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De-Orientalizing Classical Ballet in the Twenty-First Century

by

Pamela Gendron

A thesis project submitted in conformity with the requirements for the
Master's Degree in Contemporary Art
Sotheby's Institute of Art
2020

13,008 words

Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to examine the efficacy of strategies used to de-Orientalize canonical ballets. Of particular interest are contemporary productions of *The Nutcracker*, *La Bayadère* and *Giselle*. Through close readings of digitized performances, I explore the ways in which the best practices for presenting non-offensive stereotypes put forth by community leader Final Bow for Yellowface reinforce the conservative impulse of ballet rather than inspire radical change. I present an alternative option for renegotiating racial stereotypes in ballet through Akram Khan's commissions for the English National Ballet, situating his work within Anurima Banerji's concept of partatopic performance.

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Fig. 1. “Cultural Integrity Grid,” *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact* (Brooklyn, NY: Yellow Peril Press, 2020), 158.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my parents who spent years suffering through my ballet recitals in silence; I know I was far more talented in my mind than reality.

Introduction

The performance of racist stereotypes in ballet, and racial inequity within the companies themselves, has grown as a topic of political importance since 2015. That was the year Misty Copeland was promoted to principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre, the first African American female to hold the title. The following year Benjamin Millepied left Paris Opera Ballet after two and a half short years as director of dance when his attempts to modernize the troupe and racially diversify the corps branded him too polemical for the conservative company and French audiences.¹ In 2017 Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin founded Final Bow for Yellowface, an organization dedicated to eradicating Asian stereotypes from live performance with a deep investment in ballet. Chloé Lopes Gomes's struggle as the first black female dancer at Staatsballett, Berlin made headlines at the end of 2020 when the dancer revealed a company teacher repeatedly forced her to lighten her skin with makeup. Gomes quotes the unnamed teacher as saying that a "black woman spoils the aesthetics" of ballet, especially classical *ballet blancs* like *Swan Lake* and *La Bayadère*.² It has also become common practice for companies to highlight the range of ethnicities represented in their ranks in printed programs. Take, for example, Ballet Vlaanderen who describe themselves "as a diverse and versatile company, uniting more than forty dancers from over fifteen nationalities" in the materials accompanying their March 2020 run at the Joyce Theatre in New York City.³ Considering the increased awareness regarding systemic racism in ballet, it would seem prudent that companies reevaluate repertoire and company diversity to reduce harmful stylizations of non-White cultures and more accurately reflect

¹ See: Roslyn Sulcas, "Benjamin Millepied Opens Up on Leaving Paris Opera Ballet," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/11/arts/dance/benjamin-millepied-opens-up-on-leaving-paris-opera-ballet.html>.

² Kate Connolly, "Berlin: Staatsballett's first black female dancer accuses it of racism," *The Guardian*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/09/berlin-staatsballetts-first-black-female-dancer-accuses-it-of-racism>.

³ Program for Ballet Vlaanderen at the Joyce Theatre, New York City, 2020.

the heterogeneity of the communities they serve. Instead, ballet's conservative impulse has hindered even minor change with choreographers, artistic directors and board members acting as sentinels of history, presenting "work as it was done, for the sake of posterity, warts and all" rather than developing programming that speaks to and about contemporary audiences.⁴

The assumed anti-Blackness of ballet is rooted in nineteenth-century romantic France. Ballets from this period are readily identifiable by their use of national dance divertissements and the *ballet blanc* (white ballet). The inclusion of national dances was a "means of injecting 'local colour'" while providing a visual foil to the newly codified ballet technique.⁵ Countries that fell within the category of the Orient were combined into a single national dance that made ready use of blackface to indicate its non-European identity. The supposed differences between folk traditions and European theatre dance were further highlighted by the *ballet blanc* in which a corps of female dancers all dressed in matching white tutus dance a classical adagio on pointe.

The following study explores myriad ways ballet reinforces Orientalist stereotypes of Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures in canonical works *The Nutcracker* and *La Bayadère* and the effectiveness of current harm reduction strategies. What becomes apparent is the inability of ballet companies to maintain traditional repertoire while correcting for the Orientalist fantasies that inspired librettos, music and choreography through minor costume alterations and tokenistic use of non-ballet corporeal languages. Despite the inefficacy of current methods to remedy the racism in canonical ballets, I believe a positive solution has already presented itself in the

⁴ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact* (Brooklyn, NY: Yellow Peril Press, 2020), 136. This quote is from choreographer reconstructionist Millicent Hodges in reference to Ballet West's remake of the lost Orientalist Balanchine ballet *Chant du Rossignol*.

⁵ Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith, "National Dance in the Romantic Ballet," in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet*, ed. Lynn Garafola (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 11.

paratopic performances of *Dust* (2014) and *Giselle* (2016) choreographed by Akram Khan for the English National Ballet (ENB).

Chapter 1 The Coffee Character/The Arabian Caricature surveys national dances in romantic and classical ballets as seen in the perennial North American holiday classic, *The Nutcracker*. It is of note that this project uses the designations of 'romantic' and 'classical' interchangeably as their differences have more to do with the shift of ballet popularity from France to Russia after the mid-nineteenth century than any significant technical developments or libretto restructuring.⁶ National dance in ballet is a synonym for folk, ethnic and even character dance. Susan Leigh Foster defines ethnic dances as those "envisioned as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative, simple rather than sophisticated, a product of the people rather than a genius."⁷ These dances are considered to lack choreography and, in the case of many dance traditions from the Middle East and South Asia, are categorized as religious practice rather than artistic performance. When a dance form is labelled ethnic, it is stripped of any avant-garde potential and is instead museified, forced to "represent custom and a culture frozen in time," similar to how art from North American First Nations falls under the auspices of natural history museums rather than modern and contemporary galleries.⁸ Despite Joann Kealiinohomoku's groundbreaking 1970 essay "An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance," which methodically dismantles the antiquated division between folk and ballet, Western theatre dance continues to be acultural, giving it the undue power to modernize folk dance when elements of its technique are applied.⁹

⁶ Marion Kant, "The soul of the shoe," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, edited by Marion Kent (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193.

⁷ Susan Leigh Foster, "Worlding Dance – an Introduction," in *Worlding Dance*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

⁸ Yvonne Hardt, "Staging the Ethnographic of Dance History: Contemporary Dance and its Play with Tradition," *Dance Research Journal* vol. 43, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 29.

⁹ For example, The New York Times published an article by Valerie Gladstone on the Akram Khan Company titled, "Shiva Meets Martha Graham, at a Very High Speed" on August 10, 2003

Romantic ballets make frequent use of national dances such as the mazurka and polka (Poland), cachucha (Spain), tarantella (Italy) and waltz (Austria), as well as invented dances from imagined places like the Orient; it is these Oriental dances that indiscriminately borrow from multiple cultures, as seen in *The Nutcracker's* Land of the Sweets divertissements, that draw the attention of this project. Although not all national *Nutcracker* variations are offensive, too many problems persist with Arabian Coffee and Chinese Tea to simply excuse insensitivity as a child's fantasy. Arabian Coffee tends to present an erotic East with dancers dressed in skin-baring costumes, forming tableaux that suggest Hindu temple bas-relief, moving languorously to a score based on a Georgian lullaby from the composer's childhood. Meanwhile, Chinese Tea frequently sports the queue hairstyle en vogue during the Qing Dynasty with dancers shuffling and bobbing across the stage, their index fingers articulated to resemble chopsticks. Final Bow for Yellowface formed in response to cofounder Phil Chan's marginally successful collaboration with New York City Ballet artistic director Peter Martins to rectify accusations of racism levelled against George Balanchine's divertissements in recent years. Chapter 1 examines the best practices developed by Final Bow for racially sensitive live performance and their application, or lack thereof, in *Nutcracker* productions staged by three venerable North American companies who have signed the organization's pledge: "I love ballet as an art form, and acknowledge that to achieve diversity among our artists, audiences, donors, students, volunteers, and staff requires inclusion. I am committed to eliminating outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians (Yellowface) on our stages."¹⁰

Chapter 2 The Case of the Temple Dancer examines how companies grapple with the mythification of canonical ballets, which demands classical works resist change

¹⁰ *Final Bow for Yellowface*, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.yellowface.org/>.

at all costs. According to Vida L. Midgelow, "temporal, geographical and artistic particulars of dancers, makers, steps, patterns and narratives are discounted such that these elements are formed all together under the mythical sign that is 'the ballet.' This process can be seen to homogenize differences between one ballet and another such that a ballet as a specific creative act becomes lost in dense layers of signification and comes to seem to be just as it 'always has been' and, perhaps more problematically, 'as it should be.'"¹¹ This homogenization is evident in the standard libretto format of romantic ballets. First, the key players are introduced, culminating with the reveal of the doomed central heteronormative couple - she is either a supernatural being like a sylph and/or he is betrothed to another, more socially acceptable partner. The illicit relationship is dramatically revealed, and the scorned female collapses dead. The final act occurs in a spiritual realm where the deceased female protagonist and her lover are reunited in a climactic *ballet blanc* and *grand pas*. *Swan Lake*, *Giselle* and *La Bayadère* are a few classical ballets that adhere to the stock script. Whereas *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* have been reworked to critical acclaim challenging their mythical 'as it should be[ness],'¹² *La Bayadère* has been unable to break from convention.¹²

La Bayadère, or The Temple Dancer, tells the tragic tale of Nikiya, who chooses death over a life without her lover Solor. The ballet exemplifies the romantic links between dance, morality, sex and death, utilizing the Oriental body of Nikiya to support colonialist objectives such as the anti-nautch movement of the 1890s that criminalized *devadasis* (temple dancers) in India by reclassifying them as prostitutes. By way of a historical overview of Europe's interaction with *devadasis* and comparison of three productions of *La Bayadère* - one by Mariinsky Ballet filmed in 2014, another a 2020

¹¹ Vida L. Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 23.

¹² For an in-depth discussion of successful reworkings of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* see Vida L. Midgelow's *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (2007).

production by the Paris Opera Ballet, and a preview of parts of Pennsylvania Ballet's newest version at a Works & Process panel at the Guggenheim Museum in February 2020 - I argue that the tradition obsessed *La Bayadère* fails contemporary audiences with its steadfast Orientalism despite modifications by Indian dance experts and intervention by groups like Final Bow for Yellowface.

To conclude, Chapter 3 applies Anurima Banerji's paratopic performance theory to *Dust* and *Giselle* choreographed by Akram Khan for ENB. Paratopic performance "refer[s] to those political and cultural enactments engendered by dance in the contemporary moment and which exist adjacent to the prevailing norm."¹³ Banerji marks the paratopia as a contiguous concept to Michel Foucault's heterotopia, or 'other space,' an architectural site where non-conforming bodies are confined to an existence that runs parallel to the dominant culture.¹⁴ While the heterotopia is a specific place, the paratopia "is a temporal realm that materializes specifically *through embodied movement*" of radical performance (emphasis original).¹⁵

Khan's commissions for ENB are part of artistic director Tamara Rojo's vision to "enrich the vocabulary of ballet, so that it does not stagnate as preserved and frozen."¹⁶ Trained in kathak and multiple contemporary dance styles, Khan crafts ballets utilizing a corporeal language seemingly incongruous with traditional ballet technique. His choreography challenges the regimented ballet body to reconsider its relation to gravity while still performing virtuosic jumps and fluttering steps on pointe. I believe that Khan's ballets exceed analyses of interculturalism and hybridity and instead establish "a new

¹³ Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2019), 22.

¹⁴ See: Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October, 1984).

¹⁵ Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha," in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and the Global*, ed. André Lepecki and Jenn Joy (Calcutta, India: Seagull Books, 2009), 350.

¹⁶ Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), D160.

economy of the body" that exists parallel to codified classical dance.¹⁷ The purpose of Khan's paratopic ballets is not to dismantle the hegemony of the canon or contemporize technique but to embrace ballet as a living art that thrives when released from the binds of tradition.

Special Note on Research Methodology

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 profoundly affected how research was conducted for this study. Live performance in North America came to a halt in early March and has yet to return. While this would seemingly limit the availability of ballet, the reality has been the exact opposite. Many companies have produced digital seasons, both free and subscription-based, granting viewers an expansive digital library at home, allowing this project to remain viable. Instead of comparing live performances of *La Bayadère* by Pennsylvania Ballet and American Ballet Theatre as originally intended, this study contrasts footage of Paris Opera Ballet and Mariinsky Ballet productions. The great digitization of 2020 turned the year without *The Nutcracker* into the year of arguably too many *Nutcrackers*, only three of which appear in detail in Chapter 1, and the bounty of ENB repertoire suddenly accessible from my Brooklyn home provided the linchpin to this study. The aftermath of the global pandemic on live performance has and will continue to be staggering, but ballet's embrace of digitization despite the artform's penchant for conservatism has been both a respite from the ongoing health crisis and a welcome addition to dance research.

¹⁷ Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance," 349.

Chapter 1 The Coffee Character/The Arabian Caricature

The Nutcracker premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1892 to infamously poor reviews. Even the score by beloved composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was deemed overly symphonic, practically undanceable in places. Based on E.T.A Hoffman's 1816 "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King," the libretto deviated from the standard format of Russian Imperial Ballets of the Marius Petipa-era, placing an unprecedented emphasis on a child protagonist. Clara, sometimes called Marie, is gifted a nutcracker doll by her eccentric godfather Herr Drosselmeyer at a raucous Christmas Eve party, the setting of act one. Late that night, Clara finds herself under the family Christmas tree surrounded by an army of mice. The Nutcracker springs to life, gallantly saving the girl from the vicious Mouse King. Together, Clara and the Nutcracker travel to a snowy land and are brought to the palace of the Sugarplum Fairy, where personified sweets entertain them for the duration of the second act.

Despite its rocky start in Russia, *The Nutcracker* found great traction when brought to the United States in 1944 by Willem Christensen at the San Francisco Ballet (SF Ballet). It became a nationwide household name by 1958 when George Balanchine's version for the New York City Ballet (NYC Ballet) was televised on Christmas Day by CBS. *The Nutcracker* has become of such importance in North America that ticket sales account for upwards of fifty percent of a ballet company's annual revenue; SF Ballet presents the work over one hundred times per season, more than double the forty-seven performances by NYC Ballet. It also tends to be the first ballet experienced by children, and often the only ballet viewed by adults. In short, *The Nutcracker* is synonymous with ballet and, as such, sets the tone for classical repertoire.

Since it is common for *The Nutcracker* to be a person's only exposure to a full-length ballet performance, its ethnic depictions in the second act divertissements are of utmost concern. According to Petipa's original instructions, the nations and their

corresponding treat are Spanish Chocolate, Arabian Coffee, Chinese Tea and Russian Candy Canes. The Spanish dance typically draws on flamenco and bolero vocabulary, somehow avoiding incendiary reactions to the colonialist link between Spain and chocolate in criticism and academic texts.¹⁸ Russian Candy Canes pulls from trepak technique, with productions frequently featuring professional trepak dancers in lieu of company corps. Meanwhile, the choreography, costuming and set accoutrement for Arabian Coffee and Chinese Tea tend to rely on 'othering' stereotypes of the bifold exotic-erotic East and comical coolie, respectively.

The Rise of Final Bow for Yellowface

The questionable representation of so-called Chinese-ness in the Land of the Sweets gave rise to Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin's formation of Final Bow for Yellowface in 2017. In the 2020 book of the same name, Chan details best practices for staging racially problematic canonical works, navigating the "line between honouring history and tradition, while looking toward the future, and in the process, staging creative, engaging, and *living* art that impacts people positively today" (emphasis original).¹⁹ Unfortunately, Chan falls prey to ballet's conservative impulse, which emphasizes the importance of tradition and historical fidelity, leading to superficial and inconsistent results. With *The Nutcracker* more accessible than ever, the Oriental 'other' reproduced by Arabian Coffee in productions by NYC Ballet, SF Ballet and National Ballet of Canada (NBC) require drastic reimaginings that exceed the limits of Final Bow's "Cultural Integrity Grid" (see fig. 1).

Chan defines yellowface as "the portrayal of East Asians in entertainment from a dominant Western perspective rather than authentic depictions of East Asian cultures

¹⁸ The representation of chocolate, a product introduced to Europe by way of colonialism, by Spain is an issue that lies outside the scope of this project.

¹⁹ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 17.

and people. Yellowface relies on stereotypes or caricatures of East Asians, and is usually performed by White actors. Like Black actors appearing in blackface, Asian performers have also historically appeared in yellowface."²⁰ There are two keywords to unpack in this definition: authentic and caricature. Debates on the representation of race are easily distracted by the question of authenticity and who determines authentic culture. This issue runs parallel to the unavoidable variance between authorial intention and audience reception. Yutian Wong addresses differences in opinion on what counts as authentic culture in her book *Choreographing Asian America*. Wong compares a 1993 account of the Chinese circus at a Six Flags Great America outside of Chicago, Illinois, by theatre historian James Moy with that of an imagined immigrant viewer. Moy likens the Chinese acrobats to "pornography and [asserts] that the fetishization of Asian bodily virtuosity on stage functions as a denial of Asian American subjectivity through the disfigurement and denial of the Asian American body."²¹ He believes this performance of Chinese-ness reinscribes Western stereotypes of the exotic-erotic Oriental female body and thus declares the Chinese circus at Six Flags an inauthentic cultural performance. On the other hand, Wong's imagined viewer proclaims the acrobat as an exemplary of Chinese-ness, drawing the patronage of immigrant parents looking to expose American born children to their cultural heritage. For these parents, the "Chinese circus is real. It is as 'authentic' as it gets."²² The discord between Moy's critique and that of the immigrant parents reveals how cultural corporeal vernacular requires a special skill set for intelligible transmission from performer (and choreographer) to audience just like spoken language. If the viewer lacks the interpretive key necessary to read the physical language of the Chinese circus, it becomes a near-impossible task to produce criticism

²⁰ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 19.

²¹ Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 117.

of the performance that does not focus on whether it appears 'authentic' or 'better' than other Chinese representations. The problem of translating culturally unique movement vocabularies will be further addressed in Chapter 2.

The distinction between caricature and character is central to the strategies put forth by Final Bow. Chan describes caricature as "a distortion of the basic elements of a person while retaining a recognizable form, often to elicit a specific emotional response. A caricature is a sketch, a shortcut to an idea."²³ Exaggeration is a central feature of caricature, overemphasizing stereotypes to create unflattering portrayals on a sliding scale between comical and grotesque. For Chan, caricatures are 'othering' and flatten personality. Alternatively, a character is "someone we build empathy for, someone with nuance and depth to their personality."²⁴ Characters may also be comical in nature, but they are "in on the joke," unlike caricatures.²⁵ Despite insisting caricature and character are opposing concepts, Chan's definitions come across somewhat murky. He tries to clarify the difference in his book's conclusion with the "Cultural Integrity Grid." The grid's quadrants are fixed by "outsider fantasy" and "insider depiction" on the *x-axis*, and "character" and "caricature" on the *y-axis*.²⁶ Here again arises the issue of authenticity with "insider depiction" set as a positive determinant in ethnic representations. Recounting his meeting with Peter Martins at NYC Ballet, Chan unwittingly uncovers the problem of the insider when he quotes himself saying, "As a dancer of Chinese descent, I would hate to be forced only to dance 'Chinese.' If I were the only Chinese an in the company, would that mean I never get to dance the Sugarplum Cavalier? *Besides, I'm too tall for 'Chinese'*" (emphasis added).²⁷ Even insider Chan is not without his idealized and prejudicial version of what Chinese should look like onstage. By reducing physical

²³ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 52-53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

attributes of Chinese to height, Chan's cultural expertise veers Chinese Tea into the realm of caricature. The fact that it is so easy for even a cultural insider, and cofounder of the organization, to slide into the lower half of the "Cultural Integrity Grid" shows the arbitrariness of categorizing an ethnic portrayal as (positive) character or (negative) caricature.

According to *Final Bow* and *Nutcracker* expert Jennifer Fisher, the role of costuming and set design in visually reinforcing harmful stereotypes is peripheral to movement, if not even unimportant. After all, if a divertissement is stripped of all stereotyped gestures, costuming and sets remain the sole signifiers of nationhood attached to the sweets by Petipa back in the nineteenth century. Even the use of yellow makeup and body paint is insignificantly considered in *Final Bow*, with Chan brushing the problem aside by writing, "*The problem with yellowface isn't the makeup but the caricature*" (emphasis original).²⁸ And yet, would not a ballet dancer in yellowface while dressed in standard tights completing a sequence of *tours à la seconde* for the duration of Chinese Tea be reinforcing racial stereotypes? Considering *Final Bow* is the leader in eliminating yellowface on stage in North America and is in high demand to give talks and consult on productions, the contradictory statements in Chan's book deny its very purpose to provide a set of guiding principles in presenting racially sensitive ballets.

Interlude

George Balanchine "give[s] the fathers something to look at"

New York City Ballet, December 5, 2019, David H. Koch Theater

Choreography: George Balanchine

Set design: Rouben Ter-Artunian

Costume: Karinska

²⁸ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 20.

Lighting: Mark Stanley after Ronald Bates

Arabian Coffee: Georgina Pazcoguin

NYC Ballet's digital 2020/2021 season features Final Bow cofounder Georgina Pazcoguin in the role of Arabian Coffee. She slinks onto a darkened stage, donning a metallic bralette and asymmetrical skirt that hits high on her bare thighs; a combination turban-headscarf designed by legendary company costumer Karinska cascades between her shoulders in a waterfall of sparkling silk. Ankle bells dangle over Pazcoguin's pointe shoe ribbons while zills hang from her index fingers and thumbs. Such a hodgepodge of garb and percussion - ankle bells, or *ghungroo*, feature in classical Indian dance and zills are often used in Turkish belly dancing - exemplifies the Orientalist's vision of a mysterious east whose occupants need not be identified as individuals with unique cultures. Balanchine's original 1954 choreography for Arabian Coffee was intended for a solo male dancer. Arthur Mitchell famously danced the role in the televised version of 1958. Accompanied by four small children, Mitchell serves Marie and the Nutcracker small cups of coffee with lumps of sugar before performing a short dance featuring slithering arms and sneaky steps. The switch from male to female dancer in 1964 is associated with the infamous Balanchine quote that Arabian Coffee "give[s] the fathers something to look at" during the family-friendly ballet.²⁹ The choreography and costumes are intended to be not only exotic but also erotic adding what romantic dance critic and librettist Théophile Gautier called "spice to the deadly boring framework of ballet."³⁰ Balanchine's revisioning turns Arabian Coffee into a harem maiden, someone of such wanton sexuality that the young Marie and Nutcracker are swallowed by dark shadows, shielding their innocent eyes from her titillating dance.

²⁹ Jennifer Fisher, "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets," *Dance Research Journal* Vol. 35/36, Vol. 35, no. 1 – Vol. 36, no.1 (Winter 2003 – Summer 2004): 153.

³⁰ Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith, "National Dance in the Romantic Ballet," 29.

Helgi Tómasson Dreams of Genie

San Francisco Ballet, 2008, War Memorial Opera House

Choreography: Helgi Tómasson

Set design: Michael Yeargan

Costume: Martin Pakledinaz

Lighting: James F. Ingalls

Genie: Sara Van Patten

A 2008 televised production of Tómasson's *The Nutcracker* was made available by San Francisco Ballet on an interactive platform that included special features such as how to perform basic pantomime with former principal dancer Wendy Van Dyck and virtual meet-ups for the duration of the 2020 holiday season.³¹ An illustrated program details Tómasson's transformation of act two from the archetypal Land of the Sweets to the Sugar Plum Fairy's Crystal Palace, where a parade of nations entertains special guests Clara and Herr Drosselmeyer. Reminiscent of the home to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in name and set design, Tómasson's act two connects the popularization of national dances in nineteenth century ballet to the historically concurrent proliferation of World's Fairs, both of which provided audiences with distilled glimpses of non-European cultures.

Although Tómasson grants Spain, China, France and Russia distinct moments in the spotlight, a *pas de trois* embodies the entire Arabian Peninsula. Moving from stage right to left, two harem-pants clad, turban-wearing men carry out a large smoking lamp. It comes as no surprise to North American audiences familiar with Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) that when gently rubbed by the male attendants, a genie dressed in blue emerges. Unlike Aladdin's barrel-chested, joke-cracking sidekick, SF Ballet's genie,

³¹ Tómasson's *The Nutcracker* premiered in 2004.

danced here by Sara Van Patten, more closely resembles the character portrayed by Barbara Eden in the sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970). Tómasson's choreography is reminiscent of his mentor Balanchine's original serpentine-like variation danced by Mitchell with added extensions pushed to extremes with the help of the two male consorts.

Arabian Coffee visits Tsarist Russia on the Canadian Stage

National Ballet of Canada, 2008, Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts

Choreography: James Kudelka

Set design and costumes: Santo Loquasto

Lighting: Jennifer Tipton

Arabian Coffee: Stephanie Hutchison and Etienne Lavigne, Alejandra Perez-Gomez and Keiichi Hirano

In 1995, James Kudelka created a version of *The Nutcracker* for NBC that saw both acts move to Imperialist Russia in a nod to the ballet's heritage. Kudelka's revamped libretto stars Marie and Misha, siblings that take to bickering and roughhousing when repeatedly neglected by their wassailer parents. On Christmas Eve, they share a magical dream in which they visit a grand palace in the sky, a building that shares architectural vernacular with Moscow's Saint Basil's Cathedral, alongside the Nutcracker Prince (Peter, the Stableboy from act one), their beloved Baba and Uncle Nikolai. It is here, backdropped by a larger-than-life Fabergé egg, that Kudelka's *Nutcracker* most significantly deviates from both its source material and New York City and San Francisco contemporaries.

The national divertissements in act two begin as conceived by Petipa with Spanish Chocolate followed by Arabian Coffee. Despite the setting change, *Nutcracker* aficionados would be primed by these two variations for a sprightly, bouncing Chinese Tea to follow. Instead, Kudelka replaces Tea with a comical vignette featuring four child

dancers dressed as roly-poly chefs wielding kitchen utensils as weapons as they chase an escaped goose around the palace. Since the ballet's Russian setting renders the Russian Candy Cane national dance redundant, the standard balletic trepak is replaced by a solo for the Nutcracker Prince. Where Balanchine elected for Marzipan and Tómasson a cheeky French ribbon dance to accompany Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Reed Flutes," Kudelka has Baba shepherding a herd of little lambs around the stage as their mother dances a flirtatious *pas de deux* with a red fox. The NBC divertissements close with a banquet in place of Mother Ginger, a role customarily danced by a male in drag, and the Waltz of the Flowers altered through the addition of male dancers as stems and a bee soloist.³²

Although many of Kudelka's modifications correct racial and transphobic depictions, Coffee remains racially overdetermined. The costumes are of ambiguous Middle Eastern origin, combining multiple cultures with impunity, and the choreography once again is dominated by hyper-extensions and Orientalist arm gestures. Kudelka's decision to maintain the status quo with Coffee mirrors the ongoing racial inequity in NYC Ballet's *Nutcracker*; Chinese Tea may no longer feature short choppy steps implying bound feet and the standard chopstick index fingers, yet Balanchine's 1964 erotic Arabian Coffee fantasy endures. NBC and NYC Ballet prove there is a hierarchy of importance when it comes to sensitive portrayals of race in ballet, with only certain Asian cultures privy to harm reduction strategies.³³

A response to "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets" by Jennifer Fisher

³² Mother Ginger and the wicked stepsisters in *Cinderella* reveal ballet's penchant for portraying ugliness in women through drag. It is an outdated mode of representation based in transphobic discourse that judges transwomen as passing based on beauty standards developed by Hollywood and magazines. The use of drag in ballet is a topic that requires more attention than can adequately be paid in this study.

³³ Peter Martin's alterations to Chinese Tea at NYC Ballet resulted in what Chan describes in *Final Bow for Yellowface* as a "bland" minute-long variation. He aptly points out that the subpar revision was likely affected by Martins' sudden departure the week after their meeting when the New York Times revealed the ballet company was investigating claims of sexual harassment against the artistic director, soon to be followed by allegations of verbal and physical abuse (see page 51 of *Final Bow for Yellowface*).

Jennifer Fisher's article "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets" functions as an addendum to her 2003 book *"Nutcracker" Nation*, a study that celebrates the Christmastime phenom in how it reflects the cultural values of what she calls the "New World." The article appraises a number of Coffee variations to determine whether or not they "reinforce historical stereotypes of the generalized Arab 'other.'"³⁴ Like Chinese Tea, which is addressed more closely in her book, Fisher finds that

far from being a dismissible, outmoded ethnocentric mistake – as many sensitive ballet observers fear – the 'Arabian' dance can be seen as an evolving attempt to imagine, recognize, and embody difference in an idiosyncratic way. In its best incarnations, it keeps evolving and reflecting a specific kind of encounter (a decidedly balletic one) between different people, danced out in creative, searching ways. At its worst – when sideshow hip-wriggling and cartoon Arabs take over - the variation merely perpetuates the culturally narrow practices that made dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild call ballet 'the last bastion of white supremacy in concert dance.'³⁵

Fisher fails to understand that when only select cultures are reduced to stereotypes in act two, like Coffee but not Tea in Kudelka's *Nutcracker*, there is no amount of intercultural borrowing, especially considering the direction of borrowing, that justifies the perpetuation of a fantasy Orient. It is worth mentioning that arguments that defend traditional portrayals of exoticized Coffee and Tea in *The Nutcracker* because the act occurs in a dream do not excuse racism, a position that bubbles near the surface of Fisher's article and book.

A concept that arises in Fisher's article and has yet to be explicated adequately in this study is Orientalism, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" developed by Edward Said in his 1978 book of the same name.³⁶ Orientalism collapses multiple cultures and histories into one consumable Eastern entity produced by "an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to

³⁴ Jennifer Fisher, "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets," 148.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

³⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1978), 3.

a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do)."³⁷ Most significantly, the Orient (or East) is what the West (or Occident) is not. Additionally, as an imagined place, the Orient is where Western fantasy can flourish with the Oriental female body sexually available and morally corrupt. Since "the Orient is always already 'ancient,' the relationship between modern-day 'Orientals' and past cultures is one that is naturalized and distanced such that the 'Oriental body' can be objectified and shelved," with the classification of a culture as Oriental having the same historicizing effect as labelling a dance form as folk.³⁸

Fisher's article references Said only to dismiss his theory of Orientalism as irrelevant to discussions of contemporary productions of Arabian Coffee by claiming that people of the Orient are no longer prevented from voicing "the terms of their own representation."³⁹ ⁴⁰ As both corps and organizational leadership of ballet companies in North America and Europe are predominantly White, who exactly is voicing the terms of Arabian representation in *The Nutcracker*? Like Chan's Final Bow, Fisher's argument is stained by the conservatism of ballet. In her conclusion, Fisher flippantly writes, "in the dance world, companies around the world have borrowed and adapted ballet, but we do not accuse them of 'Occidentalism,'"⁴¹ and in her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, Fisher draws upon historian John M. MacKenzie to claim that ballet

³⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

³⁸ Yutain Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 13.

³⁹ Jennifer Fisher, "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets," 158.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Fisher would benefit from Gayatri Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from 1985. In this text, Spivak argues that dispossessed women are spoken for by the patriarchal white colonist who outlaws cultural practices like *sati* and, as will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, the *devadasi* system to save "brown women from brown men."

⁴¹ Jennifer Fisher, "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets," 158.

participates in "a kind of benign artistic borrowing [that] has always gone on in the world of the arts" and that choreographers who borrow "may have a genuine admiration for the cultures in question."⁴² Fisher does not seem to understand the importance of the direction of borrowing. Her argument rests on an idealist belief that sampling from other cultures results in innovation so long as the individual doing the borrowing is of good intent despite the impossibility of ensuring that intention and impact match.

Conclusion

When the question of Arabian Coffee was posed by former New York Times critic Alastair Macaulay, Chan replied, "Our approach with *Final Bow for Yellowface* has been to remain laser focused on the 'Chinese' dance. We can speak directly about our experience as people of Asian heritage, and directly address how we want to be portrayed."⁴³ This is yet another confusing sentiment from *Final Bow* that challenges the organization's efficacy to eliminate "outdated and offensive stereotypes of Asians (Yellowface) on our stages" especially considering cofounder Pazcoguin's willing participation in Balanchine's *Arabia*.⁴⁴ Before her December 2019 performance of *Coffee*, whom did Pazcoguin consult about portrayals of Middle Eastern women in ballet? The answer is, unfortunately, herself. Pazcoguin - of Filipino and Italian descent – decided to emphasize "the belly dancing roots of the dance, attempting to make the dance feel more like an empowered woman expressing her sexuality as opposed to a passive object of a sexualized male gaze."⁴⁵ The self-proclaimed Rogue Ballerina's attempt to shift the sexualization of *Arabian Coffee* from the male gaze to an internal force is far too subtle to be a noticeable change, even to annual audience members.

⁴² Jennifer Fisher, "The *Nutcracker*: a cultural icon," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, edited by Marion Kent (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 253.

⁴³ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 101.

⁴⁴ *Final Bow For Yellowface*, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.yellowface.org/>.

⁴⁵ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 101.

Pazcoguin will never be able to dismantle the hyper-sexuality attached to the female body by Orientalism if she continues to perform Balanchine's choreography.

Fisher praises Kudelka's *pas de quatre* as a creative solution to Arabian coffee's "ethno-appropriating dilemma."⁴⁶ Kudelka "abandons previous slinking and swooning in favour of geometric clarity and austere positions. The costumes for the two couples bear traces of the imagined Middle East (sheer harem pants and braided gold headdresses, with women fairly well covered and men with bare chests), but their enigmatic positions suggest an abstract kind of ritual."⁴⁷ However creative Kudelka's choreography may be, there is no denying that by maintaining a generalized Arab identity for Coffee, he participates in "the assumptive practice of replaceability that is common in multicultural programming."⁴⁸ When the Arab peninsula is condensed into a single type the unique characteristics of the many cultures located in the geographical region are subsumed by a Western idea of Arab 'other.' NBC's Coffee dancers may not be recreating harem scenes or snake charmer vignettes, but they still perpetuate a homogenous Arab identity to the detriment of the expanding Middle Eastern population in Toronto.

SF Ballet appears in Chan and Fisher's writing primarily because of its role in bringing *The Nutcracker* to North America, but the company's genie dance provides an interesting test subject for Chan's "Cultural Integrity Grid." No doubt Tómasson's Arabia is an outsider fantasy that hits to the far left of the *x-axis*. As for where it fits on the *y-axis*, the reference to moments of Orientalism in pop culture history reduces SF Ballet's genie from character to caricature. Although firmly entrenched in the lower-left quadrant of the grid, Final Bow's book suggests that there is the potential to redeem Tómasson's version. I believe, however, it would be far more effective to start from scratch.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Fisher, "'Arabian Coffee' in the Land of the Sweets," 156.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Yutain Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 11.

Tómasson's Arabia is not a replica of the original choreography, so there is no reason to maintain it for the sake of preserving ballet history. SF Ballet's *Nutcracker* emphasizes nationality, not sweets, in the second act, meaning Tómasson has a long list of nations to explore as a new member of the Crystal Palace court. He could even scrap the link to the Arabian Peninsula altogether and draw inspiration from coffee culture in the United States. The creative potential of the three-and-a-half-minute long variation is endless if choreographers just let go of tradition.

Chapter 2 The Case of the Temple Dancer

La Bayadère is the most overtly Orientalist ballet in the classical repertoire still performed today. Not only does the ballet perpetuate a Western vision of the East, but it is a constant reminder of the destruction of the 'real *bayadère*' (*devadasi*) system by British imperialists. For the purposes of this project, I will focus specifically on the *devadasi* system of the eastern state of Odisha known as *Mahari Naach*. While the roots of the *devadasi* are found in Southern India, "several scholars, artists, critics and members of the viewing public locate the authentic identity of Odissi [the classical dance of Odisha] in *Mahari Naach*," exclusively identifying the dance with Hinduism.⁴⁹ The treatment of odissi as "a purely devotional dance" makes it a prime subject when discussing depictions of Indian dance in ballet, which relies on the over-ritualization of the Indian experience that equates Indian culture with Hinduism.⁵⁰

Female temple servitors practiced *Mahari Naach* from the twelfth century until the Prohibition of Devadasi Dedication Acts of the early twentieth century. Girls were sent to the temple by their families or adopted by *Maharis* as young as nine years old. "Although her social background held relatively little importance, the girl's beauty, bodily proportions, devotional intensity and artistic aptitude were all appraised before she could be accepted into the system."⁵¹ Beauty was privileged since the *Mahari* would become a consort to the gods after her dedication ritual. *Maharis* held special status in the Hindu temple and in larger society with "the privileges of property ownership, education, artistic training, [and] access to royalty" she would otherwise have been denied as a woman.⁵²

⁴⁹ Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi*, 103.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 131.

In addition to her ritual participation in music, singing and dancing, *Maharis* were "sexually available to the king as well as temple priests."⁵³

As simultaneously sacred and unchaste, Christian colonial authorities struggled to understand *devadasis*. Colonialist literature, purity associations and anti-nautch⁵⁴ campaigns "produced new patterns of signification, inventing the social and legal category of the *devadasi* as 'prostitute,' a figure embodying the decadent dispositions and stigmatized sexuality of the Orient."⁵⁵ *Devadasis* were stripped of their special privileges and kicked out of temples, leaving many with no choice but to become self-fulfilling prophecies.⁵⁶ The *devadasi*'s perceived turpitude was the perfect opportunity for colonialists to flex their moral superiority and promote colonial reform by implementing Western-style penal codes. There was an ulterior motive to reclassifying *devadasi* as prostitutes. In her book *Dancing Odissi*, Anurima Banerji includes excerpts from several memoirs that reveal foreigners were less concerned with the Christian immorality of ritual sex and more upset about being denied access to *devadasis* as outsiders.⁵⁷ Once they left the protection of the temples, *devadasis* became consumable objects for the Western imperialist.

Since most ritual dancing occurred within the temple walls, Europeans did not see *devadasi* perform until 1838 when five dancers, "marketed as the 'real *bayadères*,'" and three musicians from Pondicherry, India visited Europe for an eighteen-month tour.⁵⁸ The Pondicherry dancers arrived in France eight years after the first *bayadère* ballet, *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* with music by Daniel Francois Auber and libretto by Eugene Scribe,

⁵³ Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi*, 132.

⁵⁴ According to Banerji, nautch was most likely a misspelling of *naach* (dance).

⁵⁵ Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi*, 225.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri, "Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West," *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 32, no. 2 (2004), 439.

⁵⁷ See pages 244-247 of *Dancing Odissi* for examples.

⁵⁸ Molly Engelhart, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 42, no. 3 (2014): 510.

premiered at the Paris Opera.⁵⁹ The ballet was choreographed by Filippo Taglioni, who cast his daughter Marie in the lead role. "Versions of *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* and other oriental ballets of the 30s offered audiences the visual topoi they expected to see – dancing girls, funeral pyres, licentious sultans, eunuchs, snakes in baskets, magic bouquets, slave markets on the stage – the 'false and monstrous' relics that fed European fantasies while reinforcing the belief in India's cultural stasis."⁶⁰ The arrival of the 'real *bayadères*' did little to change the public perception of India as envisioned by the ballet since no attempt was made to translate Indian dance movement into something comprehensible by French and English audiences. The dancing was so unfamiliar that even Théophile Gautier, a man known for writing dance criticism and ballet libretto, could not produce any meaningful historical record of the movement performed thus focusing almost exclusively on the dress and jewelry of the dancers in his review.⁶¹

The indecipherability of Indian dance by European audiences was guaranteed when Fredrick Yates presented the Pondicherry dancers at the Adelphi Theatre in London for two months. Whereas most ballets would be accompanied by a fifteen-to-forty-page libretto that "explained the action of a ballet scene by scene, often including actual line of dialogue [...] to be mimed by the characters," the Pondicherry playbill was practically nonexistent.⁶² "To include a key for helping audiences understand the dancer's language would have involved research, which [Yates] probably had neither time for nor interest in, and it would also put the English in a position of inferiority to India because of their illiteracy in a Hindu language they sought to understand."⁶³ Translating the movement language would have been in disservice to the colonial project, which

⁵⁹ Marius Petipa's 1877 *La Bayadère* is regularly mistaken to be the original *bayadère* ballet.

⁶⁰ Molly Engelhart, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," 510.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁶² Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith, "National Dance in the Romantic Ballet," 21.

⁶³ Molly Engelhart, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," 524.

required the British to maintain a sense of superiority over all other cultures.

Interestingly, English audiences did request for more information to be included in the programs.⁶⁴ Perhaps it is because this request was denied that the Pondicherry dancers were so quickly forgotten, and the balletic *bayadère* was able to assume the guise of the 'real *devadasi*.'

Interlude

***La Bayadère* in Twenty-First Century France and Russia**

Libretto: Marius Petipa and Serguei Khoudekov based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Le Dieu at la Bayadère"

Music: Ludwig Minkus

Premiered February 4, 1877 by Imperial Russian Ballet

Paris Opera Ballet (POB), December 13, 2020, Bastille Opera House⁶⁵

Choreography: Rudolf Nureyev after Marius Petipa

Set design: Ezio Frigerio

Costume: Franca Squarciapino

Lighting: Vinicio Cheli

Nikiya: Dorothee Gilbert (Act I), Amandine Albisson (Act II), Myriam Ould-Braham (Act III)

Solor: Germain Louvet (Act I), Hugo Marchand (Act II), Mathias Heymann (Act III)

Gamzatti: Léonore Baulac (Act I), Valentine Colasante (Act II)

The Rajah: Yann Chailoux

The High Brahmin: Vincent Chaillet

⁶⁴ Molly Engelhart, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," 524.

⁶⁵ The December 13, 2020 performance of *La Bayadère* was done so in an empty theatre. POB elected to have a different dancer perform the roles of Nikiya, Solor and Gamzatti in each act.

Gold Idol: Paul Marque

Mariinsky Ballet (MB), 2014, Mariinsky Theatre

Choreography: Marius Petipa, revised by Vladimir Ponomarev and Vakhtang

Chabukiani, with dances by Konstantin Sergeyev and Nikolai Zubkovsky

Set design and lighting: Mikhail Shishliannikov

Costume: Yevgeny Ponomarev

Nikiya: Viktoria Tereshkina

Solor: Vladimir Shklyarov

Gamzatti: Anastasia Matvienko

The Rajah: Unlisted

The High Brahmin: Vladimir Ponomarev

Bronze Idol: Unlisted

Excerpts from Pennsylvania Ballet (PAB), February 26, 2020, Guggenheim Museum,

Works & Process (live)

Panel: Angel Corella (Artistic Director of PAB), Linda Murray (Curator, Jerome Robbins

Dance Division, New York Public Library), Phil Chan (Cofounder, Final Bow for

Yellowface)

Choreography: Angel Corella after Marius Petipa in collaboration with Pallabi

Chakravorty

Nikiya: Oksana Maslova

Solor: Zecheng Liang

Bronze Idol I: Ashton Roxander

Bronze Idol II: Albert Gordon

Act I The Festival of Fire⁶⁶

Moments before a ceremonial fire lighting, the great warrior Solor and his hunting companions pass through a Hindu temple. Unbeknownst to his fellow hunters, Solor has not come to the temple for the festivities but to seek out Nikiya, the head temple dancer and woman he loves. Before the lovers can reconnect, a fakir hurries Solor away from the temple, presided over by the formidable High Brahmin.⁶⁷

Accompanied by an entourage of monks, the High Brahmin stalks out of the temple, calling upon the fakirs to light the central fire. Once lit, the temple ascetics scurry off to make room for the ritual performance of the devadasis. The ceremonial dancing reaches its crescendo with a solo performed by the titular bayadère Nikiya. Her extraordinary beauty overwhelms the High Brahmin, who watches with rapt attention as she concludes her circumambulations of the fire. The Brahmin is so enamoured that he declares his love for the dancer. Nikiya reminds him of his sacred duty, but his ties to the temple are not strong enough for him to resist the bayadère and so he offers to renounce his priesthood, a gambit that destroys Nikiya's respect for the temple leader. Belittled in front of his monks and the fakirs, the High Brahmin stomps back inside a scorned man.

With the assistance of a fakir, Nikiya and Solor reunite at long last. Their embrace and subsequent pas reinforce their devotion to each other. Wholly consumed by their romantic interlude, Nikiya and Solor are unaware that the High Brahmin has seen them. Catching Nikiya with another deepens fresh wounds, and the act ends with the priest praying to the gods for vengeance.

⁶⁶ The sectioning of *La Bayadère* into acts and scenes varies by source. What appears in this essay is derived from my own viewing of multiple productions.

⁶⁷ Fakirs are Hindu religious ascetics. Their Orientalist portrayal in *La Bayadère* makes them out to be helpless beggars rather than revered members of the religious community.

Act one of *La Bayadère* by POB and MB are near identical choreographically. This is because of Rudolf Nureyev's history performing the role of Solor while a member of MB (then called Kirov Ballet). Nureyev defected from the Soviet Union in the 1960s and went on to dance with The Royal Ballet in London before his appointment as artistic director of POB, a position he held until his untimely death in 1993. His revival of *La Bayadère* premiered in October 1992 and was his last major contribution to the company.

The choreographic semblance of the two productions provides a prime opportunity to examine the role of costumes in conveying meaning. Yevgeny Ponomarev's designs for MB draw from Orientalist depictions of the East in paintings such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* of 1814, in which the artist lengthens the Odalisque's spine, endowing her with a serpentine quality. Ponomarev generates a similar elongating effect by dressing Nikiya in a dropped-waist skirt and bra, drawing visual attention to the dancer's hips, a body part typically downplayed in ballet by tutus that rest at the natural waist. Franca Squarciapino's costumes for the *devadasis* in act one remain faithful to the romantic tutu, "a bell-shaped skirt made of masses of billowing material that reaches almost to the ankle" concealing the body, "making the ballerina's bare neck and shoulders the only signs of real flesh and blood."⁶⁸ The romantic tutu is an emblem of French ballet and was first worn by Marie Taglioni in 1832 when she debuted *La Sylphide* for the Paris Opera.⁶⁹ Squarciapino exoticizes the French costume by way of material, selecting silk brocades in jewel tones and gold to shift the tutu from a signifier of the West to the East.

Act II

⁶⁸ Jack Anderson, *Ballet & Modern Dance: A Concise History* (Trenton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 2018), 92.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

Scene I The Rajah's Palace

The Rajah has decided that Solor is the perfect partner for his daughter Gamzatti. Reluctant at first, Gamzatti eventually agrees to the arranged marriage when she is shown a life-sized portrait of the handsome warrior. Solor remains true to Nikiya and opposes the engagement only to find himself betrothed when his good sense is momentarily overwhelmed by the unveiling of the stunning Gamzatti. No matter how fleeting and superficial, the Rajah spots Solor's attraction, and he is bound to the match by royal decree. The engagement is consecrated by the dance of the bayadère Nikiya, who is blissfully ignorant of Solor's betrayal as he shields himself from her line of vision.

After Solor and Gamzatti leave to prepare for the formal celebration of their engagement, the High Brahmin storms into the palace, and he reveals to the Rajah Solor's preexisting commitment to Nikiya. The Brahmin's plan to discredit Solor backfires spectacularly when the Rajah decides to simply eliminate the enchanting temple dancer.

When she overhears the heated discussion between her father and priest, Gamzatti devises a plan of her own, summoning Nikiya to the palace. She tries to bribe the dancer with gifts of gold and jewels to leave the kingdom. Nikiya refuses, confused by Gamzatti's actions until Solor's betrayal is revealed. Although upset, Nikiya elects to fight for her love. The women's ensuing altercation becomes physical, culminating with Nikiya chasing her new rival with a dagger. Horrified by her actions, the bayadère runs off, and the scene ends with Gamzatti duplicating the Brahmin's final movements from act one, declaring her intent to destroy Nikiya.

Scene II The Palace Gardens

Representatives of the Kingdom are invited to the palace to celebrate the betrothal of Solor and Gamzatti. The Rajah and his daughter arrive on filigree palanquins with Solor close behind on an elephant. As typical in romantic ballets, the party scene is dominated by several divertissements, including a variation starring maidens holding

fans and exotic birds, the show-stopping dance of the Bronze (sometimes Gold) Idol, an energetic drum number known as "Dance of the Indians" and a playful balancing act for a female dancer on pointe. Solor and Gamzatti perform a jovial pas de deux, the choreography and music in stark contrast to the sensual duet of Solor and Nikiya in act one.

The final performer of the celebration is once again Nikiya. She is devastated by the confirmation of Solor's disloyalty and dances a lament to the sorrowful sounds of the violin. Solor forces himself to maintain physical distance from the bayadère while simultaneously resisting Gamzatti's attempts at affection. Nikiya is given a moment of respite from her heartbreak when gifted a basket of flowers by a lady of the court. Her dancing turns joyful until the basket's true gift reveals itself, a poisonous snake planted by the Rajah. The potent venom makes quick work of Nikiya, and she withers away in front of an immobile palace audience. The High Brahmin comes to her assistance by offering an antidote, but realizing Solor will never leave Gamzatti, Nikiya chooses to die. The act ends with Solor cradling her lifeless body.

The Bronze Idol was introduced to *La Bayadère* by MB in the 1940s. It has since become an iconic role, and images of the idol are regularly used on programs and marketing materials for upcoming performances. The idol is a Hindu sculpture come to life, most likely inspired by the god Shiva as Nataraja, the divine dancer. Choreography for the notoriously difficult variation is attributed to Vakhtang Chabukiani and appears in its near-original state in POB and MB productions and with minor alterations in PAB.

There are two main areas of concern with the dance of the Bronze Idol. First is the hand gestures. The second is the use of blackface. Nureyev's *Bayadère* depends on costumes and set design to situate the libretto in India over physical cues. The dancing is overwhelmingly classical ballet technique with a smattering of arm movements that see breaks in the wrists and palms turned upwards, a position that evokes poses found

in Egyptian art. The discord between the place signified by the corporeal vocabulary and the location of the scene is unsurprising given *La Bayadère's* Orientalism which, as discussed in Chapter 1, tends to merge multiple cultures into a single generalized 'other.' The multi-authored MB production makes greater use of Orientalist hand gestures, frequently replacing curved high-fifth arms with intertwined prayer hands, a position that resembles but does not replicate a *Samyukta Hasta*, a *Mudra* (codified hand positions in classical Indian dance) that uses both hands. The Bronze Idol is the only character in *La Bayadère* that maintains an Orientalized hand gesture for the duration of its time on stage. Although difficult to discern in much of the available video footage online, the idol's hands are typically positioned in a pseudo-*Mudra* that combines elements of *Bhramara* (middle finger and thumb pressed with index finger curled in, and ring and pinky finger extended) and *Hamsaasya* (index finger and thumb pressed with three remaining fingers extended). Considering proper ballet hands require articulating each finger so they are visible from the side with the pads of the thumb and middle finger closest to each other, eradicating the use of the idol's fake *Mudra* is so easy it is laughable and yet is not done in any of the productions discussed here.

It may seem odd that the second problem with the Bronze Idol is blackface; after all, images of the idol are occasionally mislabeled as examples of yellowface. Blackface, the use of makeup and body paint to make someone appear to be a black person made popular by nineteenth century minstrel shows, is traditionally used in *La Bayadère* on the group of children, perhaps fakirs in training, who accompany the idol to the palace. The children are used to distract from the idol resting between jump sequences. Painting the children black does not help them execute their role on stage; it only serves to identify them as exotic 'others.' To avoid the issue of blackface in PAB, Angel Corella removed the children from the ballet entirely and added a sequence of turns to the idol variation to fill time. At the Works & Process Guggenheim panel, Chan adeptly pointed out that

Corella could have kept the original choreography and simply not painted the children black. Despite the long history of Russian dance companies employing liberal use of blackface,⁷⁰ the MB *Bayadère* exchanges painted young fakirs for the scarf dancers from the previous scene.⁷¹ The Works & Process panel made it sound like POB had banished the use of blackface under former director Benjamin Millepied, but either moderator Linda Murray was mistaken, or POB brought back blackface after Millepied's exit. Rather than using makeup, POB outfits the young dancers in dark brown full-body leotards with matching facemasks to cover their mouths and noses, an addition to the costumes of children and background characters in response to the coronavirus pandemic.⁷²

Act III

Scene I Solor's Apartment

Overcome with grief, Solor retreats to his private quarters to mourn Nikiya. The fakirs come to perform a ritual to calm the bereft man, but instead, he finds solace in an opium pipe. Solor falls into a drugged sleep and enters the Kingdom of the Shades.

Scene II The Kingdom of the Shades

The otherworldly kingdom revealed to Solor through a haze of opium smoke is populated by Shades, the spirits of deceased women. Solor finds the spirit of Nikiya, and they come together for a final pas de deux. It is unclear at the end of the scene if Solor remains with Nikiya in this fantastical afterlife. His use of mind-altering substances would indicate that he eventually returns to reality where he must marry Gamzatti; however, this is not for certain. Petipa's 1877 ballet ended with a short fourth act that tied up the loose plot seen in contemporary productions.

⁷⁰ See page 13 of *Final Bow for Yellowface* where American Ballet Theatre artist in residence Alexi Ratmansky describes the Bolshoi Ballet's use of blackface when touring *La Bayadère*.

⁷¹ Although MB does not use blackface on the scarf dancers, there is use of skin altering makeup on the girls who perform with the jug dancer in the act two divertissements.

⁷² Where clothing and masks are used to alter the skin of the children, brown body paint is applied to the fakirs in act one.

The Kingdom of the Shades not only takes place in a different realm, but it is also practically its own ballet. In POB and MB productions, textile and design signifiers of India are absent, with Nikiya and the Shades dressed in matching white pancake tutus. The set is stripped bare, with a non-descript jungle backdrop masking the utilitarian stage. Only Solor's turban and the identity of the protagonists link the final act to the previous two. Even *Mudra*-like hand gestures are ignored in favour of pure classical technique. The Kingdom of the Shades varies so much from the rest of *La Bayadère* that companies often perform it as an abstract variation on a mixed bill. In doing so, it takes only one or two quick modifications to Solor's costume to rid the act of its Orientalism.

The scene is a prime example of a *ballet blanc* with "the ballerina in virginal white replicated en masse by the ensemble."⁷³ The *ballet blanc* is an opportunity for lovers to reunite in a supernatural realm and, as a near-plotless scene, is the precursor to the neo-classical abstract ballets of George Balanchine. Standard requirements of a *ballet blanc* include the tragic death of the female lead in the preceding act, a corps of identically dressed female dancers representing death who perform adagio in sync and a male love interest who is battling a mix of grief and guilt.⁷⁴ After all, he is typically to blame for the death of the female dancer due to his inability to stay true to one woman. The male protagonist in romantic ballets tends to bend to social pressures and chooses a partner like Gamzatti over the less-acceptable, over-sexed woman he would have picked for himself, in this instance, Nikiya.

Significant to this study is the relationship between romantic *ballet blancs* and notions of morality, sex and death. As evident in the anti-nautch campaigns, European imperialists associated dance with sex and sex with immorality to the extent that certain

⁷³ Lynn Garafola, "Introduction," in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet*, ed. Lynn Garafola (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 4.

⁷⁴ There are *ballet blancs* that vary from the standard format. For example, act one of *The Nutcracker* ends with The Waltz of the Snowflakes, an ostensibly white ballet that is celebratory in nature, welcoming Clara and the Nutcracker to the realm of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

forms of dance were criminalized. European dance manuals proclaimed ballet to be "the ideal of dance as morally virtuous behaviour."⁷⁵ With its regal posture and militant like training, the ballet body was an outward manifestation of internal purity. At the same time, "loving to dance too much connoted sexual promiscuity, while dying from dancing signified orgasm as in 'la petite mort.'"⁷⁶ While Nikiya does not die from dance mania like her counterpart in *Giselle*, colonial discourse equated the temple dancer with prostitution, and the death of Nikiya can be read as just punishment for her promiscuity. She may not have succumbed to the advances of the High Brahmin, but her lust for Solor showed a lack of conviction to her sacred role according to Christian theology. The *devadasi* was not the only dancer forced into prostitution in the nineteenth century. As ballet training became more formal, dancers left the familial home for the academy where they often sought out the patronage of wealthy men to supplement their low earnings.⁷⁷ While the prostitution of the *devadasi* became a public spectacle, that of the ballet dancer remained disguised by the virginal characters she performed on stage.

Conclusion

"When encountering problematic portrayals of race in the classical Western canon, how do we not throw the baby out with the bathwater? Are there any works that cannot be redeemed, that should no longer be performed? How do we determine that?"⁷⁸

- Phil Chan

According to Vida L. Midgelow, the ballet canon "may be understood as a consolidated narrative of origin that forms the legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity."⁷⁹ Works included in the canon set the standards of the art form codifying technique, variation sequencing, and establishing the ideal story format. Entry

⁷⁵ Jennifer Nevile, "The early dance manuals and the structure of ballet: a basis for Italian, French and English Ballet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, edited by Marion Kent (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16.

⁷⁶ Sarah Davies Cordova, "Romantic ballet in France: 1830-1850," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, edited by Marion Kent (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.

⁷⁷ Lynn Garafola, "Introduction," 6.

⁷⁸ Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface*, 18.

⁷⁹ Vida L Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet*, 22.

requirements are so strict that few works comprise the ballet canon, and those included take on a mythical quality that demands they remain static overtime as gatekeepers of ballet history. As such, the cannon is incredibly homogenous, with many ballets bearing such close resemblance to one another they are practically interchangeable. In fact, if *La Bayadère* was relocated to Germany and stripped of its Indian and Hindu connotations, it would be *Giselle*. The similarity between these two canonical works adds another question to those posited by Chan: Why keep performing a ballet if a less problematic version already exists?

Although reworkings of *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* have proven that some canonical ballets can inventively engage "in a dialogue with tradition, often challenging established premises," Corella's collaboration with Final Bow and Pallabi Chakravorty for PAB highlights *La Bayadère's* reconstructionist tendencies.⁸⁰ Revivals of *La Bayadère* are more interested in the opportunity to stake a claim to ballet history rather than a chance to present a contemporary interpretation of classical material. A kathak dancer and scholar, Chakravorty was brought into PAB rehearsals to scout for insensitivity as a cultural insider. Corella also drew on her expertise to correct inaccurate borrowings of Indian dance vocabulary, for example, the bowing. In *La Bayadère* by POB and MB, bowing is mimed as a long lunge with the right hand to the head and the other to the heart. Chakravorty made it 'Indian' for PAB by shifting the pose into a *tribhanga* stance. Perhaps more accurate, the employment of a single Indian posture amongst classical ballet technique is a tokenistic gesture that does not solve the root problem of an Orientalist libretto magnified through costumes and sets that construct the East from a Western perspective. Corella's hiring of Chakravorty is part of ballet revivals' "obsessive

⁸⁰ Vida L Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet*, 10-11.

yet unattainable search for an authentic version" that repeats past mistakes under a smokescreen of cultural sensitivity.⁸¹

⁸¹ Vida L. Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet*, 11.

Chapter 3 The Paratopic, Akram Khan and the English National Ballet

The paratopic is a theory of performance first developed by Anurima Banerji in regards to the choreography of South Asian artist Chandralekha that has recently garnered the attention of dance scholars with the publication of her 2019 monograph *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State*.⁸² Banerji describes the paratopic as "alterity in its simplest, most basic and literal sense: 'Otherness' not as alternative to the dominant, not as the marginal 'otherness' that marks the locus of the center. This is alterity in terms of 'another,' as in, another ontology and epistemology – ways of being and knowing that exist beside what is offered as the center or the ideal."⁸³ The paratopic is perhaps more easily understood by what it is not: it is not an act of dissent against the hegemonic regime, nor is it a kind of "'hybrid' milieu [...] or a site of 'intracultural/intercultural' encounters because it is not exclusively diasporic."⁸⁴ Hybrid and intercultural interpretations of performance fixate on drawing attention to the number of unique cultural expressions mixed into a single act. When applied to ballet and other Western dance theatre traditions, hybridity and interculturalism are choreographic strategies used to camouflage Whiteness through the inclusion of ethnically determined dance vocabularies.⁸⁵ What the paratopic *is* is the generator of a unique embodied reality that does not 'other' uninitiated bodies of the audience but presents them with an alterior modality for understanding the world. While heretofore applied only to South Asian dance by Banerji, I believe that *Dust* and *Giselle* operate as paratopic ballets that coexist with the classical canon and resist the red herring of authenticity that bedevils

⁸² *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* won the coveted de la Torre Bueno Prize for the advancement of dance studies in 2020.

⁸³ Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance," 358.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁸⁵ For example, in his choreography for William Forsythe: A Quiet Evening of Dance at The Shed, New York City, October 19, Forsythe sampled from hip-hop (The Dougie) and pop culture (Flossing).

revivals and their interpretations as hybrid or intercultural.⁸⁶ It also avoids the pitfalls of classifying Khan's work as contemporized kathak, a notion that requires the belief that movement vocabularies developed in the West by artists like Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Pina Bausch are the standards of contemporary dance and kathak is a relic of history.

Khan's first piece of choreography for English National Ballet (ENB), which he also performed at the premiere, is *Dust* (2014). Artistic Director Tamara Rojo approached Khan to create a work that would round out a tryptic program commemorating the centenary of the First World War. Khan was inspired by images of war in which he noticed "people covered in dust. It's something like a skin, a snake that needs to be released in order for new life to start."⁸⁷ The success of *Dust* - it even travelled to the 2014 Glastonbury Music Festival - encouraged further collaboration with Khan, and Rojo hired him to reimagine the 1841 romantic classic *Giselle*. The original libretto by Théophile Gautier told the story of a peasant woman in a Middle Ages Rhineland village during grape harvesting season. She falls in love with Albrecht, a duke disguised as a peasant. When his father and fiancé Bathilde stop by Giselle's village to enjoy some wine at the harvest festival, Albrecht is exposed, and Giselle is devastated. Unable to control her emotions, Giselle whips herself into a frenzy and dances to death. At Giselle's grave, Albrecht is visited by her spirit and a group of Wili, women who were betrayed by lovers on the eve of their nuptials. They try to kill Albrecht, but despite his treachery, Giselle protects him with her love. For ENB, Khan and Dramaturg Ruth Little transformed the ballet to reflect the contemporary issue of low-wage factory jobs in the Middle East and Asia.

⁸⁶ While Khan is part of the Bangladeshi diaspora and a trained kathak dancer, it is the freedom from analyzing cultural difference and mixing provided by the paratopic that makes it of interest to this study, not Khan's personal connection to South Asia.

⁸⁷ Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, 163.

Interlude

Dust

October 20, 2015, Milton Keynes Theatre

Choreography: Akram Khan

Music: Jocelyn Pook

Dramaturgy: Ruth Little

Set design: Sander Loonen

Costume: Amanda Barrow

Lighting: Fabiana Piccioli

Featured performers: Fabian Reimai, Tamara Rojo, James Streeter

A spotlight reveals the contorted body of a man, Fabian Reimai, on an otherwise darkened stage. He is folded at the waist over intertwined legs, stretching his arms behind his back to the point of discomfort. The only sound comes from the backs of his hands smacking and twitching against the stage. He claws at his spine as if trying to peel away his skin to rid his body of its damaged shell. Writhing back and forth across center stage, the man finds moments of release in frenzied backbends that wrench his hips and shoulders from the ground. As he struggles to find his footing, a line of men and women slowly appears from the shadows. When they suddenly bring their hands together releasing plumes of dust, the crashing of skin on skin startles the man into a fetal position where he resumes his violent thrashing. It looks as if the people are going to stand back while he suffers, holding their outstretched hands above their heads beyond his reach. However, as Jocelyn Pook's haunting music reaches its full volume, the dancers turn to face center, linking hand-to-elbow to form two undulating units that find a conjoining hinge in the lone man. Joined together, the dancers ripple in syncopated waves, slowing down and speeding up until the force of movement expels the man and Rojo. While they dance a short parting duet, the men from the line trudge

upstage into the shadows and disappear over the ridge of a foxhole made visible only by a fiery backlight.

The men have gone to war, leaving the women behind to work in the factories, building the very weapons the men will use to kill one another. Heavy repetition and synchronicity emphasize the drudgery of factory work as the women fulfill their wartime duty. Khan alludes to the tradition of the ballet blanc by using a corps of female dancers dressed identically and moving in sync, but instead of delicate arabesques and bourrées on pointe, he grounds the sequence with wide plies in second and curved spines, making sure these women are not confused with a classical Wili or Shade. Arm gestures are sharp and frequently end with fistful hands, signifying the strength and mechanization of the temporary factory workers.

Dust concludes with Rojo reunited with a changed man, performed by James Streeter. He enters the scene dragging on broken limbs. Rojo approaches him with caution, and when she tries to help him rise from his knees, the man struggles against her, pushing his body weight onto her through his straining arms. Suddenly realizing he is not touching the woman he loves with the care and gentleness he should be, the man breaks physical contact, staring down at his hands as if they have betrayed him. The ensuing duet depicts a couple attempting to reconnect after the trauma of war, which has left his body broken and her wrestling with the psychological toll of building tools of death. The hardships they have endured apart are too great to reconcile, and yet their love remains. In what is a heartbreakingly honest portrayal of the end of a relationship between two people who have nothing left to say, Rojo and the man unite their bodies in a final physical expression of their love.

Giselle

October 28, 2017, Liverpool Empire Theatre

Choreography: Akram Khan

Music and sound design: Vincenzo Lamagna, after Adolphe Adam

Dramaturgy: Ruth Little

Visual design and costume: Tim Yip

Lighting: Mark Henderson

Giselle: Tamara Rojo

Albrecht: James Streeter

Hilarion: Jeffrey Cirio

Myrtha: Stina Quagebeur

Bathilde: Begoña Cao

Landlord: Fabian Reimair

Act I

Giselle opens on a tableau that immediately distinguishes Akram Khan's ballet from its source text. As the stage lights rise, the audience sees a group of outsiders pushing against an immovable concrete gate. As these unemployed factory workers step away into the shadows, the audience sees that handprints are stamped across the lower third of the gate, traces of futile attempts to open or scale the barrier to a life of economic opportunity on the other side. Albrecht is the final person to peel himself away from the gate, and he weaves through the group until he finds the keeper of his heart, Giselle. The bodies of the unemployed outsiders are repositories of factory work, and they rock to the sound of machinery heard in Lamagna's score; it is like they are the needles in industrial sewing machines on the factory line. Giselle and Albrecht flirt and play to the chagrin of Hilarion, who knows of Albrecht's true identity as son of the landowner who lives behind the wall. Khan drops clues as to Albrecht's real position in society throughout the opening of the ballet. While the outsiders drop their heads when performing the rhythmic rocking, Albrecht keeps his chin level with the ground, and during movement canons, he lags behind the group. Overall, Albrecht's movement

quality shows that he is dancing the outsider's corporeal vocabulary with an accent. Blinded by her love, Giselle cannot see Albrecht's accent, and so, when she tells him she is pregnant, she has no reason to believe her announcement is anything but a cause for celebration.

A menacing foghorn interrupts their sweet and intimate pas de deux announcing the opening of the wall. Unlike the outsiders that pushed in an attempt to breach the barrier at the start of the act, Albrecht tries to keep it shut, much to Giselle's confusion. As the gate lifts, a group of stately individuals appear, chief among them the landlord and Bathilde, Albrecht's fiancé. Unlike the outsiders' drab and dirty clothes, the people from the other side of the wall wear intricate gowns and expensive fabrics. Recognizing her own work, Giselle approaches Bathilde for a closer look at her gown but her overfamiliarity is unwelcome and Bathilde treats the unemployed worker with utter disdain. Hilarion, capable of passing as one of the wealthy, leads the outsiders in a formal inspection for the landlord. Albrecht tries to hide among the dancing outsiders, but his delayed movements catch the eye of Bathilde. Jealous of Albrecht, Hilarion draws the hiding man out from the crowd by starting a fight. Giselle puts an end to the altercation and, in doing so, reveals her illicit relationship with Albrecht. The landlord presents his son with two options, life as an outsider with Giselle or a wealthy life married to Bathilde. Albrecht shows his true character and cowardly abandons Giselle and their unborn baby. The opportunistic Hilarion swoops in to promise his fidelity to Giselle who deftly rejects him. Giselle is broken and projects her rage onto her fellow outsiders, shoving her friends to the ground. The landlord and his male comrades' coral the maniacal Giselle, who is literally spinning out of control by this point. The act reaches its climax with the sudden and mysterious death of Giselle.

Act II

Scene I

Inside the gates, we are confronted with a grieving Albrecht. He expresses his pain through sharp and chaotic movements as his peers and father watch totally devoid of emotion. The statue-like comportment of Bathilde is infuriating, and Albrecht does what he should have done when presented with his father's ultimatum and breaks off their engagement.

Scene II

The body of Giselle lies in the basement of an abandoned garment factory. Myrthe, Queen of the Wilis, traditionally vampire-like women, drags a limp Giselle across the stage. Through an incantation, Myrthe awakens Giselle's spirit and invites her to join the ranks of dead female workers killed in the many industrial disasters that plague the garment and textile industry. Myrthe and the Wilis are vengeful, violent creatures who arm themselves with bamboo poles, relics of looms long destroyed. Hilarion enters the factory, his presence a reminder of what Giselle has lost, prompting the reenactment of her final moments. Without the shield of the landlord's body, the audience learns Giselle died at the hands of the bitter Hilarion. The Wilis surround the man, stabbing him repeatedly with their sticks. He tries to escape, but his wounds are too severe, and Hilarion is chased into the depths of the factory to die.

Albrecht has come to reunite with Giselle. For Myrthe, his presence is the perfect opportunity for Giselle to prove herself worthy of joining the Wilis by killing him. She places a pole in Giselle's hands and even goes so far as to guide it to Albrecht's heart, and yet Giselle cannot follow through, choosing to forgive the visibly repentant Albrecht. The ballet closes back at the cement gate where Albrecht finds himself a permanent outsider.

An Introduction to Akram Khan

Since this project's anticipated audience is English-speaking North Americans, I will take a moment to give a brief overview of Khan even though the same attention was

not given to the choreographers who appeared in Chapters 1 and 2. This special attention is a response to NBCUniversal's decision to cut the Akram Khan Company's contribution to the 2012 London Olympics' opening ceremonies, undermining his opportunity to become a household name in North America even if only for a brief moment. In her book *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, Royona Mitra details *Abide with Me*, "broadly considered a tribute to the fifty-two victims of the 7 July 2005 London bombings that took place the morning after London won its bid to host the Olympics."⁸⁸ The poignant work hit a sombre note in the otherwise sprightly ceremony that featured James Bond and a giant puppet Lord Voldemort. The reasons for NBC censoring *Abide with Me* are unknown; however, I wager that its removal from North American broadcast was not an effort to make room for commercials but a way to maintain control over the Islamophobic national discourse on terrorism.

Khan is a first-generation British citizen born in 1974 to parents who emigrated from Bangladesh around the time it gained independence from Pakistan. To instill the importance of his cultural heritage, Khan was enrolled in kathak dance as a young boy. Along with odissi, kathak is one of the eight classical forms of Indian dance, a classification that Khan calls a "residue of the British Empire" seeing as the taxonomy of dance classicism only occurred in the mid-twentieth century in an effort to recover lost culture.⁸⁹ In many ways, Khan was a child prodigy who, according to the 2020 Netflix documentary series *Move*, could remember twenty-minutes of choreography at the age of four and yet could not speak a full sentence in English until the age of seven.⁹⁰ It would be accurate to claim that Khan's primary language is corporeal. In addition to his formal kathak training, Khan taught himself the movement vocabularies of pop-culture

⁸⁸ Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, 2.

⁸⁹ *Move*, season 1, episode 5, "Featuring Akram Khan," directed by Thierry Demaizière and Alban Teurlai, Netflix, 2020.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

figures such as Michael Jackson, Charlie Chaplin and Bruce Lee. He eventually sought formal training in contemporary dance at De Montfort University, the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and under Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.

The Akram Khan Company was founded in 2000. In addition to his commissions for the London Olympics and ENB, the company repertoire includes *Kaash* (2002) featuring set design by Anish Kapoor and music by Nitin Sawhney, and *Our Animal Kingdom* (2020), a multi-authored video performance created under the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic. Although he no longer performs, Khan continues to choreograph new works with the world premiere of his second full-length ballet for ENB, *Creature*, scheduled for September 2021.⁹¹

Conclusion

The contrast between Chakravorty's collaboration with the Pennsylvania Ballet (PAB) in Chapter 2 and Khan's work for ENB is remarkable. The dialogue between ballet and kathak is made explicit in PAB's *La Bayadère* through gestures that read obviously Indian to a predominately White audience: it is a project of interculturalism that requires the ability to distinguish markers of multiple cultures. Dissecting Khan's ENB ballets to determine which movements are kathak and which are ballet leads only to frustration and arbitrary results. It is much more productive to view Khan's ballets as belonging to a radically new dance language that demands the performing body process movement through a different framework, one that has no reference in the codified technique of kathak or ballet. For a classically trained ballet dancer of ENB, this means shifting the centre of gravity from the solar plexus, which encourages upward momentum, to the pelvis, welcoming the effects of gravity on the body.⁹² The movement's weightedness shifts the dance to a horizontal plane, undermining the fantasy element so prominent in

⁹¹ *Creature* was scheduled to premiere in August 2020 but was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

⁹² Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, 162.

romantic ballet. By comparing PAB's *La Bayadère* and ENB's *Giselle*, the difference between intercultural and paratopic performance is made visible; Khan is not combining two distinct vocabularies in an attempt to be politically progressive but creating something completely new. According to Banerji, paratopic performances "generate their own ideologies outside of dominant discourses" and are created by "artists who are genuinely seeking to create new social grounds and orders, meanings and visions; those who are engaged in inventing and instituting their own practices."⁹³ I believe Khan has proven himself to be such an artist through *Dust* and *Giselle*.⁹⁴

⁹³ Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance," 349.

⁹⁴ In a bizarre twist, *Giselle* was named Best Classical Choreography at the 2017 Critics' Circle National Dance Awards.

Conclusion

As the organization leading the charge to eliminate racial stereotypes in ballet, Final Bow for Yellowface falls short of fulfilling its promises, bending to the hegemonic forces of the ultra-conservative dance form that prides tradition above all else resulting in a best practices guide for superficial change. Although new works are being choreographed, the performance of romantic and classical repertoire determines a company's legitimacy in staking its claim to ballet. For example, when Arthur Mitchell founded Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) in 1969, one of the recurrent criticisms of the company was that African American bodies are unable to perform traditional ballet technique, and therefore DTH was not a ballet company. To validate DTH as a member of the ballet community, Mitchell added *Giselle* to the repertoire, premiering *Creole Giselle* in 1984. Although the libretto setting was moved to Louisiana, hence 'Creole,' DTH's *Giselle* stayed as true to Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot's original choreography as possible one hundred and forty-three years after it was first performed at the Paris Opera. The drive to reconstruct original choreography counters attempts to correct historically inaccurate, highly stylized portrayals of non-White people. There is a fear in the ballet world that if romantic and classical repertoire is not constantly performed, it will be lost and so, year after year, company seasons are dominated by productions of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Romeo and Juliette*, and *Don Quixote*, to name a few not already mentioned in the preceding pages.

Repertoire staples *The Nutcracker* and *La Bayadère* have been privy to attempts to reduce harmful stereotypes since the turn of the century. Both ballets are notorious for depicting a fantasy Orient conveyed through skimpy costumes, erotic dancing, and the Westernization of dance vocabularies that originate in the Middle East and Asia. Alas, changes to choreography and costumes tend to be tokenistic, using cultural insiders to replace stylized Orientalist gestures with 'authentic' movement from non-Western dance

forms. The hybrid or intercultural products of these collaborations lend ballet the appearance of political progressiveness without actually challenging its racist history. Fortunately, Akram Khan has presented a new way of navigating ballet conservatism and the canon's dominion through his commission's *Dust* and *Giselle* for English National Ballet. By embracing innovation and creating an entirely new corporeal language, Khan's paratopic performances avoid the question of authenticity in Final Bow's differentiation of character from caricature and instead are an opportunity to explore another way of experiencing and understanding the realm of ballet.

The Problem of Watching Digital Dance

The coronavirus pandemic necessitated ballet companies shift from live performances to digital seasons. This relocation from theatre to home draws attention to the inconsistencies in transcribing live dance to video. The simplest way to film live dance is from a single, unmoving camera aligned with centre stage, generating footage that looks highly archival. Perhaps a little boring, this stagnate centralized perspective aligns most closely to live viewing as audience members cannot drastically change their vantage point for the duration of a performance except by the use of visual aids like binoculars. Most digitized performances use multiple camera angles, readily shifting from capturing the full stage to tight frames around the faces of lead characters. The results can be quite jarring, specifically when large durations of time elapse with only the top half of the dancers shown in the frame. It was surprising how many dance performances available online in 2020 regularly cropped out legs and feet, even when the movement was focused in the lower half of the body. There is an incommensurability in producing video of live performance as if it were a movie that needs to be resolved to better adapt the viewing experience from a proscenium theatre to a screen at home.

Illustrations

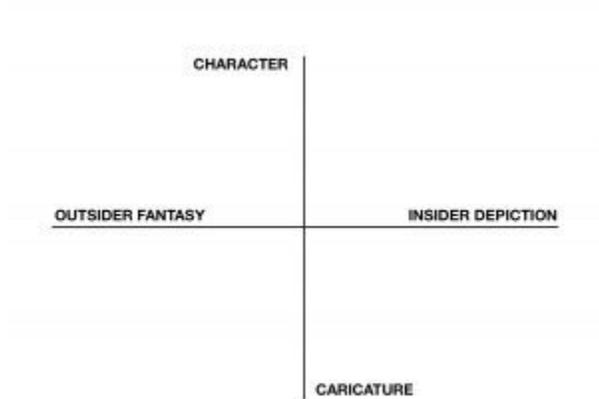


Fig. 1. "Cultural Integrity Grid," *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing Between Intention and Impact* (Brooklyn, NY: Yellow Peril Press, 2020), 158.

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