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The Balletic Mind: Expressive Arts Therapy for Professional Ballet Dancers: A Literature Review and Autoethnography

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Abstract

This thesis explores the mental health needs of professional ballet dancers and suggests how expressive arts therapies can be used to address issues surrounding themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity. A review of the research on ballet culture examines both the advantages and disadvantages of ballet for a dancer's overall health. By acknowledging both the negative and positive qualities of ballet, counselors may develop a deeper awareness and empathy for a population that severely overworks their body and mind. An autoethnographic approach was used to allow for personal ballet practices to influence and stimulate academic inquiry while also providing the reader with vivid examples of dancers' lived experiences. Three expressive arts interventions were conducted using intermodal transfers to focus on each theme addressed. Findings concluded that involving professional ballet dancers in expressive arts therapy could tend to their wounds while simultaneously nurturing their passion. The intent of this thesis is to advocate for ballet dancers and provide an avenue for healing and restoration.

Keywords: professional ballet, expressive arts therapy, dance movement therapy, mental health counseling, body image, injury, identity

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Introduction

Classical ballet is considered one of the most physically demanding of the performing arts, where the body is placed center stage, acting as the primary source of expression. Dancers begin learning the silent craft at a young age, working tirelessly for years to embody an occupation that etches vocabulary of movement into the body. Pushing themselves beyond boundaries, dancers are perpetually on the verge of injury and rarely free of aches and pains. Combining their passion with a "show must go on" culture, ballet dancers remain a vulnerable population with a fragile career path (Fitzgerald, 2023). In need of attention, ballet culture must be explored further in order to understand the degree of care that is required in order to support the performers. Therefore, exploring important themes within professional ballet will inform the counseling community of the dancers' mental health needs, with hopes of creating a voice of advocacy for such an under-researched population.

I utilized Lesley University's library database, Google Scholar, and a variety of educational books as sources of research concerning professional ballet dancers. Within the research, I found that most literature prioritized the physical effects of balletic injury and the maintenance of a healthy balletic body, but very little research focused on the dancer's mind in response to the many stressors they endure. Gregory and Interiano-Shiverdecker (2021) recalled that viewing professional ballet dancers as privileged and idolizing them for their physical endurance and beauty leaves them vulnerable to mental health concerns. Given that the majority of studies conducted on this population have linked negative aspects of their well-being to ballet dancing, it is plausible that age-old ballet culture has prevailed to define the mental health of

ballet dancers. Similar to elite athletes, many dancers have normalized their struggles, identifying harmful habits as a part of the specific stature they must maintain for the profession (Gregory & Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021). By researching, understanding, and acknowledging both the negative and positive aspects of ballet, counselors may develop a deeper awareness of how to best equip the dancer with the ability to heal in a way that is respectful and genuine. Therefore, exploring ballet culture, body image, injury and pain, identity, and the impact that each has on ballet dancers' well-being could be the first step in providing tailored care to an overlooked and overidealized population.

A central dichotomy of the ballet world is watching ballet compared to practicing ballet. The ethereal illusion of effortlessness the audience witnesses is nothing short of years of training and sacrifice. One must simply do ballet in order to understand what it is like. The physical exertion required to glide seamlessly across the stage is primarily what the dancers use to distinguish themselves from the audience. Vulnerable and exposed, a principal dancer once explained, "You're completely naked out there. They see what you have on the inside!" (Wulff, 1998, p. 9). Translations of ballet, be them text, video, or photographs, inevitably lose something along the way. Dancers note that when watching recordings of themselves dancing, the movements do not reflect what they feel on the inside when dancing (Wulff, 1998). As a past amateur ballet dancer, I deeply resonate with this feeling, the way in which my emotions controlled the movements that I had dedicated hours to perfecting, only to watch a video of myself and be disappointed with what I saw. But how might such a tainted mindset be deconstructed when the art of ballet is to look beautiful?

Thus far into my research of ballet culture and themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity, I have concluded that there is still much to learn about dancers' complex

relationship with their craft. There is a sense of belonging that ballet provides to those who dedicate their lives to practicing such art where the body withholds many expectations. I believe there to be an essential tool that could be used for healing the wounds caused by the dichotomous nature of ballet, one that shares many of the same qualities of expression, emotion, and embodiment—expressive arts therapies. Expressive arts therapy utilizes a multimodal approach, integrating all the arts in therapeutic practice, at times working in sequence with the arts, using the arts simultaneously, or carefully transitioning from one art form to another within the therapeutic encounter (Estrella, 2005, as cited in Kossak, 2021). Specifically, movement-based expressive arts therapy focuses on the body and its primary language, movement. This view guides one's understanding of how the body reflects their way of being as humans (Halprin, 2003). Just as movement therapies reflect on the body's way of being human, ballet reflects on the body's way of being a dancer. After all, are the two really that different? In this thesis, I will advocate for the mental health of professional ballet dancers and speak to the power of applying expressive arts therapy to a population whose roots lie closely to the practice of mind-body connection.

Literature Review

The intent of this research is to advocate for the mental health of professional ballet dancers and suggest implementations in which expressive arts therapies can be used to aid issues surrounding themes of body image, psychological effects of injury and pain, and identity. Professional ballet dancers' mental health experiences are sparsely found in research and counseling literature. Instead, most research concerning ballet dancers focuses on injury, eating disorders, and performance enhancement with emphasis on the body. A key aspect that is rarely addressed is the dancer's mind and mental wellbeing. Yet, where there is injury, an eating

disorder, and performance enhancement, there is the endurance of the *mind*. This literature review will discuss the negatives and positives of ballet and how expressive arts therapies can support in healing the negative aspects while enhancing the qualities of the positive aspects.

History of Ballet

Ballet is an age-old tradition holding origins in the 14th century Italian Renaissance courts. Fusing peasant folk dance with court processions, ballet emerged as an elaborate spectacle of entertainment for noblewomen and noblemen. Catherine de Medici, a grand patron of the arts, held festivals that encouraged the growth of ballet and inspired the first ballet production, *Ballet Comique de la Reine*. Under the rule of King Louis XIV, a dancer himself with a deep passion for the art form, ballet became a profession within academies and theatres. By the 18th century, many ballet companies had been established across Europe, but it was in Paris where classical ballet celebrated its ethereal expression in the Romantic Era ballet, *La Sylphide*. Dance historian Walter Sorell described *La Sylphide* as containing the "elements of the supernatural, the power of love, and the desire to reach out from the ordinary into the dream of the unknown" Wulff, 2008, p.521).

To this day, ballet continues to be defined by its 19th century Romanticism roots, featuring European fairytales and folk legends. Women dancers, often dressed in tulle and pointe shoes, portray graceful swans, princesses, or fairies, while men dancers, often dressed in tights and ballet shoes, perform as heroes and high acclaimed princes (Wulff, 2008). There is an ethereal quality to ballet, one that causes the audience to silence their phones and fully indulge their senses in a wordless narrative. In a world dominated by reason, ballet transcends its viewers to a place that eliminates the contrast between logic and emotion. Whether it be a chilling story about a dying swan fighting to win back the affection of her beloved prince or a man with his

trusty squire searching for chivalry and adventure, ballet generates a visceral reaction within the viewer, bringing one to tears or inspiring one to stand in thunderous applause (Moola & Krahn, 2017). While the audience may easily get lost in the alternative reality of ballet, at what cost do the ballet dancers exert themselves to create the illusion of ethereal expression?

Ballet Culture

For reasons unknown, ballet is a severely neglected topic in the psychology of the mind and body. Wainwright and Turner (2006) suggested that little attention has been focused on how social worlds invest, shape, and deploy human bodies. Instead, research on the "body and dance" is generally dominated by work that emphasizes history and textuality, drawing on secondary sources such as written historical records and videos. Despite such sources being an important part of ballet's roots, there is a desperate need to understand dancers' relationships to their mind and body in adjunct to their profession. Little research has been conducted using first-hand observations of and interviews with dancers. Although Wainwright and Turner (2006) presented important topics related to the physical health of professional ballet dancers, I am still left pondering the mind's response to such physicality, an even more neglected topic within the well-being of professional ballet dancers.

Fusing beauty and athleticism, ballet culture is built on idealistic tenets in which a dancer's tenacity, perceptions of the ideal body, and devotion play a role in the ability to illustrate a story through movement. Such commitment to the artform requires ballet dancers to overwork their bodies, sustain injuries, and endure chronic pain, often leading to emotional distress (Gregory & Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021). Because classical dancers' sense of self is predominantly formed as a result of how others perceive them, they are particularly prone to issues involving self-esteem, perfectionism, body image, and eating disorders (Van Staden et al.,

2009). In a compelling critical review written more than 40 years ago, *Competing with the Sylph*, Lawrence Vincent (1979) discussed the dangers of ballet's occupational culture and the consequences of working to uphold aesthetic ideals. He described the obsessive ways in which the ballet world focused on the body weight of female dancers and attributed this to the frequent occurrences of eating disorders. Ten years later, Vincent published an article in the *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science* concluding that eating behaviors have not improved, stating that "the reason is our failure to confront the root of the problem, because it is a cultural and aesthetic, not a scientific or medical one" (Aalten, 2007, p.110).

Negative Aspects of Ballet

Body Image

Body image is a multifaceted construct rooted in cultural values and intrinsically linked to experiences concerning perception, sensation, affect, cognition, and personal experience. It can be operationalized as the image one holds in their mind of the shape, size, form, and worth of their body (Bechtel et al., 2020). In the practice of ballet, the use of mirrors is regarded as crucial for the dancer's performance enhancement. During rehearsals, the mirror acts as the point of orientation, reflecting steps that have been corrected time after time. However, long-term preoccupation with the mirror can become overwhelming for dancers, leaving them critiquing more than their balletic steps. Absorption with physical appearance is exaggerated by the fact that dancers have been taught to scrutinize their mirror image, using their reflection as a tool to reveal incorrect positioning or movements. When the performance finally arrives, there are no mirrors to inspect and critique the body, allowing the dancers to transition from technique to artistry. Liberated from the constraints of the mirror, each movement becomes more expressive and truer to the dancer (Wulff, 1998).

Considering the physical and mental demands of training, rehearsals, and performances, professional ballet dancers are not only artists, they are elite athletes. Dancers are exposed to various stressors that may negatively impact their mental health, such as fulfilling specific body images and being judged by their performance or physical appearance (Junge & Hauschild, 2023). They dance through pain, constantly risking career-threatening injuries, and perform in challenging environments while under psychological stress. Additionally, the aesthetic ideal of the female ballet dancer is low body weight with a long, thin frame and a high degree of flexibility. Such a body type is assumed to assure graceful and delicate movements, the ultimate goal of a dancer. Consequently, ballet dancers are at high risk for eating disorders, with a high prevalence of substance abuse and misuse (Peric et al., 2016).

Eating Disorders and Substance Abuse. In a study designed to examine the prevalence of substance abuse/misuse and eating disorders among female ballet professionals in the National Ballet Ensemble from Croatia, Peric et al. (2016) concluded that both alcohol and analgesics consumption in ballet remains high. The data revealed there to be a higher level of eating disorders among dancers who consume alcohol compared to those who do not. Amenorrhea was also found as a moderately common result of the eating disorders, a condition that is highly neglected in research of female ballet professionals. High alcohol consumption is a common strategy used to help cope with occupational stress, although the simultaneous use of analgesics and alcohol is prevalently seen in sports and exercise. Unsurprisingly, this is one of the first studies to report such findings among ballet dancers. Results suggest that both substances are being misused for similar reasons concerning musculoskeletal pain, but the health-related hazards of consuming analgesics and alcohol poses risks of acetaminophen toxicity and gastrointestinal bleeding associated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (Peric et al.,

2016). With pain and consequent injuries being one of the greatest health risks of ballet dancing, I cannot help but wonder about the state of the mind while the body searches for relief through substances.

Injury & Pain

In an industry for which working through pain is common practice, professional ballet dancers often push through injuries, attending physical therapy as needed and temporarily masking the discomfort with anti-inflammatories. Research on injured athletes reports psychosocial impacts such as anger, depression, anxiety, tension, fear, and low self-esteem as a result of disruption to training and performing. As a dancer's balletic art is deeply woven into their identity, injuries threaten not only their careers, but their social health and well-being. Dancers typically choose their career at a young age, sacrificing traditional education, social relationships, and hobbies with the intent of fully dedicating themselves to their craft. Such a precisely defined sense of self predisposes professional ballet dancers to struggle with injury, leaving a tremendous void when they are unable to attend practices or perform on stage. In a career that already suffers with instability and minimal salaries, the injured dancer's state of mind is mourning job security, financial stressors, and their identity. Stress, combined with an impaired ability to cope, may prolong the injury and minimize opportunities in an already short career (Drury, 2019).

Research on professional ballet has repeatedly and convincingly shown that most dance-related injuries are not caused by physical trauma, but by chronically overworking and overburdening the body. Therefore, when a dancer continues to ignore the pain, a minor injury could easily grow into a major one, damaging their career and mental health. Retired British dancer Darcey Bussell shared:

> Dancers are always so desperate not to miss any part of their careers that we find it tempting to work through injuries if we possibly can. When we first join the company we're especially determined to prove ourselves, and I know many dancers who have been injured but who have carried on working without telling anyone. (Bussell, 1999, as cited in Aalten, 2007, p.100)

Bussell continued to share that though she was well aware that pushing an injured body was neither safe nor healthy, she continued to do so in the height of her career. In an occupation where the body is drastically prioritized, one would expect dancers to treat their body with the utmost respect to retain its functionality and form. However, similar to eating disorders, overburdening and exhausting the body is believed to be one of the unavoidable risks of the ballet profession (Aalten, 2007). To what extent are dancers listening to their bodies outside of the pressures of body image, identity, and injury? Where lies the separation between the body and the *balletic* body?

Physical pain is a part of the daily life of a ballet dancer and considered inevitable in a culture of injury and pain. Most questions about pain are answered by a dancer's shrug of the shoulders, disregarding it as a part of their day-to-day experiences. According to research, dancers have an abnormally high level of pain tolerance. The junction of complaining about pain while also enduring high levels of pain can only be understood through the framework of a ballet dancer's relationship with their body within ballet culture. In an interview with past professional dancer Yoko van der Tweel, pain was spoken of as something that comes only when it is given attention to:

> I remember having a corn once and I still needed to go on pointe for the ballet we were doing at the time. Then I discovered that it is possible to focus yourself mentally up to the

> point where you do not feel the pain anymore the moment you get on stage. In a way you surpass the pain. (Aalten, 2007, p. 116)

All dancers interviewed by Aalten (2007) had comparable stories about their ability to ignore pain while dancing. They accepted pain as an unavoidable part of their profession, while also feeling that they had a certain degree of control over it. In the culture of ballet, dancers know that in order to succeed, one must suffer. Because of this blindly heroic aspect, pain is seen as a sign of hard work and improvement; therefore, pain is welcomed. Yoko van der Tweel was interviewed again by Aalten seven years later, revisiting her mindset of pain. She shared, "I think you feel pain when you are doing nothing. That's when you feel it. But when you are dancing you do not feel any pain" (Aalten, 2007, p. 116). Dancers teach their bodies to move in ways that defy principles of human design, therefore crossing physical boundaries and seeing bodily limits as challenges (Aalten, 2007).

Identity

Occupational identity forms the basis of relating to the individuals' understanding of the role of their body, especially in professions where the body is at the root of their craft (i.e., professional ballet). Conceived of as the conscious awareness of oneself as a worker, occupational identity can represent a complex array of meaning-making through which the individual's association with their aspirations and competencies within a role act as the vehicle for which they conceptualize their identity. Disruption to one's physical and/or mental health can have a radical impact on one's ability to relate to their occupational identity. Maintaining a positive relationship with the self-discovered identity strongly influences the individual's psychological well-being (Fitzgerald, 2023). In professional ballet, the body is considered the entity that is in the process of becoming, a project that is worked on where the body acts as the

very essence of self-identity. Deborah Bull, a past dancer with The Royal Ballet suggests that, "If the body can talk, then the language of classical ballet should be the most articulate which exists" (Wainwright & Turner, 2006, p. 249). Dancers internalize the dance then *become* the dance.

A potential occurrence in professional ballet dancers is allowing role-identity to dominate self-identity. Role-identity is practiced when embodying a stage character, where the dancer leaves behind their personal identity and adopts a new way of being through dance and expression. Some dancers gradually learn to form self-perceptions from the roles they play, which has the ability to strongly influence one's sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, dancers' sense of self is primarily formed as a result of how they are perceived by others, causing detriment to their behaviors, attitudes, and self-concept (Van Staden et al., 2009). Fluency in understanding the body, both as a role and as the self, is gained through years of learning and practicing ballet. A celebrated past soloist with The Royal Ballet, Antoinette Sibley, admirably captured the process of becoming:

> From childhood to retirement you must force your body into the studio and through its paces – exacting, unnatural, exhausting paces – on six days out of every seven. You must accept constant criticism with thanks, accept praise with humility, and accept a regimen that dictates what you can eat, when you can rest, how much you can play. You must accept – or ignore – pain and disappointment, and resign yourself to never-ending fatigue. And when you think you will go mad trying to perfect what you know can never be perfected, you must continue trying. (Newman, 1986, p. 5)

For dancers, ballet is not seen as their job or occupation; it is their vocation. The decision to become a professional dancer is often made after an extraordinary experience of ballet art, a

revelation. From standing on one's father's feet and dancing in the kitchen to growing up in a house with music, there is something that inspires one to become a dancer, something that is often intrinsically connected to their identity (Wulff, 1998).

Positive Aspects of Ballet

Notion of Pleasure

Such an abundance of negative consequences related to becoming a professional ballet dancer may create cause for concern, but the art of ballet must be examined further. Alongside the hardships, there are fulfilling aspects of ballet that provide immense benefits that, in my opinion, create a unique bond between the body and mind. Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) emphasized that ballet has commonly been accounted for its detrimental effects on the mental and physical health of dancers, its elitist implications, and highly authoritarian teaching methods. They asserted that research on ballet has overlooked an essential feature that explains its importance in many dancers' lives: the notion of pleasure. Within their research, Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) found that the most cited reasons for participating in ballet was enjoyment of discipline, sense of achievement, harmony of body and mind, music, expressivity, escape, and beauty. Highlighting the complexities of ballet's dichotomous nature, a dancer reported feelings of inadequacy due to her body shape, leading to an eating disorder, while at the same time she claimed she found pleasure in the beauty of movement and degree of ballet's difficulty. I am curious that if a distinction was made between the pleasure of viewing ballet and the pleasure of practicing, our understanding of ballet's dichotomic complexities may help us to better understand the mental health of the dancer.

State of Flow

With the ability to move their bodies in far more elaborate ways than everyday human

motions, dancers can experience such a deep sense of pleasure when dancing that their movements sometimes manifest into a state of flow. This state, also referred to as a transcendental state, is considered a peak point when action and consciousness blend. It is during this state of flow or transcendence that the dancer no longer thinks about technique, but rather experiences dancing as the pure sensation of moving (Wulff, 2008). Dancers may experience this during daily training or rehearsals, but most significantly during performances. Moments of flow, when the dancer feels completely in control of their body, are the rewards for years of daily practice, coping with pain, and working hard to make themselves known. The pleasure of moving fluidly between the body and mind is an important part of professional ballet that many dancers would claim to be the driving force to their craft (Wulff, 1998).

Connectedness

An important aspect that many professional dancers recall to be an essential part of their career is community. Long training hours paired with a shared love of the art creates unique bonds and connections that dancers describe as "difficult to experience elsewhere" (Gregory & Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021, p. 430). The sense of power and connection to others felt while dancing on stage provides a sense of meaning to their dance career. In Gregory and Interiano-Shiverdecker's (2021) research, a professional female ballet dancer spoke about her relationship with ballet stating, "Dancers thrive in the sense of community. When you are in a company you are exactly that—part of the greater company and you work together" (p. 430). Not only is there a connectedness to others, there is also an ultimately sensitive connectedness to one's emotional body. Ballet's systematic technique invites a form of expression that is socially cohesive, while also allowing the individual dancer to personally experience meaningful movement that is both physically and mentally satisfying. Thus, channeling the self-expressive identity through ballet's

codified language is a primary stimulus for such practice (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012).

Despite professional ballet being structured by constant ranking and competition, there is a pronounced camaraderie that grows out of a particular intensity and closeness of the ballet world. The camaraderie takes the shape of peer-coaching in rehearsals and performances, wishing luck before premieres, and providing support in the dressing rooms, where many worries, emotions, and doubts are comforted. Camaraderie also appears in the habit of complimenting a dancer on a variation of steps or a beautifully danced performance. On the other hand, support is also offered to the dancer who experienced a poor performance, fell while on stage, or submitted to the pain of an injury. In the wings, the areas between the curtains to the left and right off-stage, dancers intently watch one another, keeping a supportive eye on variations they know to be the most difficult and stress inducing. Speculations regarding high rates of competitive natured behaviors and intentional sabotage are out dated. In a profession where the dancer is constantly at war with their own body, fighting to perfect movements, company members stick together, working to have compassion toward one another (Wulff, 1998). After all, who better to understand the trials and tribulations of ballet than the ballet dancers themselves?

Expressive Arts Therapies

The dichotomic relationship dancers have with ballet is quite intriguing. After examining the negative and positive aspects of practicing ballet, one might describe the profession as paradoxical. Ballet's controlled aesthetic form can enable the body to express uninhibited states of emotion, thereby experiencing pleasure—perhaps of a kind that the "undisciplined" body cannot (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012). This phenomenon can also be seen in nature, celebrating the organic structure of the tree while honoring its controlled yet uninhibited environment.

Similarly, the sonnet, with its highly codified form, is used to encapsulate intricate emotions such as love and sorrow. For each of these examples, the dancer, the tree, and the sonnet, freedom seems to lie in the structure. The art of dancing acts as symbolic language, using the body as a voice and as a window into the mind. Such ability to share stories in this way gratifies the dancer, allowing them greater subtlety and depth in their portrayal of emotional states (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012).

Accompanying the physical and mental challenges is pleasure in movement, harmony, and expression. Expressive arts therapy is a professional discipline that recognizes the power of moving in the diverse nature of the arts themselves. It is grounded not in a particular technique or media, but uses the imagination as a response to human suffering. Arts therapies, including art, drama, movement, and music, propose a continual creative process, rooted in imagination and consciousness (Estrella, 2023). Specifically, dance-movement therapy highlights the use of empathetic reflection and nonverbal dialogue for communication and connection. Being in contact with one's embodied relationships, or felt experiences, involves oscillating attention between internal and external stimuli (Burns, 2012). Just as a ballet dancer oscillates their attention between the awareness of their own body and the awareness of others, expressive arts therapy offers a similar mind-body connection, focusing more on the process rather than the outcome, or in the case of professional ballet, the performance.

Expressive arts therapy utilizes the arts in a supportive setting to foster growth, healing, and restoration. It is a process of self-discovery through any artform—movement, music, sound, drawing, painting, sculpting, writing, drama, and improvisation—that emerges from an emotional depth, not from the act of simply creating a pretty picture or a dance perfected for the stage. Expressive arts encourage the use of emotional and intuitive aspects as a means to enter

one's inner realm to discover feelings and to express them through various media. When using art for healing or therapeutic purposes, the beauty of the painting, the harmonic flow of the song, or the correct structure of the poem is not the concern. The concern of the art is to let go, to express, and to release. When working with the mind and body, emotions not only bring forth intuition and imagination, they elicit linear thought as well. As emotional states are seldom logical, the use of imagery and non-verbal actions provide an alternative path to self-exploration and communication (Rogers, 1993), expressions that professional ballet dancers are extremely familiar with.

Dance Movement Therapy

Life experiences are observed and felt through the body. Focusing on the body and its language of expression can draw awareness to sensation, gesture, emotion, and thought in concrete ways (Halprin, 2003). Dance movement therapy is defined as 'the psychotherapeutic use of movement and dance through which a person can engage creatively in a process to further their emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration' (Meekums, 2002, p. 14). Such therapeutic practice can be used as a primary intervention, therefore the focal use of psychotherapy, or as a supportive and adjunctive therapy, as used in expressive arts therapy (Meekums, 2002). Movement therapist Barbara Mettler wrote about movement as the underlying to all arts:

> Movement is our primary medium of expression, upon which all other means depend. Speaking, writing, singing, drawing, painting, using any tool or instrument, building, all begin with a movement impulse which is then transformed into word, tone, line, color, or some other material. In every other medium our inner experience is externalized in some material apart from ourselves. In movement expression, the movement of our own body

> is the material. Material and instrument and idea are one in the expressively moving body. (Barbara Mettler, as cited in Rogers, 1993, p.50)

In other words, movement is life and life is movement. A reciprocal relationship exists between movement and emotions as well. One's physical well-being can be affected by their way of moving and one's way of moving can be affected by their physical well-being. Dance movement therapy enables one to get in touch with their inner self, utilizing movement as an instructive way to become more aware of oneself and constructively release energies (Rogers, 1998). Just as movement brings life to the dancer's body, dance movement therapy has the potential of bringing life to the parts of the dancer that have been damaged, wounded, or lost.

In conclusion, the relationship dancers have to their profession is complicated. Where there is genuine love and passion for ballet, there is exhaustion, pain, and sometimes suffering. With most research connecting this populations' well-being to destructive aspects, it is possible that age-old ballet culture has prevailed as the predominant identity of a ballet dancer's mental health. As a past ballet dancer and future expressive arts therapist, I strongly believe that due to the intense demands of professional ballet, mental health services should be regulated into dancers' career contracts. Curating therapeutic services into the profession, equally as vital as physical therapy, is an important step in aiding a population that is involved in such a challenging culture. I am particularly interested in the effectiveness of using expressive arts therapy with such population, as dancers are familiar with body and music attunement, creativity, and self-expression. Expressive arts therapies are well positioned to lead change since the arts themselves support the transformation of experiences and stories. Actively engaging the body while creating art allows for the mind and body's relationship to be explored and transformed (Bechtel et al., 2020).

Methods and Autoethnography

As a past ballet dancer and visual artist, my passion for integrating mental health services into the professional ballet population dwells from a place of personal experience and passion. I chose to explore my topic using an autoethnographic research approach because in order to incorporate expressive arts therapy into the lives of professional ballet dancers appropriately and effectively, I must expand my research while challenging a methodological framework. I specifically wanted to utilize an autoethnographic structure so that my own experiences as a dancer could influence and stimulate my academic inquiry. In order to explore which expressive modalities produce stimulating results, I chose to use intermodal transfers as artful inquiry to explore themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity. This allowed for me to experiment with different modalities of which a professional ballet dancer may find familiarity or comfort, such as movement, storytelling, and visual art, and allowed for me to begin laying the groundwork for restorative healing. Engaging with my own preferences of what "feels good" for the balletic mind and body was an informative aspect of research that I believe provided a unique and passionate perspective.

Personal Ballet Experience

From the young age of four I began ballet classes, too shy to move my feet without the direction of the dance teacher and too attached to my mother to enter the classroom without persuasion. Little did I know that 15 years later I would be dancing solo on stage in front of hundreds of people, without anyone to direct or persuade me. However, the journey to get there required significant amounts of endurance, strength, empathy, and compassion, for the art of ballet is not for the weak at heart. I left many rehearsals crying over an exhausted mind, body, and soul, exclaiming in the car ride home that I would not be continuing next year. Nevertheless,

I would awake the next morning excited to return, ready to exhaust my body all over again, and for many years to come. I graduated from my ballet school at the age of 18 and decided against the perusal of a career in ballet. At the time of this decision, I felt mentally and physically unequip to become a professional ballet dancer, believing that I was simply "not good enough." Looking back, I believe I made the right decision, but not for the right reasons—I *was* good enough. In pursuit of filling the void left by not dancing daily, I began teaching ballet and continued to do so for many years. Ballet has felt intrinsically connected to my being, as if I had been born a creative mover, unable to ignore the calling. Exploring my personal journey of ballet has been one of my most treasured adventures, one that has made me into the woman I am today.

Body Image Intervention

Before diving into my artistic inquiry, I first spent time exploring my own relationship with each theme, beginning with body image. I have memories of looking at my body through the mirror in the dance studio and wondering why my hips were not shaped like the girl's next to me, or why my turnout was not quite as defined as the others'. It was difficult to show up to a room of mirrors and critique different parts of my body, but it quickly became such a normal part of the craft. Honoring the complexities of body image, I chose to explore movement as the modality for tending to the judgment of one's body. As movement is the primary language of the body, moving awakens deep feelings and memories, also revealing disabling and repetitive patterns (Halprin, 2003). The goal of my intervention was to focus my attention on the practical strengths of my body, including its ability to move without aid and feel sensations such as touch and warmth.

I decided to play an instrumental song as I danced, as moving to music feels innate to my core and informs the movement of my body. Beginning the music, I sat on the floor and took a

few deep breaths, allowing my body time to become present to sensations while at the same time distancing myself from current thoughts and feelings. Focusing strictly on the goal of appreciating my body's structure and ability, I began to slowly rub my arms, giving thanks to their mobility and artistry. Finding connection with honoring parts of my body, I continued this process, moving from my head all the way down to my toes. I then arose, moving slowly with my eyes closed, concentrating on the way my body felt when I moved, not what I looked like. The process concluded once the music began to fade and I found myself in the same position as when I began, hands over heart and stomach. I deliberately did not record this encounter on video, as watching the footage would only have induced judgment, the very feeling I intended to avoid during this process.

Injury Intervention

In exploration of my relationship with injury, I reminisced on past experiences where a physical injury affected not only my ability to dance, but my ability to cope. During a time when I was dancing daily for weeks at a time, I sprained my ankle. Similar to dancers in previously described studies, I was determined to prove that I could continue through the injury despite the pain I felt. Inevitably, the swelling increased, along with the discomfort. To this day, I still have trouble with that very ankle, finding it weaker than the other and more prone to injuries. Additionally, I was taught that bleeding through my pointe shoes was a sign of good luck. Therefore, I felt a sense of accomplishment and pride when I danced to the point of bloodshed, knowing I worked hard and truly dedicated myself. Pain is the body's way of speaking up, escaping its elusiveness by making itself heard and thereby becoming undeniably material. Delving into the ballet world, it is the specific culture that dominates moral belief systems and behavioral codes, along with a specific language that dancers use to communicate and

understand each other. As such, this culture impacts how dancers conform to beliefs dominant in the ballet world and helps others to understand the meaning dancers attribute to pain and injuries (Aalten, 2007).

After processing my experiences with pain and injury, my intermodal transfer took me to paper, where I engaged in creative writing. I wrote a free style poem about the aches and pains of my body, apologizing for when I ignore them and thanking them for making themselves known. The goal of this intervention was to understand pain not as a hindrance, but as a language of my organs, warning me when to slow down, when to stop, and when to keep going. During my writing process, themes surrounding conflict between the mind and body arose, shining light on the harmony that is broken when the mind ignores the body. I explored what it means when the aching body is under so much adrenaline that it relinquishes communications of pain, seeking to discover if such action is honorable or dishonorable. After finishing the poem, I spontaneously spoke a few words to my body, acknowledging her vast capacity for pain, expression, and emotion.

Identity Intervention

Growing up as a dancer, I had a sense of dignity and pride in my identity, feeling as though I belonged to a community that was unique and special. From the time I set foot in the studio at age four to the present, I have identified as a ballet dancer. The art, the culture, the stage, each part of the craft feels etched into my mind and body, as ballet truly did become a *part* of me. I believe that this strong attachment I have to the art has something to do with the nature of the craft and the way that I felt when dancing. A professional dancer once said, “Somehow dance felt like it gave me the most ability to participate in music in a way I really wanted to and a kind of level of expression I never really had” (Gregory & Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021, p.

430). Ballet taught me how intrinsically connected I am to music and allowed me to discover how to express myself through movement. For most professional dancers, ballet and the culture of ballet are integral parts of their identity. Yet, some find their identity to evolve past ballet, feeling it no longer represents them (Gregory & Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021). Although ballet is no longer the core of my identity as it used to be, it will forever be a part of me.

For the final phase of my intermodal transfer, I chose to use digital artmaking to explore identity. Before I began the creating process, I answered the question "who am I?" in my journal, writing down words and phrases that I thought best described my identity. I strove to write down the first words that came to mind, with the intent of minimizing the possibility of second-guessing ideas or adapting identities that have outgrown me despite their admirable qualities. Once finished, I used my laptop to search for images that felt genuine to the portrayal of my identity. Utilizing Adobe Photoshop, I collaged the images onto a digital canvas, arranging and rearranging until I felt satisfied with the imagery. Choosing which images to add to my collage was a tedious process, as I intentionally chose images that represented the rawest and most genuine parts of me. Finally, once my artwork felt complete, I audibly read the words and phrases previously written in my journal while at the same time looking at my collage. The goal of this intervention was to explore which of my personal interests, such as ballet, govern my identity and which parts, if any, no longer feel particularly sincere.

Results

Through the utilization of intermodal transfer as a method of artful inquiry, I was able to effectively delve into the themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity, resulting in a meaningful exploration of my relationship with each of these aspects. The interconnectedness of the arts combined with the inner thoughts of my mind brought a sense of clarity and emotion that

I had neglected to honor and name. Similar to ballet, expressive arts therapy is a process of self-discovery through an art form that emerges from an emotional depth. Inner feelings are expressed by creating outer forms (Rogers, 1993), just as a ballet dancer creates lines and shapes to tell a story. Though I have not lived the life of a professional ballet dancer, my deep relationship with ballet and years of dance experience appoint me as a reliable source and advocate for ballet dancers' mental health. Having grown up in the ballet world, I understand the short moments of triumph, such as ovations and applause, as tribute to hours of rehearsals. I know about the pain – and the passion – of dancing; therefore, I possess knowledge of the cultural structure, both backstage and frontstage. I feel that my voice provides a rich point of view for accurate advocation toward the balletic being—both body and *mind.*

Movement

Exploring my personal relationship with body image through movement brought forth a mix of emotions—nostalgia, sadness, freedom, and peace. In the beginning, I struggled to relinquish the grip of my judgmental mind, remembering how it felt to overthink each balletic movement and wonder if it looked beautiful or not. Being that the goal of this intervention was to celebrate my body's practical strengths and sensations, not its physical appearance, I welcomed this struggle. One intervention focusing on my relationship with body image is not going to alleviate years of self-inflicted pain and judgment. But I believe that expressive arts therapy, particularly by modality of movement, has the power to rewire the mind's correlation of a perfect body, instead focusing the mind on understanding the body as a vessel that provides a home for the soul. After greeting the struggle and sending it on its way, I welcomed tears as I felt a wave of freedom, freedom from infectious thoughts regarding a "not good enough body." Entering a state of flow, I focused on the feeling of being alive and the feeling of being in my body without

the constraints of judgment and hate. I thanked my body for her strength and perseverance, for she has endured so much.

Injury

Writing words to explore pain not as a hindrance, but as a language of my organs, brought forth quiet emotions of gratitude coupled with a feeling of connectedness to my body as a living and breathing form. This intervention reminded me that pain in an intrinsic part of human life, one that everybody experiences but each tolerates differently. I pondered the relationship between the body and mind and how the mind can override the body's needs in dire situations, similar to the fight or flight reflex. Documenting these abstract thoughts with writing felt satisfying, as my brain was able to conceptualize the deeper, more humanistic qualities of pain. I felt most attuned to this intervention when I thanked my body for speaking up and apologized for the times I ignored signs of distress. Memories of dancing with an over-exhausted body and bloody toes brought me to the realization that ballet truly did enhance my pain-tolerance threshold. This realization heightened my awareness of how I manage pain and to what extent this tolerance has carried me through difficult times in my life, both mental and physical. Though closing this intervention with such a strong sense of gratitude, I was also left with many questions regarding the endurance of dancers and their capacity for pain. To what extent does the body suffer while the mind gets lost in the art of movement? How might I best aid ballet dancers in balancing care for their bodies and minds in a culture that focuses on pushing the abilities of the body?

Identity

Alongside my beloved ballet history is a passion for visual art, especially graphic design. I find the craft of digital artmaking to be a very accessible modality that offers a broad variety of

expression. Collaging digitally allowed for me to use realistic images and photographs to reflect parts of my identity, a form of representation that resonates with my aesthetic creativity. In answering the question "who am I?", I answered with the following: lover, mover, gardener of life, seed of nature, caregiver, and artist. If I had answered the same question years ago, when ballet was the pinnacle of my life, the word mover would have been replaced with dancer or ballerina along with other words revolving around the craft. This intervention provides a look into the parts of oneself held most dear; qualities that a person feels dominates their life, whether helpful or harmful, and qualities that demonstrate themselves through their actions and motivations. During my creation process, I noticed how much ballet really was a way to breathe for me. Although my collage did not contain images of tired feet, ballet tutus, and dancers waiting backstage, it included moments of movement, capturing the feeling of freedom and expression. The outcome of this intervention showed me that ballet, in relationship to my identity, has and will forever be, a part of who I am.

Discussion

The intent of this thesis was to review literature on professional ballet dancers' mental health and explore how expressive arts therapies can be used to aid issues surrounding themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity. My goal of researching the negative and positive qualities of ballet was to directly correlate aspects of the vocation to aspects of expressive arts, advocating for the rich opportunity of using the arts to heal the wounds of the artist. An autoethnographic approach was used to develop a method so that my own experiences as a ballet dancer could influence and stimulate my academic inquiry. Within the autoethnographic approach, I used intermodal transfer as artful inquiry to explore themes of body image, injury and pain, and identity. Each intervention utilized a different expressive modality, of which a

professional ballet dancer may find familiarity or comfort, such as movement, storytelling, and visual art. Practicing movement, writing, and digital art, I explored how expressive arts therapy can be utilized in the ballet world to foster healing and restoration. Results proved successful, as the interconnectedness of the arts combined with the inner thoughts of the mind brought forth a collision of emotions, of which felt dormant before.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I remained especially curious about the control ballet dancers have over pain. In my introduction, I asked the question, "where lies the separation between the body and the *balletic* body?" I have concluded that the answer to such must be *pleasure*; the pleasure of moving to the point of entering a state of flow, where the dancer feels completely in control of their body. This must be what drives away the pain. There is such power in feeling utterly attuned to one's body, so much so that pain escapes the mind for a while and allows movement to feel as fluid as breathing. The separation between the body and the balletic body lies in the power of escape, or in this case, dancing. In the art itself, the very art that can cause harm to body image, induce high pain-tolerances, and challenge identities, can also bring bliss to those who practice it. How strange the dichotomic quality of ballet truly is—where there is love and euphoria, there is pain.

I want to bring final attention to the lack of research concerning the mental health experiences of professional ballet dancers. Even now, there is much to learn and understand about the dancer, both performing artist and athlete. Due to the demands of their profession, dancers relate differently to their bodies than non-dancers. Dancers cannot disappear from the awareness of their body as most people do. Since their bodies are the very raw material from which their art is created, they are continuously conscious of how they feel in their skin and how they move, both on and off the stage. However, the repetition of familiar movement patterns can

lead dancers to reach a state of unconsciousness in their body, where they no longer need to consciously think about how to perform a specific movement as it becomes ingrained in their muscle memory (Aalten, 2007). Due to their heightened awareness of their bodies, dancers are at a higher risk for mental health issues like eating disorders, dissatisfaction with self-image, and identity crises. When one becomes too attuned to the body, especially in a profession where the body is the focus, the mind captures every detail from the shape of the body to the way it moves and how it breathes.

The art of professional ballet dancing brings many hardships that not only push the bounds of the body, but challenge the mind to great lengths. In response to such, I believe the practice of expressive therapies would align beautifully with the needs of a ballet dancer. In this practice, we as expressive arts therapists, immerse ourselves entirely in the experience of the moment, submitting to sensation, feeling, thought, and image. The happenings of our lives act as the muse that calls us to the dance, the poem, or the collage. We, as therapists, speak without reservation or judgment and welcome our inner voice to come forth. Just as ballet dancers, we fight through the pain, surrender to emotions, deconstruct, rebuild, take risks, welcome play, and celebrate the light (Halprin, 2003). There may be times when we are stripped of our old costumes, left with nothing new to bring to the stage. However, in our creativity lies passion and hope, which motivate and inspire us to continue, just as the dancer continues their movement, no matter the pain.

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