

U Hoo

UNDER THE RUG

By CJ Hoo

In the ballet studio, the music of soft piano notes and pointe shoes beating the ground in unison reaches the tall ceilings. The scarred, black marley bends under the weight of time and reflects endlessly in the floor-length mirrors. This is where Jane Doe, a precocious and dedicated dancer, was sexually assaulted as a young teenager by her trusted instructor. In the waiting room, the tired, green rug tries to hide what has been swept under it.

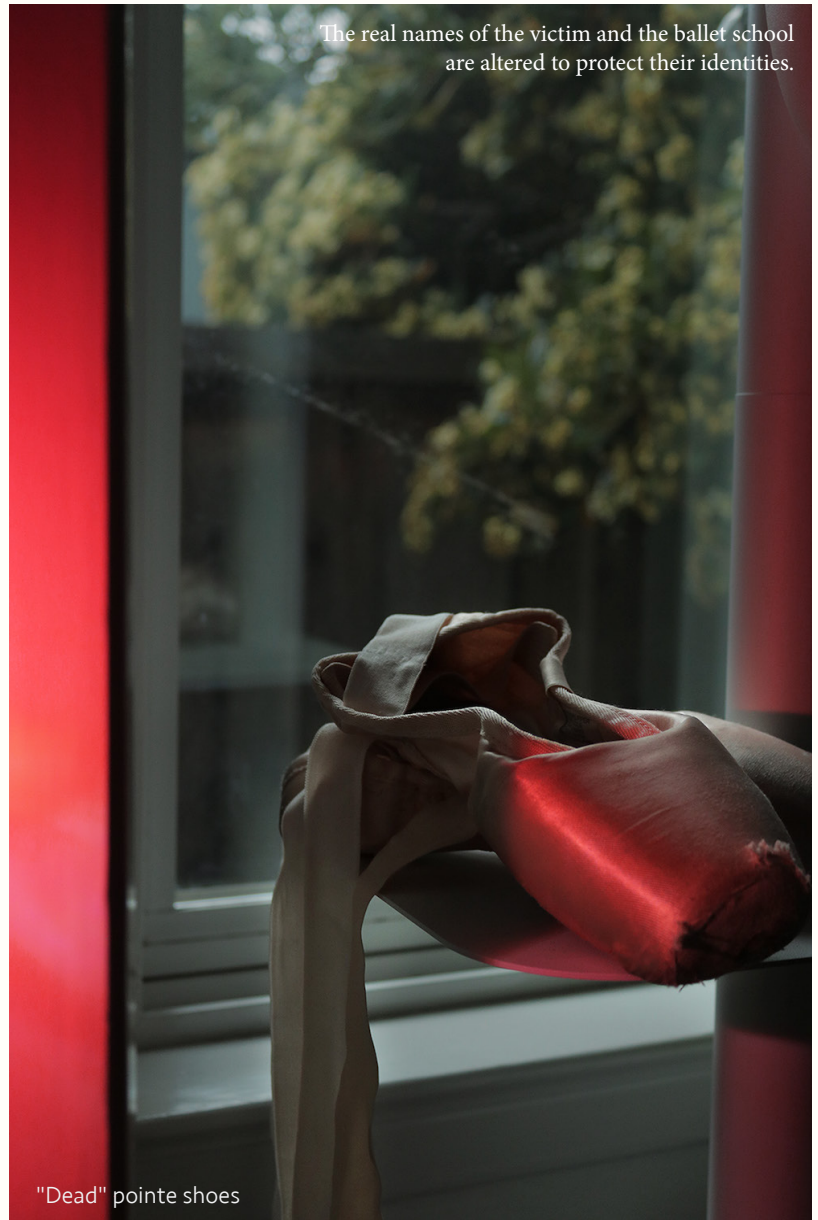
A Brief History of Sexual Assault in Ballet

Since its creation in the 15th century, ballet's focus on external beauty has bred a strict hierarchy of power kept in place by a culture of silence. But more recently, in light of the #MeToo movement, ballerinas have begun to come forward about their experiences with sexual misconduct. In 2017, New York City Ballet director Peter Martins stepped down after being accused of sexual abuse and harassment (Liu). In 2021, Sage Humphries filed a lawsuit against Boston Ballet's Mitchell Taylor Button and his wife, Dusty Button, for grooming and coercing her, among other dancers, into sexual acts (Leavey). While there has been some progress in holding perpetrators accountable, the problem persists. An anonymous study on the Paris Opera Ballet in 2018 revealed that 77% of 108 dancers felt that they had been verbally harassed, while 26% had either been a witness or a victim of sexual assault at work (qtd. in Sulcas). These statistics clearly show that the majority of ballerinas still do not feel safe telling their stories. So how can we encourage them to speak out? What can we do to prevent sexual assault from occurring in ballet in the first place? And how can we reconcile our love for ballet?

Jane's Story

Jane is a passionate and motivated ballet dancer who was sexually assaulted at her former ballet school. Yet her experience with ballet's unforgiving hierarchy and culture of silence has not discouraged her from pursuing a professional ballet career. Ballet has been a part of Jane's life since she was three years old. She was born in Germany and danced at a little studio until she was six years old. Her family then moved to

The real names of the victim and the ballet school are altered to protect their identities.

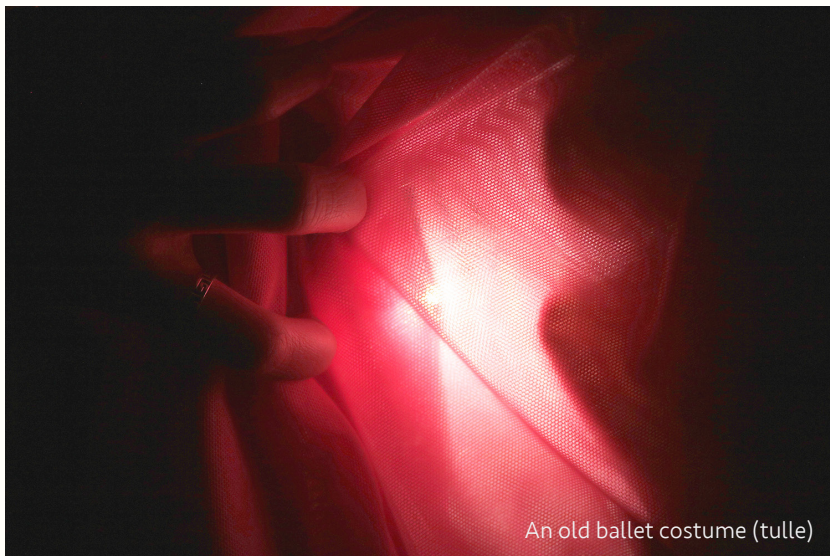


"Dead" pointe shoes

the San Francisco Bay Area, where she started her seven-year education at The Ballet Academy.

Jane started private lessons with the instructor who assaulted her when she was in sixth grade. Private ballet lessons are a costly yet effective way to improve one's technique because they entail one-on-one time to work on specific skills or adjustments with a teacher. During their private lessons, Jane's instructor pushed her harder and harder. He began telling her, "I just need to work you harder," and even though The Ballet Academy is a non-competitive dance school, he urged her to compete in the Youth America Grand Prix, commonly known as YAGP, because he said he saw so much potential in her. When the sexual abuse started occurring, Jane was conflicted about speaking out because she still wanted to prove that she had "potential to be something great." Once she told her parents, Jane immediately left The Ballet Academy, but she didn't tell anyone else for four years.

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An old ballet costume (tulle)

After both Jane and a young female teacher came forward to The Ballet Academy about being sexually abused by the same man, the studio did nothing to address it. Instead, the directors quietly removed him from their performances and watched as a mass exodus of dancers left their school. Since then, The Ballet Academy has successfully continued their *Nutcracker* and *Spring Showcase* performances, along with expanding their programs to include more contemporary styles of dance.

Only last year did Jane finally confide in her best friend at Menlo Park Academy of Dance (MPAOD), where she moved to after leaving The Ballet Academy. She recalls, “I talked to her for a long time. I was just crying the whole time. I was like, ‘I don’t know why I’ve never told anyone this before, I don’t know why.’” Jane gratefully remarks, “she really helped me believe that it wasn’t my fault.” Perhaps this is the most powerful thing for a ballerina to do: to tell someone. To break the silence that has kept ballet’s strict power hierarchy in place for centuries.

Both Jane herself and Gaby, a former The Ballet Academy student who left the school after sexual assault allegations against a male teacher surfaced, agree that The Ballet Academy, partly because it is a non-competitive dance studio, was able to create a relaxed yet motivated community where they were able to express themselves. Gaby explains, “It was always fun. I really liked all my friends there, obviously. I liked having the group that I danced with [...] the community part of that.” But this sense of community and security is exactly what made The Ballet Academy’s decision to cover up the sexual assault incidents feel like such a heavy betrayal. It severed the trust which students like Gaby had built over the past several years. When Gaby’s mom told her that she could no longer dance there, Gaby remembers, “I was really upset because I didn’t want to leave. I mean, all of my friends were there. I’d been there for so long. I spent hours there every week.” For Jane, it was alienating. She admits, “no one really knew except my parents until even, like, I think last year.” Coming forward as a victim of sexual assault, which is already an excruciating

ating process, is even more complicated in ballet because it is very normal for ballet instructors to touch their students’ bodies in order to correct their form. In Ellen O’Connell Whittet’s book about her relationship with ballet, titled *What You Become in Flight*, she writes, “at no point in any ballet class I ever took was there a chance to revoke or rethink my implicit consent to teachers, choreographers, and partners who must, for the aesthetics of ballet, touch women’s bodies to perfect positions or movement—either directly or by encouraging us to dance even when our bodies felt very, very wrong” (qtd. in Liu). This “implicit consent” is exactly what gives ballet instructors so much power over their students, power which they are trusted to use wisely, but which is too often abused.

Conversely, receiving physical corrections is one of the most rewarding parts about ballet. This is because they are not only helpful in improving one’s technique, but they also symbolize attention and validation from an instructor. Jane comments, “I love receiving corrections. It’s my favorite thing in the world.” However, this is where the line between corrections and sexual assault becomes blurred. Jane explains, “it was hard for me to kind of differentiate [...] was this normal?” She adds, “I just thought this was someone who had really shown a lot of interest in me and I was like, wow. They really like how I dance and they really think I have potential to be something great.” Trusting one’s instructor is deeply ingrained in the culture of ballet in that every ballerina must understand that whatever corrections their teacher makes are for the good of the student and for the good of the dance. Even now, Jane is not considering taking legal action against The Ballet Academy or the instructor who sexually assaulted her even though she feels as though “he should reap some sort of the consequences.”

Another factor that made Jane uncomfortable to speak out or confide in someone was her young age. Jane was 13 years old when she took private lessons with the instructor who sexually assaulted her, and the private lessons continued for a year and a half. Gaby, on account of her age at the



Frayed satin on toe box

time, also remembers not grasping the gravity of the situation when her mother was explaining why she had to leave The Ballet Academy. She recalls, “I don’t think I understood what “assaulted” meant [...] but, I mean, I could tell it was bad.” By not addressing and preventing sexual misconduct, the ballet industry is robbing children like Gaby from enjoying extra-curricular activities and from having a place to express herself. After leaving The Ballet Academy, Gaby took a few dance classes at a different studio for a few years, but her passion for ballet never fully rekindled.

The Psychology Behind It

Jane was so young when the incident(s) occurred that it was hard for her to recognize that her discomfort was valid and that what had happened to her was wrong. The Childhood

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Development Institute writes, “a child may not be able to clearly disclose what happened because young children do not understand time, have difficulty explaining the order of how things happened, and are still developing their memory skills” (Beniuk and Rimer). Jane reflects now on the situation, saying, “I was younger [...] I didn’t think it was anything out of the normal.” Unfortunately, her experience is not as out of the ordinary as one might wish to believe, especially for young girls.

The Journal of Adolescent Health found through surveys conducted in 2013 that by 17 years old, 26.6% of girls had experienced sexual abuse or assault (Finkelhor et al.). Angela Browne and David Finkelhor, who are both known for their extensive research on child sexual abuse, describe in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry their now famous traumagenic dynamics model explaining both the short and long term effects of sexual assault on children. They conclude that four main factors contribute to sexual abuse based trauma: traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization (Browne and Finkelhor).

Concerning betrayal, Browne and Finkelhor write, “in the course of abuse or its aftermath, children may come to the realization that a trusted person has manipulated them through lies or misrepresentations about moral standards. They may also come to realize that someone whom they loved or whose affection was important to them treated them with callous disregard” (Browne and Finkelhor). These realizations make it more difficult for children to build relationships of trust with new people they meet. In Jane’s experience, she reveals, “it was harder for me to trust in other teachers, specifically like a male teacher, again. [...] And it was hard because I was like, I like, all I want to do is dance and get better. And like, why did that have to happen? [...] Just because of, like once you break trust, it’s very hard to get it back.”

Powerlessness and stigmatization also deeply affected

Jane's decision to conceal the sexual assault for so long. In ballet culture, power is not asserted through direct force; rather, directors have the *implicit* power to fire or blacklist company members, and instructors have the *implicit* consent of their students. And because this silent power is so deeply ingrained in and understood by ballet dancers, it is easy for them to shift the blame onto themselves (Browne and Finkelhor). Before Jane confided in her friend at MPAOD, she remembers, "I felt a little like, Oh, this is my fault. I was kind of blaming myself and how I looked like for what happened to me." Clearly, something within the very structure of ballet needs to change in order for Jane and other victims of sexual assault to feel secure in breaking their silence.

Prevention and Solutions (and the Patriarchy)

One proposed solution to sexual abuse, grooming, and assault in ballet is reducing or limiting the normalcy of touching students in the studio. Again, this gives instructors a perverse amount of power over ballerinas, and it is difficult to speak up due to implied consent. Francis Veyette from Miami City Ballet School chooses to rely on clear communication and imagery instead of direct touch to correct his students' technique (qtd. in McGuire). With the consent of both dancers, he has also used a peer to correct another dancer because it involves a lower portrayal of authority and is also a learning experience for both students.

Furthermore, ballet studios and companies must work to create more safe and encouraging environments where they regularly check in on their students' well-being. The strict power hierarchy in ballet culture renders students unable to stand up to their teachers or directors, and especially unable to confide in them about sexual assault or other cases that challenge the prestige of the school. At The Ballet Academy, Jane found that the directors did not effectively build relationships with her and the other dancers, which made her feel as though she couldn't tell them or her friends. She believes, "if I just told one friend it could have probably stopped earlier, but I didn't really feel as though I could."

A more systemic way for ballet companies to prevent sexual assault or to encourage victims to speak out entails hiring more female directors. In 2021, Dance Data Project found that 65% out of 125 global ballet companies had male artistic directors, and that 9/10 of the largest ten U.S. ballet companies' directors were men (Global

Ballet Leadership Report). Considering that 82% of all sexual assault victims under 18 are female, and 88% of perpetrators are male, hiring more women to positions of power in ballet could reduce the number of male-on-female sexual assault cases while also making female dancers feel safer confiding in a director who may have a shared experience (qtd. in "Children and Teens: Statistics").

What Lies Ahead

Today, Jane is still working on telling more people about the sexual assault, as well as considering seeing a therapist. This shows significant growth from where she was a few years ago—when she was trying to sweep it under the rug herself. Furthermore, her passion for ballet was not hindered; she moved to Texas last year to dance in the Classical Training Program at the Dallas Conservatory where she dances for six hours a day. She takes her academic classes online and completes her schoolwork after dance.

Jane's goal is to become a professional ballerina within the next few years, but whether that be after college or next year, she isn't yet sure.

Attending college next year is plan B if Jane isn't immediately able to secure a job as a ballerina, but she reveals that she has already auditioned for multiple ballet companies. It seems like the system itself cannot deter Jane from pursuing ballet; she explains, "from a young age, my mom would always tell me that that's all I wanted to do [...] I just wanted to dance."

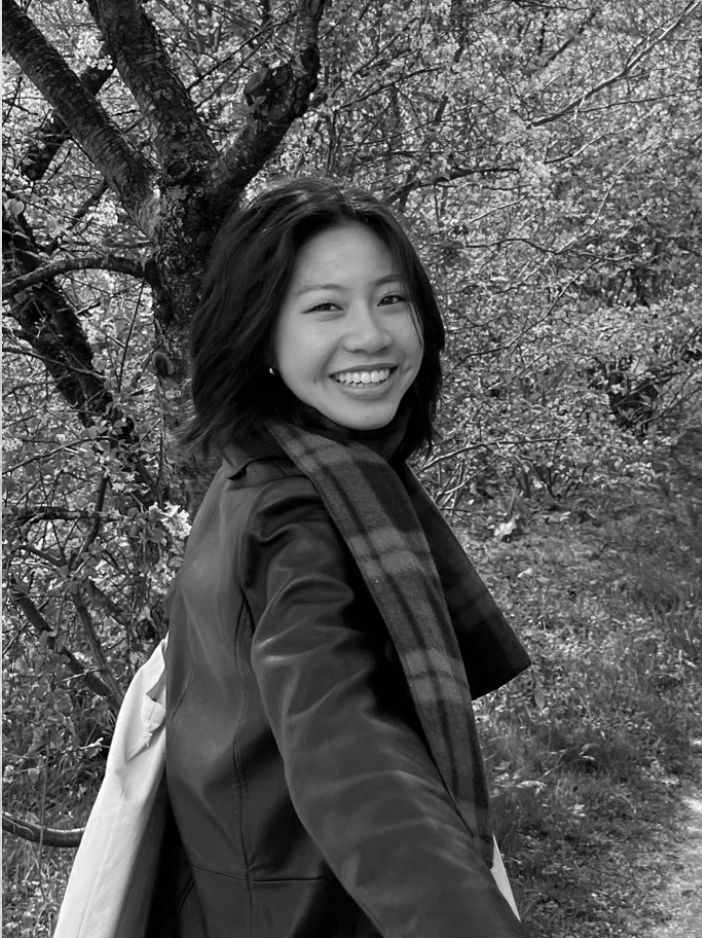
"I just wanted to dance."



Light shining through the seams

About the Author

CJ Hoo is a junior at Los Altos high school, and she studies film at Freestyle Academy. Outside of academic pursuits, she enjoys a variety of hobbies, including sketching, sewing, running, photography, and learning new languages. In the context of this article, she was a ballet dancer for ten years, seven of which were at "The Ballet Academy". You'll rarely spot her not wearing her black fleece vest from The North Face.



CJ's Documentary Webpage:

