

## From Storytelling to Scoring Points

*If dancers train to catch the judges' eyes with technical tricks, and social media reels emphasize virtuosity over artistry, what happens to the future of ballet?*

by Katie O'Gara

At its core, ballet is an art form built on storytelling, using movement to convey emotion and narrative. However, an increasing emphasis on commercial dance competitions in studio training has shifted the focus from artistic expression to extreme technical feats. I saw the way this worked when I competed in the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) from ages 14 to 17, eager to prove my worth. In my months of preparation, I approached my variations with the intent to bring characters to life, believing my artistry could set me apart from dancers who excelled only in technical ability. However, I quickly realized that my scores would never match those of dancers who could kick their heads or hit an over-split in the air—even when their movements lacked expression.

The winning competitors, it seemed to me, resembled machines, executing tricks flawlessly but with little artistry. It was through this experience that I realized that it was not artistry that would win a competition, but rather tricks and flexibility. My observation revealed a larger issue in ballet today: competitions like YAGP prioritize technical perfection over storytelling, shifting the focus of ballet training and performance. As a result, both dancers and audiences have adapted to a ballet culture that values tricks over artistry, ultimately diminishing societal appreciation for ballet as a true art form. Technique is imperative in ballet, but the expectation has shifted to an ideal that goes beyond normal technique, emphasizing hyper-flexibility and other show-stopping moves.

Ballet competitions like YAGP have shifted performance priorities, rewarding high jumps, multiple turns, and extreme flexibility, while downplaying emotional depth and character portrayal. The YAGP scoring system allocates equal weight to technical execution and artistry, with each judge's score being an average of these two elements on a 100-point scale (Youth America Grand Prix). However, it seems that dancers who perform complex technical moves tend to score higher, as these feats are more visually striking, valued as a measure of a dancer's skill and control. These moves dominate the performance, leaving little room for artistic expression or storytelling. As a result, dancers focus more on high-scoring tricks, limiting the opportunity to showcase emotional depth. The artistry score, though seemingly equal in weight, is overshadowed and diminished in significance.

Additionally, since dancers perform only approved variations, out of context, the storytelling aspect of a full-length ballet is almost entirely lost. For example, the expressive “mad scene” from *Giselle*, a moment of raw emotional turmoil, is excluded from the YAGP variation list. Instead, dancers can perform *Giselle*'s first variation, which highlights light footwork and technical clarity but lacks dramatic complexity. The condensation of ballet to a highlight reel of tricks in variations “eliminates the story, history, and tradition embedded within the full-length ballet” (Ballet with Isabella). To address this issue, ballet competitions could integrate variations

that encourage a deeper exploration of character and narrative, allowing dancers to demonstrate emotional expression as much as their technical mastery. Of course, merely incorporating more variations is not enough; the scoring system must truly maintain equal weighting to ensure dancers excel in both technical skill and artistic expression, which includes musicality as well as emotional expressiveness.

The emphasis on technical elements in competitions has also shaped public perception, influencing how audiences experience and engage with ballet. Historically, ballet emerged as part of operas before evolving into an independent art form. French ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre played a crucial role in this transformation, emphasizing movement as a means of storytelling and character development. He argued that "ballet should contain expressive, dramatic movement that should reveal the relationships between characters" (The History of Ballet). For centuries, ballet was defined by its narrative-driven approach. However, in the post-Balanchine era, the emphasis shifted toward "unthinking athleticism," with dancers prioritizing technical feats over artistic expression. Jennifer Homans observes that after Balanchine's influence, ballet became increasingly focused on movement and abstract forms, often at the expense of the storylines that once defined the genre.

Ballet's turn from expression to physical virtuosity has been further reinforced by social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which highlight visually striking tricks over emotional or narrative depth. As a result, both audiences and dancers often equate quality and success in dance with executing complex maneuvers. Young dancers exposed to these highlight reels from an early age redefine their perception of what makes a good dancer, believing that excellence comes with extreme technical ability rather than well-rounded artistry. This constant exposure influences training priorities, pushing dancers to focus on acrobatics and show-stopping elements at the expense of developing their own artistic voice.

Ballet competitions not only emphasize technical skills but also reinforce rigid body standards that influence both their scoring and the dancers' perceptions of ballet mastery. Since technical difficulty is a key factor in competition scoring, dancers with a naturally more flexible build may have an advantage, leading others to believe that achieving this physique is necessary for success. Judges may inadvertently give out higher scores to dancers with these body types, as extreme flexibility and thinness make certain high-scoring tricks easier to execute. Dancers who lack the naturally lean, hyper-flexible "ballet body" often feel pressured to conform to this ideal to stay competitive, even at the expense of their health. They come to believe that success depends not only on technique but also on achieving a specific look. This creates a cycle in which dancers equate high scores with a certain body type, leading many to adopt extreme training regimens or restrictive eating habits to mold their bodies to competition standards (Weisman).

As a result of this physical bias, the competitive environment diminishes ballet's artistic value, reducing it to a display of beauty ideals and physical appearance. Alarmingly, some competitions allow children as young as 10 to perform on pointe or in pas de deux, despite their joints, muscles, and bones not being developed enough to handle such physical demands. Pushing

young dancers to execute these advanced movements can lead to severe physical damage. Instead, training should prioritize building foundational skills for a sustainable career rather than rushing young dancers into flashy tricks just for the sake of winning awards.

Historically, success in ballet was measured by a dancer's ability to transport an audience into the performance, creating an emotional connection. This emphasis on artistry persisted through the early 20th century, with choreographers like Michel Fokine advocating for movement that conveyed narrative and emotion instead of showcasing "technique for technique's sake" (Michel Fokine). However, the recent intense focus on scoring in dance competitions can foster "grade obsession," a mindset in which dancers prioritize pleasing judges over exploring creativity. Queen's University professors argue that this obsession in education stifles risk-taking and creativity in students, making them less likely to experiment with new ideas (Rickey et al.). In ballet, the fixation on technical scores in competitions discourages dancers from taking creative risks or developing their own artistic voice. Art is, by nature, subjective, and attempting to quantify it with numerical scores diminishes its creative potential.

While dance competitions can be a means to secure scholarships and further a dancer's education, they have now become the focal point of a young dancer's training. This intense emphasis on competing has contributed to increased burnout, anxiety, and performance-related stress among young dancers, who are especially vulnerable to these pressures. The high-pressure environment of ballet training already can take a psychological toll on young dancers. The prevalence of competitions complicates it further.

Ultimately, the rise of ballet competitions has transformed the art form, shifting its focus from storytelling to the mechanical execution of athletic tricks. While technical excellence is undeniably essential, the dominance of technique in competitions has overshadowed the emotional depth and narrative elements that have historically defined ballet. If this trend continues, ballet risks losing the very essence of what has made it a timeless and moving art form. The future of ballet should not depend on how high a dancer can leap or how far they can stretch, but on how deeply they can move an audience. Without emotion, ballet ceases to be an art and becomes a mere display of athleticism.

The key to preserving ballet's marriage of technique and artistry lies in education. Teachers and schools must instill in their students that technical skill is merely the foundation upon which artistry is built. Without an emphasis on acting, musicality, and character development throughout their training, dancers are left with only a "bag of tricks" that convey nothing beyond athleticism. Just as learning to properly enunciate words does not make someone an eloquent speaker, mastering technique alone does not make a dancer an artist.

The world of ballet must now decide whether it wants to be seen as a sport or as an art form. For centuries, it has been celebrated for its ability to convey raw human emotion through movement, but this rapid transformation toward an athletic, competitive focus threatens to redefine its essence. While competitions have their place, they should not become the singular goal of a dancer's training, nor should they restrict a dancer's freedom to explore creativity and develop a

unique artistic voice. To preserve ballet's integrity, educators, company directors, and competition organizers must refocus on ballet's fundamental purpose: to tell stories that resonate with audiences, offering them not just impressive physical feats, but moments of shared humanity.

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