

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Victorian Era Ballet Performers and Gender Roles Exhibition

By

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August 2022

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social  
Sciences

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## Introduction

This exhibition examines nineteenth-century English ballerinas and the coinciding gendered themes of the era. My thesis is in the form of a traveling museum exhibition proposal on the professional lives of ballerinas during the Victorian Era in England. A "traveling" exhibition generally includes pieces from various collections. A traveling exhibition would allow a larger audience to enjoy and learn from the collection because it would be more mobile and accessible. This exhibit offers people a new way of looking at and experiencing Victorian ballet. Ballet is often associated with fashion, beauty, and effortlessness. While there are truths to these observations, ballet has a gritty side, especially when ballet first became popular in Great Britain. Viewers may be surprised by the poor working conditions of the corps de ballet and even the mistreatment of star ballerinas. Viewers should come away with their own observations about gender roles in Victorian England, the idea of ballerinas as celebrities, and ballet as an art form.

Both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Opera House have extensive collections of ballet-related items. The Theatre and Performance Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum is one of the largest dance material collections in Europe. At the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011 there was an exhibition titled, "Invitation to the Ballet: Ninette de Valois and the story of The Royal Ballet."<sup>1</sup> This exhibition showcased a selection of materials from De Valois' own ballets. Here the viewer journeys through the foundation of the Royal Ballet in the late 1920s to the present day.

There are also exhibitions focusing solely on costumes. For example, in 2021, the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City had an exhibition entitled

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<sup>1</sup> Overview of exhibition: <https://www.britain-magazine.com/features/history/an-invitation-to-the-ballet/>

“Ballerina: Fashion’s Modern Muse” about ballerinas’ impact on fashion.<sup>2</sup> Ballet-inspired exhibitions of the past either encompassed the broader history of ballet throughout Europe or focused on one particular part of the art form. My exhibition is narrowed down to a span of approximately one century and geographically to one country.

My thesis should prove essential for public history. I hope that by looking back to the gender-defined roles of the Victorian Era, current museum-goers could reflect on contemporary gender roles within and beyond the performing arts. Because the project is in the form of a traveling museum exhibition, I will hopefully reach more viewers and broaden their thoughts on gender roles concerning Victorian Era performers. The attraction to the general public is the opportunity to learn more about ballet as an art form. They may also be interested in how gender roles during the Victorian Era may have influenced the concept of gender moving forward throughout British history.

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<sup>2</sup> Overview of exhibition: <https://www.fitnyc.edu/museum/exhibitions/ballerina.php>



# Exhibition Objects Catalog

## *Physical Objects*

- 1. Stage Costume (in three parts) for Françoise Prevost, created 1912, Wilhelm, London, worn by Adeline Genee in *La Danse*, Metropolitan Opera House, New York (1912) and London Coliseum, 1914.<sup>3</sup>**



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<sup>3</sup> Housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the Theatre and Performance Collection.

**2. Pointe Shoe Slippers, owned by Emma Livry, 1860.<sup>4</sup>**



**3. Pair of Pointe Shoes, Owned by Marie Taglioni, worn in St. Petersburg, Russia, Satin with silk trim, leather and cotton lining, leather sole, 1842.<sup>5</sup>**



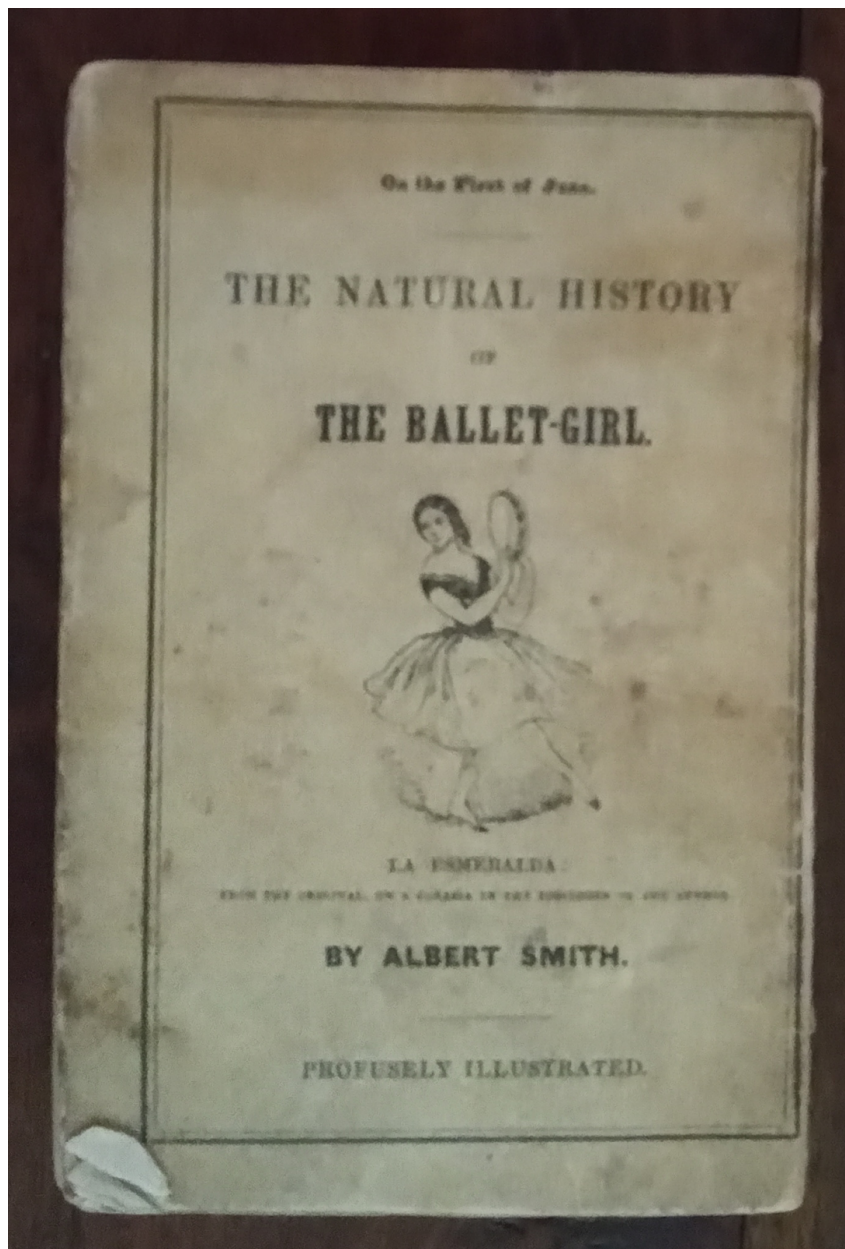
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<sup>4</sup> Photograph provided by Gaynor Minden.

<sup>5</sup> Housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the Theatre and Performance Collection.

*Print*

4. Smith, Albert, *The Natural History of the Ballet-Girl*, London, England, David Bogue Publishing, 1847.<sup>6</sup>



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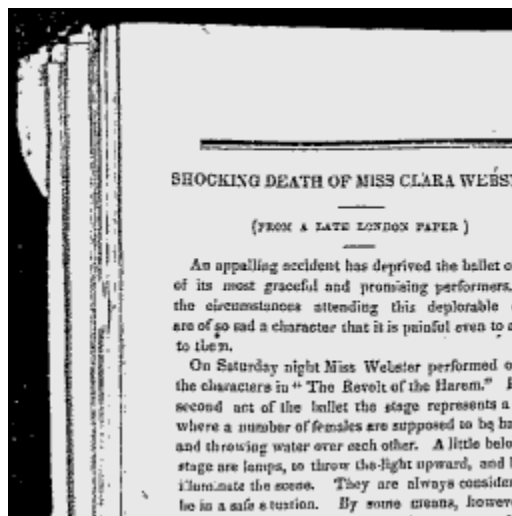
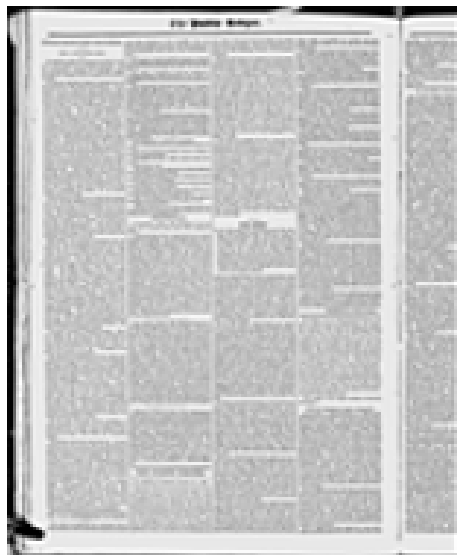
<sup>6</sup> One copy housed at the University of Chicago Helen and Ruth Regenstien Collection of Rare Books Special Collections.

5. Poster for the Royal Italian Opera Performance of the Opera *Fidelio* and the Ballet *Eva*, Royal Italian Opera, Printed by M.S. Francis, height 76 cm x width 51 cm, Covent Garden, England, performance date April 24, 1855.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Housed at the Royal Opera House Poster Collection.

## 6. The Public Ledger Newspaper, The Shocking Death of Miss Clara Webster, March 18, 1845.<sup>8</sup>



### SHOCKING DEATH OF MISS CLARA WEBSTER

(FROM A LATE LONDON PAPER.)

An appalling accident has deprived the ballet of its most graceful and promising performers. The circumstances attending this deplorable event are of so sad a character that it is painful even to allude to them.

On Saturday night Miss Webster performed on the characters in "The Revolt of the Harem." In the second act of the ballet the stage represents a hall where a number of females are supposed to be bathing and throwing water over each other. A little below the stage are lamps, to throw the light upward, and to illuminate the scene. They are always considered to be in a safe position. By some means, however,

<sup>8</sup><https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=59&dat=18450318&id=cSA1AAAAIBAJ&sjid=GicDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6310,1978758&hl=en>.

Transcription of the article:

\*Important lines bolded\*

“SHOCKING DEATH OF MISS CLARA WEBSTER”

(FROM A LATE LONDON PAPER)

“An appalling accident has deprived the ballet of one of its most graceful and promising performers. All the circumstances attending this deplorable event are of so sad a character that it is painful even to allude to them.

on Saturday night Miss Webster performed one of the characters in “The Revolt of the Harem.” In the second act of the ballet the stage represents a bath, where a number of females are supposed to be bathing and throwing water over each other. A little below the stage are lamps, to throw the light upward, and better illuminate the scene. They are always considered to be in a safe situation. By some means, however, **a portion of Miss Webster’s muslin dress, as she lay in the bath, caught the flame of a lamp. Feeling the fire, she sprang up and rushed upon the stage. The motion fanned the flame, and almost in an instant the whole of the slight and inflammable material of her dress was a mass of fire. With piercing shrieks she sought for safety among her companions on the stage. For a moment they surrounded her; but the frightful spectacle the unhappy girl presented made them shrink from the contact with her. It was fortunate they did so, as then nothing could have prevented their own dresses catching fire; and the consequences would have been indescribably terrible. Never ceasing to rush wildly about the stage, and apparently losing all presence of mind, Miss Webster approached the side wing. A carpenter instantly seized her in his arms, disregarding the dancer, took her off the stage, and throwing her on the ground, extinguished the flames. He was himself greatly burnt in the effort.**

All had passed so rapidly, a few instants only elapsing from the time Miss Webster sprang from the bath till her exit from the stage, that **the audience were bewildered. The rapidity and the terror of the incident made it appear like a frightful illusion. The consternation of the house, however, was extreme, and shrieks burst from many of the ladies present. After some delay it was stated by Mr. W.H. Paybe that hopes were entertained that Miss Webster was only slightly injured, and the ballet was allowed to proceed.**

**Miss Webster was conscious immediately after the occurrence. She was frightfully burnt about the arms, bosom, and face, and suffered extreme agony. Her mother, who was present in the theatre, was one of the first to attend her. “My child,” she said, “if I had but been in the wings, I could have saved you with my cloak.” The sufferer replied, “Yes, mamma, you could.”** After medical assistance had arrived, Miss Webster was conveyed to her apartments in Upper Norton-street, Regent’s Park, and Mr. Liston and Dr. Marsden were called in. Everything was done to relieve the pains of the sufferer, and for a time hopes were entertained of her recovery. On Monday Mr. Cooper, the

stage-manager of Drury Lane, wrote a letter to the paper, stating that Miss Webster was out of danger, and that her benefit would take place on the following Monday. The result showed that the relatives of the sufferer had permitted their hopes to deceive them. Her medical attendants seemed never to have doubted that she had received mortal injury. She died at 2 o'clock on Tuesday morning.

An inquest was held on Thursday morning. **When her remains were viewed by the jury it was apparent how severe she had suffered. Her face, neck, and arms were much blistered and discoloured. Some artificial flowers were in her hair. No members of the Drury Lane company were present.**

The Coroner, in remarking on the case, highly commended the courage and humanity of the carpenter, and hoped something would be done to reward him. Speaking of the number of lives lost by the fire, Mr. Wakely said that a very slight precaution would render muslin dresses inflammable. A preparation of muriate of ammonia would effectually prevent ignition. A piece of muslin had been sent him by Mr. Hodson of Great Portland-street, got up with a kind of starch he posed selling, which would render it unflammable. The muslin was here exhibited, and held to the flame, but would not ignite. That invention he thought well worth attention. He would recommend, also, that a network of wire should be placed over the lamps so as to prevent like accidents in future.

**The jury, fully concurring with the coroner's remarks, expressed an opinion that at present sufficient precautions were not taken against accidents to performers on the stage. Their verdict was "Accidental Death."**

**Miss Webster was in her twenty first year. It is only during the last two seasons that she had become so great a favourite with the public, and had given promise of such excellence in her profession. She was the half-sister of Mr. Webster of the Haymarket, her father having been married three times. Her style of dancing was remarkable for its neatness, elegance and finish.** In the pantomimic action of the ballet she was without a rival for espieglerie, expression, and vivacity. In person she presented a marked contrast to the foreign artistes. Her complexion was light, and her face arch in its character and round and blooming. Her figure was short, but extremely airy, and delicately proportioned. The benefit announced is still to take place on Monday for her relatives. The carpenter has been temporarily provided for by the management."

6. *La Sylphide* - Royal Swedish Ballet 2012. Choreographer: August Bournonville, Music: Herman Severin Lovenskiold. Staged by Frank Andersen, Eva Kloborg. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg0T8O80bM4>

7. Chalon, Alfred Edward and Lane, Richard James, *Marie Taglioni, La Sylphide*, lithograph, colored by hand, London.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum no. S.2610-1986.



8. Newspaper print of Lola Montez's enthusiastic reaction by American audiences, monochrome lithographic print, *The Herald Newspaper*, London, approximately 1840.<sup>10</sup>



9. *Madame Taglioni's Dancing Class*, ink and watercolor on paper, London, England, late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Library of Congress online format.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum.

10. *Print depicting Clara Webster in The Beauty of Ghent, L'Enfant*, lithographic print, London, England, 1844.<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> The New York Public Library Digital Collections Prints depicting dance collection.

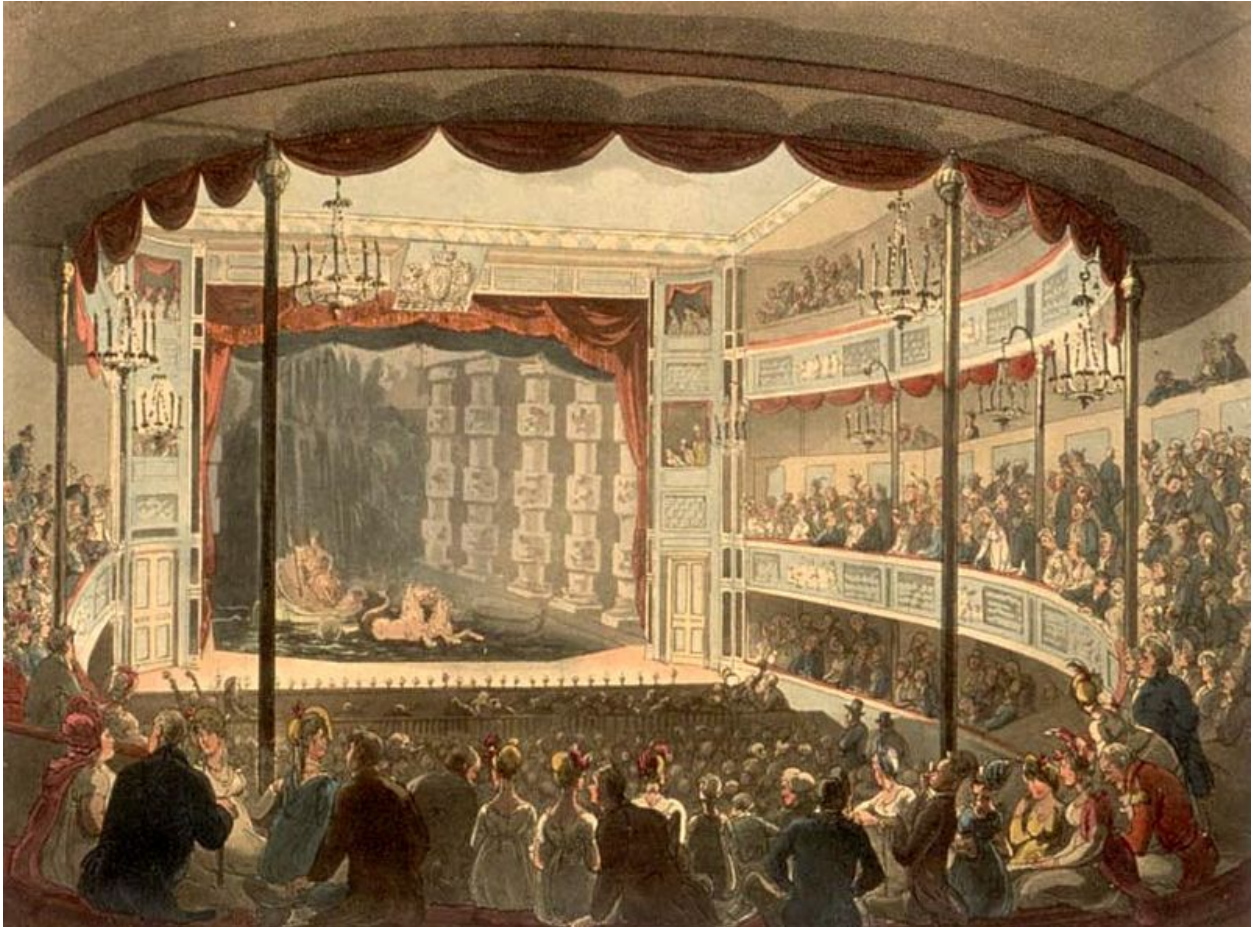
11. *Print of the celebrated Pas De Quatre, composed by Jules Perrot as danced at Her Majesty's Theatre, lithograph, London, July 12, 1845.*<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum no. E.5033-1968.

12. Print of Sadler's Wells Theatre, Engraving published a plate 69 of the *Microcosm of London* (1810), Architecture by Augustus Charles Pugin, 1808.<sup>14</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

13. Ballerina Katti Lanner, lithography by Adolf Dauthage, 1861.<sup>15</sup>



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<sup>15</sup> Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



14. Ballerina Katti Lanner, Photograph, as choreographer at the Empire Theatre, London, England, 1895.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> Vintage Pointe.

## Virtual Exhibition Link

<https://www.artsteps.com/view/627bc70fd8a3fb7eefaa2be8?current>  
[User](#)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> To enter the exhibition, click on the doorhandle.

## Telling a Story through Audio Recording

### Stage Costume

#### **How Dancer's Movements Are Either Enhanced or Inhibited by Costuming:**

This costume was worn by Adeline Genee in the first scene of *La Danse* as the character of Françoise Prevost. There are three distinct parts to the costume: dress, headdress, and shawl. She danced a Passepied, which translates to passing feet. This dance is comprised of quick, neat footwork. The long dress may have concealed some of the footwork in a way that a tutu would not have. But the dance was meant to impress the audience, and the costume added to the elegance of the whole scene.

The fabrics have rich layers of silk brocade of silver and metallic gold with cotton net trimmings. The deep blue silk chiffon stole has a pattern in metallic gold and is stitched onto the left shoulder of the dress. Had the stole not been attached to the dress and simply draped over one shoulder, it surely would have fallen off due to the quickness that Genee moved. There is also a small gold signet ring above the rear hem that gathers the back of the dress to allow for freedom of hands while dancing. The costume is embellished with glass gems, metal braid fringe, and fake pearls that would have caught the stage light in a way that glimmered out onto the audience, especially with the fast past moves of Genee. The costume is inspired by the fashion of the early to mid-eighteenth century. It has a close-fitting bodice, stiffened with metal boning, that extends into a deep point in the front and fastens in the back with metal hooks. The sleeves are elbow-length to reveal some hand motions but do limit mobility a bit.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stage Costume (in three parts) for Françoise Prevost, created 1912, Wilhelm, London, worn by Adeline Genee in *La Danse*, Metropolitan Opera House, New York (1912) and London Coliseum, 1914. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O106247/costume-theatre-costume-wilhelm/>



## Pointe Shoe Slippers, owned by Ballerina Emma Livry, 1860

### The History of Pointe Shoes:

Pointe shoes were first invented in the 1730s by Paris Opera Ballet dancer Marie Camargo. The ballet slipper allowed for more movement with leaps and fast-paced steps that were not previously accomplishable in the old, heeled ballet shoes. Pointe shoes gained popularity in the 1830s with Italian and French ballerinas, especially Amalia Brugnoli and Marie Taglioni. During this Romantic Era of ballet, the tips of pointe shoes were square-toed and covered in satin, which did not provide adequate support for dancers. Taglioni was the first ballerina to dance a full-length ballet, *La Sylphide*, in leather-soled, tight-fitting satin slippers. There was some darning on the sides and underneath the shoe, but not on the tip.

For this reason, quick turns and short balanced poses were the only moves completed on pointe. The modern pointe shoes with reinforced tips were not invented until later. The moves allowed by the shoes conveyed character and emotion and gave the appearance of floating across the stage, which aligned with the ideals of romantic ballets. Pointe work was meant to expand the role of the female lead character. Male characters were earthbound and captivated by the ethereal beauty and grace of the idealistic female. In the late 19th century, pointe shoes were standardized when Italian shoemakers reinforced pointe shoes with stiff boxes, and cardboard insoles strengthened with leather. This shoe model was exported to Russia, where they were used in ballets such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, in which long balanced poses were worked into the choreography with the help of the new pointe shoes. England once again looked to Russia for ballet inspiration and adopted this new form of pointe shoe.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Guiheen, Julia. "The History of Pointe Shoes: The Landmark Moments That Made Ballet's Signature Shoe What It Is Today." Pointe Magazine, August 4, 2020. <https://pointemagazine.com/history-of-pointe-shoes/>.

This particular pair of pointe shoes was owned by Emma Livry, one of the last ballerinas of the Romantic ballet Era and a protegee of Marie Taglioni.

### **Pair of Pointe Shoes, Owned by Marie Taglioni, worn in St. Petersburg, Russia**

#### **The Ethereal Woman: Marie Taglioni**

Marie Taglioni is remembered and revered for her ballet work on pointe. She was not the first ballerina to dance on pointe, but she developed and refined the genre of pointe shoe dancing. She was born in 1804 in Stockholm, Sweden. Her father, Filippo Taglioni, was a well-known dancer and choreographer, and her brother was also a dancer whom Marie often partnered with. Her father was strict with her training, usually six hours of daily practice.<sup>20</sup>

In 1827, at the age of 23, Marie made her debut at the Paris Opera, performing in the *Ballet de Sicilien*. No other ballerinas of her period had achieved the lightness of her pointe work and the strength of her technique. She starred in the first full-length ballet en pointe, *La Sylphide*, in 1832 and led the era of Romantic Ballet and the ethereal style. This style includes curved arms overhead in port de bras, with hands framing the face and legs in fourth position on pointe. She performed in Paris for the next ten years and became famous both as a ballerina and in her character acting.<sup>21</sup>

She was one of the first true celebrities of the 19th century in Europe. Women began emulating her hairstyle, and little girls played with *La Sylphide* dolls. The most interesting story

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<sup>20</sup> Raftis, Alkis. "Marie Taglioni." *Detailed Biography - Marie Taglioni*, <http://marietaglioni.orchesis-portal.org/index.php/texts/detailed-biography>.

<sup>21</sup> Terashima, Kendall. "Marie Taglioni: The First Sylph." *The Ballet Herald*, 23 Apr. 2021, <https://www.balleteherald.com/marie-taglioni-the-first-sylph/>.

happened after her last performance in Russia (in 1842) when a pair of her ballet shoes were sold, cooked, and in the end, eaten by a group of ballet fans.<sup>22</sup>

### **Marie Taglioni *La Sylphide* Lithograph**

#### ***La Sylphide:***

*La Sylphide* is a dramatic Romantic ballet chronicling the story of a young Scottish man who falls in love with a sylph when he is soon to be married. The dramatic aspect comes in when the sylph dies after the young man captures her. The impossible love between a human and a spirit was further solidified by Taglioni's en pointe performance. The role displayed Taglioni's lightness and delicacy to show the ethereal nature of the Sylph floating across the stage. The Sylph is a symbol of ideal femininity: spiritual, exquisite, and unattainable. The pointe work contrasted with the rustic movements of the Scottish peasants.

This was the role that elevated Taglioni to stardom during the Romantic Era of ballets. This era replaced the classical style of ballet, which featured ornate costumes. Romantic Era ballerinas wore long, white, billowy tutus that flowed around the dancer and across the stage in an elusive way.

### **Print depicting Clara Webster in *The Beauty of Ghent, L'Enfant* lithograph The Tragic Story of Clara Webster:**

Clara Webster was born into a dancing family. Her father, Benjamin Webster, was a dancer and taught his children from a young age. Clara was the sixth in the family to dance at the Theatre Royal when she debuted on May 19th, 1830.

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<sup>22</sup> Raftis.

Leading up to her debut at the Theatre Royal, she was a young ballet girl in London. Clara arrived in London during the first year of Queen Victoria's reign. Clara became an official member of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1841. This was one of London's most famous playhouses of the time. The advent of gaslighting in theaters added to the stage effects but was very dangerous. A false step near a light could cause the tulle costume to go up in flames. This was an accepted risk of a ballet-girl's profession and unfortunately claimed many lives including Clara Webster and Emma Livry- protegee of Marie Taglioni. It was not until 1855 that theaters were inspected for a risk of fire by the Lord Chamberlain's discretion.

On Saturday, December 14th, at the Theatre Royal performance of *The Daughter of St. Mark*, Clara was playing the role of Zelika, the royal slave. Clara's dress touched one of the flames and was on fire. She saw what happened and jumped to her feet. The dancers around her went to put out the flame, then realized the danger to themselves and moved away. A stagehand named Daniel Coyle finally caught her and threw her to the ground stamping out the flames. The curtain was not drawn for any of the ordeal, so the audience witnessed the entire event. Her legs, chest, and hands were severely burned and her face was blistered and scorched, but her hair was untouched. She lived for another three days and passed away on December 17th, 1844, at half-past three on Tuesday morning. No blame was placed on the theater or theater owner Alfred Bunn.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Guest, Ivor. *Victorian Ballet-Girl: The Tragic Story of Clara Webster*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1980, 111.

### **Dancing with Death: The Shocking Death of Clara Webster**

The death of 21-year-old Webster was a disturbing event for the theatrical world of London, but ultimately rendered an accident. The one-column article in this exhibition piece recounts the night and states that “all the circumstances attending this deplorable event are of so sad a character that it is painful even to allude to them”. It was reported that the audience was confused because it happened so quickly and Mr. Payne announced that Miss Webster was only “slightly injured” and the ballet was able to proceed. The ballet did continue, but Clara’s body was extremely burned and she was in extreme agony. The article goes on to explain the jury’s conclusion, concurring with the coroner’s remarks, which rendered it an accidental death. This tragedy could have been avoided and future theatrical disasters involving fire may have been prevented if more responsibility was placed on the theatre owners.

### **Print of the celebrated Pas De Quatre, composed by Jules Perrot Romantic Era of Ballet:**

The Romantic Era encompassed all aspects of art from the high arts, poetry, music, and ballets. Art celebrated beauty, passion, nature, and love. Ballets of this time typically have a dramatic encounter between a mortal man and a supernatural woman. These magical women come in the form of fairies, ghosts, birds, sylphs, and sprites. As previously mentioned, pointe dancing enabled ballerinas to rise to the supernatural weightlessness of delicate floating. The effect was meant to portray skimming or hovering right above the earth. The invention of gaslight also added to this effect and cast a ghostly moonlight glow.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Romantic Ballet. Victoria and Albert Museum, April 30, 2013.  
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/romantic-ballet/>.

## **Print of Sadler's Wells Theatre Theater**

### **Sadler's Wells History:**

As London's second-oldest theater, the Sadler's Wells began in 1683 as a music house by Richard Sadler. In the eighteenth century, visitors could see a number of acts such as jugglers, tumblers, rope dancers, ballad singers, and wrestlers. Ballets and operas began in 1931 after the opening of the fifth Sadler's Wells' building. While the opera was important at the Wells, it was during this decade and the 1940s that Sadler's Wells was most associated with dance. During World War II, Ninette de Valois founded the British ballet at the theater and founded the school. At the end of the war, de Valois moved her ballet company to Covent Garden to become the Royal Ballet. The touring ballet company associated with the Royal Ballet was first known as the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, then the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, then permanently moved in 1990 to Birmingham to form the Birmingham Royal Ballet.<sup>25</sup>

### **Ballerina Katti Lanner's lithograph**

#### **Ballet in British Music Halls:**

Ballet was not simply reserved for opera houses. Ballet had a long period of acclaim on the famous stage of music halls and became an important part of British theatrical history. In Great Britain, from the 1880s to the 1920s, ballet performances were popular in music halls. The audience for ballet expanded as dancing became an essential component of popular entertainment and vaudeville. Women like Katti Lanner and Albina de Rhona choreographed and directed ballets for the public. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 brought about dozens of new

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<sup>25</sup> Crompton, Sarah. "History - Our Story - Sadler's Wells." SadlersWells. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.sadlerswells.com/about-us/our-story/history/>.

theatrical establishments outside the realm of patent theaters, such as Drury Lane and Covent Garden.<sup>26</sup>

The best-known venues for ballet were the Alhambra Theatre and the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square. Some venues specialized in ballet spectacles that celebrated national pride and culture. Ballet in music halls may be regarded differently than the Royal Ballet in Britain. This does not mean that ballet was only studied as high art. It also is studied as public entertainment.

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<sup>26</sup> Carter, Alexandra. "Blonde, Bewigged and Winged with Gold: Ballet Girls in the Music Halls of Late Victorian and Edwardian England." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 13, no. 2 (1995): 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1290909>.

## Companion Piece

This is an introduction to the companion piece of my professional thesis, which is in the form of a digital museum exhibition. The readers are people attending the exhibition. This will be a mixed group, most likely historians or patrons of either the arts, museums, virtual galleries, or ballet. They have a potential stake in viewing the exhibit because they are either interested in the Victorian Era or ballet, or want to further learn about gender roles in Victorian Britain. They may be surprised when finding out about the harsh truths of ballet girls and ballerinas of the time, as this was the era of Romantic ballets, which had a particular aesthetic of beauty and light.

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### Curatorial Process:

There are five distinct elements of this project. First is a catalog that serves as an index. A photograph of each object in the exhibition and a descriptive caption will be included. I used the Cooper Hewitt guidelines for image and object description to create the captions.<sup>27</sup> One example of a curatorial decision was whether to write the dates in European or American standards. For example, 12, July 1845 versus July 12, 1845. Although these objects were initially used in England, I chose the American standard because the exhibition was created in the United States.

The second element is a virtual model of the exhibition that allows viewers to move through the space manually. This simulation mimics how museum-goers navigate an in-person exhibition. The third component is a guided audio tour that allows for more accessibility and includes background stories about select pieces and other sounds associated with ballet. The

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<sup>27</sup> "Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Description: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum." Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, March 2, 2022. <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/cooper-hewitt-guidelines-for-image-description/>.



fourth piece of the thesis is “Stories”. These stories coincide with the objects on display, offering an in-depth look into ballet girls’ and ballerinas’ personal and professional lives in this era. This companion piece makes for the final element, providing reasoning for the curatorial decisions, a deeper dive into the gendered component in ballet, and reflections.

## Captioning:

As previously mentioned, I used the Cooper Hewitt guidelines to assist in my captioning. I did not want to add too little detail to the captions, as it is important to identify the object that museum-goers are looking at, and proper citation is essential. But at the same time, I did not want the caption to take away from the object. By revealing too much information, the viewers may be unable to come to their own conclusions about the object.

## Virtual Exhibition:

Artsteps is the program that allowed me to create a model for the exhibition. As a web-based software, it enables users to create virtual art and museum galleries in a 3-D setting.<sup>28</sup> There were pre-made exhibit templates for use or the option to create your own. I created my own exhibition space in a simple layout of four walls, so the space was large enough for all the items to fit with proper spacing. The design choice includes selecting walls, doors, boxes, and a color scheme. The user can add an object by uploading an image, titling the piece (with the specific caption, in my case), and include a description and sound. I saved the sound for the

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<sup>28</sup> More information about Artsteps.

<https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/c.php?g=719466&p=5150750#:~:text=Artsteps%20is%20a%20web%2Dbased,as%20videos%20in%20the%20exhibit.>

guided tour. Furthermore, after adding each object, the user has the option to choose a frame or leave the objects unframed.

I planned a guided tour with nine stops along the exhibit. The path is in the shape of a box, so viewers do not have to navigate the exhibition in an awkward pattern. At each stop, I added my prerecorded “Stories” for that particular object. When viewers click the Play button on their screen, the guided audio tour will automatically start by bringing them to the first stop on the tour and continue until the final stop.

Within the Artsteps website, you can search for other exhibitions that have been published for users. I published my exhibition to be shown publicly on Artsteps and can be shared or embedded on social media. Viewers can “heart” the exhibition and comment below, similar to many social media platforms. It will be interesting and educational for me to view the comments of viewers.

## Audio Tour:

I used Online Voice Recorder software to record the audio clips for the stories in order to allow for more accessibility. I debated whether I wanted to do the recordings myself or recruit someone else to voice the recordings. I decided to record them myself, but there were some challenges! The software did not include a cutting or editing feature, so if I made a mistake recording an audio clip, I had to start over from the beginning. It was a bit frustrating, but through practice, the audio recordings did not take too long. Artsteps only allowed for clips under two minutes in length, so I had to cut some information from the stories. In the future, for a similar type of project, I would consider looking for different software.

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I was initially driven to work with material culture due to the interaction between people and objects. The point of captions is to introduce viewers to the object they are viewing. But captions are just part of the story. The “Stories” section further adds information about the object that is not clearly evident. And even further, historical objects are meant to be pondered over. We can read about and view Adeline Genee’s costume, but what would it feel like to be in that costume? How heavy is it with the various embellishments, and does that make moving difficult? How would audience members see the costume? Would the gems catch the stage light the right way to shimmer out over the crowd? Or even a very human experience of sweating in the outfit under the heavy lights is something to consider. These questions have answers, the costume has long sleeves, lots of material, and the stage lights are bright, but the point of asking these questions is so viewers can “put themselves in the dancer’s shoes”. Each object in the collection leads to further investigation and questions, which will differ for each person and ultimately offer a glimpse into the lives of Victorian ballerinas.

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Primary sources I included are images of costumes, footwear, posters for upcoming shows, theater layouts, prints of famous ballerinas, and pictures from dance classes. Primary sources are key to my project because they comprise the bulk of the exhibition. I chose a variety of objects for the collection to allow for a complete picture of Victorian ballet culture as each object adds to the storyline. In the first few pieces, the costume and pointe shoes act as visual and physical representations of the scenes in ballets. Female ballerinas wore costumes appropriate to each ballet but sometimes heavy to dance in or made of flammable material. Early pointe shoes, such as the ones on display in the exhibit, were rudimentary and difficult to remain en pointe for

long. Pointe shoes and their comfort has greatly improved from early models, but they are not pain-free.

One of Adeline Genée's costumes is on display in the exhibition. Genée first gained popularity in Denmark before moving to London,<sup>29</sup> where she was well-loved by the local audiences, especially for her performance as Swanhilda in *Coppelia*. Genée's story has a happy ending, which was not always the case for ballerinas in this time period. She retired as a dancer in 1917, and in 1920 she had a part in setting up the Royal Academy of Dance in Great Britain. She retired as president of the Royal Academy of Dance in 1954 but remained on the committee until her death in 1970 at the age of ninety-two.<sup>30</sup>

The video from 2012 of *La Sylphide* is the only modern piece in the exhibition. Even though it is not directly from the Victorian Era, *La Sylphide* gained popularity during this time. It would be difficult to have an entire exhibit dedicated to ballet without having some type of visual representation of dance. It is important to see firsthand dancers' movements and expressions, which cannot be fully captured through words.

The next category, print, includes newspaper clippings and advertisements. These offer a glimpse into how people of England would have seen the ballet world outside of the theater. Advertisements would have lured spectators to see a new show or a famous ballerina, and news of the tragic death of Clara Webster might have turned away audiences due to the sometimes dangerous nature of performance technology. Lastly, there are prints, lithographs, and photos of various ballerinas, theaters, and costumes. Since there are no video recordings from this time, viewing costumes and backdrops is crucial in imagining what ballets would have looked like.

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<sup>29</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum. *Dance in Popular Theatre*. Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London, July 17, 2013. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/dance-in-popular-theatre/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Through secondary sources, I curated the exhibition catalog with descriptions and the “Stories” component. From there, I strategically organized the exhibition to appeal to visitors. A complicated caveat of traveling exhibits is that each space they occupy may have a different physical layout. Thinking about viewer experience is crucial in curation.

## Themes: Gender roles, Physicality, Practicality, and Beauty

The central theme of the exhibition is gender roles in ballet during nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. Gender roles were further solidified during the Victorian Era, particularly through the lens of performance art. This research topic is essential because of its implications with respect to current social patterns. I am not on an anthropological quest, but I do hope that through researching a feminine occupation within the arts of the Victorian Era, some patterns might emerge. The exhibition timeline will be from the 1830s, when ballet began to increase in popularity in England, to 1931, when the Royal Ballet was established in London, originally known as the Sadler’s Wells Ballet.

Female artists, such as painters and authors of the Victorian Era, have been the study of some authors, but stage performers rarely are. Victorian gender ideology emphasized separate spheres for men and women, further clarifying the roles of “male” and “female”. Men generally belonged to the public sphere, and women belonged to the private sphere. This model was not universally applicable because working-class families typically could not survive on a single income. It was not common for female performers to have families and work simultaneously.

Most dancers were young (hence the term “ballet girls”) and did not have families. Once these women had children, their time on stage was usually over.

One example of the control of ballerinas is Marie Taglioni’s married life. In 1835 Taglioni married Count Gelbeit de Voisins, but unfortunately, she did not have a happy personal life.<sup>31</sup> The couple had two children, but after just three years of marriage, they decided to divorce. It is unclear what happened to the children after the divorce, but they were not a large part of Taglioni’s later years.<sup>32</sup> She retired from performing in 1847 but continued teaching until her death in 1884 when she was eighty years old.<sup>33</sup> The reason cited for the divorce was that her husband disapproved of her frequent travels and asked her to give up her career as a dancer, which she refused to do. Taglioni was such a popular figure that her presence was demanded throughout Europe. Her life revolved around being in the public eye, not in the private sphere of the home. Taglioni chose her career and passion over a domestic life, which was an uncommon choice for a Victorian Era woman.

By studying female performers during this time, one might better understand the mixing of feminine private and public spheres. Victorian ballet can be seen as an expression of women’s entrepreneurship, even though these girls and women were often unfairly paid and treated. The public accepted ballet girls in society because they provided entertainment, but they were generally put in a lower class. Star ballerinas were revered and treated as celebrities, but as in the case of Clara Webster and Emma Livry, their safety was not put ahead of the performance. Ballet is one area of the public sphere that was female-dominated as opposed to the more common male-dominated public sphere.

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<sup>31</sup> Raftis.

<sup>32</sup> New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Marie Taglioni," *New World Encyclopedia*, , [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Marie\\_Taglioni&oldid=1013795](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Marie_Taglioni&oldid=1013795).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The age of a ballerina could also impact how they were viewed. Young girls were permitted more freedom in the life of a dancer, but they were poorly paid and treated. Outside of the typically female private sphere, the life of a female performer could provide a unique lens into a woman's life in the public sphere. I have chosen ballet performers to research and present because of their unique position as entertainers and their strict training. Ballet as an art form first developed in France and then Russia and slowly increased in popularity and professionalism as it came to England.<sup>34</sup>

Another consideration is how British audiences during the Victorian Era related to different types of ballets. Romantic ballets gained popularity from approximately the 1820s to the 1870s.<sup>35</sup> They are characterized by softness, flowy costuming, emotions, and increased pointe work to create an almost floating aura. Nature and the countryside were inspirations for artists and ballerinas alike, harkening back to a time prior to the Industrial Revolution.<sup>36</sup> Although males choreographed most ballets, women were the primary performers. Men did have roles in these ballets, but the main focus of romantic ballets was on females and feminine features. Audience members most likely viewed these types of ballets as easy or "feminine" rather than a more demanding art form. This is the nature of ballet, as dancing is meant to appear effortless while simultaneously being physically difficult. The style of dancing could have affected the audience's perception of the ballerinas themselves. For example, a slow adagio dance is performed with grace and fluidity. An allegro is quick-paced with fast and dynamic movements.

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<sup>34</sup> Kant, M. and Guest, Ivor. "ballet." Encyclopedia Britannica, November 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/art/ballet>.

<sup>35</sup> Romantic Ballet. Victoria and Albert Museum, April 30, 2013. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/romantic-ballet/>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Another way to glean audience reactions is through newspaper reviews. Other primary sources in the print area of the exhibition are newspapers and advertisements. Print culture was an essential aspect of Victorian life, and a high percentage of the public was literate and read regularly. The working class read newspapers enough to see these advertisements, but it depended on their interest level in the ballet and if they could afford tickets. Middle-class and upper-class people were more likely to attend ballets, operas, and other performances. Mostly adults attended ballets due to the serious nature of some performances, but some ballets were for the whole family.<sup>37</sup>

Exhibit object number six recounts the tragic fire incident involving Clara Webster. A line in the article states, “The consternation of the house, however, was extreme and shrieks burst from many of the ladies present.”<sup>38</sup> Female and undoubtedly male audience members were horrified by the event unfolding in front of them. However, they calmed down and continued to watch the remainder of the performance once they were told that Webster had only minor injuries and would be alright, even though this information was incorrect.

The lamps that were below the stage to throw the light upward were thought to be safe. A portion of Webster’s muslin dress caught the flame. The article says that the results would have been even more disastrous if the other ballerinas on the stage had tried to help Webster, as they were also wearing muslin dresses. There were no male dancers on the stage at the time, which is why the stagehand had to come in to assist Webster. People should have rushed to help Webster, but everyone stood back and waited while her burns became more severe. Her mother was in the audience and later said, “If I had but been in the wings, I could have saved you with my cloak,”

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<sup>37</sup> “Victorian Era Morality Facts: Moral Behavior, Values, Ideals, Ethics.” Victorian Era, 2020. <https://victorian-era.org/victorian-era-morality.html>.

<sup>38</sup><https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=59&dat=18450318&id=cSA1AAAAIBAJ&sjid=GicDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6310,1978758&hl=en>.



and Clara answered, “Yes, mamma, you could.”<sup>39</sup> Clara was only twenty-one years old at the time of her death. She had dedicated her life to ballet at a young age, and it was ultimately what caused her demise.

After her death, there was discussion about adding a kind of starch to the muslin so the costumes would be inflammable and a network of wires be placed over the lamps to prevent this type of casualty in the future.<sup>40</sup> These precautions were not legally required by theaters, even though they could have prevented further incidents. This proved that ballerinas were expendable to the company. There is a strong juxtaposition of the ideals of Romantic ballets; life, love, and beauty, with the real hardships and dangers of being a ballerina. This tragic event was not a singular occurrence but one of many in ballet and other theatrical productions.

Another infamous theatrical fire disaster occurred at the Iroquois Theater on December 30, 1903. This theater, located in downtown Chicago, was showing a musical comedy, *Mr. Bluebird*, and over 1,700 audience members were present. Halfway through the show, a stage light ignited nearby drapery. The fire spread across the flammable backdrop and could not be halted. Doors were locked from the inside and the outside, making it impossible for patrons to exit. There was an upper-level fire escape but not a ladder leading down to the ground. Many jumped to their death, among them primarily children who were seated on the upper balconies. Most cast members were able to escape from a rear stage door, but one ballerina was trapped in rigging and did not make it out alive.<sup>41</sup> Although this incident did not occur in England, it is an example of how little theater owners and city officials cared about performer and audience safety

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<sup>39</sup> The Public Ledger Newspaper, “The Shocking Death of Miss Clara Webster”, March 18, 1845.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Uenuma, Francine. “The Iroquois Theater Disaster Killed Hundreds and Changed Fire Safety Forever.” *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 12 June 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-theater-blaze-killed-hundreds-forever-changed-way-we-approach-fire-safety-180969315/>.

concerning fire during this era. The Iroquois Theater Disaster occurred over fifteen years after the tragic death of Clara Webster, but few improvements were made in fire safety. If Webster's death had been taken more seriously or not ruled an accident, future disasters such as this might have been avoided.

Another young ballerina's life cut short by fire was Emma Livry. Livry had a performance on November 15, 1862, when her skirt came in contact with a gas lamp.<sup>42</sup> Her fellow cast members and the audience watched her go up in flames until a fellow dancer and a fireman managed to smother the fire with a blanket. By that time, forty percent of Livry's body had burned, and her corset had melted into her ribs. She lived for eight months after the incident, eventually perishing due to blood poisoning. After her death, some safety measures were taken more seriously, such as flame-retardant gauze and wet blankets hanging in the wings.<sup>43</sup>

Another gendered perspective is demonstrated through the costumes or specifically through pointe shoes, which appear to be beautiful on stage but are painful and could be potentially dangerous for dancers. One example is Marie Taglioni's pointe shoes in the exhibit. She was known for wearing pointe shoes a few sizes too small. In doing so, her metatarsals were squeezed together, providing more stability on top of the pointe shoe.<sup>44</sup> This must have been incredibly agonizing, but she tolerated it for the art form. The use of pointe shoes, used by female but not male performers, raises important questions about gender history and how the discomfort and pain of ballerinas were not taken as a serious concern.

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<sup>42</sup> Zublin, Fiona. "The Ballet Girls Who Burned to Death." OZY, May 12, 2020. <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/the-ballet-girls-who-burned-to-death/71244/>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Portzline, Madeline. "The Pointe of Shoes." The Pointe, October 30, 2015. <https://sites.psu.edu/portzlineballet/2015/10/30/the-pointe-of-shoes/>.

Dancing was not accepted as a respectable vocation, and girls in the corps de ballet were among the most underpaid people in the city at only six shillings per week.<sup>45</sup> Money had to come out of their own wages if they needed a costume fixed or a decorative flower added to a hairpiece. Ballet girls had long days – usually from ten or eleven in the morning to a six pm call time for the evening performance, then quickly home and to bed.<sup>46</sup>

A younger generation of ballet girls filled the majority of roles in these particular ballets. These girls were trained locally in London. Most girls came from working-class families, but some were part of theatrical families and had some prior connections. The corps de ballet, members of the ballet who dance as a group, rarely appear in written records as named individuals.<sup>47</sup> Record keeping and playbills were not as inclusive as they are today. These ballet girls included women of all ages and backgrounds. There are letters from ballet performer Emily Banbury and other letters of complaint written to the London County Council about poor working conditions in music hall ballets of the time.<sup>48</sup> Ballet was a dangerous profession, from the physical exhaustion of performances and practices to potentially fatal fires to being crushed by falling sets.

The corps had an essential role in ballets as moving pictures of color and costume. They danced as the backdrop to the lead ballerina. A standard part for the corps was fauna, reflecting the popular image of Art Nouveau in which women and nature were represented in a symbiotic

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, Albert, *The Natural History of the Ballet-Girl*, London, England, David Bogue Publishing, 1847.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Guest, Ivor. *Ballet in Leicester Square: The Alhambra and the Empire 1860-1915*. ACLS History E-Book Project, 1992.

<sup>48</sup> Carter, Alexandra. "Blonde, Bewigged and Winged with Gold: Ballet Girls in the Music Halls of Late Victorian and Edwardian England." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 13, no. 2 (1995): 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1290909>.

relationship.<sup>49</sup> Art Nouveau as an art style was a way to express nature. The corps often depicted dancing blossoms, fairies, and exotic lands as a visual display in ballets.<sup>50</sup>

Dramatic symbols in ballets can arise from costuming, shoes, and miming. Because ballets forbid speaking, all emotions and communication must come through body gestures and music. Costuming can also help in this silent dialogue. The star ballerina often wears a tutu while the other female dancers wear ankle-length to floor-length dresses to stand apart. Some female characters do not wear pointe shoes but rather tan, heeled shoes. Again either to stand out or for folk dances.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Sorabella, Jean. "The Ballet." *Metmuseum.org*, Oct. 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/balt/hd\\_balt.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/balt/hd_balt.htm).

## Reflections:

The original idea for my M.A. thesis was to research museums during the Victorian Era. I might be able to incorporate that idea into my current thesis by modeling my exhibition on examples of exhibitions curated during the Victorian Era. I am unsure if this method would appeal to present museum attendees, as many modern museums nowadays have layouts that may be dissimilar to those of the Victorian Era.<sup>51</sup> Modeling my traveling exhibition on static exhibitions from 150 years ago may not translate well for today's museum-goers.

I chose to present my Victorian ballet research in the form of an exhibition for two reasons. The first is that I am interested in curatorial work as a profession. By working with this digital format, I can work on those skills and have a deeper appreciation for the craft of curating. Secondly, ballet is an art form made to be seen on stage. For the same visual reasoning, a museum exhibition that showcases a brief glimpse into the world of ballet made sense. Ballet performances are live and ever-changing. While it is possible to record and playback a performance, for the most part, each dance is fleeting. Ballet is used as a vehicle to exploit or explain something beyond itself, whether that be the star ballerina or a particular culture.<sup>52</sup> Artists elicit emotions on command. Movements are fleeting in live performances, unlike a static piece of art that can be observed for as long as you prefer. Each performance of a ballet changes because dancers never execute choreography precisely the same way. Ballets can portray abstract thoughts, words, and emotions through the artist's movements.

But in a museum exhibition, viewers can take the time to truly see each item for as long as they would like. The guided audio tour gives snippets of life, drama, action, and history that

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<sup>51</sup> Kriegel, Lara. *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, Selma Jeanne. *Next Week, Swan Lake: Reflections on Dance and Dances*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986.

these ballerinas would have experienced. Captioning is crucial for identifying the pieces, but having entire written stories posted alongside each object would take away from experiencing the object. By listening to the audio, museum-goers can fully take in the object, only focusing on looking. Lastly, I hope viewers can reflect on their own experiences with these objects. Not everyone will have personal ties to the objects; not everyone will be a dancer, a historian, or even have a strong interest in ballet. But the exhibition will hopefully allow viewers to think beyond those constructs to the greater themes of gender and beauty that Victorian ballet created.

## Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank several people who made this thesis possible through their guidance and support. To my preceptor Lily, who was always willing to help and offer advice. To my parents, for supporting me throughout this year of graduate school. To the number of people in the small thesis working group and anyone else who has proofread my thesis. To Elizabeth Frengel, a curator of rare books who works in the Special Collections Research Center of the Regenstein Library, for allowing me to discuss ideas and ask about digital components of exhibits. And finally, to the many, many wonderful museums I had the chance to visit this past year in Chicago. I am grateful to live in a city that prioritizes public history, which has deepened my love for curation!

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