

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Emma Cohen

Dance Studio Life

by Emma Cohen

Even if you have never attended a ballet class, chances are good that you know someone who has. Perhaps you saw a performance of the *Nutcracker* as a child, or maybe someone in your life has a cherished Angelina Ballerina lunchbox. If nothing else, there is a good chance that at some point, in some U.S. suburb, you have driven through a strip mall past a large window emblazoned with the silhouette of a girl arching backwards towards her leg bent high in the air. A pink awning might bear the words “Gotta Dance,” “Diva Dance,” “Expressions,” or perhaps the ever-classic “First Positions.”

Despite the fact that ballet harbors associations of elite inaccessibility, it has nonetheless become a staple of American popular culture. In her new book, *Ballet Class: An American History*, Melissa Klapper explores how ballet has come to be so firmly rooted in this country’s collective consciousness. Situating herself in the storefront studio or rec room rather than the conservatory or stage, Klapper charts the myriad ways in which ballet class manifests itself in everyday life.

Until now, there have been no social histories of ballet class in the United States. Klapper does impressive work to fill this gap in the literature, drawing on an archive that ranges from magazine advice columns to advertising campaigns to interviews with young dancers. As an academic text, *Ballet Class* seems to be intended for historians who do not have much experience with dance. However, Klapper’s clear and accessible prose makes the book appropriate for a broader audience as well.

Ballet Class’s twelve chapters are split into two sections. The first, entitled “First Movements,” aims to give a broad overview of the history of ballet class in the U.S. From French dancing masters who taught ballet technique in the nation’s earliest days, to the “dance boom” of the 1960’s, Klapper follows the development of ballet class from an occasional pastime to an essential extracurricular for children of the middle class (or those who aspired to join its ranks).

Significantly, Klapper emphasizes that ballet has long held mass appeal, appearing alongside musical theater and vaudeville as well as more overtly highbrow opera. She also draws attention to its broad geographic influence: touring stars such as Fanny Elssler and, later,

Anna Pavlova, played a major role in popularizing ballet. Far from being cloistered in major cities, these tours made their way to small towns and rural areas as well, leaving in their wake ballet teachers and inspired children clamoring for classes.

Although certain chapters, like “Ballet Class 101,” might be familiar for those with a background in ballet, Klapper’s research is thorough and offers a number of surprises. For instance, I was pleased to learn just how significant Philadelphia has been throughout the history of ballet class in the U.S. After Paul Hazard, a dancer with the Paris Opera Ballet, performed in Philadelphia in 1838, he remained in the city and became an influential teacher in the region. Klapper credits Catherine Littlefield’s Philadelphia-based troupe with lending ballet a particularly American flavor in the early 20th century, by creating ballets about such subjects as barns and bicycles. Later in the book, Philadelphia is highlighted as an important center for studios supporting young Black dancers: Essie Marie Dorsey’s school, the Judimar School of Dance, the Sydney School of Dance, and eventually [Philadanco](#) all sought (and seek) to rectify the overwhelming whiteness of ballet.

Issues such as racism are explored further in the second (and longer) section entitled “Themes and Variations.” These chapters address the commercial challenges of running a studio, boys in ballet, ballet in higher education, body image issues, the interplay of ballet and “girl culture,” and the presence of ballet in pop culture. The latter two chapters are particularly engaging—in the first, Klapper combs through children’s books to show how girls’ relationships to ballet and femininity are formed and reflected in their pages; in the second, she turns to movies and TV shows to chart the persistence of familiar tropes that equate ballet with melodrama, romance, and extreme sacrifice.

Despite acknowledging certain issues surrounding ballet, there is a pervasive rosiness to *Ballet Class* that I found difficult to swallow. Admittedly, this may have more to do with my own relationship to ballet than with the book itself. Maybe I am just like that “one resentful former ballet student [who] claimed” that ballet encouraged harmful passivity and unhealthy competition (p. 241).

But my sense that Klapper favors positive interpretations over critical ones is not purely projection. While Klapper tends to present positive aspects of ballet class as facts, she tends to express criticism at a notable remove. For instance, she writes that “ballet class was ... a medium for both personal and artistic development” (p. 111), but “critics of traditional ballet pedagogy ... claim that this approach negated students’ personal autonomy” (p. 110). Rather than more neutral terms such as “noting” or “stating,” Klapper tends to say that critics “blame” (p. 234), “denounce” (p. 244), or “claim” (p. 225).

There is an [argument to be made](#) that assessments of ballet too often focus on the negative, and that work must be done to recuperate ballet’s positive qualities. And it is true that plenty can be left out if analysis is given over to criticism alone—Klapper’s chapter on race, for instance, rightly highlights a number of Black and Native American artists who made successful and significant contributions to the ballet world, stories that are too often left out of ballet’s history.

Still, there are criticisms of ballet circulating among dancers and in internet think-pieces that I am eager to see teased out at greater length. Klapper mentions the ways in which ballet plays into traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, but what of the [challenges that trans and nonbinary dancers face](#) in ballet class? When describing what ballet offers young dancers, Klapper returns again and again to discipline. Is that obviously a benefit? She acknowledges the body-image issues that can come with ballet training, but what of the [perfectionism](#) that can lead to or exacerbate anxiety and depression? What about ballet’s persistent inability to adequately address [dancers’ mental health](#)? Ballet can be sublime, but it can also be devastating. Perhaps that is a melodramatic statement, but downplaying the emotional pitch of critique for the sake of “objectivity” can be a bias of its own.

Of course, one book need not (cannot) do everything. I’m clearly thirsty for a book that will encapsulate all of the contradictory and complex dynamics of ballet class, all the psychological drama it holds for its participants ... but that was never what *Ballet Class* promised. If anything, my yearning for *more* underscores Klapper’s assertion that ballet class in a pop-cultural context is a rich and understudied field. *Ballet Class* has provided a solid and wide-ranging foundation—I hope others will hasten to take this as an opportunity to build even further.

Melissa R. Klapper, [*Ballet Class: An American History*](#). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020. 403 pp.

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