

Name of the Research Report: *What makes ballet relevant in the 21st century?*  
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## 1. Introduction:

### I.1. *What is the context of this research topic?*

For the international ballet community, the question of what makes ballet education relevant in the XXI century is synonymous with how to compete with the demands of the present. And this ever-present question is often accompanied by uncertainty and fear of being unable to answer adequately. This research report aims to bring more coherence to the possible solutions by opening up the horizon of understanding ballet from the inside out through the lens of a long-time practitioner and a more curious than traditional ballet theorist.

Looking at the various demands of the XXI century and current aspects of ballet, gaps in existing theories and frameworks require attention. Identifying the causes of these missing parts, reflecting on possible solutions, and exploring new potential directions for implementing the necessary changes in ballet education has been the main focus of the author's doctoral action research. She will defend her thesis at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca in September 2023. The present research report includes some of her work.

### I.2. *What is the background of the main question?*

The need for a broader and more adaptable ballet context, particularly concerning ballet education in the 21st century, arises from several factors and shifts in the artistic, cultural, and professional landscape. Key drivers include the development of new creative expectations from audiences and artistic directors. The boundaries between different art forms have become more fluid, and interdisciplinary collaborations have become more common. Including dancers from different backgrounds, body types, and cultural perspectives enriches the art form and expands its relevance to a broader audience. Cultural shifts towards diversity, inclusion, ethical practices, community engagement, well-being, and technological advances, are changing the professional landscape.

### I.3. *What is the relevance of ballet as art, education, and lifestyle in the 21st century?*

Following Naveen Jain's business suggestion to ask the right questions, at some point, one should realize that 'the questions you ask are the problems you solve. If you're asking the same questions, you're solving the same problems, and you're becoming a commodity. What questions can you ask that are different from what everyone else in the industry is asking?' (Jain 2021.) From a philosophical point of view, the use of the 'Socratic method' - *maieutics* - for generating ideas through reasoning and dialogue (Merriam-Webster) meets the intention of this paper's author first to outline what is currently *lacking* in the preparation of ballet dancers to meet the demands of the 21st century. Below is a brief description of the main issues that need attention, as well as the configuration of helpful inquiry questions to support the process of reflection:

1. The traditional pedagogy of ballet training has been passed down through generations. This approach emphasizes strict adherence to established techniques, often leaving little room for innovation and exploration, and limits evolving artistic and physical demands.  
Question to consider: *Where might the current state of knowledge in ballet education be heading?*
2. Ballet education has historically inherited a need for more diversity regarding body types and cultural perspectives. This lack of diversity has been partly, but not exclusively, imposed by the aesthetics of the ballet canon itself. Overcoming this challenge requires actively embracing diversity in student recruitment, faculty hiring, and curriculum development.  
Question to consider: *What are the root causes of this problem?*
3. Ballet education needs to become faster to integrate other movement skills into its curriculum. As the dance landscape evolves, incorporating influences from contemporary dance, improvisation, somatics, and other movement forms is essential to meet the demands of the 21st century and to produce versatile dancers.  
Question to consider: *What are the main factors that impact integrating other movement skills into the curriculum?*
4. Ballet training has historically focused on preparing students for professional performing careers. However, the demands of the 21st century include non-performance roles such as choreography, teaching, dance science, dance therapy, arts administration, and digital media. Broadening the educational focus to include these career paths can better align ballet training with the diverse opportunities available in the dance field.  
Question to consider: *What are the potential solutions to align ballet training with diverse personal and professional self-development opportunities?*

#### I.4. *Objectives of the research*

The objectives of this pedagogical action research report focus on attempting to answer the questions above by confronting the deeply rooted approaches of ballet, exploring new horizons of the visible and invisible knowledge contained within it, and developing an understanding of what changes need to be made and how to navigate towards a possible beneficial answer.

As a long-time practitioner in ballet, the author dares to believe that the ballet community needs to rely on its strengths, to define and express them adequately because the best sustainable solutions can come from within the ballet community. All the pressures from outside (political, social, medical, or other dance directions, etc.) point towards an unresolved internal conflict and remember that it will persist over time until it is solved.

As theorists and practitioners of ballet, we need to develop the courage to express our *independent thinking*. By concentrating on our strengths, we can be aware and discover a deeper understanding of our identity; we can develop a training framework for ourselves as a *whole*. It means that we are not (anymore) ‘machines for creating beauty’<sup>1</sup> (Guillot-Prudhommeau 1969.7.) to be filled with knowledge poured into us by teachers or choreographers (nor should we see ourselves as such). We become aware of our power to be active creators in self-directed learning, with many possibilities to make new connections between our artistic movement expression and existential experience. From the author's perspective, this means fostering artistic expression, creativity, and intertwining personal and professional development in the XXI century.

#### I.5. *Importance and relevance of the research*

Addressing the need for ballet education to align with the demands of the 21st century gains significant importance and relevance in *enhancing and empowering ballet dancer preparation and updating the ballet teacher's approaches*. It is crucial to ensure the continuation of ballet as an art form, an education system, and a possible lifestyle. It motivates dancers, teachers, parents, and institutions, promotes diversity, supports well-being, advances good pedagogical practices, embraces technology, and nurtures artistic development, ultimately contributing to a thriving and dynamic dance community.

#### I.6. *Description of the research design and approach used*

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<sup>1</sup> «Le danseur et la danseuse se forment dès l'enfance : ce sont, si l'on veut, des machines forgées au rebours de la nature. Mais des machines à fabriquer de la beauté.»

Following Louis Cohen's suggestion of 'fitness for purpose' by applying 'different research paradigms for different research purposes' (Cohen 2018.1.), the author of the present paper considered the *action research*, coined by Kurt Lewin in 1944 (George 2023.) as an appropriate format to support the complexity of the topic. Acquiring knowledge in classical ballet is mainly through direct experience, so choosing a suitable framework for research in investigating, solving, and reflecting upon practice was essential. In this sense, *the field theory* from Kurt Lewin's social psychology proved to be a valuable foundation. Kurt Lewin's field theory is based on the idea that an individual's behavior is influenced by their psychological and social environment (which he called 'living space' or 'psychological field'). (Lewin 1946. 338.)

Investigating the *phenomenon as a whole*, and the *three-stage model* of Lewin, especially with the suggestions of change within the system, ballet education could be interpreted as an integrative field of information between art, science, and lifestyle.

Choosing an *epistemological approach* was inspired by the positive results of the empirical investigations through *Noja-Nebyla STAGE Education*, a two-year pilot project carried out by the author in Viena (2020-2022). The practical methods of inquiry and analysis, through individual case studies, interviews, experiments, and isolated studies gained through the pilot project, have complemented a theoretical framework, where empirical investigation could meet conceptual analysis.

Even though scientific reasoning for theorizing the processes of thinking about movement in ballet is rare, this epistemological approach strives to differentiate between unsubstantiated opinions and justified beliefs based on direct experience. It is a strong attribute in scaffolding essential reference points in developing research hypotheses. In this sense, the epistemological approach provided the ideal framework for deploying a deep and robust understanding of knowledge.

## II. Findings:

### II.1. *Where might the current state of knowledge in ballet education be heading?*

By looking at ballet education through the lens of 21st-century skills, we understand the *meaning of the whole* differently, because we discover in its parts other purposes than we have known before. The paradigm of change begins by re-evaluating the elements from the *whole* perspective to identify the root cause that created the need for change.

As we all know, the traditional pedagogy of ballet training has been passed down from generation to generation. This approach emphasizes strict adherence to established techniques, often leaving little room for innovation and exploration, and limiting artistic and physical demands. A more flexible system is needed. How can this change occur in a system - the ballet canon - that operates with strict rules deeply rooted in the professional and social conscience?

The author of this paper believes that this challenging transformation can be accomplished from within the ballet community through a healthy, well-planned, supportive system:

- First, the awareness and need for such a change must be carefully guided among teachers, not out of fear, but out of belief in the better outcome of the change. A win-win process requires a clear and compelling presentation.
- Second, the theoretical and practical framework should be compelling enough to arouse the curiosity and interest in self-development of the entire ballet community (including dancers, teachers, students, parents, etc.).
- Third, the public presentation and promotion of the general and specific benefits that every one may receive from a ballet education must break new ground. The knowledge gained from neuroscience should be more deeply involved in optimizing the profession and extending the ballet canon beyond it.

## II.2. *What are the root causes of specific approaches of the body?*

Perceptions of the body, particularly the ballet dancer's body, have perpetuated narrow beauty standards and limited the art form's relevance to a broader audience. Over time, the perception of the dancer's body has had a variety of interpretations. Here are two of the most representative:

1. German researcher Claudia Jeschke offers an analytical reappraisal of the notion of the dancer's body, referring to the *triadic valence of the dancer's body* as it was perceived in the 19th century: the *subjective body*, the *idealized body* – 'both bodies are constructed in tandem'<sup>2</sup> (Jeschke 2022.), and the *demonstrative body*. Prof. Dr. Claudia Jeschke, a leading figurehead and ardent promoter of international dance research, winner of the 2019 Dance Prize of the City of Munich in Germany, in her scientific research on the pedagogical clues of 19th-century ballet, senses the dancer's internal conflict regarding 'the discrepancy between what they want to do and what

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<sup>2</sup> „beide Körper werden im Tandem konstruiert“

they are actually able to do.'<sup>3</sup> (Ibidem.) The *demonstrative body* illustrates the combination of the subjective and the ideal body, distinguishing what is right from what is wrong, sometimes even exaggerating; the *demonstrative body* is shaped by the teacher's instructions, by one's perception in the mirror, by comparison with the bodies of other dancers or media presences, it 'avoids shortcomings because of its claim to perfection'<sup>4</sup> (Ibidem.), Jeschke continues.

We must note that much of the current ballet training system still promotes this approach.

2. The British researcher Adesola Akinleye, who works in the United Kingdom and the United States, draws attention to the pitfalls of dualistic arguments about the body. She contrasts the concept of the body as two separate entities of subject and object with a *mind-body-environment matrix*. (Akinleye 2016.) It imposes a unified vision of the thinking body in its immediate fusion through movement with the environment. In other words, the dancer's transactional body, as she calls it, is a *whole* whose parts merge into a continuum of movement that requires them to be treated as such.

The author of this paper prefers to approach the dancer's body from Akinleye's perspective of the transactional body as opposed to his fragmented approach to the body as subject and object. As we have learned from neurocognitive science, the path to a problem is relevant to its solution, which means that approaching the three bodies will lead to a conclusion that treats the separate parts, not the whole. The energy invested in this direction is thus redirected, and the learning process changes from assembling the pieces to transcending them. In this way, the accumulation of information, as practiced in the educational system, is replaced by a change of emphasis in understanding it, where the hermeneutic process leading to new goals becomes essential.

Or, the method and the purpose of education become a single entity whose approach depends on the success of the learning process. How this moment of merging new knowledge with old knowledge takes place depends, in turn, on memorizing the mechanism and, thus, on the potential for its successful repetition. Cognitive resources used only for retaining information are redirected to the exploration of creativity because 'imagination depends on our knowledge and experiences and on our ability to store and recall them'<sup>5</sup>. (Cîrneai 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> „Diskrepanz zwischen dem was sie tun wollen und dem was sie tatsächlich in der Lage sind zu tun“.

<sup>4</sup> „entzieht aufgrund seines Perfektionsanspruchs“

<sup>5</sup> „... imaginația este dependentă de cunoștințele și experiențele noastre și de capacitatea de a le stoca și reaminti“.

As Leslie Schwartzman observes: ‘Real learning requires stepping into the unknown, which initiates a rupture in knowing’. (see Land *et al.* 2018.) But from the perspective of the mind-body-environment continuum matrix, this rupture can be blurred, perhaps even harmonized, thanks to the fluidity of this processual continuum.

As noted above, Akinleye's proposed *mind-body-environment continuum* approach to the body in contemporary dance could also benefit classical ballet. The potential for a brighter spectrum of educational perspective in ballet implies an updating of purpose for those within and outside the profession. The state of the mind-body-environment continuum in ballet could define a *new form of the whole*. It can be applied as an artistic concept, as Adesola Akinleye has done, but it can also be used as a starting point for a new educational concept, as this paper intends.

### II. 3. *What are the main factors that impact integrating other movement skills into the curriculum?*

Curriculum development in ballet education continuously updates objectives, content, strategies, assessments, and resources for the transfer/transmission/development of knowledge, skills, competencies, and behaviors required in ballet. Considering the current steps of curricular integration we have in ballet education:

- *monodisciplinarity*, represented centrally by classical ballet, is the catalyst of the other disciplines; it has been and remains the traditional step of integrating knowledge of the ballet canon;
- *multidisciplinarity*, as a process of correlation, of the juxtaposition of disciplines, without changing the existing structures; it has become helpful with the addition of domains;
- *Interdisciplinarity*, in the sense of interaction, intersection, or transcendence of disciplines within a common framework; integration is beneficial but is hampered by the abundance of information and the lack of appropriate selection tools;
- *transdisciplinarity*, as an organic fusion of knowledge in learning and teaching processes, is based on a common theoretical understanding and insight into the epistemologies of each discipline, yet to be implemented in a current ballet curriculum; (see Ciolan 2008.)

In a world as multicultural as the world of ballet, even if the language of ballet is universal, difficulties remain in its transmission at the level of communication. As Thomas Schack reminds us, inconsistencies in communication can have the following causes:

*In the relationship between teacher and student, because:*

- focusing on different details of the movements or using various expressions to describe them;
- the student's level of understanding is not developed enough to interact with the teacher's level of expertise;
- the teacher's teaching style and the student's learning style are incompatible, with the age difference sometimes playing a decisive role. (see Schack 2019.)

*In the student's learning process because*

- of the accuracy of perceptual information according to the 'event segmentation theory'; of the mental representation of the *expected effects* and 'the model of the future' ('comfort effect of the final state'); of the muscle control by anticipating key moments ('cognitive chunking' and 'segmentation of the movement') and anchoring them in the 'movement memory bank'; (Ibidem.)

Returning to how knowledge is integrated into the ballet curriculum, transferring information from the conceptual-theoretical to the physical-practical system through the embodiment of behavior is central to transforming skills into knowledge. Knowledge is nothing more than applied skills. And one of the characteristics of skills is transversality, says Lucian Ciolan, which, being transferable, gives mobility to added value.

'Transfer ... can be described in terms of an observable function: the benefit of previous experience in the acquisition of new skills. The focus is therefore not on the mechanisms of transfer, but on its detection once it has taken place...to perform in a new, unfamiliar context'<sup>6</sup>. (Ciolan 2008. 153.)

Such a framework can be represented by the transdisciplinary approach to ballet education, similar to the one proposed by Lucian Ciolan in the previous work. The transdisciplinary approach to ballet education is based on the processual nature of the pedagogical phenomenon, in which the diversity of methods does not become a handicap but an opportunity for multiple explorations of the knowledge process.

II. 4. *What are the potential solutions to align ballet training with diverse opportunities in personal and professional self-development?*

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<sup>6</sup> „Transferul...poate fi descris în termenii unei funcții observabile: beneficiul obținut din a avea experiență anterioară în dobândirea noilor abilități. Focalizarea nu se face așadar asupra mecanismelor de transfer, ci asupra detectării lor odată ce transferul a avut loc...pentru a performa într-un context nou, nefamiliar”.



It would be a missing link in the XXI century to think of ballet training solely as the preparation of professional dancers. The benefits of practicing and watching ballet at all ages are becoming more evident as the results of neuroscientific and medical studies are published. The ballet community must consider the need to open the ballet canon to new horizons of interpretation. The ballet dancer is constantly improving their knowledge of movement through training, and each new piece of knowledge is a way of re-evaluating the potential of using the ballet canon. Redefining the purpose of ballet training and why a ballet dancer trains are critical questions for the ballet community to ponder, for it may be where the correct answer dwells.

### III. Conclusions:

*Where might the current state of knowledge in ballet education be heading?*

The traditional pedagogy of ballet training needs to adjust to the demands of the 21st century. Change can be achieved within the ballet community by raising awareness, fostering curiosity and self-development, and promoting the benefits of ballet education. Integrating insights from neuroscience can optimize the profession and expand the ballet canon. This transformative process requires a supportive and well-planned approach.

*What are the root causes of this problem?*

Perceptions of the ballet dancer's body have perpetuated narrow beauty standards, limiting the art form's relevance. Two representative interpretations include the *triadic valence of the dancer's body in the 19th century* proposed by Claudia Jeschke and the *mind-body-environment continuum* proposed by Adesola Akinleye. An *understanding of the whole* should replace the fragmented approach to the body. This shift allows for the exploration of creativity and the merging of new and old knowledge. The *mind-body-environment continuum* approach has the potential to redefine ballet education and update its purpose.

*What are the main factors that impact integrating other movement skills into the curriculum?*

Curriculum development in ballet education involves continuously updating objectives, content, strategies, assessments, and resources to transmit knowledge, skills, competencies, and behaviors. The integration of disciplines in ballet education progresses

from monodisciplinarity (centered around classical ballet) to multidisciplinarity (correlating disciplines) and interdisciplinarity (intersecting disciplines within a common framework). Transdisciplinarity, a holistic fusion of knowledge, must still be implemented in ballet curricula.

Communication challenges exist in the multicultural world of the ballet despite its universal language. Inconsistent communication between teachers and students can arise from differences in focus, understanding levels, teaching and learning styles, and age. The student's learning process involves perceptual accuracy and mental representation with anticipation of key moments to control the quality of movement.

In the ballet curriculum, knowledge is integrated through the embodiment of behavior, transforming skills into applied knowledge. Skills possess transferability and transversality, providing mobility and added value. Transfer of learning occurs when previous experience benefits the acquisition of new skills in unfamiliar contexts.

A transdisciplinary approach adapted to ballet education, after Lucian Ciolan, offers a framework for such integration. It embraces the processual nature of pedagogy and the diversity of methods as opportunities for exploring knowledge.

*What are the potential solutions to align ballet training with diverse personal and professional self-development opportunities?*

In the 21st century, viewing ballet training *beyond* preparing professional dancers is crucial. Studies in neuroscience and medicine reveal the benefits of practicing and experiencing ballet at all ages. The ballet community needs to embrace new interpretations and expand the ballet canon. As dancers continually enhance their understanding of movement through training, each piece of knowledge offers an opportunity to reassess the potential of the ballet canon. Redefining the purpose of ballet training and its motivations are essential questions for the ballet community to explore, as they may hold the key to finding the correct answers.

This pedagogical action research report aims to highlight ballet's potential to shape all practitioners' lives in the XXI century. The author dares to believe that by asking questions about the purpose of ballet education to shed light on some problematic areas and by exploring new questions, new answers may emerge and new knowledge about how to deal with change.

As an experienced ballet dancer and teacher, she believes that the ballet community should build on its strengths and find sustainable solutions from within. The report examines problematic issues, identifies their roots, and offers potential solutions through observation and reflection. It emphasizes the importance of independent thinking, self-directed learning, and integrating personal and professional development in ballet education. By focusing on strengths, the ballet community can foster artistic expression, creativity, and a deeper understanding of one's identity and integrity in the 21st century.

*References:*

All sources cited in this research report are in Harvard style.

*Short presentation of the author:*

Simona Noja-Nebyla is a former principal dancer, dancing mainly with Romanian State Opera Cluj-Napoca, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Düsseldorf-Duisburg, Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Wiener Staatsoper. Her guesting career expands though from Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires), Teatro Municipal (Santiago de Chile), Ballet de Cuba (Havanna) to Bolschoi Theater (Moscow), La Scala (Milano), Balletto dell'Opera (Roma), Semper Oper (Dresden), Teatro San Carlo (Napoli), Royal Swedish Ballet (Stockholm), Finnish National Ballet (Helsinki), Stuttgarter Ballet, Frankfurter Ballet, and Bayerische Staatsoper München.

Besides the leading classical ballet roles, she danced the principal parts in the choreographies of F. Ashley, G. Balanchine, R. Barra, B. Bienert, J. Clifford, J. Cranko, N. Christe, B. Eifman, W. Forsythe, E. Gervasi, S. Gianetti, J. Mannes, J. Neumeier, R. Petit, H. Spoerli, and R. Zanella.

She won prizes and awards in different countries. Besides ballet teaching and mentoring activities, she dedicates time to ballet research and works on her Ph.D. thesis on a ballet educational model.

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