

Notes from the Field

Work | Strike | Dance: The Paris Opera Ballet and the 2019 Pensions Dispute

By Martin Young



Fig. 1: Paris Opera dancers perform in front of the Palais Garnier against the French government's plan to overhaul the country's retirement system, in Paris, on December 24, 2019. (Photo by Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images).

The day before Christmas Eve 2019, 27 of the Paris Opera's ballet dancers, alongside a large contingent of the orchestra, staged a 15 minute excerpt of *Swan Lake* on the front steps of the Palais Garnier. This performance was part of a wave of strike action by French workers against major proposed pension reforms which had, since the start of December, already seen the closure of schools, rail networks, and attractions like the Eiffel Tower, and drawn hundreds of thousands of people into taking part in protests in the streets. As reports of the labour dispute, which would become the longest running strike in France's history, spread around the world, footage of the *Swan Lake* performance gained a disproportionate prominence, circulating virally as one of the

key emblematic images of the action. That ballet dancers might become the avatars of struggling workers, and that workers' struggle might become the perspective through which to view a ballet performance, is an unexpected situation to say the least. As Lester Tomé writes, ballet is 'a high-art tradition commonly characterized as elitist and escapist, seemingly antipodal to Marxist principles' (6). What, then, is at stake in the reception and circulation of this performance?

One question is the inclusion of ballet dancers within an aggrieved working class. The entry level pay for these dancers is around €35,000 a year, just shy of the French average salary of €35,856, with the leading stars paid far more.¹ However, although the dancers were among the more privileged of France's striking workers, in absolute terms they stood to lose the most from the changes. Prior to the reforms, they were able to retire at the age of 42, meaning that the government's proposal to impose a universal pension plan on all workers with a harmonised retirement age of 64 confronted them with a two-decade extension of their working lives. The opera's specialised pension scheme, which also saw singers retire between the ages of 50 and 57 and technicians between 55 and 62, had evolved from a provision initially established in 1698 as part of a Royal Privilege granted by Louis XIV (Semmens 56-7).

If this august historical lineage, which was widely repeated in news reports of the protest, aligns the dancers with the indulgences of elite culture, deploying the conservation of heritage against a modernising government, it cannot completely distract from the fact that the labour process these workers are subject to—dancing—is one which imposes intense stress and degradation on the body. Dancer Héloïse Jocqueviel told a journalist

We start classical dance at the age of 8. By our late teenage years, we're getting recurring injuries ... Once you reach the age of 42, you're already suffering from

¹ These figures were reported during the dispute, prior to the effects of coronavirus (Mainwaring).

arthritis, stress fractures, hernias and in some cases titanium hips. It's hard to maintain a level of excellence until 42, but 64 seems impossible. (Lough)

Her words evidence the observation made by dance ethnographer Dunja Njaradi that dancers 'view their profession as 'body work'', and that many ballet dancers describe their work using 'exclusively corporeal terms: pain, exhaustion, muscle strains, etc' (149). The question of a retirement age, in other words, brings into sharp focus a fundamental aspect of how dancers understand their experience.

Recognising these dancers as workers runs counter to the formal conventions of ballet itself as it is presented to audiences. Priya Srinivasan writes that 'In the aesthetic realm, audiences are trained not to see the labor of dance, but they are still consumers of that effort' (12). Ballet is strenuous work arranged to make itself appear effortless. Dancers must maintain extremely high standards of physical fitness and discipline, their work requiring great strength, flexibility, and mental concentration and entailing a high risk of injury. And yet through its formal gracefulness, ballet offers audiences a vision of the human body transcending its seeming limitations. If dance is among the most corporeal of artforms, traditional ballet arguably does the most to obscure and conceal the realities of bodily exertion. By seeming to show movement without acknowledging sweat, breathlessness, exhaustion, injury, or even the constraints of gravity, ballet brackets itself off from the world of material necessity and consequence. In other words, the principles of ballet's aesthetic form are at odds with recognising the fact of labour.

In an account of ballet dancers in the revolutionary Cuba of the 1970s visiting factories to stage performances for the workers, Lester Tomé writes that

Regarding dancers as workers meant recognizing the labor of ballet and, more specifically, equating the profession's hard physical demands with the arduous activities through which manual workers fueled production. (6)

These performances were part of a deliberate political strategy by the

socialist government to make dancers more immediately visible as workers and so incorporate them within a unified national proletariat. Something comparable, if less revolutionary, was implicitly being attempted in Paris. The dancers affirmed their status as workers according to very traditional criteria (hard physical graft and ‘body work’) and also asserted through their inclusion a broadened conception of work and workers.

Tomé writes of these factory performances by ballet dancers in Cuba that

up close observation of the artists revealed palpable evidence of strenuous labor—effort that, in a conventional theatrical venue, is masked by lights, makeup, and costumes and is minimized by the distance between the audience and the stage. (10)

On the drizzly stone steps under the cold December sun, and in the subsequent digital circulation of the images, a similar demystification was rendered possible. There is, therefore, something fundamentally compromising in the picket line performance, which announces so boldly the extent to which ballet is an act of work. The nature of the event, which conspicuously draws its audience’s attention to the mundane details of an industrial dispute, firmly punctures any spectatorial illusion or escapism. To struggle over pensions is to say ‘this is work that I do, and I do it for pay, but I cannot do it forever. My body is finite’.

In another statement to journalists after the performance, Jocqueviel affirmed that the dance was a protest against the government but went on to suggest that it was

also a gesture towards spectators because we as artists are very sorry for what is happening to hundreds of people who are deprived of seeing Christmas shows. (France24)

The fact that the dancers refused to comply with their duties *as workers* did not mitigate the calling they felt *as artists*. A crucial aspect of the performance, which seemingly accounts for a significant degree

of its appeal and viral popularity, is that it holds the promise of performance liberated from commerce. One of the tensions inherent in the performance is that it encourages its spectators to recognise dance as work and the dancers as workers precisely at a moment when they were in principle withdrawing their labour. To mention this is not to accuse them of crossing a picket or undermining the industrial action by staging this performance, but rather to draw attention to the question of how dance signifies as work not only in its physical activity but in its formal organisation—dance is organised into performances according to workplace requirements and performances are scheduled and regulated by contracts and motivated by budgetary concerns. A performance is not only an act of labour, it is a shift. This picket line protest therefore offers the prospect that we might do away with both the obfuscating accoutrements of scenery and lighting and the market apparatus of box office ticketing, and instead stage the dance as an unmediated, non-commercial interaction between those who wish to perform and those who wish to spectate. Even as the performance draws conscious attention to the dancers' status as workers, it also offers a kind of prefigurative ideal of performance liberated from being work.

And yet, even shorn of its theatrical embellishments and commercial status, the dance does not lose its cultural aura. Where the dancers have sacrificed their prestigious stage, the august facade of the Opera House provides an even more grandiose setting. Above the black and gold wrought iron gates of the entrance archways, between carved reliefs of Pergolesi and Haydn hung a hand painted banner that read 'OPERA de PARIS GREVE', and between Haydn and Cimarosa 'la culture en Danger'.² The claim, signalled through this second banner slogan, that the striking opera workers were the defenders of an imperiled culture (or that the Paris Opera should be taken as a figurehead for 'culture' in the abstract) underscores an orthodox and conservative undercurrent which identifies the continuity of ballet's

² 'Paris Opera strike', 'culture under threat'. Translation from French was done by author.

aesthetic and cultural traditions as an aim of the strike. Classical ballet performers, in their pristine white leotards and tutus, represent, on the one hand, the kind of opulent leisure activity that the working class is routinely denied access to, and on the other a set of conservative cultural values which a radical working class militancy might seek to abolish, or at least to displace from its authoritative position. While it seems, in line with Tomé's writing, that this performance invited audiences to recognise both the activity of work and the condition of workers within an elite art form, it also gave onlookers the opportunity to champion bourgeois aesthetics and sensibilities within a proletarian movement. It became possible to regard the involvement of dancers, and the elite culture which they represent, as elevating the industrial action.

Spectacle and theatricality were by no means absent from the wider pensions struggle. People took to the streets in vibrant protest, incorporating banners, flags, props, and costumes, setting off fireworks, flares, and smoke bombs, building and burning barricades, and graffitiing slogans around their cities. Firefighters in full uniform set themselves alight and violently confronted the cops. These raucous and heavily policed demonstrations, constituting at times a continuation of the insurrectionary *gilets jaunes* and *gilets noirs* protests of earlier in the year, provide the context against which a performance of *Swan Lake* appears as a corrective, perhaps even redemptive, injection of classical elegance and grace. It garnered praise in the course of its viral circulation for making the workers' struggle beautiful, but it did so by reinforcing orthodox conventions of aesthetic beauty. If there is something implicitly Brechtian in the gesture of presenting dancers as organised workers in neutral daylight without the mediation of the theatrical apparatus, the contradiction between the delicate music of Tchaikovsky's Romantic score and the urban soundscape of crowds and traffic it competed with serves to heighten the sense of irreconcilable contradiction. The ballet's escapist qualities are reinforced, and the performance reads as a rare glimpse into a world of taste and refinement. In the juxtaposition between the dance and the riots with which it was theoretically in sympathy, the sense that the art transcends the base

material and political demands of both the market and the strike, and constitutes a kind of benevolent gift to culture-starved spectators, is hard to shake.



Fig. 2 and 3: Paris Opera Dancers perform at home as part of the lockdown video circulated by the Paris Opera via social media. Screenshots from YouTube, 5 August 2020.

Four months after the strike performance, at the height of the coronavirus lockdown, with the Palais Garnier once again standing empty, a new video of the Paris Opera dancers circulated online. In this video, a tribute to ‘those who work with dedication and courage to protect us’, dancers performed remotely, isolated in their homes.³ With dancing filmed in kitchens and living rooms, on beds and in bathtubs, set against a section of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, this video brought the ballet’s disciplined body movements and lavish music into dialogue with the domestic sphere, rather than the sphere of industrial action. If it posits a kind of jubilant resistance to the tedium and confinement of working from home, it does not make the same assertion of worker subjectivity that the *Swan Lake* performance did. Instead, the dance is once again a beautiful and redemptive gift, an expression of human

³ Original: ‘à tous ceux qui travaillent avec dévouement et courage pour nous protéger’ (@balletoperadeparis). Translation from French was done by author.

warmth and connectedness; not the execution of highly disciplined and ultimately injurious labour, but a performative display of good will. The video's unseen dedicatees, workers in the health and care sector, food distribution workers, emergency workers, and so on, provide the terms for the performance. It is in appreciation of their ongoing labour, so essential to the maintenance of social function, that the dancers dance—not as fellow participants in the class struggle, but as the beneficiaries of work done.

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