Mia Staulo

Mr. Greco

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The Significance of Classical Ballet in the Modern World

The sounds of murmuring echo off the white walls as dancers shuffle into the studio in their leotards and tights. Their hair is swept back into neat buns, and the ribbons of their ballet shoes are tucked away. They have come early before the technique class to warm up. Some stand by the barre, lifting their legs and extending their limbs and backs into intricate, precise poses. Some run or jump to get their heart rate up, and some lie stretching on the marley floor. They practice their pirouettes (turns) and port de bras (movements of the arms). They fuss over the cleanliness of each position: first, second, fourth, fifth. They examine themselves in the mirror to notice their mistakes: Is my leg crossed when I lift it back? Is my head tilted too far? Thin rays of sunlight trickle through the cracks in the curtains. When the teacher arrives, the students perk up; those sitting now stand. The pianist sits down, and the students line up in front of the barre with their legs in fifth position. “Révérence,” the teacher intstructs. The music starts to play. The class begins.

Inna Bayer, Artistic Director of Bayer Ballet Academy, says, “When I was young, I thought everybody thought ballet was beautiful. I didn't understand that somebody could not love ballet. How impossible, not to love such beauty.” Bayer founded Bayer Ballet Academy, a local ballet school in Mountain View, California, in 2005. Since then, the school has become a

prestigious international training center where many students, some as young as 11, replace regular school with online learning to pursue professional dance careers.

As modern ballet has grown, companies that have been classical for generations have increasingly included fewer classical ballets in their repertoire. Some say that pivoting to modern ballet is the only way to keep the art alive. According to Sarah Keough of *The Washington Post*, "Money problems weigh on ballet like a stone around its neck: salaries, rent, costumes, toe shoes, insurance, musicians, storage, and so on… ballet has gotten itself into trouble by aspiring to opera-house prestige without the more stable budgets of its European counterparts. To survive into the future, I think the average ballet company would do better to downsize, aim for excitement, stir the pot — and drop the full-length ballets, which are better left to the few larger, richer operations" (qtd. in Martin). In some ways, the ballet world has no choice but to lean away from classical ballet. Modern-style productions are more economical due to simpler set designs and costumes. Contemporary pieces capture modern audiences more reliably than traditional classical works. Additionally, modern dances often require fewer rehearsal hours because they don't require precise movements and formations, saving companies more money. However, leaving classical ballet behind would mean losing the treasured choreographies that have been performed for centuries.

While classical ballet may be declining in its global cultural influence, it still offers students skills and learning experiences that push them to grow and can help them succeed in other fields.

Bayer Ballet is one of the few institutions preserving classical ballet through high artistic standards and rigorous training. Unlike many other schools, Bayer Ballet emphasizes quality

above all else. Other ballet schools rarely stage large classical productions due to time and budgetary constraints. By contrast, Inna Bayer does everything she can to make their ambitious classical performances happen. By preserving the traditions of classical ballet and teaching the art form authentically, Bayer Ballet spreads love of ballet and brings people together to appreciate the beauty of dance.

Though Bayer Ballet is now a large school with an excellent reputation, it didn't start out this way. Bayer explains, "From the beginning, it was only me. I had no students and no money. I just had a School gym in Menlo Park, which I rented. When I got more students, I rented Samovar [back room in an Eastern European Grocery store]. And then I rented one small studio on El Camino, and in 2010, I found a place here." Bayer started her school hoping to pass on her knowledge of ballet through the Vaganova curriculum, a technique developed by legendary dancer, teacher, and choreographer Agrippina Vaganova in the late nineteenth century. With this in mind, Bayer grew the school from what it was to what it is today.

Despite initial skepticism about her school's success, Bayer stayed true to her vision: "Everybody told me that I can't do it. They said I have to offer many different classes: Jazz, Hip-Hop. This is how it worked. But I said, 'No, I don't like this way, you can't do classical ballet this way.'" (Bayer). Inna Bayer saw that serious classical ballet training was lacking in the Bay Area. Few schools focused solely on ballet, and the ones that did, didn't teach the Vaganova system. She believed that the community needed a place like BBA.

The scale and quality of its productions set Bayer Ballet apart from other ballet schools. Guest dancers are invited to perform from schools like the Royal Ballet School and the Kazakh National Academy, costumes are handmade in Europe, and choreographers are invited to stage new productions. It takes considerable work to run productions of this size while teaching and

managing students full-time. As Bayer describes, “We compete several times a year, we have workshops, we have productions, we have full-length ballets, and we host guest teachers. We have summer shows, spring shows, and we participate in a lot of community events. We attend three competitions a year, plus the finals [for each one]. Our students compete in many different locations. It's a lot of work.” For a long time, Bayer single-handedly ran her school. Now that the school is larger, she has assistant staff, but she still makes the creative decisions that go into each production. Running the business side of the school while also teaching is challenging. In addition to the meetings, phone calls, and paperwork, Bayer teaches classes and private lessons, directs rehearsals, and organizes school events. Nonetheless, this doesn’t lessen her love for teaching dance.

All of the students at BBA are hungry to improve. Both students and teachers are passionate about ballet and take pride in their work. Many families have made sacrifices for their children to take classes at BBA. Some students commute from hours away, and others have moved to America to join the school.

Bayer has dedicated her life to her craft: raising strong, beautiful dancers. “I like to discover new things to help students improve. The longer you are teaching, the more you understand. You discover something new every day” (Bayer). In ballet, good teachers are rare. This is because being a good teacher requires many specific qualities. They must have sharp eyes to catch mistakes and fix them, and they must always be curious and willing to learn. They must be investigative, figure out why a movement is not working, and articulate their discovery to their students in a clear and implementable way. Bayer’s passion for teaching has never faltered,

even after many years in the field; she is an artist, and her students are her art. Through her hard work, she creates something beautiful: technically skilled and artistically talented dancers.

Most students at BBA participate in three competitions per year: Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP), American Dance Competition International Ballet Competition (ADCIBC), and California Dance Classics (CDC). Students first compete locally, dancing both solo and ensemble dances. Students at BBA usually compete at the San Francisco location. Then, if they are invited to dance at the Finals, they travel to worldwide destinations to perform their pieces again. Finally, if they make it to the Final Round, they dance for the last time and are eligible to win an international prize. Competitions also conduct workshops and auditions, and connect dancers with esteemed schools and companies. Many students at BBA dream of winning scholarships and contracts to prestigious institutions.

Chloe Helimets is a 15-year-old student in Bayer Ballet Academy's day program. She started homeschooling three years ago to devote more time to pursuing her dream of becoming a professional dancer. She wakes up at 5:45 and commutes for over an hour to get to the studio at 8 am. She does much of her schoolwork during the car ride. When she arrives, she warms up and rehearses her solos, and then takes the daily class from 10 am to 2 pm. From 2 pm to 4 pm, she has private rehearsals for competitions. Then, she takes a second class with the students who attend regular high school from 6:15 to 8:30. Though this schedule is more specific to students homeschooled for dance, students who attend normal school have a similar level of dedication to ballet. After classes, students write down their corrections, visualize their dances while listening to music, practice in empty studios, and do cross-training exercises. Even students not aiming to become professional dancers are doing everything they can to improve, both inside and outside of classes.

Ballet is sometimes described as a harmony between the mind and body. Ballet class is inherently meditative, despite being physically and mentally rigorous. It is required for all professional dancers daily, usually in the morning, to prepare them for rehearsals. Many dancers think of technique class as their daily "medicine": a cleansing of the body and the soul. As Bayer puts it, "Ballet is about the body. It's like a regimen. You have to eat correctly. You have to sleep. You have to stay warm [to protect your muscles]. You're always stretching. You concentrate so much on your body, more than everybody else." Ballet has a reputation for encouraging obsessive dedication. This is because ballet requires an all-consuming commitment to be successful. To be taken seriously as a professional dancer, you have to dedicate your entire life to the art. For this reason, BBA students make sacrifices to pursue their dreams. Many give up other extracurricular activities. Some stop going to school and give up all their free time to ballet. Weddings, birthday parties, sleepovers, even funerals. These are all events that many students sacrifice because of their dedication to dance.

Maya Belomoina is a student in the Pre-Professional division at Bayer Ballet Academy. From a young age, she knew she didn't want to become a professional dancer. However, she has dedicated nearly as much time and energy as any student who plans to pursue dance. Going to a serious professional ballet school and putting all your effort into training every day while knowing that you will probably never become a dancer is difficult. Students who don't plan to continue dancing professionally have a very different relationship with ballet than those who do. "It's a little bit bittersweet because I've put in so many years, and I'm not going to become a professional. I have to remind myself that it's about the whole journey of my life. The goal isn't to become a professional ballerina. It's just to dance" (Belomoina). It can be challenging for dancers who have put so much effort into their art to let go of the dream of pursuing it at a higher

level, even if they know that the success may not be worth the sacrifices they would need to make to achieve it. Maya is just as passionate about ballet as any student who is aiming to become a professional. She is not trying to make a career out of ballet, but she works hard in her dancing each day. It is not only the performances and competitions that are fulfilling. Every day is a chance for her to prove herself.

Many ballet dancers struggle with comparison. BBA has plenty of naturally talented students born with certain genetic traits that give them an advantage in ballet. Some examples include long limbs, a long neck, mobile hips to allow for turnout, and natural flexibility and coordination. It is common for students who do not possess these traits to feel discouraged from continuing ballet.

Dancers like Maya, who love dancing but don't plan on becoming professionals, often struggle with comparing themselves to the students who train full time. "When you go to a good school surrounded by talented kids, it's hard not to feel like sometimes you're falling behind or everyone is improving faster than you. You're constantly failing to meet your own expectations. But ballet teaches resilience… You improve and you become better. And sometimes, you will surprise yourself when you continue to work hard" (Belomoina). By continuing ballet despite doubting herself and feeling discouraged, Maya has developed perseverance and grit. She enjoys the process of everyday practice. For Maya, ballet is not about being the best. It's about enjoyment.

Maya has learned not to depend on external validation. "[Ballet has] taught me to work for myself and not for other people. I'm doing this because I like it and I can continue to improve. I don't have to be someone else" (Belomoina). Many dancers who don't receive

immediate positive feedback lose confidence and sometimes quit dancing. To avoid unproductive comparison, Maya has learned to focus on herself and the joy that ballet gives her.

Maya advises young dancers, “Not becoming a professional ballet dancer doesn't make you any less of a dancer” (Belomoina). For most BBA students, being a dancer is a core part of their identity, lifestyle, and thinking. Deciding on a different career path doesn’t mean that their experiences in dance weren’t valuable. Those experiences shaped who they are.

Today, classical ballet no longer has the cultural significance that it once had. Ballet companies are straying away from traditional ballet and towards modern dance, which appeals to contemporary audiences. “As a result of modern ballet, classical ballet suffered a slow decline. In the present day, many of those knowledgeable in classical ballet have died. Familiarity with the art is almost nonexistent. Artists of today appear conflicted between the past and the present” (Perry). Though ballet is slowly declining, it will continue to be valuable through its teachings, which are passed down to its students. Fewer students who graduate from top schools are becoming professional dancers. Ballet requires extreme physical exertion, so careers in dance are very short. Furthermore, ballet dancers are paid very little, and even less as company funding decreases. “In FY 2021, the Largest 150 [ballet] companies operated with a combined total expenditure of $441,886,534. This reflects an extraordinary decrease of 31.62% compared to the operating expenses of $646,264,494 in FY 2020. This decline is larger than the 11.07% decrease observed between FY 2019 and FY 2020” (“DANCE DATA”). Ballet companies have been losing support, especially from younger generations. Unlike those in Europe, ballet companies in the U.S. rely on wealthy donors and grants. The future of ballet is uncertain. No one can be sure of where it is headed or how its popularity will change in the future.

Professional dancer turned dance critic Jennifer Homans states, “In recent years I have found going to the ballet increasingly dispiriting. With depressingly few exceptions, performances are dull and lack vitality; theaters feel haunted and audiences seem blasé. After years of trying to convince myself otherwise, I now feel sure that ballet is dying. The occasional glimmer of a good performance or a fine dancer is not a ray of future hope but the last glow of a dying ember, and our intense preoccupation with re-creating history is more than a momentary diversion: we are watching ballet go, documenting its past and its passing before it fades altogether.” Though Homans is likely correct in asserting that ballet will not last forever, it’s important to consider that this doesn’t mean that ballet doesn’t have a place in the world. Ballet has much to offer to its students. It may not stay popular as a professional art form, but it will always exist as an activity for people to test the limits of their physical abilities and work to achieve mastery of a discipline.

Classical ballet is very strict, with a set dictionary of movements, which is why it is often seen as stiff and more reserved than other styles. Emotion is not expressed as forwardly as in other dance styles, and there is rarely any interaction with the audience. Ballet creates the illusion that the audience is peering into an ethereal, imaginary world, rather than watching a performance being put on for them. This is part of the magical quality that ballet has.

Why is classical ballet beautiful? Inna Bayer answers, “Classical ballet is the visualization of music. Of course classical ballet is beautiful, because it's the goal of classical ballet to be beautiful.” Children exposed to ballet develop an appreciation for the beauty of dancing.

Ballet also exposes young dancers to a world of art, beauty, and traditional storytelling. Within ballet, there are many types of traditional dance. Young students at BBA learn cultural

folk dances like Mazurka (Poland), Czardas (Hungary), and Kadril (Russia). There is a balance between the strict technique of classical dance and the energetic freedom of folk "character" dances.

The rigidness of ballet can be challenging for younger children to get used to, but it is crucial in instilling the discipline that ballet is known for. Every class begins and ends with a "révérence," a bow or curtsy to the teacher to thank them for their time. Students learn to respect their teachers and to be grateful for the opportunity to learn.

Ballet is also a way for children to express their emotions through movement. The School of American Ballet states, "As children master new skills, they gain confidence and develop self-expression through movement and music." This gives them an outlet to release frustration and regulate their feelings.

In their training, ballet students develop the ability to work well with others. "[Dancers] learn how to work together, because so much of ballet is non-verbal. The whole corps de ballet (ensemble dancers) have to move in unison, without speaking to each other" (Helimets). Ballet students learn collaboration, and through the support of their team, they learn to persevere. In most ballet schools, classes stick together until graduation. The group overcomes challenges together: exams, competitions, performances, and galas. This creates a lasting bond between the students. They learn to support and encourage each other.

It is said that ballet dancers are highly motivated and therefore often achieve success in other fields of work. "People with classical ballet training are *teachable, flexible, fast learners, prepared, hard-working and team players…* These attributes are vital for success in dance, but they are also vital for success in the modern workplace" (Jukes). Ballet instills many core values in its students: discipline, perseverance, appreciation of art, and responsibility. These values

prepare dancers to adapt to new environments, tackle challenges, and work with diverse groups of people.

Many students join Bayer Ballet dreaming of becoming professional dancers. Upon graduation, some change their minds and decide to pursue other career paths. However, the lessons they learned in ballet and their identities as dancers stay with them forever.

What is next for Bayer Ballet, Chloe Helimets, and Maya Belomoina?

Going forward, Bayer Ballet Academy aims to uphold the high standard of ballet education they have provided for many years. Inna Bayer says, “A ballet school is a living organism,” meaning it will always change and grow depending on the people (teachers, students, and choreographers) and their ways. Bayer Ballet’s mission is to continue the art of classical ballet by producing skillful and successful dancers.

Chloe Helimets is a student at BBA who is on the track to becoming a professional dancer. Earlier this year, she competed at the Prix de Lausanne, a highly regarded ballet competition in Switzerland, where she won a scholarship to attend the Paris Opera Ballet School next school year. She will be moving to Paris with her parents in August of this year and will begin studying at the school in the fall. Helimets shares her hopes for the future: “A decade from now, I hope to be dancing in a company. Honestly, I don't have a master plan for where exactly I'm going to go yet. I hope to be a soloist, possibly a principal dancer in a company” (Helimets). Helimets’ parents are both former professional dancers. Because of her parents’ knowledge of the industry and their connections, her future is more secure than some of the other BBA students. However, that should not diminish her success. She works harder than anyone and has put in many extra hours to get to where she is now.

Maya Belamoina is currently a junior in high school. She plans to continue dancing in college through the dance programs that are offered. “If they don't [offer any], then I would probably start my own club. I don't want to just stop dancing once I graduate high school.” Maya’s future is bright, no matter what discipline she chooses to pursue.

Even though Classical ballet may not last as a professional art form, its values will carry on through its students and those who enjoy ballet recreationally.

In many ways, today’s culture encourages people to “just get by.” Children learn to do the bare minimum in school, sports, and other activities. Not only is this an unfulfilling way to live, it also means they miss out on opportunities to grow. Ballet goes against this way of thinking. Ballet dancers are conditioned to put their maximum effort into everything. A common phrase from ballet teachers that many dancers will recognize is: “you’re not working hard enough.” Ballet requires so much effort that even students who think they are trying their best will be told that they need to give much more if they want to improve. Furthermore, children who care deeply about a craft will inevitably experience moments of failure, which are crucial for development. Ballet students are always striving for perfection, to reach the unattainable standard. “In ballet, you can never be perfect. You're always striving to get better” (Belomoina). There is no endpoint for ballet dancers, it is constant effort and constant work. It takes hours each week just to maintain the technique that you have, and a lot more to improve. The work ethic that ballet cultivates in its students is not only significant because it will aid them throughout their lives, but also because hard work is meaningful in and of itself.

Jennifer Homans writes in the final paragraph of her book, *Apollo’s Angels*, “If we are lucky, I am wrong and classical ballet is not dying but falling instead into a deep sleep to be

reawakened—like the Sleeping Beauty—by a new generation. The history of ballet, after all, abounds in spirits and ghosts, in hundred-year silences and half-remembered dreams, and The Sleeping Beauty has been its most constant companion and metaphor. At every important juncture, Beauty has been there: in the court of Louis XIV where ballet formally began; in late nineteenth-century St. Petersburg where Petipa, Tchaikovsky, and Vsevolozhsky awakened and elevated it to new heights; in the imaginations of Diaghilev and Stravinsky in 1921 as they clung to their own fast-receding past; and in the mind of Maynard Keynes as he sought to usher Britain back from war to civilization. The Soviets leaned on Beauty too, and George Balanchine began and ended his life with the ballet: Beauty was his debut performance as a child in Imperial St. Petersburg and his final dream at the New York City Ballet."

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I used generative AI to brainstorm ideas for interview questions. I did not use AI in any other part of my writing process.