

A Perspective on Teaching Contemporary Ballet

Fox Marttinen

ABSTRACT

Research on contemporary ballet teaching in Finland has focused on the pedagogic perspective, but work on the teaching content is scarce. In this article, I describe my pursuit to outline core elements of contemporary ballet through two pilot workshops. I present four elements that seemed meaningful in my teaching (improvisation, interpretation, partnering and off-balance) and their nexus with classical ballet. In addition, I share my experiences of teaching contemporary ballet using these core elements to vocational dance students at North Karelia College Outokumpu. Here, I address contemporary ballet as a part of the evolution of ballet, not as a combination of contemporary dance and classical ballet. The overall aim is to develop a method of teaching that equips dancers with the skills they need when performing and co-creating contemporary ballet.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Nykybaletin opetuksen tutkimus Suomessa on keskittynyt pedagogiseen näkökulmaan ja opetuksen sisällöstä on kirjoitettu hyvin vähän. Kuvailen artikkelissa pyrkimystäni hahmottaa nykybaletin keskeisiä elementtejä kahden pilottivorkshopin avulla. Esittelen neljä itselleni merkitykselliseksi nousutta elementtiä – improvisaatio, ilmaisu, partnerointi ja off-balance – sekä niiden yhteyden klassiseen balettiin. Lisäksi kerron kokemuksiani nykybaletin opettamisesta näiden keskeisten elementtien avulla tanssin ammattiopiskelijoille Pohjois-Karjalan ammattiopistossa Outokummussa. Käsittelen tässä yhteydessä nykybalettia baletin evoluution näkökulmasta, en niinkään nykytanssin ja klassisen baletin fuusiolajina. Tähtäimessä on ollut löytää opetusmetodi, jonka avulla on mahdollista opettaa tanssijoille niitä taitoja, joita he tarvitsevat esittäessään nykybalettia ja osallistuessaan teosten luomisprosessiin.

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Introduction

The teaching of classical ballet rests on the solid foundations of methodologies and schools with their own specific syllabi. Some methods were created by outstanding choreographers and pedagogues, such as August Bournonville, Enrico Cecchetti and Agrippina Vaganova. Others, such the French and English schools, were developed in their respective national dance teaching institutions. Historically, the American school, which often goes by the name of George Balanchine, draws from the neoclassical era.

In contemporary ballet, there is no one, well-established methodology that gives general guidelines for the skills that the post-millennial generation of ballet dancers needs. Ballet students are often encouraged to attend classes in contemporary dance, but without integrating contemporary dance qualities into ballet vocabulary, this might not be sufficient for dancers to be able to embody these movement skills in contemporary ballet. I believe that teaching contemporary ballet should enhance not only students' skills in contemporary ballet but also their performance in classical ballet.

The academic research on contemporary ballet teaching in Finland has focused on the pedagogic perspective. Salosaari (2001) and Kauppila (2012) have conducted significant work answering the question of how to teach ballet in the twenty-first century. However, the question of 'what'—that is to say, the content—remains unanswered. A rigid syllabus might not fit the current pedagogic paradigm which emphasizes personal choice (Kauppila 2012, 42–48). Being part of and closely experiencing the contemporary ballet scene, I feel

that certain key skills can help students move from strictly classical dance towards contemporary ballet. As Kauppila states (2012, 177), art forms do not survive or perish on their own. Ballet has changed through the romantic, classical and neoclassical eras. Following the evolution of ballet in teaching is what I believe keeps ballet a living art form.

In this article, I introduce the work I performed in two pilot workshops. The goal was to identify core elements in contemporary ballet, skills that I felt were important for contemporary ballet dancers. I break down these elements as four skills sets and discuss their nexus with classical ballet. In addition, I share experiences of teaching contemporary ballet to students in the dance department at North Karelia College Outokumpu.

Pilot workshops

I taught pilot workshops to students at Kuopio Conservatoire in spring 2014 and Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Music and Dance in spring 2015. These workshops played a major role in establishing my ideas about teaching contemporary ballet. The first workshop in Kuopio Conservatoire was conducted with students of basic education in contemporary dance. I taught a group of teenage dancers in a weekly ballet class. I tried to figure out what skills that could be seen in contemporary ballet performances were often missing from the classical teaching. Introducing the use of improvisation, elementary partnering and interpretational tasks in ballet seemed meaningful to me, although these ideas did not yet have a very clear form. My own classical ballet training was based on the principles of the Vaganova method, so the basic class

structure primarily followed the Russian school tradition.

The warm-up was always an improvisational task that introduced the theme of the lesson. This exercise seemed to be more successful in increasing cardio-vascular activity and getting students out of breath than a traditional warm-up at the barre. I continued with barre exercises, sometimes adding an interpretational layer of character, story or emotion. In the centre exercises, I included basic classical partnering in a *développé* combination and later widened the scope on possible holds and sharing the balance in an improvised partnering task.

The students, possibly due to their background in contemporary dance, were rather fearless at trying new things. The concern for doing things ‘right’ was present at the beginning of the workshop, and we discussed the question of obeying the balletic form. Following the guidance of Salosaari (2001, 62–64), I encouraged the students to explore and break the form if embodying the task so demanded. I needed to find a way to bridge the gap with elements that were not a core part of a classical ballet class.

Students’ experiences during both workshops confirmed that there is a gap between the classical ballet syllabus and the requirements of the contemporary ballet repertoire. I expected a reaction from the students, as both Kauppila (2012, 79–80) and Salosaari (2001, 62–64) discussed in their doctoral dissertations. Ballet is an art form with very clear ideas of how things should be done, and ballet method books emphasize meticulous execution of the vocabulary (Kauppila 2012, 31).

In the second workshop, I taught my

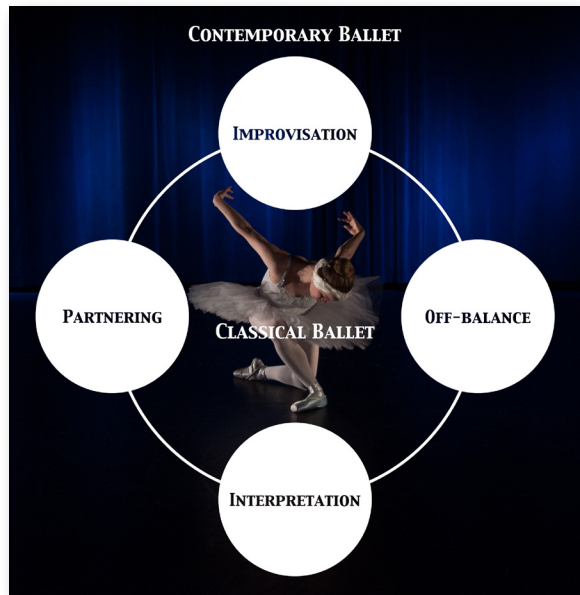


Illustration 1. Photographer and illustrator: Fox Martinen. Performance: Dying Swan. Dancer: Piia Lehto. Caption: The core elements of contemporary ballet overlap with the contents of classical ballet.

peer students at Savonia University. The classes were constructed around four major themes that had begun to gain significance to me as bridges connecting tradition to the present day: improvisation, interpretation, partnering and off-balance. Each lesson focused on working with one of these four themes, which I call the core elements.

Core elements

I do not see the core elements as the sole domain of contemporary ballet but as the subject matter of classical dance, which has expanded considerably during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, my experience is that these elements are rarely taught in class, especially in pre-professional and recreational dance education. All of the core elements can be seen as useful skills by themselves for dancers or as tools for teaching many other aspects of

dance.

The vocabulary of classical ballet is extensive, and quite often, teachers struggle with time management during class. I am by no means an exception. To fit contemporary ballet elements to a class schedule, the key is not to teach them separately but to integrate them into well-established syllabus. Layering the subject matter grants the opportunity to teach multiple skills within a single exercise, such as a *battement tendu*.

Improvisation

Improvisation is often seen as utterly foreign to classical ballet. However, our memories span only our lifetimes, and historical research shows that there have been improvisational elements in ballet. At the end of the nineteenth century, soloists were allowed to add their favourite steps to the variations. Some used music merely as a background for their technical brilliance. (Noll Hammond 2006, 202.)

Improvisation provides a good warm-up and introduction to the theme of a lesson. It gives the opportunity to explore one's kinesphere, become familiar with the overall theme of the class and warm-up more effectively than doing a set of *relevés* and *tendus* at the barre. One warm-up task that I gave students was to imagine dancing underwater. I instructed the dancers to feel the resistance of the water and to decide on the quality of the water. Very different movement experiences were born from the idea of dancing in cold, dirty water than in warm, clear water. This task teaches improvisation skills, as well as the support of the arms in *port de bras* and the fluid movement quality needed, for example, in *temps lié* combinations.

Another way to use improvisation is to create improvised barre or centre exercises. In general, this seems to work best with intermediate or advanced dancers as they need to know the basic movement vocabulary. The task, for example, could be to

execute a *battement tendu jeté* combination that includes *jetés* in all directions (front, side and back), to use *effacé* and *croisé* poses and to end in a one-leg balance. This exercise allows students to fine-tune movements they feel the need to repeat.

Interpretation

Interpretation is by no means new in ballet, but in my experience, it is rarely taught in any dance class. Indeed, students might have even been asked to maintain a neutral expression. I do not oppose maintaining a respectful, dignified mood in the class, but I propose that it is difficult for a dancer who spends ten years learning to be neutral to suddenly start interpreting a variety of emotions.

Interpretation tasks can and should be integrated into dance as it is what dancers are expected to do when performing. I split interpretation into intrinsic and extrinsic interpretation, which I see as equally valuable ways of working. The intensity or texture of the interpretations dancers create are different and resonate with the audience in various ways. Both intrinsic and extrinsic interpretation can also be performed through classical ballet mime.

Extrinsic interpretation is better known in classical ballet. In this method, a teacher or choreographer gives the dancer a character or an emotion and instructions in how to embody it. I showed my students images of three characters from the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*: Princess Aurora in a beautiful, pink tutu, the wicked fairy godmother Carabosse in threatening make-up and a black dress and the joyful Canari-qui chante (Songbird Fairy) in a perky, yellow tutu. Students picked the character that they felt was the most inviting and then had the opportunity to dance an old routine or an improvised combination while in character. This exercise helped find different dynamics for the same material and prepared students to interpret variations from story ballets, such as *Giselle* and *La Bayadere*.

Intrinsic interpretation might be more needed in the contemporary ballet repertoire as the emotion or mood often comes from the dancer and is not dictated by a character. This emotion might have to be re-created for every performance. In my first pilot workshop, I asked students to choose a person with whom they recently had an emotional encounter. They might have seen their true love, fought with their mother or had a fun day with their best friend. In a port de bras sequence, they wrote that person's name with arm movements. This exercise connected the lived emotion to ballet vocabulary and gave the experience of being able to express meaningful personal experiences through ballet.

Partnering

Classical partnering has been part of ballet since the late eighteenth century. When female dancers' dresses started to become less bulky, male dancers could stand closer and offer support in slow adagios. (Noll Hammond 2016, 191–92.) Today, the common practice seems to be that partnering classes are separate from basic ballet training and are rarely seen outside professional and pre-professional education. However, in contemporary dance, teaching contact work can start in the very first dance class, and I see no reason why this cannot be done in ballet. Of course, beginners and children should not do sky-high lifts or difficult pirouettes, but learning the basic skills of contact makes the step to moving onto more technical material smaller.

Before and alongside actual physical contact, it is good to be aware of other dancers or one's partner. Balanchine taught the very meticulously choreographed gesture of offering and accepting a hand (Schorer 1999, 389–92). This is one way to approach the art of partnering, but for young students, it might feel too subdued. A more dynamic way could be to dance a combination while mirroring a partner, first without touching and then in a palm-

to-palm hold.

The essential skill for partnering is what I call sharing the balance. This skill has some connections to the method of sharing weight in contact improvisation, so many contact improvisation exercises can be brought to ballet class. I have found it useful to firstly teach the concepts of push and pull as separate improvisations. When combined, these two create all the possibilities of shared balance. In my partnering exercises, everything is done both ways, so all dancers get to be the one giving and receiving support. This method seems to build a solid understanding of dancing together and proves that the often-heard complaint of a lack of boys is merely a poor excuse to not do partnering. As well, in contemporary ballet choreography, the genders of partners are often not limited to the opposite sex.

Off-balance

Balanchine introduced the use of off-balance in his neoclassical works, and the possibilities of using off-balance have expanded during the contemporary era. Still, off-balance is not a new invention but is present in classical vocabulary, most clearly in form of *tombé*.

Off-balance can be an effective way to learn balance. Many dancers have experienced the problem of always falling from pirouettes in the same direction and have found the physical corrections to be difficult to embody. I have used an off-balance pirouette exercise in which the dancer intentionally falls in different directions: the dancer does a pirouette that ends with a *tombé* to the front, the next pirouette ends with a *tombé* to the back, and finally, one ends to the side. This exercise develops the bodily knowledge of deciding where to fall from a pirouette and makes normal landing in the fourth or fifth position easier.

The potential of off-balance is rather limited for the solo dancer, but it comes in useful, especially in partner work, and can be demonstrated in barre

exercises. The basic forms of off-balance at the barre are leaning out and leaning in (I call these out-tilt and in-tilt) which can be easily integrated in, for example, a rond de jambe par terre. Out-tilt makes the passé par terre through the perfect first position challenging but is a good workout for the supporting leg and arm. In-tilt and out-tilt can be developed into more dynamic swing movements, making the body follow the leg movement in rond de jambe. Adding extreme bends of the body, such as big cambrés, creates a challenge for advanced students.

Teaching contemporary ballet

After establishing these core elements, I taught contemporary ballet at North Karelia College Outokumpu for five months. The dancers were young adults who were vocational students in contemporary dance and somatic methods. The classes were held once or twice a week, and the group was split into basic and advanced levels.

In addition to the core elements, I decided to use the barre selectively, so the basic exercises were not done at the barre when not necessary. Initially, this seemed a bit confusing for the advanced students, but halfway through the course, I noticed a significant strengthening in their supporting legs. When dancers were at the barre, I sometimes put them facing partners. This caused an immediate opening in their présence, and a simple tendu exercise changed into a duet full of shared moments and meanings.

The response to some exercises was varied. After introducing an improvised task, I was once asked if there would be any real ballet during the class. Some students, though, gave me feedback that this was the first time they felt that they actually danced ballet, instead of performing movements or doing poses. My experience was that resistance to change slowly melted as the course progressed; explaining the elements took less of my time, and the students got to dance more.

Layering the exercises with the core elements and the core elements with each other seemed useful. One warm-up improvisation was to imagine wearing certain kind of clothes, being very specific about their colour, material and feel. Then students started to move as one would in the clothing they had imagined. I guided them to think who the person in the clothes was and what that person would think of the other people around them. Throughout this exercise, the students warmed up, did improvisation and learned interpretation.

In partnering, I first taught the basic classical holds (hand, wrist and waist) and then moved onto partnered pirouettes, jumps and adagio. Through the core elements, these partnering skills were transformed into contemporary ballet. Inspired by the title of Twyla Tharp's choreography (*Push Comes to Shove*), I realized that the dynamics and interpretation of partner work can be created when push comes to shove, and pull comes to yank (this more violent use of force should be reserved for advanced students for safety reasons). This changed the shared balance into interpretation.

In hindsight and reaching forward

Many discoveries were made during this process, and not all can be presented here. I believe that I could teach my students skills that would have been more difficult, if not impossible, to teach using only classical ballet methodologies. The lessons included connecting dancers' own emotions to ballet vocabulary and finding more economical use of force through off-balance.

I believe that we should educate ballet dancers with the current repertoire in mind. A dancer is often expected to perform classical and contemporary ballet and to be part of the creative process. In 1995, William Forsythe wished for more independent dancers who could take part in co-creating choreography (Genter 1999, 113). More recently, *Dance Magazine*

interviewed younger choreographers about their view of contemporary ballet. Annabelle Lopez Ochoa mentioned the intention to make females more modern and less fragile while making males more visible. Jorma Elo focused on movement research and noted that some dancers are 'mentally more flexible'. (Perron 2014.) Opening the teaching perspective to a wider variety of movement and interpretational qualities, improvisation and partner work could help dancers meet these demands of contemporary ballet choreographers.

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BIOGRAPHY

Fox Marttinen is a dance teacher, choreographer and visual artist. He was graduated with a bachelor in dance pedagogy in classical ballet from Savonia University of Applied Sciences in 2016 and completed basic studies in Benesh Movement Notation at the Royal Academy of Dance in 2013. In addition to his career in dance, he was graduated with a bachelor in health care in radiography

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