Talking Point

Margaret Watson believes the ballet world should be encouraging more female choreographers

Josephine Jewkes’ description of the Boys in Action project (see Dancingtimes, November 2012) made interesting reading beside Luke Jennings’ recent comments in The Observer on the “all-male creative stranglehold” on The Royal Ballet, and his statement: “It’s a dismaying fact, but no female choreographer has been commissioned to create a ballet on the Covent Garden main stage for more than a decade now.”

When boys are so reluctant to take up dance, particularly ballet, and girls outnumber boys in most ballet classes, why are men so much more successful in gaining recognition as ballet choreographers? Perhaps the small number of male dance students tends to nudge them in disproportionate numbers towards choreography, while the plethora of girls has the opposite effect.

Girls auditioning for vocational ballet schools face daunting competition. Without excellent physiques and high levels of technical attainment they are unlikely to be accepted, however great their creative ability. Once in, they must compete both with their own classmates and with aspiring dancers from all over the world who would like to take their places. If they are that committed, pressured, and good at dancing, they may not have the time, energy or inclination to develop a serious interest in choreography.

In contrast, boys are in relatively short supply, may start dancing seriously later, and appear to face less aggressive technical competition from their peers. This may allow them space to develop in other directions. Although most ballet choreographers start as ballet dancers, they are not always dancers of the first flight: Frederick Ashton, for example, who was a late starter.

There is a female choreographer particularly associated with The Royal Ballet: Ninette de Valois. Does this prove that women ballet choreographers have an equal chance of success, if they are good enough? I think not.

The Royal Ballet is part of the British establishment. De Valois (rightly) wanted The Royal Ballet to become a national institution, but most institutions in this country are dominated by men. The success of a small number of remarkable women in such organisations does not mean that there is a level playing field; those women are exceptions. My own institution (a university) invests heavily in supporting women. Partly driven by legislation, it is also a matter of enlightened self-interest because a leading academic institution must attract the best talent regardless of gender. Even so, women may progress best in the emerging or cross-disciplinary academic fields not already colonised by men. Likewise in dance, over the last 60 years pioneering women have found the gap in the choreographic market in which they can excel in new, contemporary and experimental dance forms. De Valois happened upon just such a gap as a choreographer in the 1930s, when British ballet itself was new.

We know, through the work of women such as Siobhan Davies, that there are women with a prodigious talent for choreography, but all ballet choreographers must be nurtured and given opportunities to develop. How to achieve this?

We need determination within the ballet establishment to seek out and foster the creative talent of women, as well as men, whether or not they are also destined to be dancers of the very first order. Strategies, such as the mentoring and equality training used by other organisations to diversify the workforce and help identify the most talented individuals, might reveal female choreographers who are already active creators. Making a few high-profile appointments of token women choreographers, however, is not the solution.

We also need a cultural shift to broaden the pool of choreographic talent entering the profession. Should exceptional physical criteria be quite so important when selecting all students for vocational schools? Should we not train students, including female students, who are considered less than physically perfect, if they have other gifts? Not every ballet demands extreme physiques of its dancers, so should every dancer be built that way? And when we do glimpse an interest in choreography, such as that shown by Nancy Osbaldeston in English National Ballet’s Emerging Dancer Competition 2012, we should encourage it. I hope that the Female Choreographers’ Collective will help. I want The Royal Ballet to offer new choreographic work of the highest standard, but I do not believe there are no first-class female ballet choreographers out there: either they are not being recognised and given the chance to develop their skills, or they are not being given the jobs and commissions they deserve. Perhaps it is both.

“WE NEED DETERMINATION WITHIN THE BALLET ESTABLISHMENT TO SEEK OUT AND FOSTER THE CREATIVE TALENT OF WOMEN”

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