

'WE DANCE, WE DON'T LIVE'. BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN DANCE STUDIES

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In 2000, BBC television broadcast a documentary about the British ballet dancer Alicia Markova, celebrating her 90th birthday. The presenter of the programme, dance critic Clive Barnes, told the audience in an admiring tone that Markova had lived the life of a nun. Markova herself confirmed his statement later in the programme and added that a dance career like hers would not have been possible in any other way. For her, marriage or motherhood would have meant the end of her dancing and she could not image it otherwise. A true dancer lives for her art and nothing else.

In the world of television and popular culture there exists an image of the female ballet dancer as a nun, who gives up everything for a dancing career.¹ But it does not stop there. In the professional world of ballet there is also a shared belief that for female dancers in particular dancing and living do not go together. New York City Ballet dancer Toni Bentley, who published a diary of her professional life during one winter season, literally says: 'We call "living" what we don't do – we dance, we don't live. After all, we are allowed none of the decorations – no love life, no food, no liquor, no late nights, no drugs. This is the general rule. Of course we are human and forget

ourselves periodically and lapse into "living" habits, but the inevitable repercussions always let us know when living is interfering with dancing!' (1982, p 18). Several months later she writes:

Today is my birthday. I'm twenty-three years old, and I think I've discovered my problem – not the cure, but the problem. It is not dancing that has been making me miserable, it is what dancing does not allow that I've missed. (...) I am starved for people, life, thoughts, conversation, alternatives to my NYCB world. I need only a few hours out in the real world to return joyful and by choice to my tendus. But I must have that choice' (1982, p 117–118).

During the season that Bentley kept her diary she struggles with the question why she is forced to choose between dancing and living. She does not find an answer and decides to leave the company, because, according to the diary, dancing no longer makes her happy; she wants to live.

Bentley's struggle is the starting point of the present article. Intrigued by the statements in

her diary I interviewed female professional ballet dancers and asked them, among other things, how they dealt with the seeming contradiction between dancing and living. I purposely write 'seeming' here; because contrary to the suggestion that is raised by Bentley's somewhat pathetic statement professional dancers obviously manage to live. In this article I will show how the belief in the contradiction between dancing and living is part of a dominant discourse within the occupational culture of the ballet world and serves to maintain unequal power relations between dancers on the one hand and artistic directors, teachers and other 'gatekeepers' on the other. Secondly I will describe how individual dancers deal with the dominant discourse, simultaneously accommodating and disputing it. The third aim of the article is a discussion of one of my research methods and the material it produced: life stories. I will maintain that it was precisely the use of this particular method that enabled me to develop a view on the contradiction between dancing and living that puts the statements by Alicia Markova and Toni Bentley in a new light.

A DANCER'S VOICE

I conducted interviews with professional ballet dancers as part of a larger ethnographic study of the occupational culture of the ballet world in The Netherlands between 1992–2000.² Focussing on body images and body practices I used a combination of different research methods: formal interviews with male and female dancers, observations of daily classes and rehearsals, conversations backstage and during touring trips, analyses of performances, and interviews with professionals like nutritionists,

physiotherapists and doctors specializing in dancer's injuries. An important part of the research material consisted of biographical interviews with twenty-five female professional dancers and nine dance pupils. The life stories that I wrote on the basis of this interview material were complimented by a collection of dancer's autobiographies (De Mille, 1951; Fonteyn, 1975; Bentley, 1982; Brady, 1982; Seymour, 1984; Kirkland, 1986; Porter, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Kent, 1997 Bull, 1999; Bussell, 1999). In the argument of the present article the life stories I constructed with the dancers and the written autobiographies will be central.

As a method the collection and analysis of life stories, or biographical research as it is sometimes called (Roberts, 2002), is not uncommon in anthropological and sociological studies. The origins of the method date back to the 1920s, when anthropologists started to collect life stories of individuals from Native American cultures that were about to die and needed to get their stories 'on record'. Sociologists of the 'Chicago School' did the same with individuals from marginalized groups, like immigrants, and so-called deviants like criminals or alcoholics. The motivations to use life stories were both epistemological and political. The practitioners believed that the method produced better, more realistic, material about the daily realities of the groups under study and offered the marginalized, which did not have a voice, an opportunity to make them heard through the words of the researchers.

In the 1980's a strong impetus to the use of life stories in the social sciences was given by the French sociologist Daniel Bertaux, who advocated the method as an alternative to the determinism

of both structural–functionalists and Marxists who dominated the social sciences in the 1970's. According to Bertaux biographical research offered an antidote to the sociologist's one–sided attention to macrostructures that resulted in a negligence of individual subjectivity. Biographical research made it possible to study individual experiences and understand human agency against the background of larger social processes (Bertaux, 1981).

With the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences the focus shifted towards life stories as social constructions. Researchers working from a constructionist perspective did not see the method as a better way to understand reality, but as a means to show how individual people constructed and interpreted their social worlds (Josselson and Lieblich, 1993). Nowadays both approaches, – the realist view that life stories reflect a lived reality of individual experience and the constructionist view that they must be understood as fictional texts about the individual's interpretation of her of his reality, – exist side by side rather peacefully, although supporters of the different views may clash occasionally.³ In the daily practice of research projects biographical researchers usually take a pragmatic stance, leaning towards one or the other perspective without limiting themselves to either. They accept that life stories refer to real events and experiences, but turn to the constructionist view to help them analyse how the tellers shape the telling of these events and experiences (Roberts, 2002, p 7–8).

My decision to make extensive use of (auto) biographical material was prompted by my own preference and epistemological considerations. According to life story theorists, personal identity

is that which emerges in and through personal narratives; by telling others about ourselves we conceive of and make sense out of our lives and ourselves (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).⁴

Because the world of ballet can be considered a subculture with its own rules and regulations, it is hard for outsiders to get insight in a dancer's identity and to understand her motivations and sacrifices. Until recently anthropological or sociological studies of the ballet world were non–existent and personal stories of professional dancers were very seldom heard publicly.⁵ Collecting life stories enabled me to get descriptions of the daily life of ballet dancers and their identities in the words of the participants themselves.⁶

Individual people tell their own personal stories by drawing on and referring to the stories of the (sub) cultures they are part of. They conceive of themselves in accordance with the values that are dominant within them. The identity they present is an identity that is shaped to the constraints and demands of these cultures (Smith and Watson, 1996). But individuals are never merely clay to be moulded by institutionalised discourses. They choose and select from the narrative prototypes that are available and in their choices and selections they are actively shaping their lives within its social and cultural context. As an anthropologist I am interested in cultural constraints and social structures, but I do not believe that structures determine individual lives. Using biographical material offered me a possibility to escape the problem of determinism versus voluntarism. Biographical research can show how individual lives are shaped by social structures, while also leaving room for

individual variation and change.⁷

There was a third reason to choose a biographical approach. Because I consider anthropology an interpretive endeavour, I was interested in the meanings that ballet dancers give to their experiences. Institutionalised discourses offer people the tools to make meaning, giving them the words and concepts to describe and make sense of their lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2001). Biographical research is based on the view that individuals are the (re) creators of meanings, which form the basis of their everyday life. The method is therefore well suited to bring together material on actual experiences and events with people's perceptions and the meanings they give them.⁸ And finally, I was drawn to the 'messiness' of the method. Life stories and (auto) biographical accounts are always multi-layered and multi-dimensional, inviting the researcher to reflect on contradictions and inconsistencies. The resulting analysis gives room to the ambiguities and complexities that are part of human life.⁹

BALLET AS A 'GREEDY INSTITUTION'

In the world of ballet there is an undisputed expectation that dancers live for their work, or calling as it is usually perceived. Professional dancing is extremely time- and energy-consuming. The daily reality of morning classes, afternoon rehearsals and evening performances does not leave much room for other activities. This pattern already starts at school, where young dance pupils are expected to spend all their free time in the dance studio. There is also the idea that a true dancer does not want anything else in life but dancing. Total dedication characterizes

the true dancer. Ballet is her great love and everything else comes second place. The contradiction between dancing and living can therefore be seen as a matter of time and identity. True dancers do not have time for anything else but dancing and the true dancer does not even want anything else.¹⁰

For an anthropologist or sociologist studying the ballet world Lewis Coser's concept of the 'greedy institution' comes immediately to mind. The American sociologist Coser introduced the concept in 1974 to describe 'organizations and groups which (...) make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality. (...) Their demands on the person are omnivorous' (1974, p 4). According to Coser modern society offers individuals many different roles and responsibilities that are sometimes contradictory or conflicting. Because most social institutions lay only partial claims, individual people usually manage to fulfill their different roles rather unproblematically. But some institutions, like the army or certain religious groups, are 'greedier' than others. Greedy institutions demand an exclusive and total loyalty from their members and absorb them completely. In exchange they offer a specific identity and a notion of belonging to a privileged group. This feeling of privilege functions as a symbolic boundary that separates members from non-members.

Within the occupational culture of ballet the total dedication to the profession is self-evident. Because of the demanding nature of the job, active involvement in a life outside the profession is difficult. As a result the world of professional dancers becomes smaller, but therefore

even more special. In his portrait of the New York City Ballet the American journalist Joseph Mazo has called this the 'Chosen People Mystique'(1974, p 103). He writes:

The dance theatre is not far removed from the convent. There is the same mortification of the flesh, the same adoration of saints – the canonized great of the company, whose roles are now executed by others – the same conditioning of beliefs, the obedience to superiors, the absolute knowledge that one has been called to serve an ideal beyond the power of those who remain outside the walls. And often, as in all limited groups, there comes a sense of superiority to those outside, a knowledge that we can do things that they can't. The knowledge is correct, the superiority justified ' (Mazo, 1974, p 105).

For dancers the 'chosen people mystique' is part of the discourse that shapes their lives. It is important to realize that the mystique is not an idea or myth, but a reality that is made concrete in the training methods and the system of auditioning and casting. In the daily class dancers develop and acquire the language and the manners of the occupational culture of the ballet world. The long years of training do not only teach young dancers the technical capacities of the profession, but also instruct them in the right attitude and direct them to their place in the hierarchical order (Hall, 1977; Buckroyd, 2000). A case in point are the French terms that are used by the ballet teacher to explain the steps and positions, having both a practical and a symbolic meaning. The use of the typical ballet jargon refers to the long tradition of ballet and its origin

in the 17th century French courts. Besides it gives teachers and pupils an opportunity to distinguish themselves from the 'ordinary' world. As a pupil in Hall's research stated: 'It's just tradition, I guess. If we used English, it wouldn't seem like ballet' (Hall, 1977, p 198). Knowledge of the French terms for the steps serves as an admission ticket to the exclusive world of ballet.

Dance teachers, ballet masters and artistic directors are the 'gatekeepers' to the world of ballet (Smith, 1998). They position themselves literally between the dancer and the dance, because they are the ones who decide whether she will be dancing. This process starts at the first audition, when a young pupil applies for a place at the school. It continues in the auditions of the ballet companies where dancers try to find a position. Even when a dancer has managed to establish her place in a company, the process continues in the casting system which grants choreographers and artistic directors the power to decide who will dance a particular role. The permanent dependency of dancers creates authoritarian relations within the ballet world, where teachers and artistic directors are credited with power and knowledge and dancers are expected to be obedient and available. The reward for their dedication is the admission to the exclusive world of ballet. The 'chosen people mystique' soothes the bitter taste of permanent dependency.¹¹

DEALING WITH THE DISCOURSE

In telling their own personal life stories people always make use of already existing stories to put their individual experiences into words. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in their

introduction to a collection of articles on the everyday use of life stories: 'Only certain kind of stories become intelligible as they fit the managed framework, the imposed system. The recitation is, in effect, prepackaged, prerecited. In this way, the institution writes the personal profile, so to speak, before the person enacts and experiences it as "personal"' (1996, p 9). A greedy institution like the ballet offers an almost ready-made story that is hard to ignore. The dancer who wants to function in the hierarchical world of ballet without suffering unbearably from the system of dependency needs to acquire the dominant story as her own and live it. And the anthropologist who collects the life stories of ballet dancers will hear the dominant story over and over again.¹²

In the daily reality of professional ballet dancers dance takes up a lot of space. All the dancers I interviewed dedicated most of their time and energy to their work. But this did not mean that they did not have a life. On the contrary, their stories show how they were constantly looking for a balance between the passion that was their profession and other parts of their lives. On the basis of their stories I distinguish three ways in which female dancers chose to deal with the seemingly contradiction of dancing and living. The first way I name, after the title of the autobiography of the British dancer Darcey Bussell, a *Life in Dance*. By finding life in the world of ballet a major problem – the lack of time – is solved. Dancers who need contacts and activities outside the world of ballet usually chose one of the other two ways. In the second they accepted that dancing and living do not go together and chose to alternate. In the third way dancers continued their professional careers, but limited

their ambitions and gave other parts of life more importance. Dancers who chose the second or third way of dealing with the discourse usually expressed an explicit critique of the 'chosen people mystique'. In the next paragraphs I will illustrate this with examples from the life stories of the dancers.

In her diary Toni Bentley writes about being 'starved for people, life, thoughts, conversation', suggesting that these could not be found within the boundaries of the ballet world. Many of the dancers I interviewed did not agree with her. For them the world of ballet offers enough possibilities for a rich social life with interesting people. A dancer does not even need to leave the studio for a fulfilling love life. A look at the list of names and addresses of a major ballet company shows many double addresses of company members living together. One of my interviewees, Anne van Tol, looked back with contentment on her 'life in dance'. She was a dancer with the Nederlands Dans Theater and with Scapino in the seventies and eighties and continued working in the latter company as a ballet master. She told me:

'When I was with the Nederlands Dans Theater I had a serious love affair with another dancer and later, with Scapino, the head of the technicians fell in love with me. That's how I always managed to combine life with my dancing. My lover was part of my profession. That was very stimulating. He knew what I did and could help me with it. I have never had any private life outside the dance world and I never needed one; dancing and living went together.'

With Het Nationale Ballet, the biggest ballet company of The Netherlands, the official retirement age for dancers is thirty–eight. The extensive interviews in many Dutch newspapers with Jeanette Vondersaar who stayed with the company until she was forty–six and other news items about dancers who are deeply sorry when a serious injury forces them to quit dancing create an impression that all ballet dancers want is to stay in the company for as long as possible. My research shows differently. For many dancers the so–called early leave–taking, i.e. before they are thirty–eight, came from a conscious decision to finish their dancing career, because they want to have the time and energy to do other things besides dancing. As far as I know there are no official studies done about the duration of dancer's careers, but looking at the available figures it becomes clear that the vast majority of professional dancers quit dancing long before the official retirement age. The motivations to quit are divers. A small study, done in France amongst a group of dancers with different backgrounds, showed that most of them stopped dancing because of a 'change of interest' (Leach, 1997, p 47). Sometimes an injury forced them to quit, but mostly getting injured stimulated them to look more critically at their careers and decide it was time for a new phase in their lives. They choose the second way of dealing with the discourse.

These are the dancers who preferred to find the 'people, life, thoughts, conversation' outside the world of ballet. They alternated between dancing and living in different periods of their life. In the first years of their career they dedicated themselves completely to the dance. They were so fulfilled by their dancing that they did not

experience feelings of deprivation or frustration. When these feelings started to arise they felt they have to make a choice. Tessa Cooke had been a dancer with the Nederlands Dans Theater for nine years when she decided to quit. With her twenty–seven years she was rather young to end her career. Cooke:

I was seventeen when I auditioned and was accepted into the company. I was three years with the Nederlands Dans Theater 2 (young dancers age 17–21) and those were really my best years. I was curious and I loved all those new experiences. It was such a funny life. I was never home. I had a room in the city, but I was never there. Between rehearsals and performances I went to my parents' house, where I raided the fridge. I was always dancing. I loved it! Nothing else to think about, just dancing. Too tired to do anything else. I really liked that then.

After those three years Cooke was promoted to the big company, Nederlands Dans Theater 1. There, her first two years were just as busy. But after that things quieted down. She was dancing less, because in the big company there was much more competition for every role. Cooke said about this period: 'Suddenly I had time to think. I was much more confronted with my choices and myself. With the younger group there was simply no time for that.' She fell in love and had a serious relationship. Cooke:

I enjoyed my dancing more because now there was someone I could share it with, share my life with. But at the same time feelings of frustration started to grow, because I became aware that there were many things

in life I could not do, because my dancing was so demanding. I realized that it was really difficult to dance at this level and do other things in life. I became more critical. I often wondered if I really wanted to do a particular ballet, if it was interesting enough. I love dancing, but it really is extremely demanding.'

Her doubts became stronger and at some point she decided to leave the company, because she wanted to have the time and energy to do other things in life. Daniëlle Valk was a dancer with Het Nationale Ballet for more than nine years. She told me that the last years of her career were characterized by a feeling of constantly running out of time. She was longing for other activities, a social life outside the company, but the way her work was organized did not permit this. Valk:

Before, I never understood what people meant when they talked about having to give up so much for their dancing. But when I started to go out more with non-dancers and had my first serious relationship, there were times when I wanted to be with them. And I never could, because there was always a rehearsal or a performance that came first. Sometimes after the performance, when I was on my way home and I saw people in restaurants or bars having a good time, I became so angry.

During this period Valk's attitude towards her profession started to change. She started to question the prominence of the 19th century ballets in the repertoire and became also more critical of the way the company was organized. She applied for other jobs with companies that

presented more contemporary work. At the same time she discovered that the pain she was suffering in one of her toes had become a chronic injury. Valk:

I asked our physiotherapist how long he expected me to be able to continue dancing with that injury. He told me that with the proper care I would still have three to five dancing years left. Then I thought: But do I really want this? I was sick of the 19th century repertoire, it was no challenge anymore. And I became more and more annoyed with the way things were run in the company, how the dancers were treated. So I decided to quit. Looking back now, I think that was a very good decision. I stopped dancing while I was still enjoying it, but I have danced long enough to be able to look back with satisfaction. I do not think I have missed out on life and I am still young enough to start another career.

Like Tessa Cooke, Daniëlle Valk stopped dancing before she was thirty years old. Apart from the reasons mentioned above, female dancers have another motive to choose for a passionate but short career: motherhood. Unlike nuns, most female dancers are not willing to give up motherhood for their dancing. The question is not so much whether they will have children, but like all other career women, when they will have them. Dancers have the advantage of starting their careers early. Many dancers have their first job with a company by the time they are eighteen, so at thirty they can already look back on a twelve years career. Contemplating children can be the starting point for a re-thinking of their career and their ambitions. At the time of my

research I interviewed many female dancers who were thinking about getting pregnant. A few years later most of them had stopped dancing. There is a third way in which female dancers deal with the dominant discourse of the contradiction between dancing and living: integration. From the stories it became clear that dancers who wanted to continue dancing while at the same time valuing other things in life often went through a process of adjusting their dancing ambitions. A critical stance on the 'chosen people mystique' usually accompanied this process. Twenty-eight years old Monique Duurvoort was a member of the corps de ballet of Het Nationale Ballet when I interviewed her. She told me that she had never felt comfortable with the mystique, which she herself attributed to the fact that she came from a mixed-race family where ballet was unknown. During her training years she had kept contact with her former school friends, because she did not want to be locked up in the ballet world. Now she said that mingling with non-dancers had always helped her to keep things in proportion. Duurvoort:

I think the pressures of a ballet career are often exaggerated. As dancers we have a full schedule, but there are also quiet times. I always use those to see friends and go out. Dancers are often so full of themselves and their profession. In some ways this is necessary because of the demanding nature of ballet, but I like to pursue other interests as well. I enjoy mingling with people who come from completely different backgrounds. Some dancers are into dance twenty-four hours a day. I am not like that.

Other dancers started to evaluate the importance of dance in their lives when it became clear to them that they had reached a certain level. Jeannette den Blijker, also a corps de ballet dancer with Het Nationale Ballet, told me:

I always wanted to become very very good. I wanted to be a soloist and I knew you had to work extremely hard to get there. But I knew I could do it. That was my aim and I survived because of that. In the first years with the company I was always working. I learned all the roles, even if I was not cast in any of them. I was a real fanatic.

But then her development came to a standstill. She realized that she would not be promoted to a higher position in the company and this notion created a certain distance towards her profession. At the same time she started to get other interests outside the world of dance. Looking back she said:

I now think it is much healthier when you do other things besides ballet. Outside the company and the dance world. It helps you to stay sober. But it is possible that it's precisely because I did these other things that I never made it any higher than the corps.

There is also an integration of dancing and living when a female dancer decides to have children and continue her career. This is not uncommon, especially not in bigger companies where dancers can get a temporary leave of absence because there are enough other dancers to fill their place. In a company like Het Nationale Ballet dancing mothers are present in all the ranks from corps de ballet to soloists. Brenda

Bood was young – twenty-five – when she decided she wanted to have children. She told me:

I was ready for it. I always knew I wanted kids and I did not want them when I was older. I love dancing and I want to do it as long as possible, but as a dancer you know that there will be an end to your dancing career. I want to do other things as well and therefore I think I better have my children when I am still young.

Several years later she had another baby and she continued dancing after that.

From the stories of the female dancers it is clear that a dancing career demands much dedication. But unlike Alicia Markova these dancers stress that it is important not to limit oneself to dancing. They utter warnings against the dangers of 'living with blinkers on'. This is the same warning that can be read in the autobiography of Darcey Bussell (1999). Bussell was only twenty-nine when she published her life story, giving a strong impression that she considers it her mission to offer a counterbalance against the old-fashioned image of the dancer as a nun, presented by Markova. Bussell agrees that as a dancer one needs to be passionate about the profession.

Dancers have to be obsessive about ballet, it has to be what they love doing most and what they are most determined to succeed at. But they have to be able to keep it in proportion. I find that it's just as important for me to be able to cut off and relax as it is to be able to work hard, not only because it

allows my body to recover but because it gives me a rest from the pressure. I have to strive to be normal in order to keep the job in proportion (Bussell 1999, p 4).

In other words, for Darcey Bussell a true dancer keeps a balance between dancing and living.

LEARNING FROM LIFE STORIES

Collecting and analysing life stories is a time-consuming research method. For the anthropologist who collects life stories of professionals who have very little time and constantly changing schedules the method can be aggravating as well. I often despaired of my methodological choice, because it was hard to find active dancers who had the time to sit down and tell me all about their lives. To make matters worse, the stories I heard sometimes did not seem to add anything to the existing literature and the autobiographies, making my attempts to collect and construct life stories futile and superfluous. But looking back now I am convinced that the biographical approach and the material it produced have been of immense value for the research project, giving me insights that I would not have had otherwise.

Collecting and constructing life stories enabled me to get descriptions of the daily reality of ballet dancers in their own words. Considering the closed nature of the ballet world this is a valuable achievement. In their stories the dancers gave me a 'presentation of self' that was usually less polished and one-dimensional than the published autobiographies. The latter were often written with a specific mission in mind, be it to present the general public with an image of the ballet dancer as a hard working performer who

dedicates her whole life to her art or to counter-balance this image and show how even dancers can be intelligent creatures who are interested in life beyond the ballet. But in both the autobiographies and the life stories it is possible to find many layers and ambiguities, thereby illustrating the complexity of human life.

The individual stories offered a remarkable variation in the possible answers to the question that was the starting point of this article: how do female professional dancers deal with the contradiction between dancing and living? Some dancers endorsed Toni Bentley's statement ('we dance, we don't live'), stressing the demanding nature of their work. Others classified her statement as exaggerated and affected, distancing themselves from it and stating that it only served to mystify the profession. At first the contradictory answers were confusing, but gradually I started to realize that the variation in the reactions offered more than just the different answers to the question how dancers manage to combine dancing and living. By comparing the stories, and looking for differences and similarities I could also find out more about the symbolic boundaries that the institutionalised discourses of the ballet world put to its members.

By taking the individual stories together and comparing them the power of the dominant story became clear. The statement that true dancers dance and don't live presented itself as a narrative prototype that shaped all dancer's lives and identities. The ballet world is, indeed, an institution that 'writes the personal profiles' of its members. All the dancers I interviewed confirmed the greediness of the ballet world. They described the demanding nature of the

profession and told me at length about the restrictions that were the result of this. But they differed considerably in their adaptation of the story that total dedication was necessary to be a true dancer. Their attitude towards the 'chosen people mystique' varied as well. A comparison of the individual stories showed that dancers have many different ways in which they deal with the dominant story, thereby underscoring its omni-presence and power, but also the possibilities for disruption and dissociation.

I first became aware of these differences when I re-interviewed a dancer after having interviewed her a few years before. In the time between the two interviews she had left the company and started another career. In both our conversations this dancer spoke highly critical about the demands of the profession in time and energy. But in the first interview she stressed that she had always wanted to dance and it was all her own choice, while in the second interview the emphasis had shifted to the unequal power relations in the ballet world that, according to her, made it impossible for dancers to make their own choices. She pointed out that the permanent dependency of dancers condemns them to a life of immaturity and availability. She criticised the mystique of the chosen as a means to disguise and explain away the unequal power relations.

It is not surprising that ex-members of a greedy institution differ from members in the ways they position themselves vis á vis the dominant discourse. And it is not necessary the merit of the life story approach that makes these differences obvious. But in this case the story not only presented a difference in position between several

dancer's lives, but also a difference within one life. Because of what happened with the story of this particular dancer and the impressive shift in her position, I became aware of the possibility of internal changes in the individual life stories. I no longer limited myself to a comparison between the stories of different dancers, but started to look for shifts within one dancer's life.

By carefully studying and analysing each individual story I started to see the differences and shifts in position that were present in almost all the dancer's lives. Dancers who had stopped dancing and dancers who were already in the profession for some time when I interviewed them often described a life that could be characterized by different choices at different times. Remember Tessa Cooke and Danniëlle Valk who both dedicated all their time and energy to the ballet, until the moment came when they started to experience this total dedication as oppressive. Both dancers mentioned other factors, like the changes in the repertoire and an injury, but the main reason they quit dancing was because they wanted to do other things outside the world of ballet. Monique Duurvoort made it clear that she had always needed to have a balance between her work and the activities outside the dance world. Both Brenda Bood and Jeannette den Blijker initially chose to live a life of total dedication to dance. But gradually their interests changed and other activities became more important. They continued dancing, but shifted their ambition and now stressed the necessity of a balance between dancing and living.

The stories of the dancer's lives helped me to understand the dominance of the 'dance is life'

story and to appreciate the greediness of the ballet world. But the biographic nature of the material made it also possible to see patterns of manipulation, dissociation or resistance against the dominant story. Taken together the life stories showed how the lives of individual dancers are shaped by the social structures of the ballet world and its demands. But a careful analysis also made it clear that there are possibilities for individual variation and change. For Alicia Markova there is only one choice: a true dancer lives like a nun. Sixty years later Darcey Bussell presents another choice: a true dancer keeps a balance between dancing and living. My research shows that there is no such thing as 'the only choice' or 'the true dancer'. The close examination and analysis of the life stories demonstrate that ballet dancers make different choices during their dancing careers and occupy shifting positions towards the image of the true dancer. The possibility of changing choices and shifting positions throws a new light on the dominant story of the dancer who gives up everything for her art and the 'chosen people mystique' that makes this sacrifice acceptable.

NOTES

- 1 The classical example is of course the film *The Red Shoes* (1948) and, more recently, the film *The Turning Point* (1977). In both films a ballet career is presented as so time-consuming for the female dancer that personal relationships, and a satisfying love life in particular, are impossible.
- 2 The study resulted in a book *De bovenbenen van Olga de Haas. Achter de schermen van de Nederlandse balletwereld* (The thighs of Olga de Haas. Behind the scenes of the Dutch ballet world) (Aalten, 2002). For an explanation of the book's title see Aalten (1998). Parts of the results have been published elsewhere (Aalten, 1997; Aalten, 2004).

- 3 In 1995-1996 the *Newsletter Biography & Society* published several articles on the controversy between realists and constructionists (see also Davis, 1997). At the 1998 World Congress of the International Sociological Association Daniel Bertaux himself accused the constructionists in strong words of an a historical and apolitical stance.
- 4 This is not the place to go into the debate that is going on among social scientists about the relation between life stories and the definition of self. It is sufficient to state here that life stories or personal narratives are the format through which individuals constitute and express their selves and identities to others in interaction, thereby making it possible for social scientists to see interrelations between individual identities and social structures.
- 5 When I started the research I could only find one article on the sociologization of the ballet dancer (Hall, 1977). Later an article on social hierarchies in the ballet world (Dietz, 1994) and a comparative study on international networks in four ballet companies (Wulff, 1998) were published. In the absence of anthropological and sociological studies I made use of several portraits of ballet companies by journalists (Mazo, 1974; Stevens, 1976; Gordon, 1983) to formulate my own research questions.
- 6 This is congruent in with the original strength of the biographical method as established by the sociologists and anthropologists who first introduced it. When one tries to get 'the voice from within', especially in the case of a closed community like the ballet, collecting life stories is an obvious choice. See for an elaboration of this particular epistemological aspect of the method Bertaux (1981), Gluck and Patai (1991), Tonkin (1992), Behar (1993)
- 7 This aspect of the life history method has been of particular interest for feminist researchers, who saw a possibility to study structural constraints on women as a group, while at the same time paying attention to individual differences and possibilities. See for example Stanley (1992), Gluck and Patai (1991) and Smith and Watson (1996).
- 8 Interpretation can be considered a central concept in life

story research and it has become even more central with the growing importance of constructionist approaches. See for further discussion for example Denzin (1997) and Roberts (2002).

- 9 One of the reasons why the biographical methods is still somewhat contested within sociology is that the material it produces can be rather 'messy'. Life stories are never a straight forward account of a life. They present the researcher with contradictions that usually do not fit neatly into theoretical concepts or schemes. See for the problems of analysing life stories Langness and Frank (1981) and Plummer (2001).
- 10 In this sense professional dancers are comparable with high performance athletes, who start also very young and dedicate most of their time and energy to their sport.
- 11 I am obviously not describing the world of dance in general, but focussing on the institutional world of ballet. Freelance dancers who usually work in small groups or specific projects often spend as much time and energy on dancer, but they do so without the kind of 'mystique' that I am describing here. Their situation falls outside of the scope of my study.
- 12 For the researcher there is much value in the repetition of certain themes and stories. When a specific theme comes up regularly in different interviews, the anthropologist knows that this might be a sign of its significance in the dominant discourse. But as a researcher I am as much interested in the idiosyncracies in the stories, because these may point at a disruption of the dominant discourse or even at forms of resistance against it, either individual or collective (see also Smith and Watson, 1996).

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