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**Taking Centre Stage: Margot Fonteyn, ballet  
boom, and renegotiating western gender  
norms in the late 1940s and 1950s**

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**Taking Centre Stage: Margot Fonteyn, ballet boom, and renegotiating western gender norms in the late 1940s and 1950s.**

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## Introduction

On November 14 1949 Margot Fonteyn became the first ballerina to make the cover of TIME magazine, accompanied with a headline that read: 'Ballerina Margot Fonteyn: For Sleeping Beauty, an awakened audience' (fig 1). With her ground-breaking New York performance of *The Sleeping Beauty*, thirty-year-old Fonteyn had stirred a nation of burgeoning balletomanes, just as she had sprung her native British audiences from the dark gloom of war at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in 1946. In the aftermath of the Second World War, and the beginnings of the Cold War, ballet was booming, and Fonteyn- principal of the emerging Sadler's Wells Ballet (later the Royal Ballet) was at the apex of it all. Her career as a professional ballerina elevated her to dizzying heights not only on the dance stage, but in the public sphere, in an era when women were firmly shoe-horned into the domestic sphere of the home and family and the primacy of maternal duties were emphasised. Amidst a period historically characterised by female marginalization, Fonteyn pirouetted into the limelight, and visual and textual portrayals of her filled the world's press, putting a further stamp of approval on the performances which had elevated her to greatness, and in many ways allowed her to surpass the stereotypical portrayal of 1950s women.

In short, this study will adopt a cultural history approach to assess how and in what ways the public figure of Margot Fonteyn represented a renegotiation of the dominant post-war and Cold War narratives of femininity and the feminine sphere.<sup>1</sup> Femininity has typically been associated with 'powerlessness' and 'imposed limitations.'<sup>1</sup> However, representations of Fonteyn, which situated her alongside particular social anxieties and needs, in conjunction with her highly skilled and powerful personal 'performance' on and off-stage, advanced an account of a more active and dynamic femininity which permitted female power in the public sphere. When seen in the context of societal debates over women's place- namely the 'the mystique of feminine fulfilment' as housewife and mother- Fonteyn complicates the meaning of 'femininity' and ideals of womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Media portrayals of Fonteyn on both sides of the Atlantic told a story of ballet's boom, and the cultural power that was available for the successful female ballerina. In an era when few role models existed for women, the ballerina – and Fonteyn in particular – related art, skill and success to femininity, as well as acquiring power beyond the domestic realm. As a cultural icon and emblem, internationally celebrated, Fonteyn's paradoxical model of agency, independence, and femininity can be seen as receiving public support, and as such Fonteyn can be 'read' as a 'text' shedding light on the cultural ideology of Western society in the late forties and fifties; in particular, the ideal societal place of women. This study does not suppose that Fonteyn was a representative figure for all 1950s women;

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<sup>1</sup> S. Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London, 1984), 2-6.

<sup>2</sup> B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), 18.

rather it might be suggested that her public renegotiation of appropriate female behaviour and gender norms represented the relative instability of Western ideals of womanhood in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Fonteyn's popularity and high profile public image indicate her as a fruitful source for deconstruction. Her cultural significance was initially secured by the Sadler's Wells 1949 performance of *Sleeping Beauty* in New York. This was the 'ballet in which Margot Fonteyn reached international stardom, pulling the company up with her. Fonteyn was Beauty. Beauty was the Royal.'<sup>3</sup> An emblem of beauty and frivolity following the hardships of war, ballet came to bridge the void between high culture and entertainment for the masses, becoming hugely popular in America and England at mid-century and less geared towards elite audiences.<sup>4</sup> *Newsweek* reported that the Sadler's Wells sold more than \$170,000 in advance ticket sales for its first American tour in 1949, and queues were reported around the block.<sup>5</sup> This first American tour was the point at which Fonteyn colonised ballet, and arguably the public sphere, becoming 'an artist who belonged to the whole world.'<sup>6</sup> As such, the 1949 American tour might be seen as an exemplary case study of Fonteyn's universal achievement both on and off stage, and will be drawn on throughout, situated alongside further evidence from the 1950s. Indeed, later American tours throughout the fifties continued to establish Fonteyn's reputation; during its 1957 tour, the company gave one hundred and twenty eight performances to an estimated half million people.<sup>7</sup> Such international tours highlight the cultural asset represented by the ballerina at mid-century- to both England and America - where the spectacle and lavishness of ballet's high art took on new meaning in the context of the post-war and burgeoning Cold War period. Indeed, a categorically national framework is avoided in this study, given that Fonteyn – through her trans-Atlantic performance and representation- undoubtedly communicated contemporary norms that had significance for both American and British women.

Ballet's historic association with high culture has halted extensive discussion in cultural studies and history. However, the resounding correlation between dance and popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s highlights how the ballerina was able to permeate and renegotiate the societal norms of Western culture. Dance scholar Ann Daly has commented that 'scholars have got to recognise ballet

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<sup>3</sup> A. Croce, *After Images*, (London, 1978), 371.

<sup>4</sup> K. Eliot, 'Starved for Beauty: British Ballet and Public Morale During the Second World War', *Dance Chronicle*, 2008, Vol. 31 (2), 175-210; S. E. Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and culture in the United States, World War II to the National Endowment for the Arts*, (California, 2010), 127-168.

<sup>5</sup> 'Ballet Invasion' *Newsweek*, (October 17, 1949), Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>6</sup> M. Daneman, *Margot Fonteyn*, (London, 2004), 252.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Ballet the U.S. Cheers', *Newsweek*, (November 18, 1957), Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.

as a cultural institution that represents and thus inscribes gender behaviour in everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Following this framework, ballet, and therefore the ballerina, might be read as a 'cultural text.' Indeed, this thesis works from a postmodernist position that 'the only way to access the past is as a "text"', supposing that by deconstructing Fonteyn in the historical context meaning might be gleaned about the place of women that looks beyond stereotypical gender norms.<sup>9</sup> However, the ballerina's personal cultural sway must be juxtaposed against the cultural institution of the media- the medium through which the famous ballerina was often projected- and whether the media serves a 'reflective' or 'prescriptive' role.<sup>10</sup> The modern scholarly consensus takes from both schools, asserting that the media portrays men and women in a stereotypical way that reflects and sustains socially enforced views of gender.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Fonteyn, however, the media aligned her with narratives beyond that of the stereotypical 1950s woman. Fonteyn's performance and representation must therefore be read in tandem, to build up a complete picture of Fonteyn's negotiation of femininity, female power and the feminine sphere, and also to return a degree of agency to the ballerina.

Thus, analysis of Fonteyn's cultural performance and portrayal, through investigation of mainstream press cuttings, magazine covers, photographs, film clips, dance periodicals and first-hand accounts (housed largely in the relatively unexplored historical archive for the Sadler's Wells Ballet) offers a valuable window into the ideals of 1950s womanhood, and the extent to which they were changing.<sup>ii</sup> Cross-examination of these various sources seeks to overcome the limitations inherent in studying one particular source group. Indeed, personal testimonies pose a challenge given the fallibility of memory, although their judgements tend to be situated in the historical context and come from reliable sources who knew Fonteyn. Mainstream press coverage, such as in TIME magazine, is highly useful in discerning the popular mood; 'indicating the degree to which audiences adored her, and the extent to which the general public identified with her.'<sup>12</sup> The dance critic propagated a more 'unbiased' description of Fonteyn: 'the function of the critic is not to be a Press Agent... he is to be no way swayed from his judgement, which he must base solely on what passes upon the stage on the occasion he is recording', propagating an unbiased description.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, an 'image' of Fonteyn is conveyed, rather than reality (often in the literal sense through visual imagery on magazine covers).

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<sup>8</sup> A. Daly, 'The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers' (1987) in *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (Middletown, 2002), 288.

<sup>9</sup> M. G. Phillips, 'Deconstructing Sport History: The Postmodern Challenge', *Journal of Sport History* (Fall, 2001), 334.

<sup>10</sup> C. L. Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover* (North Carolina, 2001), 1-16.

<sup>11</sup> J. T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (Boston, 1994), 255.

<sup>12</sup> R. J. Kowal, "'Indian Ballerinas Toe Up": Maria Tallchief and Making Ballet "American" in the Tribal Termination Era', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol.46, 2 (2014), 79,

<sup>13</sup> C. Brahms, 'C. Brahms on... The Critic', *Dance and Dancers* (1949), Winifred Edwards Collection, RBS Archives.

The representation of Fonteyn is therefore imbued with norms and prejudices inherent to the time, implicating them in the study of ideas about women. The thoughts of critics such as Walter Terry, Anatole Chujoy, Alexander Grant and Lincoln Kirstein will serve of particular interest, given their respectability in both the dance and media worlds; their reviews frequently published in esteemed journalism.

Such portrayals may also be read against her more 'visible' aspects; namely her danced performance. The survival of video footage of Fonteyn's performance overcomes the problem of 'invisibility' which has plagued the study of dance, given the common lack of complete film recordings of individual performances.<sup>14</sup> As a transitory art, and perceived as beyond the historical record, many historians have shied away from close assessment of individual dancers, as Karen Eliot has noted; 'the dancer as artist and working woman has been deemed unworthy of serious scholarship.'<sup>15</sup> It is to the strength of the influences of postmodernism and poststructuralism that previously underemphasised sources come into play as useful historical tools. Caution must be taken, however, to avoid purely biographical narratives of dancers' lives, as has been the vogue. Indeed, the paradoxical figure of Margot Fonteyn, despite her fame and significance, has only been explored in a purely narrative, anecdotal model, by biographers and dance scholars. Such work has proliferated notions of Fonteyn as overtly feminine, drawing on a relatively superficial, and reproduced reading of personal memoirs- which noted her elegant and reserved character and appearance. Working from an analytical framework, this study seeks to identify the deeper meanings of Fonteyn's 'femininity.'

A propensity to align the ballerina with the master narratives of late 1940s and early 1950s has persisted. Traditional scholarship has proposed that the end of the war heralded a return to 'natural' feminine behaviour and appearance, and the demarcation of the private sphere as feminine and the public sphere as masculine. This was a time when the 'feminine mystique' was emphasised; the idea that women should be naturally fulfilled by devoting their lives to being housewives and mothers.<sup>16</sup> Wartime historian Penny Summerfield has noted how the prioritising of domesticity was implicit after the Second World War. Despite the gains women made by war, 'the wartime disruption was not accompanied by any striking alteration to the marginalising discourse of women and work.'<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the conclusion of the Second World War also heralded the start of the Cold War, and with that a policy of 'containment' that quickly influenced attitudes towards women; traditional feminine behaviour and display were emphasised as essential to counter the communist threat.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> S. Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London, 1998), 8.

<sup>15</sup> K. Eliot, *Dancing Lives: five female dancers from the Ballet d'Action to Merce Cunningham* (Chicago, 2007), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 15-30.

<sup>17</sup> P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives* (Manchester, 1998), 200-202.

<sup>18</sup> Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and Culture*, 287.



It is in this context that Fonteyn, and mid-century ballerinas more generally, have been situated; as an emblem of what women should aspire to be like- feminine, delicate, and modest. Sarah E. Fried-Gintis has emphasised the media portrayal of the ballerina as representing an ideal of respectable femininity, but one which embodied objectification and the suppression of female independence, creating a negative image of the ballerina's position in society.<sup>19</sup> Whilst Fried-Gintis' methodology bares similarities to this study –given the attention to the ballerina's previously unexplored public representation, and her capacity to negotiate gender norms- Fried-Gintis offers an over-simplistic, negative assessment of the ballerina. Fried-Gintis hones in on one particular element; namely how the ballerina was controlled by the media; cast as sensual rather than sexual due to male fears about dangerous female sexuality.

This thesis seeks to move beyond dominant social histories in the vein of feminist scholars such as Eugenia Kaledin who have read 1950s women in a more progressive light. Kaledin's emphasis on the social and cultural opportunities for certain women - particularly in artistic professions- comes to have bearing on the case study of Fonteyn. In particular, Kaledin's emphasis on how 'by redefining a role or profession in some more socially useful way' women were able to overcome traditional gender stereotypes will serve as a unifying argument throughout.<sup>20</sup> Given Fonteyn's stature in the dance world, and her highly public role- which elevated her beyond the ballerinas explored by Fried-Gintis- the internationally famous 'super-star' ballerina was able to challenge social gender norms because of her social 'usefulness' embodied in her other attributes. Indeed, in many ways she became more akin to the successful national female athletes, who Helena Tolvhed has argued potentially surpassed the gender model ascribed to them by fulfilling a national role.<sup>21</sup> More than Fried-Gintis, Summerfield and Friedan have suggested, 1950s Western culture was characterised by upheaval and instability over the meaning of male and female, evident in the cultural documents of the period.<sup>22</sup>

Debate around the femininity and 'feminism' of ballet dancers more specifically, however, has been a feature of dance scholarship since the 1980s. Ballet has long been perceived as an art form marked by female passivity. Scholars such as Ann Daly have championed the notion that 'ballet is one of our culture's most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony', and a now tired narrative of exists around ballet as a signifier of female objectification.<sup>23</sup> Susan Leigh Foster went so far as to associate the ballerina with the phallus, whilst the male danseur 'embodies the forces that pursue, guide and

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<sup>19</sup> Fried-Gintis, 284-321.

<sup>20</sup> E. Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston, 1984), 31.

<sup>21</sup> H. Tolvhed, 'The Sports Woman as a Cultural Challenge: Swedish Popular Press Coverage of the Olympic Games during the 1950s and 1960s', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol.29, 2 (2012), 312.

<sup>22</sup> J. Byars, *All that Hollywood Allows: Re-reading gender in 1950s Melodrama* (North Carolina, 1991), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Daly, *Balanchine women*, 285.

manipulate it', thus ascribing the ballerina a more passive, objectified role.<sup>24</sup> The male voyeur has similarly been perceived as viewing the ballerina as the object of his sexual satisfaction. Indeed, Laura Mulvey's assessment of the male gaze in relation to the cinema has application. The ballerina becomes a spectacle; existing for the pleasure of the gazer; rendered male.<sup>25</sup> Gaining fuel from the woman's movement, this first school of feminists see the ballerina as detrimental to women's gains.<sup>iii</sup>

However, this position has increasingly been attacked by a new wave of feminist critics seeking to resituate the ballerina as empowered, and active rather than passive. Scholars such as Jennifer Fisher and Sally Banes have drawn to light the fundamental dichotomy of the ballerina as delicate yet powerful - frail yet iron-willed.<sup>26</sup> As dance theorists, however, their analysis is limited to the medium of dance, and does not situate such studies in the historical context in which individual dancers performed. Such approaches nonetheless have useful application for the first chapter of this study, which focuses on Fonteyn's on-stage performance and representation; how she was received and perceived on stage, and the wider implications for femininity and female power. Desmond has noted how 'social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies or exceeds norms of non-dance bodily expression within historical contexts.'<sup>27</sup> Yet to examine her performance in isolation would be short-sighted and ahistorical. To assess Fonteyn as a cultural force necessitates the parallel investigation of her public reception and portrayal. Indeed, arguments for Fonteyn's negotiation of societal gender norms will be built on in the second chapter, when Fonteyn's off stage performance and reception becomes the focus; how she projected herself as an icon and innovator beyond the dancer's stage.

This study therefore adopts a feminist analysis of the ballerina in her setting, attempting to historicise the feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s; resituating the ballerina's 'femininity' as powerful. However, caution must be taken to avoid imposing modern narratives on the past; a challenge often faced by the historian. Indeed, this project does not propose that Fonteyn was an outright feminist in the sense of the feminism associated with the women's movement of the 1960s, nor that she was unfeminine. Instead, arguing from the sources themselves, this study seeks to offer a nuanced assessment of the ballerina- aligning her with a *more* progressive model of womanhood than has typically been associated with the 1950s. This study seeks to highlight the range of narratives which came to bear on Margot Fonteyn, and how she stepped beyond traditional gender norms,

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<sup>24</sup> S. L. Foster 'The ballerina's phallic pointe' in S. L. Foster (ed.) *Corporealities* (London, 1996), 3.

<sup>25</sup> L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1973) in C. Penley (ed.) *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York, 1988), 57-68.

<sup>26</sup> J. Fisher, 'Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina as Powerhouse' *Dance Research Journal*, 1 July 2007, Vol.39 (1), 2-24; S. Banes, *Dancing women*.

<sup>27</sup> J. C. Desmond, 'Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies', *Cultural Critique*, Issue 26, 34 (1 December 1993).

operating as a lens through which to view a relatively unstable culture. It is important to note that many further associations can be made between the ballerina and culture; class, race and nationalism being foremost amongst these. However, Margot Fonteyn's renegotiation of gender norms remains the main focus for this study, looking first at how this was achieved on stage, through her performance and portrayal, and then off-stage, in the public realm she occupied as a world-renowned icon.

## Act 1: The Dancer's Stage

The ballerina's body is the first level of her on-stage performance. It is through the training, contortion, control and presentation of her body that the ballerina creates her art and conveys a story to the watching audience. The ballerina's body might be seen as the preliminary stage through which ideals of gender were communicated to the public.<sup>iv</sup> Feminist discourses have tended to emphasise the ballerinas corporeality as emblematic of her passive, powerless femininity, pointing to the attention directed on to the female body in ballet, which renders the ballerina as object rather than subject.<sup>28</sup> To an extent, this holds true in the case of Fonteyn given the emphasis accorded to her 'perfect bodily proportions' in cultural documentation, frequently seen as her most valuable attribute.<sup>29</sup> Colleagues and newspapers alike praised her embodied physical appearance, associating it with beauty and perfection. Ballet teacher at Sadler's Wells George Goncharov told TIME 'directly I saw her I knew she had a ballerina's head. Her face—she was very attractive with big, dark eyes—seemed to talk to me. She held herself beautifully.'<sup>30</sup> Whilst beauty may be seen as intricately bound up with the ballet aesthetic, in focusing on her physical attributes, and the elegant contortion of the body, Fonteyn is objectified and associated with a traditional ideal of femininity. Fried-Gintis has argued that images of female dancers as young and thin 'metaphorically contained the dangerous sexuality of adult women into the bodies of adolescents' in the context of the post-war period.<sup>31</sup> There was also a sense that to counter the Soviet threat, Western women should represent a departure from the bulky, 'masculinised' Soviet women.<sup>32</sup>

Newsweek reported that 'with a height of 5 feet 4 inches and a weight which holds at about 112 pounds, Miss Fonteyn was fitted by nature for her calling. For ballerinas are born and not made. They can be neither too tall, nor too fat. Their arms and legs must be long, their bodies well-

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<sup>28</sup> A. Daly, 'Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference' (1987) in *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (Middletown, 2002), 288-293.

<sup>29</sup> 'Antoinette Sibley, Anthony Dowell On Margot Fonteyn's Qualities as a Dancer', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwvkyK967Z4>; Frederick Ashton quoted in 'Tributes to Fonteyn' in Anon., *Margot Fonteyn in Australia: A Souvenir to Commemorate the 1957 Visit to Australia's Borovansky Ballet of one of the World's Most Fabulous Personalities and Her Distinguished Colleagues* (1957).

<sup>30</sup> 'Music: Coloratura on Tiptoe', TIME Magazine, (Monday, Nov. 14, 1949).

<sup>31</sup> Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and Culture*, 287.

<sup>32</sup> Tolvhed, 'The Sports Woman as a Cultural Challenge', 308.

proportioned, and their heads must be poised to artistic precision upon their necks. Miss Fonteyn has all these lucky attributes. Her one slight problem has been weak ankles. She has worked unceasingly to strengthen them.<sup>33</sup> Such a breakdown of the strengths and weaknesses of Fonteyn's body parts highlights the extent to which representations of the ballerina echoed of discourses of social control and post-war fear about women's bodies. Indeed, when juxtaposed with widely-disseminated images such as Fonteyn's TIME cover (fig 1) - and the dismembering of female bodies suggested by a visual display of legs and face as separate - male desires to regulate women after the Second World War, and to reassert male dominance after the gains made by emboldened female workers are implied. Thus, in some respects misogynistic ideals about womanhood, in line with the traditional assessments of 1950s womanhood, were communicated through the representation of Margot Fonteyn.

The ballerina's body might, however, be read as 'unnatural', and thus distinct from contemporary notions of ideal womanhood. Despite her perfect proportions, Fonteyn lacked the curves or voluptuousness of the maternal woman. Indeed, some ballerinas might be more akin to the womanly, such as Isadora Duncan, whom choreographer Frederick Ashton described as 'small, round, feminine, voluptuous... appealing- everything I thought and think, dance should be.'<sup>34</sup> However, Fonteyn was girlish more than womanly. Contemporary dance critic James Monahan noted 'the enormous dark eyes, the small vivid features, the olive skin and the small-boned, neat, light limbs.'<sup>35</sup> Thus, Fonteyn might represent a divergence from the bodily symbols associated with womanhood and maternal capabilities, particularly in the post-war period. Fonteyn's physique in many respects openly challenges the dominant discourse of women as 'mothers of the empire.'<sup>36</sup> Susan Bordo argues that such a balletic body brings the female dancer closer to maleness, by de-emphasising her breasts, hips, and stomach; 'taking on the accoutrements of the white, male world may be experienced as empowerment by women themselves, and as their chance to embody qualities-detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control-that are highly valued.'<sup>37</sup> The ongoing paradox that Fonteyn's body remained highly venerated, despite its differences from the likes of overtly curvaceous feminine stars such as Marilyn Monroe, thus highlights the instability of the period's supposedly homogenous gender norms.

In some respects, the traditional ideology of ballet has remained consistent, and thus the negotiation of women in ballet remains as it was at its inception, hundreds of years ago. This chimes of Judith Butler's emphasis on 'gender performativity' suggesting that through 'incessant and

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<sup>33</sup> 'Furor for Fonteyn', *Newsweek* (November 13, 1950). Winifred Edwards Collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>34</sup> D. Vaughan, *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets* (London, 1977), 389.

<sup>35</sup> J. Monahan, *Fonteyn: A Study of the Ballerina in her Setting* (Edinburgh, 1957), 6.

<sup>36</sup> S. Spencer, 'Women's dilemmas in postwar Britain: career stories for adolescent girls in the 1950s', *History of Education*, Vol.29, No.4 (2000), 338.

<sup>37</sup> S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, 1993), 105.

repeated action’ – in this case the physical language of ballet- gender is constructed around the figure of the ballerina.<sup>38</sup> Ballet has been hailed as a conservative, feminine art form, and the romantic plot lines associated with the ballet- and particularly the classical pieces performed by Fonteyn - often render the ballerina as passively feminine and faced with patriarchal expectations such as marriage. Sally Banes has emphasised the perpetuation of the ‘marriage plot’ in ballet, and marriage is a principal message in *Sleeping Beauty*, performed as the centre-piece of the 1949 tour.<sup>39</sup> Given the profound popularity of this performance, breaking box office records visiting Washington D.C., Richmond, Virginia, Philadelphia, Chicago, East Lansing and Detroit, a case can be made for it tapping into public sympathies, and the assertion that women should return to focusing on their domestic role as wife.<sup>40</sup>

However, the reviews and reception favoured the pageantry and spectacle of courtly life presented by the *Sleeping Beauty*, for which patriarchal power was merely a backdrop. Following the hardships of war, escapism in the form of the fairy world Fonteyn delivered on stage struck a chord with Western audiences. The *New York Herald Tribune* noted how Fonteyn had brought ‘the element of spectacle to ballet in America’ and Walter Terry remarked ‘the production of the three-act *The Sleeping Beauty* captures in its settings and stage effects much of the sweeping majestic beauties from the unlikely fantasies one sees in the extravagant ballet lithographs of an earlier day.’<sup>41</sup> Similarly, *TIME* magazine commented of Sadler’s Wells repertoire: ‘all these are ballets reaching to a wide public that cares less for pirouettes than for the pageantry of a world peopled by kings and queens, wicked magicians and good fairies in butterfly-drawn coaches. As usual, the epitome of that world was Fonteyn, who again opened the U.S. tour with *Sleeping Beauty*. She was nimble and fleet, as a princess should be, poised and incredibly effortless.’<sup>42</sup> The high art of ballet was rendered popular as a result of the cultural conflict associated with the Cold War. Western powers sought to show themselves as culturally superior to the Soviet Union, and Margot Fonteyn represented the epitome of this high-level culture.<sup>v</sup> Consequently, to build on Kaledin’s framework, Fonteyn can be seen as fulfilling a social need which might elevate her beyond the traditional stereotype of femininity.

Fried-Gintis has observed the ballerinas association with high art as serving to objectify the ballerina, but this is to remove the ballerina’s agency in delivering art to the masses; as opposed to embodying a work of art. Fonteyn mastered what dance critic Lincoln Kirstein termed ‘the Art of Pleasing’; a comment which highlights the ballerina’s paradoxical position as both the object of

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<sup>38</sup> S. R. Cohen, ‘Performing Identity in The Hard Nut: Stereotype, Modeling and the Inventive Body’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11.2 (1998), 487-489.

<sup>39</sup> Banes, *Dancing Lives*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Ballet Invasion’ *Newsweek* (1949).

<sup>41</sup> W. Terry, *The New York Herald Tribune*, (Monday, October 10, 1949), Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Music: Pirouette & Pageantry’, *TIME Magazine*, (Monday, Sept. 26, 1955).

spectacle – her purpose being to please- and the purveyor of art, both of which have implications for Fonteyn’s negotiation of gender norms.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, whilst theatrical spectacle implies the ballerina falling subject to the male gaze, rendered passive; to attribute art to her performance is to imbue a sense of mastery, skill, and agency suggesting an active femininity in which Fonteyn used her capacity to please to elevate her cultural position.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, there is a sense that Fonteyn was in control of the spectacle, holding power over the audience. Contemporary American critic Alexander Grant was enchanted by ‘Margot’s eyes, speaking right to the back wall of the theatre.’<sup>45</sup> Such a description emphasises the power of her gaze to command the room, creating a reciprocal intimacy between dancer and watcher, thus challenging the commonly espoused feminist notion that the ballerina was the object of the male gaze. Fonteyn differs to the ‘submissive watching and averting of gaze’ characteristic of female balletic behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

In a similar vein, Fonteyn exerted spatial control, commanding the stage. The Observer noted how ‘the large stage presents the dancer with a challenge. She must stride it as a conqueror. It gave Fonteyn the ballerina’s authority.’<sup>47</sup> This echoes of the relationship between spatial control and power proposed in the ideas of Foucault. Whilst the space is arguably controlled, it is the *dancer’s* stage; despite the watching audience, one might argue that her greater ‘knowledge’ – in this case knowledge of the skill and technique necessary to achieve her performance- renders her powerful. Furthermore, discourses which one would expect to overlook the agency of the ballerina actually emphasised her personal control and power. Indeed, she cast a shadow over the choreographer, Frederick Ashton, who might on some level be deemed her ‘creator’ or the ‘artist’ painting on his ‘canvass.’<sup>48</sup> As Walter Terry noted of the *Sleeping Beauty* performance ‘as it should have been, star of the evening was the company’s prima ballerina, Margot Fonteyn.’<sup>49</sup>

Fried-Gintis proposed that ‘representations of female dancers in American popular literature reveal the centrality of control in the post-war image of the ballerina... female ballet dancers rarely appeared in motion.’<sup>50</sup> This is directly challenged by her visual depiction in *Picture Post* in 1950 (Figs 2 and 3), which conveyed Fonteyn in motion. As she leaps through the air, manipulating her body to

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<sup>43</sup> Lincoln Kirstein quoted in *Margot Fonteyn in America: A Celebration: May 18- September 3, 2004*, the Vincent Astor Gallery, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, 40 Lincoln Center Plaza (New York, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> S. A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (London, 2000), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Grant quoted in *Margot Fonteyn in America: A Celebration* (2004).

<sup>46</sup> J. L. Hanna, *Dance, Sex, and Gender* (Chicago, 1998), 160.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Profile- Margot Fonteyn’, *The Observer* (Sunday, October 30, 1949) Winifred Edwards Collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>48</sup> Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and Culture*, 301.

<sup>49</sup> W. Terry, ‘Critics on *Sleeping Beauty*’, *New York Herald Tribune*, undated press cutting, Winifred Edwards Collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and Culture*, 301.

her will, the viewer is drawn to her impeccable skill and strength; characteristically unfeminine qualities. Thus, Fonteyn's ability to publically renegotiate gender norms is implicit. It is highly telling that such a popular publication was prepared to allow the female body to be portrayed as so adept, beyond the domestic and maternal role. A sense of athleticism is conveyed, echoed in LIFE magazine, when ballerinas were even compared to the best ball players of the period; athletes as much as they were performers (fig 4). In the context of the ongoing rivalries of the post-war period, Fonteyn was represented as conveying the strength, skill and agility which was needed in society, allowing the public image of femininity to be juxtaposed against more masculine attributes. Fonteyn's femininity might be more characteristic of the 'plot' than her 'performance', which necessitated her skill, power and autonomy be read alongside her display of femininity.<sup>51</sup>

Fonteyn noted that the most important performances of her life were in Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, making the piece an interesting point of enquiry.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it was as the Sleeping Princess Aurora that Fonteyn conquered America; the exacting Rose Adagio in Act I serving as the pinnacle of the performance. Often the centre of any ballet is a momentous and climactic *pas-de-deux*- an intimate dance between male and female leads- which has been argued as typifying the male conquering the female and manipulating her person to his will; 'an emblem of classical gender asymmetry.'<sup>53</sup> However, the solo performance of the Rose Adagio represents female autonomy and skill. The dance involves potential suitors approaching Aurora one by one and delivering a rose, as the ballerina holds a perfect *attitude*.<sup>vi</sup> Sally Banes has argued that independence is written into the choreography of this Russian imperial ballet; 'she exhibits strength, intellect and power, but she is still constructed as the perfect aristocratic woman – feminine and graceful, as well as regal. She can be demure and modest. But much more important is her ability to command space and to display precision, strength, balance and control – in short, authority.'<sup>54</sup> Fonteyn's modern interpretation takes this a step further, as she exemplifies her control by holding each of the four balances a split second longer than the last, unassisted by the male suitor.<sup>55</sup> Dance critic Alistair Macaulay has proposed that the unassisted balances held on pointe, in attitude, were in fact introduced by Margot Fonteyn.<sup>56</sup> In essence, Fonteyn had freed herself from the male grasp; her capacity to hold the position

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<sup>51</sup> Banes, *Dancing Women*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Margot Fonteyn as Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, 'Dancers World', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ff9wotb7pyM>

<sup>53</sup> Daly, 'Classical Ballet', 291.

<sup>54</sup> Banes, *Dancing Women*, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Margot Fonteyn as Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, 'Dancers World', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ff9wotb7pyM>

<sup>56</sup> A. Macaulay, 'The Sleeping Beauty: A Hundred Years of 'Beauty'', *Dance Gazette*, no.204, (June, 1990).

independently echoing of the burgeoning independence of women in artistic realm and beyond.<sup>57</sup> She highlighted that her skill did not exist relationally with the male; she was an active force.

Newsweek reported that she 'can perform 32 fouettés in 'Swan Lake' and the Rose Adagio in 'The Sleeping Beauty' as if they were the simplest movements in the world. (In layman's language, she can poise herself and whip around on a pointed toe longer than most people can stand still on one foot. And the impression of reserve power and strength she radiates prevents the kind of buck fever that an audience often gets when watching a ballerina who may be preparing for the worst.'<sup>58</sup> Fonteyn's power and autonomy is inherent to her dancing. Unlike the typical ballerina, she is subject to no one but herself; almost super-human in her achievements. Indeed, given Fonteyn's innovative approach, she may be seen as in line with Christy Adair's assessment that 'those dancers and women who have recognised the potential for rejecting restrictions and finding self-determined expression, are proving that the body can be a means to assert one's power'.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Anatole Chujoy remarked in *Dance News*: 'simple, and unaffected, as true greatness always is, Fonteyn knows no limitation in technique. She holds arabesques as long as she wishes to, not as long as she can.'<sup>60</sup>

Fonteyn ascribed autonomy as admirable feminine qualities in a context where feminine behaviour had essentially been colonised by male forces. Wood argues that 'occasionally, women who depart from traditional roles are portrayed positively, but this is done either by making their career lives invisible... or by softening and feminizing working women to make them more consistent with traditional views of femininity.'<sup>61</sup> However, the case of Fonteyn represents a paradox, in that the ballerina starts from a position of femininity, yet is able to add 'unfeminine' attributes which to some extent become her defining characterisation. A case can be made for this being the result of Fonteyn's capacity to fulfil a number of 'social needs', even to the extent that male dance critics were prepared to emphasise her more masculine attributes of skill and stamina as akin- if not superior- to her beauty and grace.

## **Act 2- The World Stage**

Examining the ballerina on the (traditional) stage in isolation, limits her scope to affect and interact with culture. By the late forties, the *Daily Mail* reported that 'she had become one of the greatest dollar-earning personalities in the United States.'<sup>62</sup> In a context where ballet was booming,

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<sup>57</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and More*, 17-41.

<sup>58</sup> 'Furor for Fonteyn', *Newsweek*

<sup>59</sup> C. Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (London, 1992), 40.

<sup>60</sup> A. Chujoy, *Dance News* (1949), Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, *Gendered Lives*, 255.

<sup>62</sup> 'Margot wires home: 'We Made It', *Daily Mail*, undated press cutting, Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.



interknitted with popular culture, the ballerina was elevated to a celebrity status while maintaining a professional persona which was explicitly different to the overtly sexual stars of the day. A famous anecdote repeated in TIME had actress Jean Harlow meeting Margot Fonteyn and mispronouncing the ballerina's name "Mar-got." "No, my dear, the 't' is silent," Fonteyn is supposed to have said. "As in 'Harlot'."<sup>63</sup> The meeting is impossible, given that the dancer was 18 when the movie star died – in 1937- but it is useful in detailing the popular mood, and as TIME pointed out 'the joke meant to show a well-bred lady of the high arts cutting a Hollywood tramp down from big-screen size.'<sup>64</sup> From the public realm, Fonteyn counteracted the precocious sexuality of the likes of Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth, rendering ballet a serious pursuit. The closing moments of the 1933 film 'Dinner at Eight' drive home the harlot connection. At a fancy party, Harlow observes, "Do you know that the guy said that machinery is going to take the place of every profession?" Doyenne Marie Dressler does a double take and replies, "Oh, my dear, that's something you need never worry about."<sup>65</sup> For Fonteyn, ballet was a profession - and whilst it had natural feminine associations- it was perceived as more respectable than the 'dumb-blonde' display of other mid-century stars. Fonteyn represented a challenge to the notion that women should endeavour to please their husbands, focus on the home, or labour in undemanding jobs as opposed to a vocation. In many respects her challenge was not only recognised but supported. Indeed, in 1956 she became Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire; a testament to the profound respect Fonteyn commanded at the public and international level.

Fonteyn's fame hinged on her ballet; perceived as purposeful and socially beneficial in the context of the Cold War, thus sending a message of the power that could be afforded if women engaged in more artful pursuits. Fried-Gintis has cast this in a highly negative light, suggesting that the ballerina embodied a tempered sexuality which might be described as 'sensual' thus devaluing woman's sexual power in a time of female 'containment.'<sup>66</sup> However, Fonteyn might be more exceptionally progressive than the 1920s Flapper-style woman, who sought to challenge patriarchal expectations through her display of sexual and social liberation. Fonteyn's persona remained bound up with her balletic skill, and thus Fonteyn's power stemmed from her profession rather than her body. Indeed, Anne Summers has argued that being a dancer was 'a virtuoso way of being a woman', requiring 'discipline, expertise... the dancer commanded respect and awe. The word 'commanded' was operative. She appeared to control situations and interactions as well as herself.'<sup>67</sup> Fonteyn

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<sup>63</sup> R. Corliss, 'Harlow, Daffy and Ken Kesey's Magic Trippers', TIME Magazine (Nov 01, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Corliss, TIME (2011).

<sup>65</sup> Film: *Dinner at Eight* (New York, 1933).

<sup>66</sup> Fried-Gintis, *Elevated: Ballet and Culture*, 287

<sup>67</sup> A. Summers, 'On Begging to be a Bridesmaid in a Ballerina Dress: some meanings of British Fashion in the 1950s', *History Workshop* (Autumn, 1997), 30.

exemplifies this idea of control and intent; aligning femininity with powerful attributes. Whilst Fonteyn's display was distinctly feminine- she was a keen supporter of Dior's New Look- building on the conclusions reached in the previous chapter, even Fonteyn's popular public characterisation as 'ballerina' might be argued to be innately powerful, in that her public image was that of a skilful professional, rather than a meek or objectified woman, and the fact that she was at the peak of her game only served to heighten her powerful image.

Sports historian Helena Tolvhed, in reflecting upon the depiction of women athletes in the popular press in the 1950s as 'beauty queens' and how 'their good looks, family, romance or general plans for the future were often the focus of the articles, rather than practice, achievements and results related to their sport.'<sup>68</sup> Fonteyn was represented in a different way, with popular publications emphasising her success in the ballet world as reason enough to acquire international praise and respect. Indeed, in the vein of reading mass media 'texts' against the grain, a case can be made to read more into Fonteyn's depiction than as innately feminine. A 1950 edition of Newsweek (Figure 5) depicted an unsmiling, focused Fonteyn, dressed in full costume tying her ballet shoes; a chair used as a prop as if to suggest she is in rehearsal. Her whole body features on the cover- emblematic of the nature of ballets corporeality- but her arched, pointed foot- her unequivocal professional tool- takes the centre of the image. Indeed, the message conveyed is of Fonteyn's commitment and immersion in her role as ballerina. Whilst a nod of lipstick is evident, the implication is not of a woman who cares to exude femininity for the benefit of her husband- nor is she rendered weak, or even objectified as a sexual object. Unlike the magazine covers of other fifties female stars, such as actress Rita Hayworth (fig 6) who can be aligned with the Tolvhed's 'beauty queen' marker, Fonteyn's public display was oriented towards her career. Furthermore, her image was not akin to the sexualised representation of other late forties ballerinas, as seen in LIFE magazine in 1949 (fig 7), which depicted American ballerinas Ruth Ann Koesen and Melissa Hayden rolling around provocatively. Fonteyn's public image lacked the gimmicks that had been employed to de-emphasise the power of other ballerinas and actresses.

It is questionable whether ballet was, in itself, a profession suited to the 'feminine' sphere. Emphasising dexterity and de-individualisation, given the physical role acted out, Dance historian Peter Stoneley has argued that ballet provided women with an 'an acceptably enclosed and miniaturized realm in which to have a career.'<sup>69</sup> This works from the premise, however, that Fonteyn was an 'amateur' ballerina; the characterisation of which 'seemed magically to resolve the problem' of women working exclusively outside the home.<sup>70</sup> Yet, Fonteyn's restitution of ballet as a

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<sup>68</sup> Tolvhed, 'The Sports Woman as a Cultural Challenge', 311.

<sup>69</sup> P. Stoneley, 'Ballet Imperial', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 32 (1 January, 2002), 146.

<sup>70</sup> Stoneley, 146.

professional rather than amateur endeavour had significant implications for a period typically characterised as championing the feminine mystique. Fonteyn displayed an image of female success, available not only to those who watched her dance- but to everyone who read the newspapers. Challenging the narrative of female marginalization and de-individualisation, the persona of 'Margot Fonteyn' was born, as Fonteyn noted in her autobiography.<sup>71</sup> Her proliferation in national publications such as Newsweek, TIME, and Picture Post as someone who had conquered her field had considerable implications for ideals of womanhood. Quite apart from Wood's suggestion that women who departed from traditional norms were resituated as innocuous by making their career lives invisible, Fonteyn's career was internationally and publically elevated to a very high stature, thus highlighting the instability of forties and fifties gender norms.<sup>72</sup>

Fonteyn's 1949 TIME cover (fig 1) makes for an interesting point of analysis. A poised Fonteyn, crowned in regal gold, planted her powerful gaze with controlled intent. In many respects she was overtly feminine; her face depicted as beautiful, delicate and youthful in pastel tones. However, the background- stage curtains superimposed with Fonteyn's elegant yet strong legs, held in a perfect *arabesque*- draws the viewer to the deeper message of the cover: this was a woman who had conquered her art, re-defining ballet as a profession- and here she was on the cover of one of the world's most respected publications conquering the public sphere.<sup>vii</sup> Whilst the imagery continued to resonate with a degree of femininity, even this was an altered version of femininity, distinct from the traditional associations of powerlessness, given the obvious power she conveyed from the cover of TIME. Furthermore, an argument can be made for the perpetuation of hints at Fonteyn's femininity as a form of 'cultural repetition.' This borrows from the discourse analysis carried out by Sarah Mills in relation to the repetition of unwanted forms of behaviour in Victorian etiquette guides, and how this pointed to the instability of appropriate behaviour.<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, the continuous emphasis placed on Fonteyn's femininity in spite of the more powerful elements implicit in her representation, might represent the instability of gender relations- rather than a sign of repression; a desire to temper Fonteyn's overt challenge by rooting her in the familiar.

Yet a sense of liberation from the home was evident in Fonteyn's lived performance. The message she conveyed was not of the benefits of domesticity and motherhood. Indeed, she was unmarried until the age of thirty-six (1955) and remained childless. When asked of her potential matrimonial aspirations she told interviewer Iris Ashley 'I suppose I've been too busy' ... 'and probably, too, I have never met anybody whom I wanted sufficiently to marry. Ours is a wonderful way to see the world. We have everything arranged for us, we meet people everywhere and we are paid to do it.

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<sup>71</sup> M. Fonteyn, *Margot Fonteyn: Autobiography* (London, 1975), 182.

<sup>72</sup> Wood, *Gendered Lives*, 255.

<sup>73</sup> S. Mills, *Discourse* (London, 2004), 79- 81.

If I were married, I couldn't enjoy travelling unless my husband came too. Even then I'd be too busy to see him.<sup>74</sup> Fonteyn transcended domestic limits, her career becoming her key focus, and she highlighted to the world the opportunities available to women beyond traditional roles.

Dance theorist Wendy Oliver has noted that as a job, 'the ballerina has as much agency as many other workers, and indeed, more than those who labor at routinized manufacturing jobs and others who must punch a time clock.'<sup>75</sup> The freedom and autonomy inherent to Fonteyn's career represented a stark disparity to the norm, and indeed she was elevated beyond the traditional female attributes in her association with male qualities such as competitiveness. Newsweek reported 'although most ballerinas – or other theatrical artists – usually remark that their favourite role is the one they are performing at the moment, Miss Fonteyn is frank to admit that her pet "is the one I'm having most success in at the moment."<sup>76</sup> Her frankness rings of both a competitive edge to succeed, and a supposition that success might be measured in monetary terms, rendering ballet as a profession more than a decorative art form. She noted in her autobiography her 'bulldog tenacity to complete successfully anything on which I have once embarked.'<sup>77</sup> In a way similar to another of the greatest ballerinas in history, Anna Pavlova, Fonteyn performed herself as a 'as a woman of action' who 'kept a high profile in progression she emphasised as serious.'<sup>78</sup> That Fonteyn viewed her dancing as work is implicit, as denoted from her confession to Newsweek: 'When I haven't done any work...my feet don't feel like feet.'<sup>79</sup> Her feet and legs were not just her artistic instruments; they were her workers tools.

A case can be made for the elevation of Fonteyn beyond traditional gender norms- for both men and women- because of the 'social needs' she fulfilled on a public level, beyond that which she delivered on stage. Indeed, for women- Fonteyn fulfilled a social role as emblematic of the opportunities available for the internationally successful ballerina; a position attainable purely through hard work. Indeed, a version of Fonteyn's life story- that of ordinary, middle class Peggy Hookham- as she was born- was frequently called upon in cultural documentary.<sup>80</sup> She thus represented a real and attainable vision for women and girls; a real-life fairy tale in a woman's body. Angela McRobbie has proposed that that the striving heroine of ballet fiction inspires 'fantasies of

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Iris Ashley, undated cutting, Neil Ambrose Collection quoted in Daneman, *Margot Fonteyn*, 290.

<sup>75</sup> W. Oliver, 'Reading the Ballerina's body: Susan Bordo sheds light on Anastasia Volochkova and Heidi Guenther', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Women's Health in Dance (Winter, 2005), 44.

<sup>76</sup> 'Furor for Fonteyn', *Newsweek*.

<sup>77</sup> Fonteyn, *Autobiography*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> J. Fisher, 'The Swan Brand: Reframing the Legacy of Anna Pavlova', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 44, Issue.1 (Summer, 2012), 63.

<sup>79</sup> 'Furor for Fonteyn', *Newsweek*.

<sup>80</sup> 'Profile- Margot Fonteyn', *The Observer* (October 30, 1948).

achievement' for disempowered women, and a case can be made for Fonteyn's real-life fulfilment of this role.<sup>81</sup> In a context where girls and women were surrounded by representations of themselves which identified the benefits of a life of marriage and children, Fonteyn represented a point of difference. Whilst she was not an active feminist, her cultural contribution can be seen advancing women's freedom.

However, it was not purely for 'marginalised' women that Fonteyn became idolised. Enlightened masculine voices similarly recognised her significance- if for her advancement of different social needs. A male brain surgeon reflected upon his meeting Fonteyn when she visited one of his patients: 'Fonteyn was the daughter's idol (indeed she was everyone's idol in London that year as the bombed city fought back from the austerity of the war).'<sup>82</sup> Fonteyn became the spearhead of the offensive to re-assert Britain's cultural might; to align itself with America as a cultural force against the Soviet Union, but primarily to highlight its resurrection from the bleakness of wartime severity. As the fifties began, Fonteyn was praised in America and England alike for the power inherent in such an achievement. The New York Times expressed the Daily Mail's view that 'She has conquered another continent.'<sup>83</sup> Newsweek entitled her cover edition with the line 'Margot Fonteyn: Britannia Rules the Waves' (fig 5). Indeed, that she was given personal praise – rather than the Sadler's Wells ballet collectively – is significant in heightening her power. Ninette de Valois, founder of the Sadler's Wells and Fonteyn's mentor noted of Fonteyn's secondary role on that first America tour; 'women are good for the pioneer work' and indeed her partner Robert Helpmann was dramatically overshadowed by Fonteyn.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, her commercial use was remarkable for both nations; Fonteyn earned \$300,000 for the British treasury- a record season, and much needed in the economic downturn.<sup>85</sup>

Tolvhed has argued that women who achieved national success were represented in a way which seemed to 'override' the meaning of gender, opening up opportunities for viewing women in a positive way as innately capable.<sup>86</sup> Fonteyn's ballet performance in itself made Fonteyn successful, but her secondary role as a 'pioneer' earned her status as an active subject and defender of the nation, quite apart from the passive femininity commonly associated with the period. TIME noted how in London, cartoonists put Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Ernie Bevin and Sir Stafford Cripps into tutus

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<sup>81</sup> A. McRobbie, 'Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement' in Desmond, J., *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (North Carolina, 1997), 207.

<sup>82</sup> A. J. Walt, 'A Piece of Mind: A Surgical Curtain Call', *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.265, No.20 (May 22, 1991), 2677.

<sup>83</sup> *The New York Times* quoted in *The Daily Mail*, (Tuesday October 11, 1949), Winifred Edwards Collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>84</sup> Fonteyn, *Autobiography*, 48.

<sup>85</sup> *The Times* (November 7, 1949), Undated press cuttings collection, RBS Archives.

<sup>86</sup> Tolvhed, 'The Sports Woman as a Cultural Challenge', 312.

and hinted that they would do well to 'make their next visit to the U.S. on tiptoe.'<sup>87</sup> Fonteyn's capacity to ascribe ballet; something traditionally regarded as overly feminine, with a sense of cultural or even political power, highlights the burgeoning opportunities for women beyond traditional gender norms. Furthermore, Tolvhed's argument can be taken a step further in that she acquired *international* success; she made the 'captured' nation of America 'love her captors.'<sup>88</sup> It seemed that America were equally ready to accept that it was 'women's place to foster and develop the cultural forces of civilization', as dancer Ruth St. Denis had noted in the 1930s.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, such a role became all the more important given the blossoming Cold War. On a Western scale, Fonteyn exemplified the cultural might of the capitalist West against the communist East, redefining herself as socially useful to the extent that her gender was overlooked by the world's media.

## Conclusion

This thesis has, in essence, been a study into the renegotiation of stereotypes; an attempt to re-imagine the performance of gendered behaviour and the reception to gender norms in the post-war and Cold War era in a more positive and progressive light, through the figure of internationally successful ballet super star Margot Fonteyn. Diverting from the master narratives of feminine powerlessness and women's entrapment in the domestic sphere, there is room to study 1950s women as interacting with a greater, more diverse collection of narratives and ideas than has been assumed, and to elaborate on women's social use and the power this accorded women to break free from traditional gender norms. This study has not purported to suggest that Fonteyn symbolised every woman in Britain and North America, nor that she was a figurehead under which marginalized women might rally. Instead, it is to contribute to a burgeoning literature which liberates 1950s women from relative silence in the historical record, and a distinct lack of influence in their own time.

The ballerina has been seen as the epitome of the marginalized woman; held up as the ideal of a traditional feminine vision. However, re-reading Fonteyn 'against the grain'; a woman who should-given her situation as both ballerina and 1950s woman –be powerless, a picture emerges of her capacity to rework femininity and re-define woman's engagement with the public sphere. Fonteyn surpassed the traditional associations of femininity with powerlessness, and built on the traditional feminine stereotype by ascribing femininity with skill, strength, power and independence. Her association with high art and national and international prestige and success in a period which venerated cultural achievement meant she was rendered 'socially useful', and could therefore escape conventional definitions of gender. Her cultural significance was amplified by her situation securely in

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<sup>87</sup> 'Music: Coloratura on Tiptoe', TIME (1949).

<sup>88</sup> A. Chujoy, *Dance News* (1949).

<sup>89</sup> R. St. Denis, *New York Times* (June 4, 1932), Undated press cutting collection, RBS Archives.

the public sphere. She represented an icon and a symbol of the power that was available to women and girls, attainable through hard work, and re-aligned ballet's version of bodily display as a respectable profession.

Indeed, the extent to which the media built on her own 'performed' renegotiation of gender norms is telling. Jackie Byers has noted how 'in the post-war period previously sacrosanct gender roles began to alter, and struggles over the meaning of female and male became particularly evident in the cultural atmosphere. Change was imminent but not yet explicitly acknowledged. Now, with the clarity of hindsight, we can see this upheaval in progress in the cultural documents of the period; mass-media texts of the period provide evidence of a concern with the domestic sphere, participating in what Tom Schatz has characterised as "a radical upheaval in the nature and structure of American ideology."<sup>90</sup> Working from the assumption that the media does not purely reflect culture, but has a degree of control over the ideals and norms it publicised, a case can be made for the media's acceptance, or at least awareness, of Fonteyn's challenge to societal norms in terms of gender. It might be argued that Fonteyn's continued association with femininity acted as a buffer to the innate challenge she embodied. However, the capacity for Fonteyn to move beyond traditional female stereotypes is implicit, and offers a valuable contribution to scholarship on women in the 40s and 50s.

This study has been enriched by the inclusion of a number of discourses beyond the purely historical, contributing to a new, exciting genre of social and cultural history which sees sources as being more extensive than ever before. Indeed, assessment of Fonteyn purely on the level of her historical cultural representation 'off-stage' would have been to ignore the vital element of her dance, and vice-versa. To examine her on-stage and off-stage life in isolation would be to negate the true cultural resonance of Fonteyn, and indeed there are further elements of her performance and representation in the contexts of both spheres which were unfortunately beyond the scope of this study. As a woman who became an ambassador for the fashions of Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent; who danced into her sixties with her famous dancing partner Rudolf Nureyev and interacted with South American politics- admittedly through the influence of her Columbian diplomat husband- Fonteyn represents further elements of female progression. As Fonteyn's legacy in the ballet world continues to grow, it is our duty as historians to re-situate her relationship with culture and society in the distinct historical moments that defined her, and more importantly – that defined women, as they started to take centre stage.

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<sup>90</sup> Byers, *All that Hollywood Allows*, 8.

Appendix



**Figure 1:** Margot Fonteyn on the cover of *TIME*. From *TIME* Magazine (November 14, 1949).

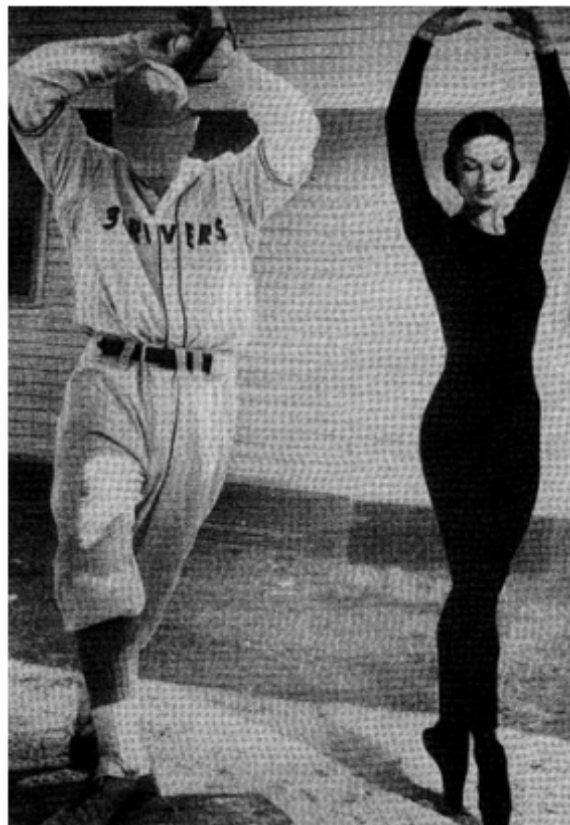


**Figure 2:** 'Seconds of Movement: The Use of Points in a Rapid Turn', *Picture Post*, (14 October, 1950), Winifred Edwards Collection, The Royal Ballet School Archives.

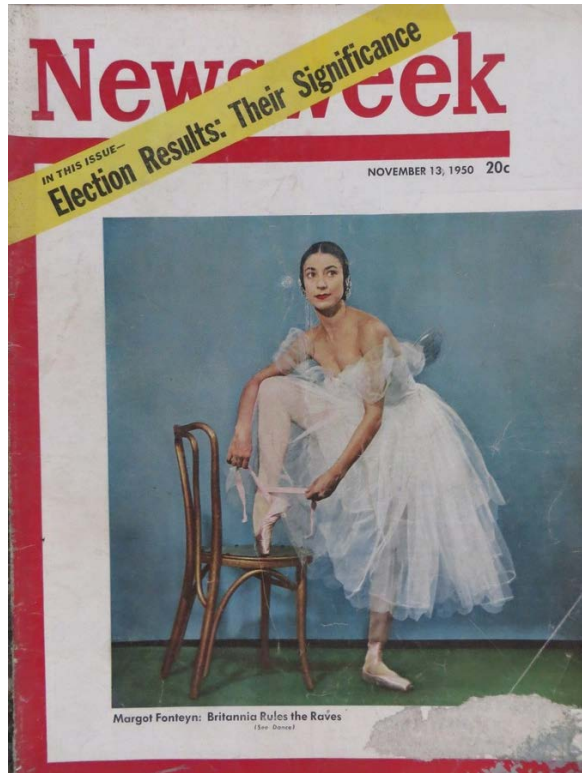




**Figure 3:** 'Time and Space: A Fractional Analysis of a Leap through the Air', *Picture Post*, (14 October, 1950), Winifred Edwards Collection, The Royal Ballet School Archives.



**Figure 4:** 'Ballplayers and Ballerinas Have a Lot in Common', *Life magazine* (April 11, 1949).



**Figure 5:** Margot Fonteyn on the cover of Newsweek. *Newsweek*, (November 13, 1950), Winifred Edwards Collection, The Royal Ballet School Archives.



**Figure 6:** Rita Heyworth on the cover of Newsweek. *Newsweek* (August 23, 1948).



**Figure 7:** Ruth Ann Koesen and Melissa Hayden in 'Ballet Beauties: American Company Has Young and Lovely Dancers', *LIFE Magazine*, (November 3, 1947).

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> A close interest and personal connection with the Royal Ballet (previously Sadler's Wells) and the person of Fonteyn has brought this project into being. Aged 11- 15 I was a student of the Royal Ballet School, and have grown up fascinated by Fonteyn.

<sup>ii</sup> A number of challenges have been implicit in using this particular source bank. The Royal Ballet School (RBS) Archive- the location of the Sadler's Wells Archive- is in the process of cataloguing the

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vast array of sources associated with the company's 84 year history. Consequently, the majority of sources found were uncatalogued and disorderly. Furthermore, none of the records have been digitised; most sources being found in extensive scrapbooks or files of press cuttings. In order to find the sources used in this study, a search for 'Margot Fonteyn' was carried out in the Archives search engine, which brought up various locations for which press cuttings on Fonteyn might be found. Whilst this raises queries about the sampling of popular literature housed at the RBS archives, my assessment was that the scrapbooks and files allowed for a wide geographical scope- taking cuttings from all over the world, and had been rigorously collected thus lending themselves to the investigation of Fonteyn as an international figure.

<sup>iii</sup> For further feminist perspectives on ballet see:

- Carter, A., 'Dying Swans or Sitting Ducks?' *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 4:3 (1999), 91-98.
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<sup>iv</sup> For further reading on the balletic body see:

- Davis, K. (ed.), *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London, 1997).
- Bordo, S., *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, 1993).
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<sup>v</sup> For further reading on ballet and culture in the Cold War see:

- Caute, D., *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2005).
- Gunther Kodat, C., *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Jersey, 2014).
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<sup>vi</sup> *Attitude*: Position on one leg with the other lifted; the knee bent at an angle of 90 degrees and well turned out so that the knee is higher than the foot. In the case of Fonteyn, the supporting foot is on pointe

<sup>vii</sup> *Arabesque*: position on one leg with the other lifted; the knee straight and the leg extended such that the leg is at a 90 degree angle to the supporting leg