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Articles

Ballet in Ukraine: From Uncertainty to Defiance and Independence

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On February 24, 2022, the world was shocked as Russian military forces crossed into neighboring Ukraine, triggering the largest military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II.¹ Perhaps even more shocking than the Russian invasion was the surprisingly stern and stubborn resistance offered by the Ukrainian armed forces, coupled with an unprecedented social mobilization across all sectors of Ukrainian society in support of its military and civilian leadership. One of the most potent and unlikely symbols of Ukraine's resistance in the first days of the invasion was its classical ballet dancers, who enlisted in military service and whose stories and images in military uniform were picked up by international media outlets as emblematic of the defiant spirit of Ukraine. These stories largely focused on the visual and emotional disconnect between "fragile" ballerinas and the gruesome realities of war, but left largely unresolved the underlying question of why internationally renowned ballet artists readily answered the call to arms. In this article, I present a case study focused on the dancing community of the Kyiv State Choreographic College in order to explore how Ukrainian national and local resistance to the Russian invasion unveiled the inextricable connections between the state, ballet, and national identity, which formed largely unnoticed during the years of Ukrainian independence.

I offer a reading of Ukrainian ballet training from my perspective as an archival researcher, ethnographer, and former post-Soviet dancer, who spent most of her training years in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. This article is part of a larger project that utilizes both archival and ethnographic methodologies and attempts to add to the academic discourse of ballet and reveal how dancers and dance makers negotiate cultural and national borders on an intimate level. The main question of this research revolves around artists who work at cultural and historic intersections: in this case, intersections between Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian culture, state and private sponsorship, and audiences in cultural transition. Utilizing critical ethnography, this project attempts to use accessible vocabulary to give voice to the dancers and teachers who have made this research possible. Responding to the ongoing war, this article attempts to shed light on dance as a uniting, empathetic practice and consider the temporality of dancing bodies and their work.

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Ballet historians Christina Ezrahi and Janice Ross have shown that it is through the persistent effort of state-sponsored dance that the body becomes a medium for the coupling of subjectivity, intimacy, and nationalistic projects. For Anthony Shay, connection between the dancing body and the state comes through essentialization and romanticization; for Ezrahi and Ross, it comes through interdependence of various state institutions. As a scholar who grew up in Siberia and completed doctoral research in Ukraine, at any point in my research I could see that the state and dance in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine had become inseparable from and reliant on each other. This does not mean that dancers internalize state power, but rather that dancers consider themselves as powerful agents, influencers who construct culture on an everyday basis. As a dancer who trained in classical ballet, modern, and jazz in Siberia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, I collaborated and trained with artists who came from different cities and districts. Very much like Ukraine, Siberia is (mis)understood as a land of in-between, separated from yet historically dependent on Moscow, with an inscribed history of Soviet-era labor camps and systematic exiles positioned against industrial and cultural opportunities promoted to those willing to voluntarily move there at the direction of the state. Although different in climate, language, and culture, in many ways Siberia mirrors the “Small Russia” narratives applied to Ukraine, but in that it also stresses the development of local identity in all aspects of culture, including dance.

Academic and political discourses previously envisioned Ukraine as a “border state,” a territory trapped between a resurgent Russia and the Old World of Europe. Works ranging from Anna Reid’s *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine* (1997; 2015) to Mitchell Orenstein’s recent *The Lands in Between: Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Hybrid War* (2019) contributed to the notion of Ukraine as a land in-between, lacking political subjectivity and ready to align with the stronger empire, while overlooking development of strong horizontal societal ties that ultimately revealed themselves in the face of Russian aggression. In this article, I suggest that past ballet-versus-state studies similarly miss the significance of local dance identity when considering state-sponsored ballet, an identity shaped by interactions between dance teachers, students, staff, and parents. Responding to the common theoretical frameworks of “in-between” and “borderland(s),” this work steps away from the Russian-centered approach to the Soviet-era and post-Soviet ballet and points to other centers, historically marked by the “borderland” notion. Ultimately, this work attempts to examine ballet through the sociality and intimacy it offers and through the analysis of it as a fabric connecting the state and the communities that make up the broader society (Nelson 2004; Croft 2015).

Theoretical and Historical Context: Between Ballet and National Identity

A vision of ballet as a companion of the state in forming and conveying national culture and identity is clear to many dancers and ballet historians. According to Ezrahi and Ross, Soviet-era ballet occupied a critical niche in formulating a common cultural sphere across the USSR, appealing to various communities and economic classes because of its accessibility and its common perception as a crown jewel of Russian and Soviet culture (Ezrahi 2014; Ross 2015).² According to Jennifer Homans, ballet offered the Soviet state a cultural and historical connection between the two imperial realms—the former Russian and the emerging Soviet Empire (Homans 2010, 342). Exemplified in Maya Plisetskaya’s description of it as “the de facto official art of the state,” ballet provided the needed historicity and assumed a central place on the cultural landscape of the USSR and Soviet Ukraine for the entirety of Soviet rule (Plisetskaya 2015).³ Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, ballet in Ukraine was reframed as a platform for national identity, culminating with the first president, Leonid Kravchuk, signing a decree to nationalize the Ukrainian ballet theaters and training academies in 1992.

Following ballet’s nationalization, the previous balance of imperial-era, Soviet-era, and Ukrainian nation-themed ballets shifted toward the development of the latter, but with the annexation of

Crimea and the transfer of funds from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Defense, ballet theaters and schools had to adapt to the changing, unfavorable circumstances (Omar Cardentey, pers. comm.).⁴ Both the National Opera of Ukraine and the Kyiv State Choreographic College had to re-emphasize familiar vocabularies of classical ballet, easily recognized by the audience, to ensure the smooth function of the National Opera of Ukraine, where the repertoire and training could offer both an exploration of national identity and a space for nostalgia. Furthermore, the verticalized structure of ballet recruitment remained intact, forcing many newly trained dancers to apply for jobs outside of Ukraine (Molly, interview with author).⁵ As I will show, in many ways Ukrainian ballet continues to exist within a contested cultural context, both in terms of the framework of state sponsorship, but also through its narratives and traditions carried on in its ballet training practices. Here, I show that classicism became a survival strategy, both for theaters and for practitioners throughout the economic crisis of the 1990s, during the protests and revolutions of the 2000s, and through the 2014–2022 hybrid war period (Molly, Erin, Alexander, interviews with author).⁶

My article is based on a critical examination of the results of an ethnographic study of Ukrainian ballet training during the so-called hybrid warfare phase of Russia's aggression against Ukraine—in the years between the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and prior to Russia's open invasion of Ukraine in the winter of 2022. Specifically, I investigate the role and position of Ukrainian state-sponsored ballet training at a crossroads of political and cultural crisis, when a new identity was shaped from the ruins of a previously constructed cultural monolith of Soviet ballet. My article explores classical ballet training in Ukraine's leading ballet school, the Kyiv State Choreographic College, through the prism of direct observation and oral narratives of those directly participating in the process of formulating Ukrainian ballet as a key cultural institution. Given a series of political regime changes in Ukraine's recent history and the ongoing open conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the questions of identity, resistance, and relationships to the state are particularly complex, requiring attention to oral narratives and to the very bodies that are working in and for the state.⁷

Methodology

I present and reflect on the results of a five-month-long ethnographic field study in the spring and summer of 2018, which took place at a primary state-sponsored ballet school in Ukraine—the Kyiv State Choreographic College, which I refer to as The School throughout this article. Founded in 1938 and expanded in 1967 in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet rule, The School survived the turmoil associated with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and has since been incorporated into Ukraine's educational system, serving as the primary gateway for subsequent employment with the ballet companies of Ukraine. I was fortunate to gain access to the training process as an observer, interview all teachers and staff of The School, and conduct interviews with graduating students entering professional ballet companies upon graduation. While the artistic life of a ballet company can be seen on stage, studied through performance records and reviews, or investigated through interviews with leading artists or choreographers, the daily life of ballet training institutions remains largely hidden behind closed doors. Past studies have shown that a disconnect might form between oral or written narratives and documented histories of dance, but in my work this tension has inspired the research (Nikulina 2019; Ross 2015).⁸ D. Soyini Madison's *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (2005; 2019) was crucial in planning this research effort and interviewing and interacting with the interlocutors. Throughout my research, I practiced a hybrid method of combining and working through ethnographic research and archival analysis. I interpret the results of my observations and interviews to examine and theorize cultural tensions between different local and national identities as they play out in the training, narratives, and oral histories of The School.

It is important to emphasize that this research project was conducted during the so-called hybrid phase of the Russian war on Ukraine, in the time period between the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the

open full-scale invasion in 2022. My findings presented here are based on interviews, and my observations reflect a very particular cultural moment, when Ukrainian society in general, and its dancing communities in particular, were in a state of complex cultural transition that ultimately culminated in the social mobilization of February 2022. I begin with a description of the ballet training process at The School, as presented by its teachers and administrators in initial conversations and during their classes, framing The School as just a broken-off piece of the once-whole, Vaganova-defined Soviet ballet. I then show that teacher narratives interrelate, misplace, and at times confuse notions of the state, Ukraine, Russia, the Soviet Union, and even imperial Russia, creating a sense of complexity and locating ballet and their own identity in different periods simultaneously. This article means to shed light on the complications, inconsistencies, and disagreements that simultaneously define and structure Ukrainian ballet identities in transition and forge a new independent dancing community.

Part I: Just a Broken Piece of the Chain?

The School is located away from the busy downtown area of Kyiv and operates as a closed educational institution with its own boarding facility, music school, middle and high schools, and theater. Hidden between two city streets and two large parks, The School creates a seemingly separate space for its workers and students within the city of Kyiv. In apparent defiance of a recent Ukrainian ban on Soviet symbols, a hammer and sickle engraving at the entrance of the state dance academy greets all visitors.⁹ In another apparent demonstration of Soviet-era policies, access to The School is tightly controlled. Normally, the only way to visit The School is to take the entrance exam that consists of ballet technique, a medical examination of “bodily capacities” or “natural abilities,” and a hearing test. Ten-year-old prospective students take these entrance exams in almost complete nudity for the verification of body type and assessment of hip rotation, flexibility, proportions between the length of the upper and lower body, length of legs and arms, and the head size. In this, The School mimics and replicates the strictest traditional Soviet and European ballet admission policies, where students were initially selected based on their physical “data” rather than artistic abilities.

On the surface, the contemporary Ukrainian ballet system’s Russian-language instruction, as well as strict adherence to and enforcement of Soviet-era visual, gender, and aesthetic ideologies, may strike any researcher as defining The School as a remnant monolith of Soviet culture, challenging Ukrainian efforts to nationalize and de-Sovietize its cultural landscape. Since my first day working at The School, I was struck by the sameness of dancing bodies in their shapes, outfits, and gazes, and even in the same angle of heel rotation during various barre exercises. While I was extremely lucky to gain access to classes, exams, and final concerts and performances, at first, I felt out of place looking at the initially selected and technique-constructed “perfect,” flexible bodies, relatively silent and submissive, moving across the space of classrooms (Foster 1997).¹⁰

In these interviews, a deeper, more complex and nuanced understanding of Ukrainian ballet emerged—an image of daily internal struggle to define and redefine ballet, to preserve and innovate, to align with aesthetics of the past, yet to look to the future. This article recognizes the larger effects of the constructed ballet body, echoing Susan Foster’s notions of the “ideal body” and “hired body” and a possible sense of loss related to dance training. Moreover, my observations resonate with arguments shared by Randy Martin and Anusha Kedhar, who have shown that flexibility, submission, and other bodily requirements exist in genres outside of ballet (Martin 1998).¹¹ At the same time, thinking about the collected interviews and my field notes, I highlight the adaptability of the training processes and the ways instructors shape their own pedagogies in relative independence from the classical ballet canon. As one of the longtime ballet teachers put simply, “An ideal body is not necessarily a *dancing body*. We try to adapt to each student and cultivate the bodies that actually dance, act, and perform” (Yulia, interview with author).¹²

As part of my initial introduction to The School, I went to see all of its ballet classes, taught to students ranging from ten to seventeen years of age. Teachers who saw me for the first time clearly

wanted to demonstrate their students' potential to the fullest. While I felt very fortunate to see the training that I had previously only read about, it was hard for me to sit through the long classes, as the live piano music was in discord with the ongoing disciplining of the ballet body. At times I had an urge to close my eyes and just listen to the music instead of desperately trying to look for differences in The School's practice of Vaganova-style ballet training. When examining my initial field notes, I noticed a recurring narrative of The School's quiet repression, even more visible in conjunction with the soft classical music accompanying it. Then again, thinking about the Soviet and Russian historians' arguments about the vigor and the persistence of Soviet practices in post-Soviet contexts, I wondered if it was easy to just erase the imposed Russian and Soviet imperialism, inherited by the ballet culture in the past (Aleksievich 2016; Treisman 2018).¹³

While the notion of a governmental influence on ballet is prominent in dance studies, this seemingly apparent conclusion—that ballet in Ukraine is a version of a Soviet or Russian ballet—would also be an incomplete and misleading assessment of the much deeper and more complicated process playing out inside the walls of The School. To see this process—to understand its unique philosophy of resilience, unity, and independent spirit—it would take me many months of interacting with members of this dancing community. Through time, as the students and teachers became used to my quiet presence in their classrooms, something aside from pure discipline began revealing itself—humor. Specifically, I witnessed the coupling of humor with what I have previously referred to as “quiet repressions,” an intimate combination hidden from outsiders and infrequent observers of ballet training. While having to discipline young bodies, teachers continuously tried to make students laugh, using contextual jokes that tapped into the temporality of training. While humor, functioning together with discipline, is hard to translate, as it is highly contextual and language specific, it is important to note its significance. For instance, in their jokes, teachers would position The School as a very specific place, separating it from the daily public interactions happening outside its walls, in supermarkets or other public places. During one of the classes, a teacher stated: “Zhenya, we are not doing anything with empty legs. It is only at the nightclub where you can dance with empty legs. Your standing leg cannot be bent. You can die but you can't dance with a bent leg!” (Erin, interview).¹⁴ While writing this joke into the academic space of my essay makes it seem demeaning and dark, in the context of the “sterile” piano-dominated ballet room, this teacher's joke made the “offender” the teacher herself, and all other students laughed with the happiness of teenagers, hearing an inappropriate joke for the first time. Here, dark humor was meant to provide moral support to the students, to contrast with the strive for perfection in dance, to provide emotional and physical release. The teacher slowly pronounced provocations—like “Katya, why are you falling like a stone from the fifth floor?” (Gabi, interview)¹⁵ or the previously cited “I guess you are not coming back [to class from the restroom]?” (Alexander, interview)¹⁶—which were meant to relieve the students from the responsibility of performing barre exercises and dance combinations perfectly, and laughed with them together at the inconsistencies and collisions of the human body, inherently “imperfect,” and the always “ideal” ballet technique (Foster 1997).¹⁷

Jokes that function as mediators between teachers' requirements and students' anxieties have a special place at The School. At the end of each year, students prepare a theatrical performance during which they humorously impersonate their teachers, through imitation of their teaching styles and walking and dressing habits. They set up a special time with their teachers to watch the video recordings of these performances together in the teachers' lounges. During one of these meetings, I was surrounded by the sweaty bodies of male students and put next to their eighty-five-year-old teacher, who was the subject of the mockery. The student considered the most “talented” by his peers depicted his teacher through a wobbly walk across the stage, carrying his “crooked” body. The student appropriated a large scarf, usually worn by the teacher, and a manner of sitting still on a chair for an extended period of time without saying a word. The teacher's sudden jumps on the chair “to have a better view from above” and fights with the pianist also got attention in the student's satire. It was particularly interesting to see the recorded performance after witnessing

the classes and particularities of this class. My field notes traced the function of humor inside and in between dialogue.

Susan Foster and Judith Hamera highlighted dance and technique as a space for intimacy, dialogue, and empathy (Hamera 2007; Foster 2011).¹⁸ At The School, it almost seemed like the constructed and performed miniature drama or improvisational comedy in between the barre exercises and center combinations meant to relieve everyone's tension and anxieties. Somehow, The School's classes, conversations, and exams were about students' and teachers' individual lives and artistic works, rather than the actual training and dance technique.

Part II. Ethnographic Surprises and Revelations

In parallel with observing ballet training classes, I conducted a series of deep interviews with the teachers, to record their oral narratives associated with the transition of The School from a Soviet institution of high culture to its current state. Prior to my visit, I constructed ordered sets of questions for The School's teachers and students and was planning on conducting deep interviews in a private setting typical of the scholarly work I have done in the past. I quickly understood that I had an idealistic picture in my mind of interviewing teachers and students of The School in a space that would provide academic intimacy and comfort, where I could talk to my subjects one-on-one. I soon realized that my ethnographic efforts would be unlike anything I envisioned through an academic prism: specifically, that the interview process would be far different from a simple one-on-one question and answer session in the privacy of a faculty office. When planning the trip and the interview process, I approached it as a US doctoral student and subconsciously positioned myself and those whom I would interview within the frameworks of a US university, where interview privacy is meant to correlate with participant safety and anonymity. It became apparent that, in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine and within the confines of a state ballet school, the opposite held true—nearly no one wanted to meet or talk in complete privacy, choosing to talk to me in semipublic spaces at The School.

At first, this apparent disregard and disdain for privacy puzzled me, but there seemed to be important underlying reasons for this choice of interview spaces by my participants, namely that publicity and communal discussion remain an important defense mechanism in the close and intimate dancing community of The School. Throughout the time I spent at The School, the majority of the interviews took place in the teachers' lounge, a semiprivate space in the sense that it provided a door that could be closed to initially create a sense of privacy, but at any moment this door could be opened, and any number of people could appear in the room. At this moment, the interview would take on a new life—becoming a form of communal interaction, during which the person being interviewed would exchange a greeting with those walking in, talk about the interview questions and their answers, seek input, or ask others about their experiences. Initially, I saw constant interruptions as an impediment to the interview process and would stop the interview as soon as the space of the teachers' lounge was no longer private. I soon realized that this was, in fact, part of the process, equally important to those I was interviewing.

I felt that, even with the unexpected interruptions, the important elements of the interview—trust and sincerity—were always there, even though the actual space for the interviews went against all my expectations, shedding light on the particularities of The School as a part of a ballet community. Teachers and students would barge in and talk while making coffee, figuring out whose turn it was to pay for kitchen supplies and who did the best job of clothing repairs, while discussing their rehearsals, music, and technique elements, sometimes all in the same phrase or sentence. These interruptions were revealing of both daily personal and creative interactions, and shed light on microeconomic transactions that take place within The School community. They revealed the close familiarity between teachers, students, and staff, and the profound knowledge of one another's

lives, schedules, and events. For example, in a single five-minute “broken up interview,” I learned that Odette usually makes coffee for Vincent, the oldest teacher, and assists him in walking toward the classroom, and that Alexander cares for Erin, who most likely fell, as her ankle had a large laceration and had to be disinfected. Molly revealed the particularities of her rehearsals, complained, and looked for pedagogical advice. Vincent asked Alexander when it was his turn to pay for the water, and Odette planned to return the jazz shoes made for her son by the mother of one of Vincent’s students. From my understanding, Mateo, a younger male teacher, delivers filtered water to other teachers as a way to make additional income, and in the same sentence I learned that Vincent’s student Aron’s mother makes ballet and jazz shoes for The School for the same reason. Empathy and acts of care for one another witnessed in such concentrated short moments allowed me to see The School not only as a formal structure, but as an informal but tightly knit network that functioned as a decentralized but highly organized social configuration. Mirroring a description in Hamera’s influential *Dancing Communities*, the ballet community of The School seemed to be united through dance technique that, like a mother tongue, facilitated family-like structures and relationships.¹⁹

Short fleeting conversations, chaotic on the outside, contained logistical questions and answers. More importantly, a critique of The School as an institution came up in these seemingly chaotic dialogues, and both times it was offered in a theatrical manner. First, Molly announced the modified schedule for her graduating students that had no space for ballet classes and rehearsals within the period of two weeks despite the “graduation concert” functioning as a final exam for ballet technique. While Molly read her critique in a poem-like manner, loudly and putting rhythmic pauses in between the phrases, Erin quietly inserted a short phrase: “They don’t pay a salary here,” which was met with Alexander’s supportive comment, “Wait, don’t tell about our good life here.” These brief comments and the mutual critique were meant to be noticed and confirmed by everyone present in the room. Yet, critique positioned inside a conversation about the ripped leather bag—this criticism is not meant for consumption outside of this room. At the same time, given that everyone knew I was recording the interview and writing down my observations, it seemed like this critique was meant to be relayed beyond the teachers’ lounge.

Recent works on Soviet ballet, like Ezrahi’s *Swans of the Kremlin* and Ross’s *Like a Bomb Going Off*, shed light on the particularities of relationships that arise within the state-sponsored art. These authors consider cases in which state sponsorship is profound in its influence over artists’ lives and works. I came to Ukraine and started my fieldwork with the assumption that, if ballet was state sponsored, the state would provide every necessity to the theaters and affiliated ballet boarding schools. However, my encounters with ballet teachers at The School disrupted this assumption with narratives like “It’s been two months since we received our monthly salary”; “There is no hot water in The School and the boarding facility”; “The School was not heated for two months during winter, the students had to train in freezing temperatures”; or “I do not go to Kyiv National Opera [to see the ballets] anymore.” It seems that, partially due to disruptions in funding, and partially due to the relatively infrequent hires by the National Opera, the relationship that was initially built and presumed as a symbiotic one is currently disrupted.

My interviews, frequently interrupted but nevertheless unceasing, would start with a question: “How did you start dancing?” or “How did your ballet career start?” Then I would proceed, adapting the questions and their order to the particular interview. In these conversations, I sought to learn about the particularities of ballet methods in Ukraine and how Ukrainian training differed from other republics of the former USSR. My interview with Alexander, the most senior of The School’s ballet instructors, was of particular significance. Alexander studied ballet in The School and immediately after graduation was offered a job in the Lviv Opera, located in Western Ukraine. Alexander’s artistic path seemed particularly valuable for the location and identification of particularities in the ballet repertoire and technique of Ukraine, but during the interviews Alexander focused on the observed absence of differences in technique or repertoire in response

to my questions (Alexander, interview).²⁰ At the same time, Alexander remembered his five-year work period in Lviv through the names of the ballet choreographers Viktor Golovanov and Urii Petukhov, who had training or professional ties with Ukraine. Golovanov, a Moscow-born and Moscow-based Soviet and post-Soviet ballet choreographer, was the leading choreographer at both the Kyiv and Odessa ballet theaters since 1977. Nataliya Ryzhenko, also initially from Moscow, was a choreographer for Ukrainian ballet theaters since 1977 and the major choreographer of Odessa Theatre of Opera and Ballet between 1977 and 1989. Finally, Urii Petukhov started his training in Kyiv State Ballet School in 1964 and transferred to the ballet school in Perm, Russia, in 1966, subsequently establishing himself as a choreographer in St. Petersburg in 1979.²¹ While claiming a lack of difference between Russian ballet and Ukrainian ballet, Alexander related the critical particularities of productions to the choreographers with artistic or cultural ties with Ukraine.

What struck me in my first attempt to gain an understanding of the specifics of ballet training and repertoire in Ukrainian cities was a straightforward denial of even the possibility of such differences in many of the interviews. This reluctance to recall the Soviet-era productions Alexander danced in, coupled with his marking the names of choreographers, signals the very state control of ballet itself and the political views of Soviet citizens, as well as Stalinist repression, most notably the collective trauma of the Stalin-era Holodomor terror-hunger campaign in Ukraine that affected many artists' lives. It was during the Holodomor years that many historians see the beginnings of a concerted attempt by the Soviet authorities to denationalize Ukraine and assimilate its population into the Russian national and cultural framework that continued throughout the Soviet period. As a result of this targeted policy, prior to the outbreak of World War II, ethnic and cultural lines in Ukraine became increasingly blurred. As peasants migrated to the cities to escape the hunger and terror of collectivization, many chose to hide their national and ethnic roots and assimilate into the ethnically and culturally Russian population of urban centers. Following World War II, the state-approved Russian history and centrally constructed Russian identity became a safer alternative to the class-based and national-identity-based cultural construction attempts of the early Soviet period.

For Alexander, Soviet productions were a part of ballet that comes and goes, while the choreographers and their names are parts that remain in the cultural memory of ballet artists. To him, it was not the ballet productions or technique that mattered, but the people who “made” them. The last reference in this interview excerpt, Anatolii Shekera, initially from Vladivostok, Russia, was the leading choreographer of Kyiv's National Opera of Ukraine from 1966 to 2000. Shekera, who was trained in and graduated from the Perm ballet school in Russia, staged a great variety of ballet works in Ukraine, from imperial-era ones like *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* to the Soviet-era ones like *Spartacus*, to the Ukrainian nation-themed ballets like *Lileya* in 1964 and *Dawn Lights* in 1967. In her article “Anatolii Fedorovich Shekera—The Master of Ballet Symphonism and Choreographic Polyphony,” Eva Kovalenko argues that Shekera was one of the pioneers of the innovative genre of “symphonic dramaturgy” and “dramatic polyphony” that came to be known as the Shekerian original choreographic style. Interestingly, all the choreographers Alexander listed as those shaping Ukrainian ballet in Lviv and Kyiv in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods had Russian backgrounds and training, but they came to be famous through their contribution to Ukrainian ballet. Critically, all of them were somehow acquainted with or directly promoted innovative or nonconformist movement styles.

When I attempted to gain a better understanding of how his references intersected with Alexander's ballet career and his own methodology and philosophy, Alexander would shift the subject to his longtime work in Kyiv Municipal Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre for Children and Youth where he accepted a position because it offered better living accommodations than the Lviv Opera.²² When I tried to subtly go back and ask about the choreographic works created by these choreographers, Alexander responded by categorizing classical repertoire as “government issued” (*kazennie*) works that were then reimagined by Ukrainian choreographers and dancers, infusing

them with meaning that was local to the dance companies.²³ Interestingly, although in the first round of my questions about choreographic differences Alexander directly offered that “nothing [is different],” in the second round he admitted that there was a different movement sequence, which depended on the libretto, as a base for any ballet.

This uncertainty in terms of how to talk about and how to position Lviv’s repertoire and technique in relation to Kyiv’s ballet particularities speaks to Alexander’s special care when responding to the questions. However, one of the most interesting and complicated parts in this excerpt is the last sentence, in which Alexander speaks about the notion of “*kazennoe*” that people use “here.” According to my interpretation, “here” would refer to the contemporary Ukraine, and “*kazennoe*” libretto would refer to a libretto belonging to the Russian state, as Petipa was hired by imperial Russian authorities. Although on the surface a confusing statement, it tapped into the highlighted influences of the Russian-trained choreographers on Ukrainian ballet and the persistence of imperial-era and Soviet-era ballets, which still constitute the ballet repertoire in Ukrainian theaters.

The ongoing “confusion” between the Russian, Soviet, and Ukrainian states and their verbal entanglement when referring to a concept of the state were prominent in many other interviews. This was particularly pronounced in my interview with Gabi, who continuously located herself in “Russia” when talking about the Soviet past, despite having always worked in Kyiv, Ukraine (Gabi, interview).²⁴ I interpreted this spatial and temporal uncertainty as signifying a cultural marker between her perception of ballet’s cultural home in the Soviet Union and a shift in that belonging during the economic crisis of the 1990s that followed the collapse of the USSR. At the same time, Gabi put the previously mentioned Erin’s and Alexander’s critique of The School’s salary delays and cuts into a historical perspective, and connected it with more broad economic forces that affected post-Soviet institutions in independent Ukraine.

It seems that, partially, the Russia and Ukraine term mix-up evident in Alexander’s statement about the “state’s librettos” and Gabi’s discussion of the effect of the USSR’s collapse on The School relate to the “mixed” backgrounds and complicated family histories and migrations of the interviewees. In our interview, Gabi offered her brief family history and intersected it with the Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian identities and geographical locations of her roots.²⁵ Throughout her narrative, the continuous spatiotemporal mix-up was even more evident; the teacher listed the places of her ancestors’ background, where some were located in Central Ukraine, some in Northern Ukraine, and some in Central Russia. However, she summarized this list with a sentence: “So, everyone is from here.” Another interesting detail from this narrative was Gabi’s use of pre-Soviet imperial geographical detail, such as Orlovskaya Guberniya (Oryol Province), inscribing her family history into Russian imperial and Soviet histories. This is understandable, given that both Poltava and Chernihiv provinces were part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. However, her use of the phrase “so, everyone was from here” is very ambiguous, not clearly outlining what she meant by “here.”

In this interview and others, I would often have trouble understanding which country was being referenced in both ballet and non-ballet contexts. In fact, at times, the countries’ names were just switched inside the same sentence or phrase, clouding my perception and understanding of how teachers position and identify themselves, whereas at other times, they would lay out these terms logically for me. For example, in the interview with Alexander, the teacher directly asked me if I was looking for particularities of the Ukrainian ballet style and proceeded to state that there are none to be found. At this moment, our conversation was interrupted by Erin, another teacher who, prior to this interruption, seemed to have been preoccupied with making her tea in the teachers’ lounge but was clearly paying attention to every detail of our interview.²⁶ She stated that The School is dedicated to the preservation of the Vaganova method, which is seen as “central” and “common,” firmly linking The School to the classical tradition of imperial and Soviet ballet.

The very popularization and near fetishization of the “common” Soviet Vaganova method might serve as one of the examples of ballet technique oriented toward and aligned with the past. I argue that the Vaganova method, Russia, and the Soviet Union serve as metaphors for one another. The instability of this narrative came across in multiple interviews in which the speaker would couple “Russia and Ukraine” and “Vaganova method and The School’s method.” The narrative of Erin and Alexander’s duet is also resilient; it attempts to resist decoupling in a sphere over which the teachers exercise control. Through their support and practice of the Vaganova method in the same way that it was practiced before the collapse of the USSR, teachers seek to maintain a connection to the past, or at least a past they have constructed and theorized.

Throughout the interviews, narratives of Ukrainian ballet theaters as “initially and inherently Russian” were very pervasive and at the same time performative, as if meant to convince the audience of this unbroken relationship. However, in a cross-examination of multiple interviews, there is a clear lack of agreement on what exactly constitutes this supposedly uniform “Russian” ballet style among the very teachers claiming its totality and uniformity. Throughout my interviews, I asked the central question: “How would you describe the training system you have here, in Kyiv State Ballet School?” Immediately, most teachers equated the training to the systems of the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow and the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg. One of the teachers explained: “I would say that we have the same system, the same training that exists in Moscow and St. Petersburg. I cannot say there is something new here [since the collapse of the Soviet Union].” Yet, as I tried to clarify how ballet teachers access and practice Vaganova method canons, the ballet teacher immediately referred to the Soviet Union and to Ukraine as one of the former fifteen republics, and the centralized system of hiring when choreographers and teachers from the cultural centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg were hired to work and live in Kyiv, Ukraine: “They would finish the ballet schools there and come here, so naturally, you have a ballet connection. Right now, we exist as a separate country [from Russia or the former Soviet Union], however before and prior to 1992 we were one entity [with Russia].”

In this seemingly non-problematic response and belief in the unity and sameness of ballet training across the former Soviet Union and current post-Soviet spaces, teachers referred to the archive, Soviet-era pedagogical materials on ballet technique, and the repertoire of common practices ensured by the system of Soviet redistribution of young specialists, including ballet artists.²⁷ In response to the question “So, most of the ballet teachers here received their training in Moscow and St. Petersburg?” one of the teachers replied: “No. But they have been trained within the same method, the method of Vaganova’s book. She has written down and deciphered all the movements and all the republics—Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan—have studied by this book.”

A unique situation emerges as Diana Taylor’s notions of archive and repertoire come together in this narrative, describing ballet practice as a completely unified technique that is taught through Vaganova’s text and as not having any variations or divergences within different republics and their post-Soviet spaces. To illustrate this merger of archive and repertoire, I want to share a telling moment that occurred during the interview. As the teacher I was talking with responded, another teacher, who happened to walk into the lounge, interrupted this narrative of generic sameness and uniformity of technique, which I will relay with all the passion that was put into this interruption:

What are you saying? What book? Listen to me, Vaganova’s text is far, far away from the method. The one who has organized the method is May, and not Vaganova.—I know. You have studied it, and I have studied it too.—Do not interrupt me. In the period when Vaganova danced and taught, it was the period of Revolution and there were a number of ballet schools—a French one, Russian one, with its own traditions, and a Dutch one. And when the Revolution was happening, our country created new art forms. They inhaled all the best things that existed, and Vaganova has done this as well—either by herself or she got an assignment to do this. But her little

book was not fundamental because it is very brief. The method itself was created by her students, it is not just us, but generations of her students. [Nadezhda] Bazarova, [Vera] Kostrovitskaya, [Alexei] Pisarev—they were all her students and we use their books as well in our training.” (Erin, interview)²⁸

In attempting to critique and unmask the response of the interviewee, this teacher followed the same structure as that constructed by the first one—between ballet training in Kyiv and Moscow and St. Petersburg and the overall cultural space of the Soviet Union. The USSR and its cultural centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg function in the teachers’ narratives as a first point of reference to the origins of Vaganova technique, yet its continuity is attributed to generations of dancers who were not necessarily located in Russia.

I was initially stunned by the ease of drawing a connection between a state ballet school in independent Ukraine and the training system sketched out by the Soviet ballerina Vaganova in the 1930s. While dance scholars acknowledge and critique dance’s ephemerality and possibility of interpretation, dance teachers of Kyiv State Ballet School seemed convinced of the authenticity and vitality of Vaganova’s training as translated through the students’ bodies and texts, even though practically a century has passed since the publication of “the book.” Yet, in an interview with Arianna, the previously mentioned classical pianist, in response to my question about the changes in the training system and the method in the past decades, I received a very interesting and telling response, comparing Vaganova’s method to a bible:

You know that everyone reads the bible in a different way, and so there is a variety of interpretations of Vaganova’s method. Some ballet instructors teach in ways that are completely opposite to other instructors. For example, some decide that the barre is not very important, and they skip it because they did not like it when they studied dance; they move very quickly towards the jumps; some like to stick to the barre as long as possible within a class (Arianna, interview).²⁹

Across interviews with both students and teachers of the Kyiv State Choreographic College, it became clear that in their dedication to the preservation of the classical Vaganova method, the Kyiv State Choreographic College has, in fact, become a site of contested technique, as multiple visions of “classical,” “Russian,” and “Soviet” ballet aesthetics find their way into the classrooms of The School. Yet, without strict guidance from the centralized agency, such as the Soviet Ministry of Culture, as to what does and does not entail “correct” technique, I argue that a wholly new ballet technique emerged in the contested cultural space of Ukrainian ballet. In this framework, The School emerges as a unique site, where state-sponsored ballet appears to be culturally detached both from the official Ukrainian state sponsoring it and also temporarily detached from the collapsed Soviet state with which its technique is associated. At the same time, as I note in the next section, the functioning model of The School defines it as a tight-knit dancing community with strong horizontal and vertical social ties, an institution deeply integrated into the cultural landscape of Kyiv and Ukraine and much more emblematic of the grassroots Maidan movement that defined the new independent identity of Ukraine in the twenty-first century.

Part IV. Ukrainian Ballet: Abandoned or Liberated?

At first glance, there is an apparent disconnect between the designation of The School as a state-sponsored educational institution and the reality that The School is only partially funded in terms of instructor salary and virtually unfunded in terms of required facility repair and upkeep. What I soon discovered is that the financial gap that needs to be covered to keep The School open is bridged by unofficially negotiated private sponsorship. These partnerships are largely negotiated by the current artistic director, Nathan, in a way that is oddly similar to the informal ways

that the ballet shoe repairs, water delivery, and coffee shifts are negotiated in the teachers' lounge. Throughout our conversations, I felt a genuine empathy and care for The School from Nathan, who himself is a graduate, and I was particularly stunned by his statement that "[The School] got nothing from the government in these five years." I was confused about the lack of support for The School's physical facilities, given that The School is the main training center for Ukrainian state ballet artists and the National Opera had a full house during every performance. As I found out later, Nathan did not tell me about the absence of heating through the winter months of the 2017–2018 academic year, and during the next winter, when I came back for my archival research. The combination of minimal support from the government for the young students who are meant to represent the future of Ukrainian ballet, the old Soviet-era schedule and Vaganova training requirements, coupled with private sponsorship of The School, seemed surreal. In combination with the previously highlighted salary cuts and delays, The School stands out as a surviving-but-caring, state-but-private, centralized-but-independent institution. As I will argue, it is precisely the combination of these seemingly opposing attributes that makes The School a uniquely Ukrainian institution and, in a way, mirrors the national image and identity of independent Ukraine.

Prior to Russia's 2014 aggression that culminated in 2022, Ukraine remained largely integrated into the post-Soviet economic and cultural sphere, in which the center of economic activity and cultural production remained in Russia, despite the *de facto* independence of all former Soviet Republics. Because Soviet Ukraine was heavily involved in the Soviet political, economic, and cultural systems, there is a great sense of separation and broken unity between modern Ukraine and the USSR, manifested in the notion of "Soviet nostalgia" referred to by historian Serhy Yekelchuk. However, as Yekelchuk points out, the sense of Soviet nostalgia does not necessarily imply a sense of allegiance with modern Russia, as most people see the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation as two unrelated political entities (Yekelchuk 2014).³⁰ The School serves as a prime case study in this phenomenon: while much of its history is grounded in Soviet heritage and there is a clear sense of nostalgia for its "glory days," there is an equally clear distinction that is drawn between institutional memory and its future as an independent institution.

To an outside observer, The School appears effectively grounded in its Soviet heritage—the language of instruction and the technique methodologies and practices are largely retained from The School's days as a state-supported and state-monitored element of Soviet ballet culture. However, a close insider consideration of The School's training practices and oral narratives reveals that it operates as a fiercely independent dancing community, in which adherence to the classical technique is balanced by modifications to the training regimen aimed to spare its students the physical and psychological traumas associated with Soviet and Russian ballet training. I argue that, because The School largely functions outside both state support and ideological supervision, it has transitioned from an element of Soviet propaganda into a cultural radicalization barrier, as theorized by Anatol Lieven (1999).³¹ I further argue that, because Ukrainian ballet training is equally resistant to incorporation into the ideological frameworks of Russian neo-imperialism or Ukrainian nationalism, it may serve as a unique platform for cultural dialogue and reconciliation, values closely tied to the emerging identity of independent Ukraine.

Conclusions

Throughout my research, I found that Ukrainian dancers and dance makers are constantly grappling with border anxieties while training, teaching, or choreographing, or when talking to outsiders looking in. Within the liminal 2014–2022 period, trapped between the hybrid annexation and full invasion, Ukrainian ballet's borders were related to time, technique, performance, and professional connections, rather than borders in a conventional geographical sense. As Dwight Conquergood highlights, "A boundary is more like a membrane than a wall," tapping into

temporality, shifts, and crossings across various cultural boundaries and spaces (2002). As I reflected on this statement, I also thought about Iryna Zapolska's words in our interview: "There are people here who live in a different time [Soviet epoch], but then we all are moving within different cultural channels . . ."32

As I have shown, on the surface The School remains dedicated to self-proclaimed adherence to the Soviet-era Vaganova technique. This is evident in terms of training regimen and ballet aesthetics, but also in terms of the language of instruction, system of physical conditioning, and yearly committee examinations of dancer progress, all remnant elements of Soviet-era ballet training. Furthermore, as I revealed through the course of the interviews, there is a distinct sense of nostalgia among the staff for the Soviet-era prioritization of ballet by the state as a key element of Soviet high culture. This nostalgia relates to the system of All-Union festivals, performances, and internships that allowed ballet students and teachers a greater sense of cultural, professional, and social mobility. To the teachers, a common memory of collaboration and travel across the geographical and common cultural spaces of the USSR is the missing element of contemporary Ukrainian ballet—already independent, but not yet fully integrated into the cultural realm of Central and Western Europe. In this framework of cultural nostalgia, adherence to common Vaganova technique signifies not just a system of training, but a sense of belonging to a professional network that spanned across vast geographic boundaries of the Soviet Republics. Thus, adherence to the Vaganova technique can be viewed as an attempt to hold on to a tangible, visible relic of the intimate past, and it should be noted that similar tropes of a "lost" common technique come through in conversations across the post-Soviet ballet realm, including the birthplaces of this technique in the ballet theaters of Russia.

My work also revealed key characteristics that distinguish The School as an independent dancing community and set it apart from its original role as a peripheral training academy in the verticalized system of Soviet ballet. First, I observed an individualized rather than standardized instruction in the Vaganova technique, with different teachers emphasizing or, conversely, deprioritizing elements of training depending on their interpretation of "Vaganova's little book," while denying that such difference or deviation exists. Second, there is clear evidence in both my observations of The School's training routines and in the oral narratives of its inhabitants that the relationships between The School's teachers, students, and administrators changed from a state-defined hierarchy in the Soviet era to a tight-knit dancing community, characterized by artistic and economic cooperation between its members. Third, in the near absence of state support and state oversight, the dancing community of The School adapted to the realities of post-Soviet Ukraine by seeking out private sponsorship and relying on collaborative economic activity to maintain its operations. Finally, while there is a sense of nostalgia for the state of ballet in The School's Soviet past, no interviews referenced nostalgia for the political regime of the USSR or appreciation of the current neo-imperial political course charted by Russia.

In conclusion, I argue that the state of The School and its dancing community is highly emblematic of the broader political forces shaping Ukrainian society, as it transitions from a nearly key Soviet Republic to an independent nation. I further argue that, in the effort to maintain and uphold its ballet traditions through collaborative efforts of its dancing community, The School echoes the defiant spirit of community central to Ukrainian national identity, as revealed both in the Maidan Revolution and the fierce resistance to the Russian military aggression of the winter of 2022. Perhaps illustrating this point beyond any uncertainty is the enlistment of one of The School's most talented graduates and active National Opera ballerinas, Olesya Vorotnyuk (Class of 2009), as a private in the military force defending Kyiv in the days following Russia's invasion of the country in February 2022. Widely circulated photos of Olesya in military fatigues armed with an AK-74 assault rifle were commonly accompanied in the media by her stage and training photos, attempting to contrast her image as a soldier and as a "fragile" ballerina. However, as I have learned in my time spent with the students and teachers of the Kyiv State Choreographic College, there is nothing fragile or ephemeral in the bonds holding together the Ukrainian dancing community and its forged tie to Ukrainian national

identity that surprised the world in 2022. As the ongoing war resolves the troubling uncertainty of cultural and national belonging for many artists, it also unveils the ways dance makers negotiate their relationship to the state on an intimate level within key Ukrainian cultural institutions.

Notes

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1. For a detailed discussion of hybrid warfare, see Kofman and Rojansky (2015).
2. For an extended discussion of Soviet ballet, its conventional and resistive works, see Ezrahi (2014) and Ross (2015).
3. For a greater discussion of the perception of Soviet ballet, see Plisetskaya (2015), 140. For more information on how Soviet ballets were commissioned, transformed, and censured at various points in the production process, see Morrison (2009).
4. Omar Cardentey, personal communication with Ania Nikulina, May 5, 2018. Omar was the director of the Culture Department of the US embassy from 2014 to 2021 in Kyiv, Ukraine.
5. Molly, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 20, 2018. In accordance with approved IRB protocol for this study, all the participants' names have been changed to protect their identity; this applies to all interlocutors whose names appear as first names only. Any use of first and last name signifies participants were interviewed as public figures.
6. According to Erin, Molly, Alexander, and other teachers, the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the immediate and severe lack of funding for The School and withholding of salaries. Both economic consequences have shaped the lives of the students and teachers throughout the last three decades.
7. I use the term "bodies" here to refer to various state employees; this term encompasses communities of dancers, ballet teachers, students, choreographers, musicians, administrators, librettists, and dance critics.
8. While there is a discrepancy between the oral narratives and Soviet and post-Soviet literature on ballet in Ukraine, there is also an immense lack of textual sources on dance in Ukraine in general. Although many findings of current leading ballet scholars do apply to the Soviet-era and contemporary ballet in Ukraine, it is important to highlight that operating in an archival context rich with largely propagandistic materials and lacking analytical, history-driven writing challenges typical academic approaches in dance history and critical dance studies. For a discussion of the disconnect between the documentation of Soviet ballet performances and their original and often hidden meanings, see Nikulina (2019) and Ross (2015).
9. In April 2015, a formal decommunization process started in Ukraine after a set of laws was passed by the Ukrainian parliament and signed by President Petro Poroshenko. Among other acts, this set of laws outlawed communist symbols, including the hammer and sickle. Violation of the law carries a penalty of fines and/or prison sentences up to five years.
10. For a discussion of the notions of "dancing body," "hired body," and "ideal body," see Foster (1997).
11. For more information on American modern dance and the training in state colleges, see Martin (1998).

12. Yulia, interview with Ania Nikulina, May 30, 2018.
13. For more information on Russian and Soviet neo-imperialism, see Aleksievich (2016) and Treisman (2018).
14. Erin, Classical Ballet (class, Kyiv State Ballet School, Kyiv, Ukraine, May 31, 2018).
15. Gabi, Classical Ballet (class, Kyiv State Choreographic College, Kyiv, Ukraine, May 30, 2018).
16. Alexander, Classical Ballet (class, Kyiv State Choreographic School, Kyiv, Ukraine, May 30, 2018).
17. For more information on the notion of the dancing body and its relationship to technique, see Foster (1997, 237–256).
18. For a detailed discussion of dance technique and intimacy, see Hamera (2007). For the connections between dance and empathy, see Foster (2011).
19. For a notion of dance technique as a language, see Hamera (2007).
20. Alexander, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 20, 2018.
21. These Russian choreographers, who had ties to Ukraine, were prominent, but at the same time they shared or were intimately familiar with the histories of Stalinist repressions. Golovanov, initially Smirnov, had a father, repressed in 1946, and changed his last name in the 1960s. Nataliya Ryzhenko, a graduate of the Moscow ballet school affiliated with the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre, was a longtime student of Sulamif Messerrer, an aunt of the prominent ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, who adopted her after the death of Plisetskaya's father when he was repressed in the late 1930s. Petukhov was a leading dancer and a choreographer of the St. Petersburg ballet of Leonid Yakobson, a famous Soviet-era subversive Jewish choreographer, whose story is explored by Janice Ross in *Like a Bomb Going Off* (2015).
22. Alexander, his wife, and his daughter occupied one small room in the Lviv's dormitory for ballet artists, working at the Lviv Opera, also called today Lviv National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre named after Solomiya Krushelnytska. As, according to Alexander, Kyiv Municipal Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre for Children and Youth provided better salary and benefits, Alexander moved back with his family to Kyiv.
23. Alexander, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 20, 2018.
24. Gabi, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 20, 2018.
25. Ibid.
26. The reason Erin is present in the interview with Alexander is again related to the context of my field site. None of the teachers, except for one, agreed to talk outside The School, in a café, or any private space where no one could interfere. Somehow, teachers felt more comfortable with their colleagues present in the rooms, and at times, my interviews transitioned into roundtable discussions or into teacher duets, like this one, in which I would be an outsider with my strange assumptions about interview privacy. In this duet, the fact that “we were one whole” mattered more than “now it's Ukraine.” At the same time, the significance of the past and a lack of attention to the present resonated with ballet pedagogies elsewhere, always directed at the past, rather than the present or the future.
27. Here, I refer to Diana Taylor's notions of the archive and the repertoire to highlight that, apart from practiced methods, there are published texts, written by Vaganova and her students, that are accessible through The School's library system.
28. Erin, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 20, 2018.
29. Arianna, interview with Ania Nikulina, June 23, 2018.
30. For more information about post-Soviet memory and nostalgia, see Yekelchik (2014; 2020).
31. For more information, see Lieven (1999).
32. Iryna Zapolska, personal communication with Ania Nikulina, January 15, 2019.

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