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Worldview Exploration Paper

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Footsteps of Jesus: Dancing in the Christian World

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I have danced. My life has danced, from growing up as a little girl in Hong Kong, studying dance, dreaming the dreams of little girl dancers longing for grace and fame, to a critically-acclaimed principal dancer with England's esteemed Royal Ballet, I have danced. My career emerged not from academia, but from movement, graceful, powerful movement, rooted in many thousands of hours of hard rehearsal and life trials. My career, so strongly grounded in my love of the beauty of movement, has been enhanced by two life-changing unexpected changes of path: the transformation from a life of glory in self to one of glory to God upon finding the saving power of Christ at the height of a storied secular career; and the retirement from professional dance and growing into the career of a professional educator of dance, learning to teach others the joy and beauty of movement. It is from this backdrop of my career and life, the secular world of dance, and following Christ, while professionally engaged in the secular world of dance, that I chronicle my growth and development of a Christian worldview as a Christian dance educator.

Classical ballet, as my academic discipline, is a form of theatrical dance, performed before an audience within a theatre setting. Though our understanding of

dance varies, dance is one of the oldest of the arts and has existed as a fundamental form of expression for mankind throughout history (Clarke & Crisp 7). Classical ballet's aesthetic has become universally synonymous with the qualities of poise, grace, and beauty, merged with skilled movement. The overarching philosophical presupposition of current secular training and scholarship in classical ballet is the aesthetic of this art form, and what informs this aesthetic and how this aesthetic is attained. In the dance world today the aesthetic standards of ballet have been dominated by secular organizations such as major ballet companies (The Royal Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, The Kirov Ballet, New York City Ballet), conservatories (The Royal Ballet School, Paris Opera Ballet School, School of American Ballet, Vaganova Ballet Academy), and individual dancers, choreographers, and teachers. Though history shows that the aesthetic of classical ballet is almost timeless, with certain deviations occurring through its history, deviations particularly accentuated with the era of postmodernism, I will examine important contributors to classical ballet's aesthetic that broadly include movement expression of the dancer and the artistic expression of the work, and I will explore both historical and current thought regarding how these qualities contribute to the current aesthetic of the secular art form.

Throughout history, classical ballet's lexicon of steps, the elegance of line and turn-out of the feet and legs, the vertical torso, and simultaneously coordinated movement of the entire body that is harmonious, graceful, controlled, and seemingly effortless, have become characteristics of its movement expression. Movement expression is so important to the universal aesthetic of classical ballet because its

development is so tied to the historical eras of dance, from the somewhat primitive steps of the Italianate and French Renaissance; to the French Romantic era's revolutionary development of *pointe* work, the ethereal lightness of which helped ballerinas to portray the supernatural creatures that were symbolic of man's yearning spirit and emotional concerns typical of the Romantic ideals at this time; and then on to contemporary ballet which, at various levels, has been influenced by both modern and postmodern thought. Movement expression may be characterized by an emphasis on youth, the phenomenon of corporeity, technique, and passion for dance.

At the forefront of secular classical ballet's aesthetic is the traditional and current obsession with youth, also shared by other elite physical training disciplines such as sports, gymnastics, and even music. Early training ensures a youthful start to a professional career that spans the optimum time of life for strenuous physical activity, lasting ten, twenty, or even thirty years, by which time the body begins to lose its capacity to withstand the rigors of performing. It is for this pragmatic reason that dance in the secular world is considered a profession for the young. Related to the physical power associated with youth is the humanistically idealized beauty of the body, often associated with youth.

Inextricably linked to ballet's emphasis on youth are movement expression's qualities of corporeity and technique. Corporeity, distinguishing classical ballet from all other arts, is the phenomenon of the dancer's non-reliance on painted canvas, musical instrument, written text, or building, but on his own body. A dancer trains his inner awareness of the sensors of the body that provide feedback to the nervous system that

govern movement, stillness, and balance, necessary for refining movement and control of his body (Fitt 266). It is this developed innate kinesthetic sense that erupts through his dancing, the sensations of freedom, power, and pleasure. As a dancer inhabits his body, he 'lives with his art' (Hamilton xi).

Ballet technique as a contributor to the universal ballet aesthetic has evolved from the days when ballet began as court dances. Technique was informed by the aesthetic obligations to elegance, balance, and movement detail, and for the courtiers, this display of sophistication and control was a sign of education and a mark of status in society. The most radical change in classical technique that gives it its present form was the onset of *pointe* work during the Romantic era that brought ballerinas to the fore because of their supernatural appearance of weightlessness, exactly the aesthetic needed to portray the irrational and ethereal characters that had come into vogue with the Romantic ballets. As technique developed in complexity and virtuosity, *pointe* shoes and ballet costumes were modified for greater support and freedom of movement. By the late nineteenth century, as training methods had developed, classical ballets that were created emphasized technical skill over artistry. By the beginning of the twentieth century, influenced by the *avante garde*, choreographers began to develop shorter and plotless forms that displayed movement for movement's sake instead of relying on a narrative as a means to display movement. Ballet continued to be influenced by other new developing dance genres. Companies today engage ballet-trained dancers who can move in choreography that merges modern, jazz, and hip-hop with ballet. In abstract works today, ballet dancers perform on *pointe* beside modern dancers in bare feet or

socks, illustrating how modern and the fragmented postmodern dance have influenced ballet today.

Passion for dance is elemental to movement expression and is therefore a contributor to classical ballet's aesthetic. In secular ballet, this artistic drive and commitment, though critical in itself to creation of art, is unfortunately not always positive, and often fuels the ego and the dancer's desires for personal recognition and gain. The passion is important to sustain the arduous path of training and career. The difficulties associated with this rigorous and often lonely career include exhaustion, frustration, social isolation, self-doubt, and fear of injury. Artistic passion, solely in the secular frame of reference, directs the secular dancer down a singular, egocentric path.

Artistic expression, a second contributor to the aesthetic of classical ballet, refers to the collaboration with the other arts that, together with movement expression, communicates the whole ballet aesthetic to the audience. With rare exceptions, ballet primarily co-exists with music, often the inspiration for movement and expression, and secondarily, with stage design, including design of scenery, props, and lighting, and the resulting space created by these interacting elements. Music and stage design have evolved through history, from the opulent, archaic renditions in Renaissance times, to early twentieth century's designs that integrated more closely with the choreographer's themes, to contemporary ballets with very abstract and minimalistic costume, scenery, and lighting, communicating a spatial ambience that may be disjointed and superimposed over music and spatialities of postmodern 1970's and later. Whatever the timeframe, music and design of the times have shaped the aesthetic of ballet. Another

element of artistic expression, serving classical ballet's aesthetic, comes from the artistry of the dancer, often characterized by facial expression, in particular, the eyes, traditionally distinguishing ballet's expressively gifted performers from those striving for virtuosic technique as an end. The ballet performer's commodity is his presence and expertise onstage. Facial expression, besides expressing the artist's passion for dance, conveys mood and narrative. In today's modern plotless ballets, dancers show little facial expression, seeming preoccupied with an agenda of their own. The abstract theatrical experience, the sum of these many parts, creates the message conveyed to an audience, ranging from a traditional classical ballet to a contemporary, plotless work, with postmodern characteristics of random-like movement by dancers that seemingly do not relate to, or acknowledge, one another.

Secular methodology relevant to effective training of ballet students today, though more scientifically-informed, has retained its traditions over the centuries and rationalizes objectives that build the student through fundamental technique classes, observation and participation, cross training, and education contributing to good work ethics and injury prevention.

Classical ballet today synthesizes several rigorously-ordered systems of dance training such as the Vaganova Method, the Royal Academy of Dance, and the latest, American Ballet Theatre's National Training Curriculum. Students of ballet must be repetitively exposed to their training system of choice to develop a consistent technique for classical ballet. Fundamental technique classes consisting of organized set exercises, traditionally provide a structured learning environment where students learn the rules

and concepts of the art in order to build understanding of technique and the vocabulary of steps. The daily regimen maintains correct placement, desired neuromuscular movement patterns of the body, flexibility, strength, and stamina. Gradually overcoming artistic and technical challenges eventually leads to discovery of the inherent beauty and joy of dance. Vera Kostrovitskaya, authority on the renowned methodology of training developed by Agrippina Vaganova in Russia during the early 1900s, wrote that development of technique means more than being able to execute difficult steps repeatedly, but development of real technique refers to how the dancer's body reflects the very words of the language of dance (White 22). This daily pursuit for an elusive perfection becomes the passionate endeavor of the student dancer (White 33).

Observation and participation are fundamental to learning within the visual arts, and are equally so for ballet training. From one generation to the next, the knowledge of technique is passed from teacher to dancer through a common teaching method of demonstration of particular movements. Students must observe, comprehend, and replicate the movement to establish an inner experience of how the movement should feel, correctly. Second, students observe professional performers and, as they participate in classes, rehearsals, and actual performances, observe and compare themselves with their peers. Third, exposure to media sources such as dance journals, video, DVD, and internet sites familiarize students not only with historical dance but also with today's complex, postmodern sensibilities as they connect with the current dance industry.

The physical demands made by choreographers today push dancers beyond previous possibility. Dancers, therefore, unlike just a quarter century ago, supplement their daily ballet classes with additional cross training that includes Pilates, low impact cardiovascular exercises, and Yoga (Hamilton 154). According to Hamilton (9), cross training, together with informed awareness and education in the fields of anatomy, diet, stress management, and work ethics, facilitates injury prevention and self-preservation.

We know from God's Word that He experienced feelings of delight when with His people (New International Version, Zeph. 3.17), saving them and rejoicing over them. Since man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1.27), he may also experience such delight. Scripture tells us of Miriam (Ex. 15.20) and King David (2 Sam. 6.14) who, in their delight for the Lord, danced and expressed it before others. The Bible calls us to praise God through dancing (Ps. 150. 4) and therefore, dance is, or could be, a part of the Christian life's praise and expression of glory to God. I believe that classical ballet, an art of rigor, trial, and perseverance, and in many ways, timelessness and universality, closely parallels the life, teachings, and steadfastness of Christ. Biblical truths appropriate to the discipline of ballet include scripture's recognition of creativity, beauty, and precision, or perfection, as a means to glorify God; the mandate for stewardship of one's gifts and the parallel development of Christian character; the use and honor of one's own body as a means to glorify God; and so perfectly shown in the humanity of Christ's life, the biblical mandate to teach and model a godly life for others.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4: 8 to fix our thoughts on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Ballet historically emerged

as an art form favored and patronized in Europe by the aristocracy, functioning to display its control, political power, wealth, and grandeur. The *danse d'ecole*, established in 1661, marked the beginning of professional training that perpetuated higher levels of complexity and precision; thus technique and vocabulary of contemporary ballet today have as a matter of course become exceedingly specialized. Scripture recognizes the qualities that we associate with the creation of such art, including creativity, beauty, and perfection, as being God's work, or the results of His creation. In Psalm 19:1 we learn that the "heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork..." and in Psalm 8:3, "...I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers..." Jesus in his teaching spoke with great beauty and precision in such great scriptural passages as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6.9-13), and in the parables: every word was perfectly chosen, and each and every sentence perfectly constructed. Christ glorified his Father through His perfection. Our powerful God is creative and exacting in his creation, and I believe the qualities of grace, formality, harmony, majesty, and power so associated with ballet aesthetic, gained through excellent and praiseworthy work, are qualities that echo the nature of God. Through the dancer who attains the privilege to perform, and the audience who has the opportunity to perceive and experience dance, God allows his children to have an extraordinary glimpse of His power, majesty, and kingdom.

God gifts His children in many ways, demanding in turn responsible stewardship of the talents and gifts entrusted to us (I Tim. 4.14, I Pet. 4.10) by our developing and maintaining such gifts to glorify Him in building up His church (I Cor.

14.12). The need to dance is a gift, individually bestowed by God (I Cor. 7.7). In the stewardship of the gift of dance, the Christian dancer develops Christian character as he runs his own race with excellence, setting his eyes on Christ to become more Christ-like (Heb. 12.1). We know from Colossians 3:23 that “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men...” Glorification of God should be a primary focus of the Christian dancer as he works for God, and not himself, or men.

The human body was created by God in Adam and Eve (Gen. 1.26). The body is the vessel God made for us to inhabit and is an incredible design of great beauty (Ps. 139. 14). Though fragile and requiring care, the body is designed for movement and capable of complex coordination, strength, and resilience. God revealed Himself to mankind (Matt. 1.20-23) in human form (Phil. 2.5-9): the incarnation of Jesus Christ affirms our humanity and the value and worth of our material bodies. When we are born again, the Holy Spirit resides within us and the body becomes a temple for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6.19 ). It is for this reason that our bodies are sacred.

Jesus throughout his earthly life taught and modeled to his disciples daily the presence of God and the truths of scripture. For Christian teachers today, Jesus models the master teacher. He lovingly taught, with patience and care, reaching out to all, using miracles, sermons, and stories so people could know God. It is in Christ’s spirit that all Christian teachers must convey their art to their pupils, including the ballet teacher who teaches by demonstration as a way to impart centuries of knowledge. As we educators fortify ourselves to teach over the long term, we must remember that Christ taught his disciples continually, even through the Great Commission (Matt. 28.19-20) as he handed

to them the power to witness for Him. Belhaven University, including the dance program, is such a mission field.

In many ways secular and Christian ballet closely parallel one another: ballet technique; the ideal physical attributes of the ballet dancer; and the teaching methods for classical ballet are somewhat universal. However, the secular and Christian attitudes toward dance and its philosophical foundations, the motivation to train, and the goals for teaching of dance abruptly differ. As young dancers establish an early independence in their careers, the secular dancer exploits youth as a culturally-mandated step in his worldly masterplan for success, whereas the Christian dancer exploits youth as a joyous time to explore the greatest range of his physicality to glorify God. The young Christian with an established Christian worldview at this age, unlike a non-Christian who has no such Christian beliefs, is grounded by his Christian faith which navigates between right and wrong when career demands lead to distorted ideas, physical self-abuse, self-criticism, and false values.

The physical aspect of a young dancer is his body, the tool of his artistic profession, hence the phenomenon of corporeity. As a young secular dancer strives to conform to a desired physical aesthetic, even to the detriment of health and safety, he believes he has the capacity to change himself and steer his own course, in his own strength. A Christian dancer, on the other hand, sees his body as a unique creation made for a specific purpose by God in His image and valued by Him, choosing to honor his body to glorify God. Christians believe that the body is inhabited by the Holy Spirit and is therefore sacred as a temple for the Holy Spirit, to be cared for and respected.

Both secular and Christian dancers are motivated to dedicate, discipline, and commit themselves to pursue excellence in their art. The secular dancer does so for his own glory, whereas Christian dancers do so as a calling from God, to steward their gifts wisely according to His will and purpose for their lives.

In a fallen world, in the hands of secular artists, there is the danger that the arts can be distorted or misused to influence today's secular culture in which human beings are glorified, an example of the power of the arts (Harbinson 23). A production using God-honoring Christian artists with godly character, spiritually engaged in a relationship with God (Harbinson 26), knowing that He is Lord of all creation, including the creative processes within the arts, will honor and glorify God. As the secular dancer dances for his own pleasure, to gratify the audience and himself, the Christian dancer merely exercises his talent for God and His purposes. As the Christian dancer dances, his art transforms an audience, nurturing in heart and mind God's kingdom values inspiring beauty, nobility, purity, excellence, goodness, and bearing witness to God's truth. In Philippians 4:8 we are exhorted to consider these things, and in this way, this verse is an example of a cultural signpost that points Christian artists towards God and His plan (Harbinson 51).

In the methodology and process of dance training involving technique classes, observation and participation, and dance education, both secular and Christian students, in their efforts to excel while developing similarly in technique and artistry, will take dissimilar paths in terms of their character, values, and beliefs. A secular student, influenced by a secular worldview, accomplishes in his own strength, whereas

the Christian student is committed to Christ's example in every aspect of his life. A Christian responds to unhealthy competition by knowing that the real competition is with himself as he chooses to honor God. As seen in all of the comparisons above, the power of art, therefore, in the hands of secular artists and organizations who do not have the understanding revealed to them of the Christian faith, can only convey limiting worldly truths and do not recognize the fullness of the truth in God's word, and who, and why, we really are in this world.

Scripture tells us that man is sinful at heart and that all, including Christian artists, are prone to feelings of selfishness, pride, perfectionism, defensiveness, envy, and lack of discipline. Christian artists must walk a fine line as they strive for excellence: on one side they can become worshipers of their art, the creating, rather than the Creator, and on the other side they can become complacent, knowing that God sees them as perfect as His creation. In my role as a teacher at Belhaven University in the years ahead, I wish to develop my effectiveness in guiding Christian dancers to integrate their faith while training in a discipline currently practiced at a high level of excellence by the secular world. First and foremost, my own personal walk with Christ must continue to grow and transform through the power of the gospel to allow God to become an evergrowing priority in my life. My church is a vital link to my students as I interact with them and other fellow Christians through growth groups, fellowship dinners, work days, missions conferences, and prayer walks. In addition to spending quality time with students in their walk, it is also important to understand the secular postmodern and post-Christian culture today that so affects the lives of our students,

not only to be able to navigate our lives as Christians, but to evangelize specifically as Christian artists. Several books illuminating these topics that I plan to read as personal development include Harry Blamires's *The Christian Mind* and *The Post Christian Mind*, Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who is There* and *Escape from Reason*, two more recent books by Schaeffer's student, Nancy Pearcey, entitled *Total Truth* and *Saving Leonardo*, and Tim Keller's *The Reason For God*. "Teaching that is distinctively Christian recognizes the relationship between God and man" wrote Eavey (16), and is concerned with three imperatives: enabling the student to realize his personal need for Jesus Christ as Savior and cause a step in conversion; showing how, through his life of confessing Christ, he can grow "into a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4.13); and leading him to dedicate his life to serving Christ. Jesus, the master teacher, is the supreme example to me as I strive to improve my own teaching. He revealed the differences between secular and biblical worlds by using simple examples understood by all, and by His own example, to illustrate the comparisons between secular values and the truths of the Kingdom of God. Jesus treated the rich, poor, strong, and sick, individually, showing the truth of God's Kingdom and demonstrating his total submission and obedience to God's will. This is how, as Christian teachers, we are to steward our calling as we seek to become more Christ-like alongside our students. I have found in my teaching, even after having danced a professional career, an aptitude, sensibility, and empathy to respond to a wide array of students' talents and physical potentials, and how these abilities, whatever they are, may be nurtured and

improved for kingdom work, not necessarily worldly work: artistic genius and skill is merely passing; I look for a heart for Jesus in a Christian dancer.

My professional development in Christian teaching skills will be enhanced by first reading three books: C.B. Eavey's *Principles of Teaching for Christian Teachers*; Chris Anderson's *Teaching as Believing -- Faith in the University*; and *Excellence in University Teaching* as edited by Thomas Buxton and Keith Prichard. My subscription to *Fitness Journal* by the Idea Health and Fitness Association, teaching Pilates, and further exploration of other somatic techniques such as the Feldenkrais method maintains my association with the fitness industry. Further venues for remaining abreast of today's trends will include annual participation in professional teachers' courses, conferences such as CORPS de Ballet International, continued teaching in summer Christian dance intensives such as Houston's Dance Ad Deum and Birmingham's Briarwood Presbyterian Church, continued attendance at various professional dance venues, including Ballet Magnificat, New York City Ballet, The Royal Ballet, English National Ballet, Boston Ballet, and the 2010 International Ballet Competition, for which I had the privilege to jury the competitive entrance process, and later to teach class to over a hundred elite dance competitors.

As I glean information in the coming years, I wish to author a journal of personal insights that reflect the relationship between secular and Christian presuppositions and find ways to communicate this investigation meaningfully to my students in the classroom through discussion and application. Dance History is particularly interesting to teach as I discuss historical events -- many of which are based on personal

experiences with Britain's professional dance world, and historical figures -- many of which were, and are, personal friends, teachers, critics, and mentors. I plan in the coming three years to bridge between secular and Christian dance world by interviewing Christian ballet dancers for further insight into how they use their faith to "survive" a profession in a predominantly secular system.

To demonstrate a progressively more profound application of my conclusions about my discipline's Christian presuppositions, I propose three goals for the three years ahead. I wish to further develop my skills in choreography, drawing upon biblical themes and learning how to effectively use dance to communicate gospel truths utilizing the dance students -- such creative work involves time and a deeper processing of biblical and secular presuppositions. Not only are the arts able to communicate biblical truths vividly and powerfully, but artists have a rightful place to engage with the world as part of the team effort in the "cultural mandate" of redeeming God's creation through "responsible practice in the shaping of culture and care for the created order", which includes all the arts (Creative Spirit: 12). Christian artists are called as part of the church to communicate the gospel truths, and that today, culturally speaking, more than ever before, is the age of the artist (Creative Spirit : 6). My second goal is to write a paper, based on my journal, concerning Christian attitudes in the ballet world with the intent to present it at a dance conference or Christian gathering, such as Stoneworks Arts leadership Training (SALT), or summer dance intensives. Finally, as an older dancer myself, I still maintain a certain ability to dance and to perform occasionally. I wish to continue developing as an artist and in the process of

being challenged just as my students are, to advocate by modeling as a mature Christian artist. At an age when secular companies have already retired their dancers, as an older professional I hope, with God's guidance, to use my gifts to excel where I am able to communicate God's strength, light, and blessing in my life, in churches (Redeemer Church, PCA), community programs (Belhaven's Community Concert, Project Dance), schools (Missionaries of Charity), and class, illustrating to my students through live performance, video, and discussion that ballet's defining secular foundations of technique, youth, and perfection do not limit the Christian dancer, who continues to strive for joy in God's eyes alone. To paraphrase the film *Chariots of Fire*, I feel God's pleasure when I dance and I feel close to God when I dance. I trust God to use what I do and practice to encourage others as I fill my place in Christ's church. As I seek God's will as a maturing Christian dancer, as I pray my students do, like them, I look to Jesus as my teacher. As I learn from Him, I seek to shepherd and teach diligently those in my charge as He has shown me. I have danced, and my life will continue to dance, in His steps.

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