Franziska Bork-Petersen

Virtuosity in the wings

article

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The collaborations that make the dancer's body at the Royal Danish Ballet

By Franziska Bork-Petersen

This article details artistic practices and institutional patterns that relate to the *creation*, *maintenance* and *transformation* of dancing bodies in a professional ballet company. It takes the Royal Danish Ballet as its case. My investigation relies on a series of interviews which I conducted with the company's dressers, dancers, physiotherapists, costume technicians and a makeup and hair artist between 2023 and 2024.[1] The collaborative nature of these experts' work emerged from my analysis of the interviews as a focal point. In what follows, I lay out in detail these collaborative practices and emphasise the composition of different techniques and skills as amalgamating in ballet dancers' bodies.

Background

Dance productions distinguish themselves – and are commonly understood – as differently weighed collaborations between dancers, scenographers, musicians, costume designers and choreographers, in addition to other credited and uncredited workers. Despite this collective nature, the infrastructure and discourse of professional stage dance in the global North rely on a star system, in which funding and credit are awarded to the individual artistic genius, as is the case in other artistic fields (Schmidt 2022, 5ff). This is especially acute in ballet, where reviews and marketing material typically associate productions

1) Costume technician Søren Johannessen's help in arranging the interviews was indispensable and I would like to express my sincere gratitude for his kindness in offering it.
Several of the interviews were conducted as part of my investigation of ballet costume as archival source material within the *Knowing in Motion* research project. *Knowing in Motion: dance, body, archive* [Viden i bevægelse: Dans, krop, arkiv] is supported by the Augustinus Foundation's reserve for Cultural Heritage 2023-2026. The project is hosted by the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen in partnership with the Danish Royal Library. The research group consists of Karen Vedel (PI), Anna Lawaetz and myself.

← Photo by Trine Brandt-Lassen.

with their choreographer and lead dancer(s). Audiences, journalists and popular culture commonly idolise the ballet dancer's exceptional body and its abilities as singular, outstanding and the result of disciplined individual labour. This is in many ways unsurprising: a ballet dancer's job demands specific bodily preconditions, extraordinary discipline, a resilient physique and psyche. It entails a short career window for peak performance under the pressure of institutions that are traditionally hierarchically organised. But what my interviews with workers at the Royal Danish Ballet reveal is that not only the productions, but also the practices and customs that create, maintain, and transform the dancing bodies are, to a large extent, collective. My article therefore asks: What are these practices, their objective functions and implied side effects; how do they relate to each other and to dancers' performances on stage? How is responsibility distributed in these practices and what is a dancer's own role in them?

In the following, I highlight the ballerina's dancing body as one central, 'collaboratively made' element of ballet productions. This emphasis allows me to investigate in detail dancing bodies as extraordinary entities in an institutional context.

In highlighting the constitutive practices, I investigate as collective, my article follows a feminist tradition of making visible practices of indispensable care and support. Historically, the frequently feminised and invisibilised labour of upholding bodies were at the centre of the International Wages for Housework Campaign (Federici 1975) or in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' maintenance art. More recent approaches have dealt with continued and specific contemporary relevance of the issue within and outside the art world (Federici 2020; Lewis 2019; Kunst 2015; Schmidt 2022; Jackson 2010).

Schmidt (2022), Kunst (2015 and 2023), Bryan-Wilson (2009) and Wilbur (2020) have contributed to elucidating the impromptu support structures that independent artists piece together to make their art under unpredictable circumstances. But how exactly do infrastructural practices of support unfold when they are available in-house, in an institution with comparatively solid funding?

Structure

Daily work in a professional ballet company encompasses repeated acts related to the dancers' *creation* as 'ballet bodies', their *maintenance* as consistent performers and their *transformation* into stage characters. I use these umbrella terms to identify and systematise their associated constitutive practices and customs and investigate these as collaboratively achieved. The terms also structure this article into three sections.

In the first section, I investigate ballerinas' fusion with their pointe shoes as an aspect of the *creation* of their dancing bodies. This section is based on a research interview with Henriette Brøndsholm, a former ballerina with the Royal Danish ballet and since 2009 the company's 'ballet shoe administrator'. Furthermore, I draw for this initial section on a factory visit at Freed of London, a company that produces bespoke pointe shoes, where senior manager of retail and ballet company sales, Sophie Simpson, showed me around and answered my questions in June 2024.

The article's subsequent section is concerned with the institutionalised support structures that ensure the *maintenance* of ballet dancers' performances at a top level. Two interviews gave me detailed insights into practices and customs related to care, support and maintenance at the Royal Danish Ballet: One was with the company's physiotherapists, Lærke Friis Hansen and Henrik Emmer. The other brought together one of the company's dressers, Andrea Harper, with 'her' former dancer Kizzy Matiakis, a principal with the Royal Danish Ballet until 2020.

Finally, the third section deals with the *transformations* that turn dancers into their stage characters. Dancers are reliant on the work of tailors, costume technicians, dressers, makeup and hair artists etc. to enable such transformations which are a significant aspect of the performances at the Royal Danish Ballet. For insights into the related practices and customs, I return to the above-mentioned interview with Andrea Harper and Kizzy Matiakis, and, in addition, to a complementary interview with a member of the company's hair and makeup department, Tina Tøttrup Jensen, and the ballet's costume technician Søren Johannessen.

Method

I conducted all interviews as semi-structured and interviewed some experts individually and others in small groups of two. The interviews lasted around 1.5 hours. I recorded the sound, transcribed the full interviews and coded them manually according to my areas of interest.[2]

As part of my case, I approached these expert interviews and my factory visit at Freed descriptively (Priya 2021). This means that 'collaboration' was not a thematic interest with which I entered the interview situations and formulated my questions. Rather, I asked my interviewees open questions about practices and customs connected to the creation, maintenance and transformation of dancers' bodies at the Royal Danish Ballet. As mentioned, the article's thematic focus on the collaborative nature and mutual dependency of the investigated work processes at the Royal Danish Ballet emerged from my analysis of the interviews.

While individual customs are specific to the institution of The Royal Danish Ballet, several routines and practices will also apply to other international ballet companies of a similar calibre.

Creation

In "Dancing Bodies", Susan Leigh Foster describes different techniques of Western stage dance as particular "methods of cultivating the body – whole disciplines through which it is molded, shaped, transformed, and, in essence, created" (Foster 1992, 480). Daily training shapes a dancer's posture, muscles, attitudes and areas of focus – with ballet producing a particular kind of body with altered musculature and turnout as defining factors (Stoneley 2007, 9).

Beyond such training regimes, the female ballet dancer's body is also 'created' by means of an extension. Becoming a ballerina entails the bodily integration of what Henriette Brøndsholm calls "the only tool we have to help us achieve the extreme virtuosity ballet requires from a dancer."[3]. She says:

2) For the interview with Sophie Simpson in connection with my factory visit at Freed, I only transcribed passages relevant for this article.

3) Brøndsholm, research interview, 12 December 2023. Translation from Danish by the author.

Ballet is so much about training to lift the whole body upwards. When a dancer puts pointe shoes on, her movements grow even higher, reach out further – everything becomes bigger. (…) That's where they become one unit – where you don't think 'there's a shoe and there's a dancer' and maybe it doesn't really fit. But when you sit in the audience and just watch the movements and let yourself be carried away by the story or what you experience. Then we have reached the goal, and that is my function today.[4]

Henriette Brøndsholm in her office. Photograph by Trine Brandt-Lassen.

4) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

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Ensuring that each dancer forms this integral unit with every shoe they put on for a performance or rehearsal is almost a full-time job for a company of the Royal Danish Ballet's size. In her office, Brøndsholm has rollable archive shelves with a box of bespoke pointe shoes for each of the roughly 50 female company members, plus apprentices.[5]

The organic material a pointe shoe is made of wears out with use. Each of the company's ballerinas goes through somewhere between five and twenty pairs of shoes per month.[6] Brøndsholm explains that until 1995, the dancers at the Royal Danish Ballet – with the exception of principal dancers – had to pay for their own shoes.

> [W]e were in eternal debt to the suppliers and the ballet shop that had to order them for us. Afterwards, we had to fight with the tax authorities about being able to deduct it as a work-related expense and there were a lot of problems with that. I also remember sometimes when I ordered shoes, they didn't quite fit exactly as I thought they should. But they were expensive shoes, and you couldn't just say 'I cannot bloody wear them' because there were no other options and you had to perform in something.[7]

In 1995, the ballet master Peter Schaufuss abolished this practice and introduced the role of a ballet shoe administrator.

The shoes Brøndsholm, orders are produced by the English company Freed "because our ballet master Nikolaj Hübbe likes the look of a Freed shoe."[8] Freed has provided ballet dancers with handmade shoes since 1929. Around 20 makers and another 15 workers still craft the shoes in a little factory in Hackney, London, today. From there, the shoes are sent to the

5) Brøndsholm is also responsible for the male dancers' soft shoes and the shoes for the children in the company's ballet school.

6) "You must be able to breathe in your shoes," says Brøndsholm. "Because when you dance and sweat a lot, it doesn't help that the shoe is like concrete – then you can't use your feet. The material has to be organic. And at the same time, that means it also dies when you dance a lot in them for a whole evening, then they simply become too soft and the whole thing disintegrates. And then there is no support in the shoe anymore and then they are discarded." (Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023).

7) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

8) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

world's leading ballet companies, such as the Wiener Staatsballet, the National Ballet of Canada, the New York City Ballet, the English National Ballet or the Bayrische Staatsoper.

But a pointe shoe that fits a dancer so perfectly that it becomes a prosthetic extension of her body is far from a matter of just choosing this particular brand. At Freed, each pointe shoe maker has their own style of making shoes. "Some make them a little more tapered, some make them a little more elegant in design, but it depends on your toes because if you have more square feet and wide toes, a tapered shoe won't work."[9] In the production process, the makers stamp the sole of each shoe with their individual symbol – a butterfly, a letter 'V', a star or a bridge – to indicate who has made it. A maker can produce between 20 and 40 pairs of shoes per day and Brøndsholm tries to order every dancer's shoes from her favourite maker. And, as Brøndsholm notes: "if that maker gets sick or injured and can't make shoes for a few months, then a dancer is in deep trouble."[10]

To craft a bespoke shoe, a maker needs information about the size, width and a number of other specifics about the desired result. For instance, soles can be made of different materials and vary in hardness, the 'wings' on the sides of the shoe can support a ballerina's foot up to a higher or lower point and the standing plates can rest her body weight when dancing on pointe in a 90-degree angle or tilt it slightly forward or backward.

This information is communicated in fittings, for which employees from Freed each year visit the Royal Danish Ballet, as well as the other ballet companies Freed works with. As Freed's senior manager of retail and ballet company sales, Sophie Simpson is responsible for these fittings. She explains: "When we go for a fitting, particularly with dancers who we work with already, it's almost like a stage in a conversation."[11] Because she has been at Freed for many years, Simpson explains that there are now several dancers whom she met as students, adjusted their shoes as they moved company or came back from maternity leave, both of which usually entails a slight change in the shoes they need.

9) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

10) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

11) Simpson, interview, 24 June 2024.

Captured at Freed of London's Hackney Factory. Photograph by Emily Maye.

The 'conversation' Simpson makes reference to continues when, at the Royal Danish Ballet, Brøndsholm is in almost daily contact with Freed. She asks for adjustments, explains company members' individual concerns or requests changes that a dancer's role in a particular ballet necessitates. In the factory in Hackney, these 'conversation stages' get translated onto a 'ticket', an order slip according to which each maker crafts the requested shoes on a given day. But Simpson also speaks to the makers directly:

> We use the tickets and that's what [the makers] work with. But sometimes, especially the makers who have been here for a long time and who I know very well, they will ask me things. […]. So when, for example, I've been to the Royal Danish Ballet, I'll come back and I'll be honest and say: 'You know what, they like your shoes in that company.' Or I might also say: 'Look, there is one person who is a little concerned that the shoe isn't quite strong

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enough here. When you get her ticket, can you try and have a look and make sure…?'[12]

Finally, the dancer herself will get each individual shoe ready for performance by sewing on ribbons and elastics first and then wearing the shoe for class or using a different technique to soften it and take away the initial stiffness. Simpson recalls meeting dancers for the first time who had had ongoing issues with their shoes and began customising them themselves by cutting away bits or sowing the sides down. "Then my alarm bells switch on," says Simpson. "But I can't ever be precious, I have to get them to trust me so they are confident enough to experiment with a different shoe."[13]

For a ballerina to become the dancing body that ballet technique requires is then vastly dependent on the ballet shoe maker's skills and availability, and on those who administer the fittings and communication between shoe production and dancer. And just as a ballerina's performance in the same ballet is not the same every evening, the point shoes are bespoke, handcrafted objects and therefore never entirely identical. Even with all information and special requests successfully conveyed by fitter and administrator and intricate details realised by the maker: every shoe a ballerina puts on is ever so slightly different from all the ones she will have worn previously.[14] Why ballerinas deem some individual shoes better than others is something that, according to Brøndsholm "we cannot fully answer: what makes a shoe good or bad. It should be the same shoe."[15]

Maintenance

Working as a dancer in a professional ballet company is unusually hard on the body, as is any physical activity practised at this level and with this intensity. The Royal Danish Ballet's physiotherapists, Lærke Friis Hansen and Henrik

12) Simpson, interview, 24 June 2024.

13) Simpson, interview, 24 June 2024.

14) Principal dancer with the Royal Danish Ballet, Astrid Elbo, describes this slight unpredictability in something that is "a very big part of this job" as a regular source of frustration: "When I get stressed, I know I put a lot of focus there." Astrid Elbo, research interview, 7 December 2023.

15) Brøndsholm, interview, 12 December 2023.

Emmer, compare the ballet dancers' working lives to those of elite athletes. Says Friis Hansen: "Repeating movements to this extent causes extreme stress on the body. No matter which sports people you ask: when you train your body a lot, you often feel something. And if you train at a very high level, the body is often sore and tired."[16]

One of the consequences of this is that ballet dancers typically retire by the age of 40. Another is that during their short careers, specialised practices are necessary to maintain the ballet dancers' capacity to perform at top level. To ensure this, the company draws on experts in a number of fields. Emmer and Friis Hansen conduct their care of the ballet dancers in close collaboration with a team that consists of a dietician, a pilates teacher, a sports psychologist, a masseur and an orthopaedist. In this section of the text, I draw on my interview with the two physiotherapists about their contributions to the maintenance of the dancers' bodies and disregard the work of the company's other affiliated experts.

In physiotherapeutic terms the 'maintenance' of bodies is sometimes called injury prevention: "It is difficult to say whether you can prevent, but we can at least help maintain something; we ensure that the dancers' bodies are at the level to meet the challenges that they face," says Emmer.[17] The way Friis Hansen and Emmer conduct this 'body maintenance work' with the dancers is individualised. Some of the dancers, says Emmer, have not had the need for a consultation since he quit his job as a physiotherapist with the Danish military and joined the Royal Danish Ballet in 2022. On the other end of the spectrum are those dancers with a long-term injury: "Them we like seeing regularly, maybe 3-4 times a week," says Friis Hansen. "We put them on a program with fixed training sessions to build something up – so that there is a structure."[18] Friis Hansen further mentions company members who have smaller injuries that they can dance with, but that require the physiotherapists' help to sustain and manage. Some dancers are injury-free but might still draw on the physiotherapists' assistance to maintain their body in a state that lets

16) Friis Hansen, research interview with Lærke Friis Hansen and Henrik Emmer, 15 December 2023. Translation from Danish by the author.

17) Emmer, research interview with Lærke Friis Hansen and Henrik Emmer, 15 December 2023.

18) Friis Hansen, interview, 15 December 2023.

them get the most out of the daily training. Friis Hansen and Emmer are available to see company dancers who are concerned or curious – or want to optimise something specific about their dancing:

> Some might sign up, and when we meet them say: I would like to get a little more height or power in my jump. Or there is something about my pirouettes that doesn't seem to work every time – is there something we can look at, optimise, work on? And then we can try something with them and analyse: what could it possibly be? Whether it is strength or technique. When you jump, do you land in the way that biomechanics requires you to, or have you got your own way of landing from a jump that is actually not quite optimal? Sometimes it might not only be about strength, but about practising a landing technique from a jump.[19]

In addition to these approaches and practices that aim at maintaining the dancers' *physical* readiness to perform, something that came up in almost all the eight interviews I held with members of staff at the Royal Danish Ballet is the *mental* support that dancers rely on receiving from their co-workers to maintain their ability to deliver their daily performances.

Beyond the pressures that come with performing for an audience several times a week, professional ballet dancers face particular kinds of career challenges. Apprentices are around 19 years old when (and if) they are employed as full members of a ballet company. With a usual retirement age of 40, their careers are relatively short and building them necessitates consistent top performances. In addition, company dancers rely on the goodwill of ballet masters to give them these chances to excel.

On a day-to-day basis, a dancer's dresser is amongst those co-workers whose support my interviews revealed as essential to enabling dancers' extraordinary achievements on stage. Former principal dancer Kizzy Matiakis states that dressers make "a fundamental difference to your performance." Matiakis emphasises: "It really matters who your dresser is – it really really

19) Friis Hansen, interview, 15 December 2023.

matters."[20] Dressers help 'their' dancers with the practicalities of changing into and out of a costume – the sartorial aspect of transforming into a character that I will address in the next section of the article. But in addition to that, Matiakis points out that during a costume change

> the unspoken thing is that you're usually in a fragile state and I really needed to have an *omsorgsfuld*, *dygtig* (Danish for caring, capable) person. Those two; you can have someone who's very *dygtig* (capable) but has absolutely no *omsorg* (care) for what you're going through. Or you have someone who's extremely caring but completely fucks the whole thing up. *Swan Lake* is a particular case in point because you are vomiting in your own mouth, you're so exhausted and you just have to have someone. You're so nervous, you have to trust that the person's not judging you for being a complete wreck.[21]

Throughout her career, Matiakis has repeatedly worked with Andrea Harper as her dresser. When asked, Harper is acutely aware of this dimension of her job: "Being supportive is definitely part of the role. You're not just there to change the costume, you're also trying to be their support." Harper mentions her work on *Swan Lake* as a good example for illustrating this generally supportive aspect of her role:

> Because in the first act there aren't any costume changes. Once I've got her in costume, I always go down with *Odette/Odile*, the leading ballerina. And then I'm just there in the wings for them all the time, without doing any costume changes. I get them water, some of them keep warm clothes on until the last minute to keep their legs, their muscles warm and I'm there to take that so it doesn't get lost. And then when they're coming out, I make sure they have water or a towel. At some point, some of them want to put the legwarmers

20) Matiakis, research interview with Kizzy Matiakis and Andrea Harper, 28 November 2023.

21) Matiakis, interview, 28 November 2023.

> on, some don't – so you're adapting. It's almost like a coach, sitting on the sidelines. And sometimes it's encouragement as well. (…) If I've been watching a lot of rehearsals, I know the difficult parts, the ones they worry about. In *Swan Lake* it's always the second act when they're having to do the 32 *fouettés*. That's always really hard for the ballerina because everyone is counting and it's so technically difficult. Then you're trying to be encouraging, maybe just clap in the wings when they're coming out.[22]

Being there for the dancers in the way they need requires empathetic instinct; Harper and Matiakis are unsure if it is something that can be learned. Her sense of how nervous a particular dancer is on a particular night influences the decisions Harper takes in performing her role as a dresser on that night.

Costumier Rikke Korfix and tailor Kenth Fredin work on Astrid Elbo's costume for her performance in *Cinderella*. Photograph by Trine Brandt-Lassen.

22) Harper, research interview with Matiakis and Harper, 28 November 2023.

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Harper:
If I've seen there is something with the costume – there's a thread hanging out or something – I have to take a decision. And sometimes, if a dancer is just about to go on, I might leave it because I know it will distract them.

Matiakis:
And then later on, you might just feel a hand…[23]

Dancers are uniquely dependent on their bodies' maintenance on a level that allows for daily outstanding performances. It therefore seems unsurprising when Emmer remarks that something not 'working as usual' is an almost certain source of a dancer's great frustration.[24] In this context, mental and physical aspects of the support work offered by different experts at the Royal Danish Ballet to maintain the dancers' ability to perform often become indistinguishable. When professional success is as closely linked to physical achievement, as it is in a ballet career, caring for a dancer's body and taking physical concerns seriously might well qualify as a form of mental or emotional support. This became noticeable when I coded my interviews: Is it the customised physiotherapeutic exercises that Friis Hansen and Emmer offer to the unwell dancer, or is it their 'casual small talk' about a specific dynamic in the rehearsal studio that maintains that dancer's ability to return to the studio? Is shoe administrator Henriette Brøndsholm's willingness to take seriously the issues a ballerina experiences with a shoe that worked perfectly the day before an act of physical or mental support?

Transformation

The last umbrella term under which I want to investigate artistic practices and institutional patterns at the Royal Danish Ballet is the transformation of dancers' bodies. These transformations are a particular focus at the Royal

23) Harper and Matiakis, interview, 28 November 2023.

24) Emmer, interview, 15 December 2023.

Danish Ballet, because the company's dancers are trained in the Bournonville tradition which emphasises character work through expressive miming. When talking about their profession in the interviews, the company dancers often stress their work with turning into specific characters.

Tina Tøttrop Jensen gets Holly Dorger ready for her performance as Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*. Photograph by Trine Brandt-Lassen.

In line with the practices I have laid out thus far, turning dancers into stage characters is a distinctly collaborative effort. Specifically, the Royal Danish Ballet's tailor's and hat workshops, the costume technicians, dressers and the hair and makeup department all play their particular and integral roles. In what follows, I will draw on an interview I conducted with Tina Tøttrup Jensen, a member of the hair and makeup department at the Royal Danish Ballet, and the ballet's costume technician Søren Johannessen. In addition, I will elaborate on input from my interview with Kizzy Matiakis and Andrea Harper, which I already referred to in the previous section.

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In the hair and makeup department, which employs around three hair and makeup artists for each bigger ballet production, they set and curl both dancers' own hair, style and fabricate hairpieces and wigs and put the more advanced makeup on the performers. Tøttrup Jensen recounts:

> Often, when dancers have to take on a special role, it is easier when they have had their hair done or put on a wig – then they can identify with the role a little more. That can be difficult if they only have their costumes on. So oftentimes they ask to have their hair done for a rehearsal just to find out 'who are they?'[25]

Ten days before the premiere, dancers typically get their full makeup and hair on for the first time. By that time, more than a year might have passed since Tøttrup Jensen has seen the designer's initial drawings. She tends to spend the first part of her working day on interpreting a designer's drawn visions and translating them into something the dancers can wear on stage. In doing that, she and her team collaborate closely with the workshop for special effects that crafts fake noses and ears at the opera, and with the hat workshop. Tøttrup Jensen and Johannessen describe this process as characterised by trial and error: the hair and makeup team model solutions, try them, show them to the designer, revise, test if the weight distribution of larger wigs still works. Before putting a particular, more complicated makeup on a dancer, Tøttrup Jensen might try it on a colleague or a hired extra. An important aspect in this process is making sure that details such as the hairdos a designer imagines for the dancers are feasible on stage. "Not all scenographers and costume designers are used to designing for ballet; they might not think about 'Can you move in that?'," Tøttrup Jensen points out.[26]

For any given evening and beginning two hours before the start of the performance, Tøttrup Jensen makes a schedule according to which the dancers get their hair and makeup done. She follows her work plan when styling them, but allows for some variation. For example, a classic ballet bun

25) Tøttrup Jensen, research interview with Tina Tøttrup Jensen and Søren Johannessen, 11 January 2024. Translation from Danish by the author.

26) Tøttrup Jensen, interview, 11 January 2024.

exists in Tøttrup Jensen's workshop in many different versions, depending on the individual ballerina's features and preferences.

"If anyone knows all about looking at themselves in the mirror, it's ballet dancers; they even know how they look in profile. If a dancer likes her hair in a slightly higher bun, I find it very important to pay attention to that, because for me it's all about her feeling comfortable."[27] Such adaptations show that in addition to helping the dancers turn into their character by facilitating their physical transformation, Tøttrup Jensen is aware of the supportive role which I described in the previous part:

> Now that I've been here for so long, I have gotten a feel for these girls: whether they're doing well. Many of them anyway. And then we also talk about other things than just ballet. Sometimes they might say: 'Now I have trained so much and have to go on again and perform tonight.' And they may be tired, maybe a little sad or something. Then we just have to find that balance: when do we give them a hug, when do we gloss over it – we have to figure out what they need. Maybe they just need some relief. I think that is super important.[28]

During an evening's performance, Tøttrup Jensen is in the wings and helps facilitate the dancers' quick changes backstage. These hair and costume changes during a ballet performance exemplify the collaborative nature of the ballet dancer's transformation into a stage character with particular clarity. Andrea Harper and Kizzy Matiakis describe the frequent, rushed costume changes during one of the ballets they worked on together in terms of a car race:

> KM:
> It's like Formula One, you know when the car goes to the side and everyone just goes…

27) Tøttrup Jensen, interview, 11 January 2024.

28) Tøttrup Jensen, interview, 11 January 2024.

AH:
PIT STOP! It's synchronised, it's choreographed.

KM:
Very choreographed.

AH:
Also, we're doing it the three of us: we have to figure out where we stand so we don't get in each other's way. Sometimes you'd discover that there's a different wig lady who had to come in and cover, and suddenly you'll get hit in the head 'cause the other one knows that as soon as I am bending down and their hand is just reaching across to do something…

KM:
Yes. You have to know what order you're doing things in, because if the dancer bends down to change the shoe and the dresser is trying to do the dress up, then she can't do her job. Same thing with hair; you have to go down but keep your head up - and they can fix the wig. Then they finish it all off - paper towel, water: go.[29]

Also Tøttrup Jensen emphasises choreographed efficiency when she changes a dancer's hairstyle or wig in the wings during a performance:

> They might get off stage with one hairstyle and quickly have to get another and then you have to have a functioning cooperation with the dresser: 'What are we going to do here if we have 30 seconds to do hair and change clothes – what is easiest? Are you buttoning while I just take the hairpins I can reach?' And make sure to have the pins in the right direction and things like that – because if I drop one, then I don't have time. But when we have tried it and agreed that you do that first, and then I throw myself at the hair and do

29) Harper and Matiakis, interview, 28 November 2023.

> that – then we all know what to do. Then there is no one who starts putting hairpins in themselves, because that makes the whole thing much worse. [30]

Dressers agree with the hair and makeup artist that the dancers' getting too actively involved in changing their hair or costume is a hindrance. In Harper's words:

> When the ballet dancers are coming out with the tutus, then all the fastenings are at the back – so they cannot really do much. And, actually, the best thing is when they just stand still. Sometimes, some of them don't. I can remember being in one quick change and the dancer kept moving when I was just about to have closed the costume – then you can't finish it. And then it's taking longer and longer to do.[31]

Yet, holding back in such a high-pressure situation entails a supposed loss of control for the dancer. "I think it is a trust thing: they know what I am doing, I know what they are doing," says Harper. "Whereas that time, I think they maybe didn't trust me in a way and then they were trying to do too much."[32] An experience of dependence and trust is also what Matiakis remembers from her costume changes: "You have to be able to go out in the wing and go like this (Matiakis freezes, passively) and completely trust that they're just going to do everything. And then you have to trust that they finish everything they're going to do – and you can just go back on stage again."[33]

In addition to providing 'transformative materials' in the form of costumes, masks or wigs and the skill to proficiently put them on the dancers, the Royal Danish Ballet's specialists then ideally balance their expertise with empathy for an individual dancer's needs. My interviews with dressers, dancers and a hair and makeup artist highlight the ideal working relation for

30) Tøttrup Jensen, interview, 11 January 2024.
31) Harper, interview, 28 November 2023.
32) Harper, interview, 28 November 2023.
33) Matiakis, interview, 28 November 2023.

Søren Johannessen moves Raymonda costumes.
Photograph by Trine Brandt-Lassen.

a costume change as one in which a dancer leaves herself entirely to the care of dresser and hair and makeup artist to take charge of changing her appearance. Beyond the dancer's own character work, transforming dancers' appearance has an associated choreography that is performed under time pressure and with the most distinct sense of accuracy and virtuosity – but it is not one the audience sees. "If I do my work well," says Johannessen, "nobody notices it."[34] As a transformational practice, the quick costume change epitomises the work relationships between dancers and their colleagues at the Royal Danish Ballet in which a large cohort of specialised professionals take care of different aspects of the dancing bodies.

Conclusion: composite ballet bodies

This article highlighted that in the dancing bodies at the Royal Danish Ballet live a series of other skilled techniques, practices and customs – on which the dancers are reliant to do what they do in the manner they do it.

Ballet bodies incorporate a multiplicity of techniques and practices that include, but go beyond, the dancer's own movement technique. These techniques and practices comprise the making, fitting and administering of point shoes, putting on and changing costumes, applying and changing makeup and hair, offering care work in the form of mental and physical support according to specific preferences, advising dancers on individual physiological and biomechanical needs and helping them to overcome injuries – in addition to a number of other practices and techniques that are not in the focus of this article.

The dancers then emerge from this investigation as having 'composite bodies'. I take this term from Randy Martin, who proposes it as a "conception of body not as a stable presence already available for appropriation but as a composite entity" (Martin 1998, 109). My use of the term differs from Martin's, who conceived 'composite body' in relation to bodies' multicultural composition. What I draw from Martin's term is his pointing to a body's unity as imaginary. At the Royal Danish Ballet, bodies are composites not only due

34) Johannessen, research interview with Tina Tøttrup Jensen and Søren Johannessen, 11 January 2024.

to each dancer's multifaceted history. They are composite also because other experts skilfully perform practices and techniques that contribute to their creation, maintenance and transformation.

While various experts' skilled contributions are indispensable in constructing ballet dancers' composite bodies, my interviewees unequivocally recognise the dancers as the centre of these compositions. The dancers carry the specialised practices that I addressed in this article in their bodies and unite them as they meet the audience. This central place also explains the high priority that members of staff attach to the dancers' comfort, in addition to the functional aspects of the support they offer.[35] Around this central position of a dancer in the Royal Danish Ballet, a system of interdependence forms. In this system, as my article has shown, a ballet dancer's body and performance are contingent on a wide web of the skill and availability of experts in other fields and – importantly – the coordination between them.[36]

This multiplicity and continuity of available expertise and technique is instrumental in facilitating the performances of dancing bodies at the Royal Danish Ballet. Infrastructurally, their realisation necessitates the planning security that distinguishes big state-funded institutions from smaller independent ones. To complement reception aesthetic approaches, an acknowledgement of this diversity of techniques and perspectives can serve as a fruitful basis for alternative analyses of stage dance.

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35) In the interview situations, the dancers' central position becomes apparent when, for example, interviewees mention 'them' without any introduction or doubt, that the dancers are the clear point of reference.

36) Factors such as individual 'form of the day' and the chemistry between people no doubt also play a role.

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