center at a time, and they see these places as the most important sites of cultural development, there are in actuality many equally important and significant places in which important developments and strands of cultural work have occurred but been overlooked. Far from "provincial," the women working in Philadelphia in the 1930s and 1960s trained with internationally renowned pedagogues and choreographers. Their work has simply been ignored because they saw Pennsylvania as a legitimate site from which to share their vision and artistry. In fact, Weisberger and the dancers of the Pennsylvania Ballet were not Philadelphians. They came to Philadelphia as part of a national movement generating the decentralization and professionalization of American ballet in the 1960s. When considering the importance of what these women achieved as artists, entrepreneurs, and cultural leaders, however, I argue that Philadelphia can be viewed as one of many significant sites of American dance history.

A second critical issue that emerges is explored in Chapter 2, which sets the stage for thinking about issues of classicism and tradition and how these issues shift when we investigate the stories of the two female producers, Catherine Littlefield and Barbara Weisberger. When we consider the role of the dancers themselves—and not the choreographers—in transmitting dance traditions, the grounds for considering reanimation and restagings shift. These are key issues in the ballet tradition that especially emerge in productions of *The Sleeping Beauty*. This book, however, is not a philosophical exploration of the meaning or definition of ballet as an art form; although it

does touch on those subject areas by virtue of its content, it is truly a story about the work of women in Philadelphia establishing the legacy of classical ballet in the United States, not about the nature of dance itself. Such a book would certainly be interesting but not what I have undertaken for this project. The focus of this project has been on bridging the world of professional ballet and academe, as well as that of popular readership with a scholarly audience, and I am dedicated to producing a readable story about the work of real women in real the world of ballet.

Together, Chapters 3 and 4 present a new history of productions of *Sleeping Beauty* in America, with the intriguing stories of *Beauty*'s premiere and second production in Philadelphia, both organized by female producers. These productions were key to bringing the internationally known *Sleeping Beauty* to American audiences who would come to love the evening-length production so well. Chapter 3 investigates the American premiere of *Beauty* in 1937 under the direction of Catherine Littlefield, a ballerina and a choreographer coached by dancers from the Maryinsky Theater and the Ballets Russes, as well as an alumna of the Ziegfeld Follies. Chapter 4 discusses a second full-length American production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, in 1965, which was also staged in Philadelphia, this time under the direction of Barbara Weisberger. In addition, the chapter engages a set of questions about what constitutes authenticity, classicism, and tradition in ballet. This is especially germane because Weisberger envisioned classicism as a fluid concept.

Having considered the roles of these two female producers, the focus shifts in Chapter 5 to the dancers who perform the role of Aurora and to reflection on how their dancerly perspectives shift our understanding of the ballet and the concepts of "the real." As Katerina Kolozova has addressed in *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy*, the idea of a "real" or "authentic" version of *Beauty* is based on a falsehood. In her words, "Poststructuralist (feminist) theory sees the subject as a purely linguistic category, as *always already* multiple, as *always already* nonfixed and fluctuating, as limitless discursivity, and as constitutively detached from the instance of the real. This reconceptualization is based on the exclusion of and dichotomous opposition to notions of the real, the one (unity and

continuity), and the stable. It also liberates theory from ideological paralysis, recasting the real as an immediately experienced human condition determined by gender, race, and social and economic circumstance."[7]

Therefore, Chapter 5 points to the problematic ideological issues tied up with much of the discourse around Weisberger's production and its adherence to concepts of what a "real" *Beauty* should do. By the time *The Sleeping Beauty* reappeared in Philadelphia in 1997, under the direction of Roy Kaiser, followed by a second performance in 2002, its performance was neither rare in the United States nor, in its conservative and conventional presentation, unusual. Thus, it is not the performance itself—its choreography or subject matter—that is intriguing in this chapter. What is interesting, however, are the circumstances that led a female producer to gain control of, build, and then lose control of a major ballet troupe in a large American city. This version of *Beauty* was directed by a man after Weisberger was ousted from the Pennsylvania Ballet by a board of directors. The stars of the chapter are the dancers themselves and the manner in which a scholarly consideration of their reflections shifts the terms of analysis of ballet. For the 1997/2002 production, I was able to interview the ballerinas and hear their views on the process of learning and performing *Beauty*. This completes the shift from analyzing ballet from the audience to analyzing it from the rehearsal studio and stage. The ballerinas' perspectives add an embodied understanding of ballet and *The Sleeping Beauty* and shift the terms of what it means to interrogate authenticity and tradition in ballet, as I show.

Chapter 6 collects and expands these arguments, first by looking back and returning to reconsider the original creation of *Beauty* in the collaborations of Petipa and Tchaikovsky, and by placing the dance choreography of *Beauty* into the context of a larger story about how the sleeping beauty theme was also treated in literature and painting, to show the difference that embodied animation makes. Further, the chapter builds an argument for how the dancers operate in a creative space in which they are not just muses to the great choreographer but actively create their ideas through embodied performance.

A brief Conclusion discusses the implications of *Dancing the Fairy Tale*'s exploration of the creative agency of women creating ballet in the United States throughout the twentieth century, and the dynamic physical power of female performers of classic ballet, guiding readers to think about the ways we understand dance studies and ballet history.