

## This is About Harassment

### *How professional dance schools can create a safe space for abusers*

by Jayne Friscia

At about twelve years old, I began to take my ballet training seriously in the hopes of one day realizing my dream of becoming a professional dancer. It was around then that I started taking regular classes with a teacher I had admired for many years. She always pushed me to improve and seemed to believe in me when no one else did. She reminded me of myself, and I came to see her existence as an affirmation of my pursuit of ballet. At fourteen, I decided to dance at the school affiliated with my teacher's company. It was then that we got very close, at least in my mind. I had weekly private classes with her, where she would often confide details about her personal life, prompting me to feel comfortable to do the same. I grew to trust her and believed we had a relationship that extended beyond the studio.

I progressed at this school until I was offered a traineeship with the main company when I was seventeen. I was ecstatic. However, my view of the professional company changed once I saw how the teachers and artistic staff acted. I saw cattiness, weight-shaming, back-stabbing, and hypocrisy. It was a confusing time that escalated quickly one night in trainee partnering class.

On Thursday nights, trainees took partnering class with the upper level of the school. The majority of the students in attendance were female minors, but our director wouldn't pay the male company dancers to partner us. Instead, there were amateur adult men who partnered us in exchange for free classes. We were touched and lifted by strangers who were forty years our senior. One of these men had a reputation among the students for making uncomfortable remarks, including telling one of my peers that her name was "hot." He partnered us aggressively and was beginning to make several of us uncomfortable. One day, he came and stood very close to me. He started asking me personal questions such as my age, which part of town I lived in, what grade I was in, and where I went to school. He then proceeded to stand next to me the entire class, even though there were only four people total in attendance, leaving him plenty of space. I remember this interaction immediately making me uneasy. I told my friends, and we all decided to take this issue to our director. He ushered us into his office where I recounted my story and my friends theirs. We didn't expect to hear what came next.

*"You're overreacting. He's been taking classes for a long time and I don't believe you. It's a shame you feel that way."*

I was shocked. I felt entirely voiceless. Worse, the next day the director called my seventeen-year-old self into the office privately, shut the door, and asked me bluntly if I had been sexually assaulted.

*"You were clearly the leader of what happened last night. If you haven't been assaulted, there's nothing I can do."*

Mortified, I turned to my trusted teacher, with whom at this point I had a nearly decade-long relationship, and heard the same response. She told me it was a gray area. To trust her and drop it. Sometimes men are just creepy.

I harbored feelings of betrayal for a few weeks until the issue reached a personal tipping point. After the older man made one of my friends cry in class by man-handling her and telling her she was wasting his time, I confronted my artistic director again. He agreed to do the bare minimum and speak with him. Still enraged, I decided to make a private Instagram post about how poorly my studio had handled this ordeal. Though I did not name the company or any names, I would find out the next day that I had angered the artistic staff beyond belief.

They called a meeting with every upper level student, both directors, and my teacher. They singled me out as a horrible student out to ruin them. Someone ungrateful for their guidance. Someone who lied about the true happenings, who exaggerated the entire situation, and who hated men. They told me male teachers at the studio were scared to have me in their class. They told me they were disgusted by me. The teacher whom I thought I had built a relationship with also joined in. She later told me that she could have been sent to jail for my actions, a statement that is wholly untrue. She was also the one to show my post around the studio to her adult friends, provoking the initial outrage.

As the week unfolded, I had former students reach out to me to say that the man in question had asked for their number, though they were fifteen. Older sisters of my friends told me that this man had been a bit too handsy with them during partnering, raising their red flags as well. When I shared this with the artistic staff, I was specifically told not to use these girl's names. Their anonymity was a loophole for this organization not to report any complaints. They seemed unwilling to take steps to protect their students.

For the rest of the year, I was blacklisted. I was told I would never make it in the ballet world. My training seemed an afterthought to the institution that was gladly taking my and my family's money. It was excruciating. But I also felt I couldn't leave. That it was right for me to suffer; after all, I had upset everyone so much. As I began to unpack this experience in college, I slowly let go of guilt and was left with so many questions. Most notably I wondered,

*“What enabled a children's ballet school to feel comfortable ignoring my concerns? How had this school been able to blame one of their students for the misdoings of someone else? How common was harassment at dance schools?”*

In 2018, Alexandra Waterbury took on a behemoth: the New York City Ballet. After catching her then boyfriend Chase Finlay sharing nude photographs of her and other female NYCB dancers with men in the company, namely Amar Ramasar and Zachary Catazaro, without their consent, Waterbury filed a lawsuit. She began dating Finlay while she was still a student at the School of American Ballet. He was already a principal dancer. Among other things, her lawsuit cited New York City Ballet as having an environment in which harassment was allowed through the active passivity of artistic staff. Though this was a huge scandal, I hardly saw any coverage in the mainstream dance media. For many dancers, it seemed too taboo to touch.

In October of 2020, the case was dismissed. By then, Waterbury had been made to look like an abuser, Ramasar returned to NYCB as a principal dancer, and City Ballet was no worse for the wear. Justice had not been served and the system that allowed a school student to engage in a relationship with a company dancer had not been changed at all. Unfortunately, the dismissal of Alexandra Waterbury's case did not surprise me.

When allegations of harassment and assault from students against famed Royal Ballet choreographer Liam Scarlett surfaced in the summer of 2020, I was not surprised. Around the same time Scotland's biggest ballet school closed down after allegations of sexual misconduct were voiced against its vice principal. I was not surprised. That very same summer, when Alvin Ailey's junior company director was fired for "conduct...inconsistent with the standards expected of Ailey's staff," I was not surprised. My thoughts around the subject are a cheap, altered echo of Sylvia Plath's most famous line:

*I am not surprised. I am not surprised. I am not surprised.*

Hypothetically, I could continue this essay to its completion simply by listing all the published instances of sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault inflicted upon children by the negligence of ballet schools. What I cannot do is include statistics. There are none. In order for there to be statistics, quantified evidence of the problem at hand, there has to be an admission of wrongdoing by major ballet institutions and a desire to make the industry safer for the next generation. Sadly, there seems to be neither.

Unfortunately, the stoicism that ballet often requires, along with a blind willingness to uphold tradition and hierarchy, can make it a dangerous environment for students. With parents so often kept out of the ballet studio, their greatest advocates are often kept in the dark. Teachers demand respect and compliance in exchange for leading roles, and they are protected in an industry of like-minded people. Behind elegant costuming is a burden carried by many silenced girls who are hard-pressed to find a happy ending when a dancer dares to speak out against harassment. Until ballet dancers, dance parents, and dance teachers are willing to have uncomfortable conversations about accountability, there will be many more stories like mine.



*Jayne Friscia will graduate in 2022 with a BFA in Dance Performance and a minor in Management. She is humbled to be the 2021-22 Cloud Hsueh Scholarship recipient for dance and hopes to have a fulfilling career as both a performance artist and arts administrator.*

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