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Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies

Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies*. by Vida L. Midgelow. 2007. London: Routledge. xiv + 223 pp, illustrations. $33.95 paper.*
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In her book, Vida L. Midgelow discusses the ways in which so-called reworkings of ballets can display attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and cultural difference. She concentrates mainly on dances that were made after 1980, and especially reworkings of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* by contemporary choreographers. At first I was thrilled that someone had taken on this fascinating and important subject, since reworkings have been such a phenomenon during the last several decades. But soon the book's central argument began to unravel.

The text is composed of two parts. The first begins with an introduction of the theoretical framework and establishes the research field. It also gives an overview of terms, such as "reworking," "reconstruction," and "adaptation," along with the ways they are used in dance and other arts. This part also outlines some of the features of the well-known reworkings made by such choreographers as Mats Ek, Matthew Bourne, and Mark Morris, noting how they remolded dance vocabulary, retold narrative in new contexts, and used cross-dressing. The second part consists of more extensive dance analyses of works by Susan Foster, Javier de Frutos, Raimund Hoghe, Shakti, and Masaki Iwana, and Midgelow herself. The central elements in these reworkings are erotic representations of female and male bodies and how they express a multiplicity of sexual and cultural identities.

Reworking the Ballet is based on Midgelow's doctoral thesis at the University of Surrey, which may account for its rigid and repetitive structure and style. Each chapter ends with a brief recap, and the final conclusion repeats what is said earlier, without expanding on it. In the beginning there is a promise to discuss the context and politics of reworkings, but the former, in particular, would require more exploration. For example, it would have been interesting to consider the larger social and cultural context of England during the 1990s when Bourne made his *Swan Lake*, or of Sweden in the 1980s when Ek choreographed his *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*. What was happening in the society and in the field of dance in those countries that helped produce such reworkings?

The strength of the book lies in its recognition of the intertextual nature of the reworkings being considered and discussion of their diverse connections with their source(s). Midgelow includes a number of different types of dance in her analyses, some of which depart radically from their sources, mixing different dance genres and cultures. The sections discussing dances at the crossroads of Butoh (classical Indian dancing), ballet, and gender in the works of Masaki Iwana and Shakti provide the most interesting reading. Analyses also show how de Frutos, Hoghe, and Foster all used self-conscious fragmenting and deconstructing in their works, creating ambiguous relationships with source texts. Midgelow justly asks what makes Foster's *Lac de Signes* (1983) and *Ballerina's Phallic Pointe* (1994) reworkings, since they do not follow the form, style, narrative, or aesthetic of *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*. The answer is that "they are fundamentally based on these pre-existing dances. Her dances exist because of them and remark upon them" (84).

At the heart of reworkings is always the complex relationship with the "original"; that is why they are particularly intriguing. It is important to remember that one cannot revisit a historical dance source, that is, a nineteenth-century ballet, because we lack the original work. What the choreographers are now reworking is our contemporary ideas of these ballets. For some time, the idea of originality has been questioned in the ballet classics. The ballets' "texts" are unstable: few in dance research today presuppose ballets as authoritative, universal, and unchanging. Still, Midgelow represents reworkings as fighting against the seeming illusion of fixed form and meanings.

The book takes sides loudly and clearly. According to the author, the most important feature of the reworkings she discusses is their potential critical stance toward ballets from the classical and romantic canon. She concedes that some choreographers might have chosen these particular works because they have stood the test of time and are popular, but argues that ultimately they have chosen them because "canonical dances represent a body of works that perpetuate particular ideologies that need to be questioned" (4). Reworkings are understood as a form of canonical counter-discourse. Still Midgelow's actual discussion of ballet and canon at the beginning of the book is quite brief, and the canon is quickly equated with myth. But what are canons, and how, where, and when are they formed? Recently Johanna Laakkonen (2009) addressed these questions by showing how canon can provide a fruitful approach to dance historiography. In an interesting discussion of the factors affecting the formation of the ballet canon, she argued that dance research has not yet explored the concept of canon as has, for example, research in music and literature. In Midgelow's book, the starting point is that so-called canonical ballets are acting as dominant, patriarchal norms (Western, white, heterosexual, male) that reworkings may be able to resist. Hence, radical and politically motivated reworkings are turning the source ballets from violent static myths into dynamic, hybrid texts.

The concept of doubleness is deeply imbedded in many ways in postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon (1988) has written. While Hutcheon draws attention to these contradictions, her discussion does not take place in a spirit of attack or defense. Midgelow recognizes that reworkings both challenge and evoke their source, but she considers this interesting dichotomy as problematic. Reworkings are risky business, because the act of revisiting ballets may reinforce their value and canonicity. Even in postmodern times of pluralization, reworkings "teeter at the edges of successful difference and fatal reappropriation" (186). According to Midgelow, for example, Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995) is commodified and not radical enough in its treatment of homosexuality. Ek's *Giselle* (1982) may be seen displaying harmful images of women and does not "correct" them. And even though both handle source ballets and gender issues from new perspectives, this does not ensure opposition because they still reproduce heterosexual discourse. The fact that they have kept the theatricality and some main elements, such as music or modified libretto, confirms the negative values of conventional ballet in her reading. On the other hand, Midgelow finds Shakti's highly sexual *Swan Lake* (1998) problematical for other reasons: While it is an example of postcolonial resistance, it may come too near to the world of commercial sex and even orientalism.

Midgelow's book is based on a poststructural framework, which demands that even source texts are not timeless and universal, but fluid and local, and all performances are open and multiple in a sense that they convey more than a single, fixed meaning. But although she acknowledges these ideas, her approach precludes seeing them in ballets. Moreover, it seems as if the author does not fully subscribe to the relativism of a postmodern world. As noted, the postmodern condition has abandoned grand narratives, but I was left wondering whether this book does not reinforce the old discourse about ballet as evil. It is written apparently in the spirit of postmodernism's undoing of binaries, but it still presumes them.

Midgelow places her book within feminist and queer dance scholarship, and states that she wants to avoid the binaries and universalist tendencies of earlier feminist dance research. However, when reading the analyses, one cannot help wondering what the ballet is and who the ballerina might be that are in constant need of "dismantling." The author echoes the claim that ballet represents objectified, passive women; ballet is depicted as an insidious, normative, and colonizing form of dance. While describing dance reworkings as disobedient daughters of their oppressive fathers (source texts), she often settles for generalizations about ballet.

Overall, Midgelow's theoretical framework consists of a long line of famous theorists such as Roland Barthes, Linda Hutcheon, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Homi Bhabha, Deleuze, and Guattari, but often their ideas are cited with a few lines that leave the reader hoping for more extended and critical discussions. Sometimes, too, statements about reworkings are made in language and research orientation that seem outdated. For example, Midgelow

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argues for reclaiming the erotic for women by building on feminist research from several decades ago. Instead of Susan Foster's "ballerina-as-phallus," Midgelow suggests more material, and specific theory is needed on "ballerina-as-penis," because phallus is too universal a concept.

Midgelow also faces a methodological problem when she comes to analyze her own choreographies: How does one handle one's dances in parallel with works by other choreographers? The writer acknowledges the difficulty of this task in a sentence but then goes on to analyze her dances in a way similar to those of other choreographers. Artists have a different experience and footing concerning their works' possible meanings than does a spectator or researcher. Even the descriptions of dances are not innocent in this sense. Who is watching? And does the researcher write from the outside or inside? One solution would have been to discuss her works in a separate chapter or to use a practice-as-research approach, thus making the subjective stance more explicit.

In sum, the message of *Reworking the Ballet* is that ballet needs to be fundamentally reworked for the better. Thus, Midgelow's book still leaves open for the future an analytical discussion of the many aspects of reworkings and their various contexts.

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Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions across a Century

Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions across a Century. *by Stephanie Jordan. 2007. Alton, Hampshire, UK: Dance Books Ltd. x, 604 pp., photographs, music and dance notation illustrations. £50.00 cloth.*
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Stravinsky Dances is monumental. At 505 pages of text and an additional ninety-nine pages for notes and appendices, it is considerably longer than current monographs edited, of necessity, to reduce publishing costs. It has the heft of a reference book and is dense with details. Having already published her highly regarded book *Moving Music* (Dance Books, 2000), Jordan now tackles *the* composer of the twentieth century, whose life and career, encompassing exile, migration, and changing aesthetics, speak to the many geo-political-cultural realities of the time. With the centenary of Stravinsky's best-known choreographic score almost upon us—Jordan calls *Le Sacre* both "icon" and "monster"—her book will spark fresh discussions and insights, and deserves to be read widely.

Jordan's point of departure is "Stravinsky the Global Dancer" (SGD), an online database that she created in collaboration with Larraine Nicholas, which currently provides documentation for a staggering 1,251 dances known to have used Stravinsky's music. Maintained by the University of Roehampton's Centre for Dance Research, the database, largely finished in December of 2002, currently provides information on choreographies created as late as 2008, and additions are welcomed. The database is fascinating in its own right, and it is easy to see how it influenced Jordan to explore networks of choreographies. One can search by year, choreographer, musical score, company, and country of performance. Within a couple of searches, I had identified correspondences that merited further exploration; "Ragtime for 11 Instruments," composed in 1920, largely after ragtime's heyday, for example, returned choreographically in the U.S. in the 1980s, perhaps as part of the Scott Joplin revival. In some productions, Stravinsky's score indeed was used along with works by Joplin and Ellington.

I came to the book as a musicologist for whom Stravinsky remains a touchstone and whose works, from the lush romanticism of *Firebird* to the austerity of the *Requiem Canticles*, have charted the aesthetic currents—notably neo-classicism and serialism—of twentieth-century modernism. Based on the reactions of some of my students, the rhythms,