

CMBA HONOR SOCIETY EDITORIAL

The Ideal Dance Body

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"One out of two dancers suffer from an eating disorder." says Linda Hamilton, PH. D., author and former professional dancer at the New York City Ballet. Since George Balanchine opened the first professional American ballet company in 1938, a lot has changed and the standards surrounding ballet should evolve with the times. For example, not all body types look like the slim, well-proportioned, toned, and the so-called perfect ballet body. These factors are affecting the professional dance industry, on social media, and in personal lives who are growing in their dance careers.

More and more professional dancers are sharing their personal stories of the dance and ballet industry becoming obsessive about eating, resulting in horrible relationships with food and even eating disorders. The current percentage of female adolescents into the mid 20s: 3.5% of females suffer from some kind of eating disorder. That number almost multiplies by 8 in the dance world. A total of 27.9% of dancers (not including higher percentages of ballet dancers) suffers from one eating disorder or another during their dance career. "Across studies, ballet dancers (anywhere from 37 to 84 percent) have reported body dissatisfaction, and over half (58 percent) are preoccupied with body weight and food compared to 38 percent of non-dancers. Ballet schools and professional ballet companies place a strong emphasis on body shape, weight, and the appearance of the body during movement." "Young dancers who develop less ideal body shapes as a result of puberty or genetics are often asked to leave or change to another style of dance (e.g., modern dance, which allows a more forgiving body ideal). In the most elite ballet schools in the United States, only 5 percent of eight-year-old ballet dancers complete the

program. A recent study reported 6 percent of adolescent ballet dancers met the criteria for anorexia athletica, demonstrating that excessive exercise was a concern for this population." Dancers are being turned away from certain styles, such as ballet, solely based on their body image and weight. Adolescents are developing eating disorders! How can this be acceptable when dancers during their younger years are still going through puberty and evolving in their body? This doesn't give the dancers a chance or a fair opportunity as they can't control how their bodies evolve during those times. This is why the ideal of a "perfect dance/ballet body" needs to change. That way dancers aren't being brought down based on what they look like. Their placement or decision to dance should be based on their passion, dedication, finding a way to express themselves, skill or talent, and having an outlet through the years. "With the numerous pressures associated with ballet to maintain a low weight and thin appearance, it is no surprise the prevalence of anorexia nervosa is three to six times higher in ballet dancers than the general population. Forty percent of ballet dancers weighed below 85 percent of their ideal body weight and 27-47 percent of dancers experienced menstrual dysfunction (i.e., irregular menstrual cycle or amenorrhea). Bulimia nervosa rates among ballet dancers range from 2 to 12 percent depending on the study, but the use of purging methods including self-induced vomiting and laxatives have been well documented in the ballet population." Ballet dancers and dancers in general are sacrificing their physical health just to maintain or get to the body image they are wanting. This includes, as stated above: not eating enough to balance between the amount of exercise the body is taking on and body weight being below the healthy weight for a person's height and age. These factors and more are affecting dancer's menstrual cycles. Dancers shouldn't have to make themselves sick just to achieve the "perfect" body they or their company wants. This evidence explains the statistics of how dancers are affected by body image and eating disorders.

Social media has an effect on growing dancers due to the amount of professional and pre-professional dancers that are posting constantly. These posts include; showing how talented the dancer is, the dancer wearing tight leotards with tights and a ballet bun, and the companies that they are going to or being sponsored by. "In SCT, there are two types

of social comparisons: upward social comparisons, when we compare ourselves to those who are superior to us or possess positive characteristics; and downward social comparisons, when we compare ourselves to those who are inferior to us or who possess negative characteristics. Both forms of comparison are common, used by everyone, and have pros and cons. Upward social comparisons can often inspire us to improve ourselves but can also contribute to lower self-esteem, lower mood, and a sense of inadequacy. Conversely, downward social comparisons can make us be thankful for our status or characteristics, but can contribute to selfishness and arrogance." Because social media is constantly available in today's society, users will inevitably begin to compare themselves to the faceted and photoshopped influencers online, whether that be of an upward or downward comparison. Both happen often, but upward comparisons to the "perfect, edited" versions of dancers that are seen on media platforms can be detrimental to a person's mental state and self esteem especially in the dance world. Some of the professional dancers are going to companies that are still abiding by the standards of those from the past, even when bodies today are extremely different than those in the 1930s. "Other research has shown associations between social media use and self-reported pressure to be thin, look more attractive, lose weight, or otherwise change their appearance. Several studies have offered more nuanced results that draw connections between certain social media-specific behaviors and body image concerns." These pressures can be brought on through the companies that are sponsoring the dancer. Some are clothing lines, shoes, or other brands. Brands that are in high demand, especially in the clothing industry, only have sizes that go up to mediums, rarely do they have larger sizes available or in stock. Seeing professional dancers sponsored by these exclusive xs-medium sized brands, younger dancers think (consciously or not) that they should fit those sizes as well. I personally struggle to find the right attire for my body type and a size that isn't extra small through medium. Relating back to what has been said already; some of these companies have been around for years and haven't changed the sizing to fit dancers today.

Issues and body image discrimination has been brought to light in the professional industry. In the past few years, more and more professional dancers have started to share their personal stories about their experiences with eating disorders and such. Kathryn Morgan uploaded a YouTube video on October 8th, 2020 sharing why she left Miami City Ballet. "Then this came up around November that made me realize I was already in the wrong company, and I quote, 'I know you're supposedly this big inspiration for all these young dancers and for other people, but I don't think you can be a true inspiration until you get back on stage looking like a ballerina and doing a ballet in pointe shoes.' So basically I was told that I wasn't an inspiration until I was a stick and I wasn't an inspiration until I was back on stage in pointe shoes, meaning Slaughter didn't count." Slaughter was a previous performance Kathryn danced in as one of the principle dancers, the highest rank you can be in a professional company. The advisers and teachers who are supposed to be her positive helpers tore her down rather than built her up. They body shamed her and told her she wasn't good enough. Directors and choreographers have a say in who they want for a specific role, which could be based on their initial vision, but these incidents crossed that line. Prestigious companies that are portrayed as perfect have issues and imperfections that not all people know about. This can only be changed if the standards and ideals evolve as time passes since dance first became a "thing" in America. While starting to learn various different pieces in the Nutcracker and for other performances, "During Nutcracker rehearsal, [Kathryn Morgan] had pulled [her] calf. Full disclosure because I didn't eat that morning trying to be the size that was required...I was told at a size two that I was an embarrassment in terms of size. That I would not represent the company in its best light." As she explains how she didn't eat that morning and the consequence that followed of injuring herself, this is a prime example of how dancers are giving up their physical health to try and achieve the ideal body. If standards and the image of what dancers are supposed to look like changed before she joined the company, she wouldn't have been put into the situation of starving herself before an intense practice/rehearsal. "Over New Year's, I went home to my doctor because I had started to feel weird because I got into a weird mental state because I was trying to fit this mold. I said to him I was not feeling so well and I'm not feeling great. So we did blood work, and he said to me he comes back

and he looks at me and goes, 'I don't know what situation you're in and I don't know what's happening (because I really didn't tell him any of this, it's a doctor I just wanted to know medical numbers) I have no idea what your life currently looks like, but your numbers are the worst they have been in 8 years. So I don't know what's happening in your life but something needs to change because you are going downhill fast.' My hair had started falling out again, I started feeling sluggish and you know backfiring and I wasn't eating much, at all. It was not good. I was having a really hard time maintaining the size I already was barely eating." As Kathryn Morgan describes, there are consequences to overworking your body and not giving it the nutrients it needs to live and perform well. Whether these consequences are physical: hair falling out, or mental: like not wanting to continue in an area of life that you've been passionate about your entire life, these are signs that your body is trying to tell you to make a change. The timeline adds up, that all that Kathryn went through in the months prior to New Years, were signs that her body was beginning to burn out and leading her downhill fast. A dancer or nondancer should not have to put their health at risk to please unrealistic standards.

The standards of what the "ideal" dance body is, slim, well-proportioned, toned, so-called perfect, should change and evolve with the times. These standards are affecting those in the professional dance industry, on social media, and in the personal lives of dancers who are growing in their dance careers. Because this issue of body image, comparisons, and eating disorders continue to affect dancers of all ages, something needs to change. It is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle throughout your life, and because of that, unrealistic body standards in the dance world need to change.