

POWER DYNAMICS IN DANCE

by Nicole Perry

Note from the author: This piece pertains to modern and ballet training and performance in the US in particular. These observations do not apply to every genre of dance nor every location.

Tiny Pretty Things on Netflix, a drama about dancers training at an exclusive ballet academy, is causing a stir in my corner of the dance world.

Jessica Zeller wrote [an incredible piece](#) for her blog on the show and the harmful power dynamics it exposes in dance training.

In 1959, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven named "[The Bases of Social Power](#)":

- **Legitimate-** Given by a title, i.e. Professor, Artistic Director, Choreographer, Soloist, etc.
- **Expert-** Being seen as more knowledgeable or valuable than the power-perceiver. Those with *Legitimate Power* also hold *Expert Power* in their rooms.
- **Referent-** Uniquely drawn from perceived influence both in and out of the current company or institution the power-holder and -perceiver are in.
- **Reward-** Having the ability to offer perks for desired behavior. In dance settings reward(s) may be distributed or perceived in grades, casting, costuming, dressing room assignments, or even stage placement.
- **Coercive-** The opposite of *Reward*.

The power dynamics described above are what Mary Parker Follett termed forms of "[power over](#)," implying subjugation. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to create parallels to the dance world.

Ballet was created in, and grew from, European royal courts involved in practices that value hierarchy, including

colonialism and imperialism. "[Colonialism](#) is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another." "...[Imperialism](#) draws attention to the way that one country exercises power over another..." Deborah Jowitt writes:

When Marius Petipa worried about pleasing "the public," he was speaking of a power elite. Dancers on the stage of the Maryinsky could look out into an orderly assemblage, seated according to rank and prestige....

The spectators looked back at a stage world that flatteringly mirrored theirs in protocol, decorum, and elegance....

The parades, grand entrances, and large ensemble dances in the ballets affirmed the power of ceremony. The surviving works from this period— *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *La Bayadère*¹— contain courts of their own. (243-4)²

21st century ballet companies continue to be structured in models that reinforce hierarchy and produce works that promote appropriation.

While modern dance may have rebelled against the aesthetic of ballet, many trainings and companies were organized around one charismatic teacher. Therefore, a hierarchical power structure remained³.

Currently, teachers and choreographers have full access to dancing bodies in order to make more perfect servants of the art. We know from stories of Diaghilev, Jerome Robbins, Balanchine, and others that this exercise of "power over" is not new. This can look like demanding, or simply assuming, that dancers will accept choreography and/or physical corrections that may be dangerous or cross personal boundaries, because of *Legitimate* and *Expert* powers. Leaders may

¹ Not to mention the imperial mindset that fills ballets like the first and last in the list above. This could be its own article- we don't have space for it here. Jowitt does a thorough, though not critical, accounting of these in the book cited.

² Jowitt, Deborah. *Time and the Dancing Image*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1988.

³ Also remaining was an imperialist approach to other cultures' dances and movements, Ruth St. Denis being a prime example. See Footnote 1.

rely on *Referent*, *Reward*, or *Coercive* power with promises of future projects or threats of “you’ll never work in this town again”. Power-holders also draw economic benefit from dancing bodies, and dancers have very little say in how or when their bodies are used in that labor (see [Emily Hansel’s blog](#) about the need for collective action within dancer contracts).

Dancers are expected to react with deference to the power-holders, because this is how the system was created to function. In these ways, many in the dance world find themselves operating in colonial, imperialistic systems of power that subjugate the bodies, wellbeing, and labor of the many for the gain, both financial and reputational, of the few.

Dancers have been trained, many from a very young age, to believe that their bodies are not their own. Students may be unable to ask questions, request modifications, or be honest about injuries. Performers can feel powerless to opt out of material that is harmful to their wellbeing, offer their own creative ideas, or say “no” to requests that cross boundaries into personal time or space. This expected surrender of dancer agency, coupled with power dynamics at play in classrooms and rehearsal rooms, makes for unhealthy industry traditions and practices. [Schools](#) and [studios](#) can be places where physical and sexual, as well as mental and emotional, abuse occurs. Storied companies like [Ailey](#) and [New York City Ballet](#) (and its school) are not above episodes of harmful and illegal sexual harassment and abuse. Recent news from [regional companies](#) show us that practices of harassment and lack of consent are frequent occurrences.

Since dance training, making, and performing are not free of power, we must seek to strategically disrupt the power dynamics in our rooms. An emphasis on performer agency to give consent to touch-based teaching practices and/or to choreographic choices would disrupt the traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal structures of dance companies in which the artistic director, followed by the choreographer, is the voice of power. The same is true of academic dance departments and even studios, where the title of professor, guest artist, or simply teacher creates power dynamics.

If we wish to create more equitable dance space and work towards decolonizing those spaces, we must evaluate our choices through the lenses of these power dynamics. It is

only then that we will be able to see how they may be influencing our dancers. This level of vulnerability is a distinct departure from the image of the infallible artistic director or teacher. It also removes the ability to rely on the “this is the way we’ve always done it” adage.

Urgency is another influence of colonialism, as we desire to make things more comfortable for ourselves, as quickly as possible. I offer no quick fixes, but instead offer you time to reflect on how these dynamics have affected you, shaped how you teach or create, and may be affecting you and/or your dancers. Name their presence in your space. Give yourself grace and time to interrogate and begin to undo the years of tradition and modeled behavior you experienced. Then, return for next month’s issue, which will offer ideas to address and mitigate power dynamics.

