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Photo: Joe Carrotta - Ballet des Porcelaines

Book Review: A Magic Carpet Ride Through Ballet's History of Orientalism

by Catja Christensen

As *Nutcracker* season quickly approaches, so too do the questions of why Orientalist tropes are still so blatantly celebrated on stages across the globe every holiday season. While Orientalism in ballet is not limited to *The Nutcracker*, the most popular, lucrative story ballet for major dance companies is an annual reminder to reflect on what we celebrate on stage. Why have Orientalist fantasies endured centuries of choreographic innovation? What is the lasting impact on audiences and dancers?

Phil Chan continues asking these questions and more in his 2023 book, *Banishing Orientalism: Dancing between Exotic and Familiar*. Chan is the co-founder of the arts activism nonprofit Final Bow for Yellowface and president of Gold Standard Arts Foundation. He has dedicated his career to advocating for artists of Asian descent, facilitating supportive creative networks and communities, and choreographing his own work, such as a reimagining of the Baroque *Ballet des Porcelaines* in 2022. His characteristically conversational, tongue-in-cheek writing style makes tackling complex issues about race, representation, and inclusion accessible to the most knowledgeable balletomanes and casual ballet fans alike.

Banishing Orientalism acts as a historical companion to Chan's 2020 work, [Final Bow For Yellowface: Dancing between Intention and Impact](#), which traced his work with leading ballet companies to eliminate the use of yellowface and offensive stereotypes from the classical ballet canon. While *Final Bow for Yellowface* serves as a guidebook on the process and practices of navigating race in ballet, *Banishing Orientalism* provides a deeper look into how Orientalism in ballet evolved, functioned, and served as a catalyst for choreographic evolution, albeit in a problematically Eurocentric fashion. Although ephemeral dance performances are primarily documented through verbal and symbolic records, such as reviews or Labanotation, Chan incorporates the visual markers of Orientalism throughout history with large photo insets from modern productions and the New York Public Library archives.

The book opens with an anecdote from *Final Bow for Yellowface*. Chan rides the Amtrak from his home in New York City to Philadelphia to see Pennsylvania Ballet, now named Philadelphia Ballet, perform Angel Corella's new [La Bayadère](#) in early 2020. In 2019, the company faced months of opposition from the local community criticizing *La Bayadère*'s "racial insensitivity," and Corella invited Chan to chat with his team about how to proceed with the revival. What ensued was a company grappling with the demands of their home community by hosting a public forum a week before opening night.

Chan's real-world case studies track the evolution of story ballets and diversification of dancer and audience identities. Ballet is no longer only for European royalty and aristocrats; it is now for multicultural audiences with a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

In a chapter titled "'A Whole New World'—Ballet and a Sense of Place", Chan invites readers to "climb aboard a magic carpet" and take a "quick tour of these fantasy kingdoms." Chan explores how ballet's imagined lands and cultures, from Arabia to India to Cathay, evolved from limited exposure to very real people and places east of Europe. Caricatures often evolved from imagery, such as 18th century porcelain ["pagod" bobbleheads](#), that were then exaggerated on stage.

Orientalism became and remains so popular in story ballets because it expanded the creative innovations and possibilities. Ballets could be set in a Bavarian court—a familiar European, aristocratic setting—or they could explore the sensuality, mystique, sounds, and looks of an exotic other world. Dancers could emerge from the Romantic ballets like *Giselle* and *Sleeping Beauty* into the new style of "the Orient," defined by stomach-baring tutus, pirates, enslaved women, and men in their harems. New musical themes and instrumentations could emerge to provide context for this new world.

But, as Chan points out, the exotic appeal does not translate today, when people are more interculturally connected than ever and cannot hide behind the fantasy of othering non-European cultures for the sake of creative liberty. The opium-induced ballet acts in *La Bayadère* and *Le Corsaire* are tone-deaf in the context of today's opioid crisis. Portraying the fakirs, or Hindu ascetics, in the opening of *La Bayadère* as animalistic and savage is, and always has been, inappropriate, especially as audiences now include people of various religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds.

Chan urges fellow artists to think more creatively about how to restage these ballets, to question why and how they should still be performed today, and how to preserve history without preserving exclusive and harmful traditions. Chan recalls asking students at the Boston Ballet School to reimagine [Coppélia](#) as a creative exercise. The students worked in groups to develop a wide range of story ideas that maintained the essence of the story and choreography while providing a modern perspective. Rather than a doll, what if Coppélia was a cyborg? What if the story was a queer love triangle? With some imagination and innovation, Orientalist stories can also be revamped with a modern lens and reveal new layers of complexity and inclusion.

Chan's analysis of intercultural collaborations between artists over the centuries resonated most with me. He compares and contrasts three partnerships in regards to cultural integrity and their lasting impacts on dance practice: Anna Pavlova and Uday Shankar ; Alicia Markova and Ram Gopal; and Sylvie Guillem and Akram Khan. All shared mutual respect for each others' artistry even though they came from different dance training. However, each instance resulted in varying levels of actual collaboration.

Russian ballerina Pavlova encouraged Shankar's practice of classical Indian dance but barred him from performing Western pieces with her company to preserve his own technique, despite his desire to grow as an artist. Gopal introduced Markova to classical Indian dance and admired the discipline and training of classical ballet, but their partnership represented the British ballerina's liberation more than the stylistic evolution of either dance form. Finally, Guillem, a French ballerina, and Khan, a British dancer and choreographer of Bangladeshi descent, highlighted the importance of a respectful cultural curiosity, interpreting and learning from each other without one person dominating the practice. Chan includes long transcriptions of interviews with both Guillem and Khan, providing direct insight into their perspectives and challenges, which is a beautifully poetic closing to this chapter.

Banishing Orientalism is the book I needed in my youth training as a ballet dancer of Asian descent. Dance practices, not just ballet, are too often separated from the history and context of the styles being performed. Understanding the cultural and historical contexts of

ballet practice and performance while also studying the relationship between economics and artistic production are critical lessons in how to address the continued performance of Orientalist works.

In order for ballet to survive, it must evolve to include people of all backgrounds and identities, not just the white, European elite as it originally did. But, rather than never performing Orientalist ballets again, Chan argues that the choreography can still be preserved if the stories behind them are changed to be more appropriate for modern audiences. He traces how ballet, a form that embraces tradition, has evolved over the centuries to demonstrate that updating the ballet canon is not a radical thought but a natural progression.

Chan's second book successfully continues to educate balletic communities with his witty, extensively researched, and clearly structured journey throughout history. *Banishing Orientalism* is an intellectually stimulating, essential read that should line the shelves of every dance educator, performer, scholar, and enthusiast.

Phil Chan, [*Banishing Orientalism: Dancing between Exotic and Familiar*](#), Yellow Peril Press, 2023.

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