

The Other Dance Mother: Analyzing the "Bad" Stage Mother in Competitive Dance

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Abstract

While the rise of competitive dance in North America has encouraged many mothers to cultivate, manage, and advance their children's involvement in dance, a stage mother is known to be intensively invested in promoting her child's performing career. Stage mothers are often regarded in dance studios in a negative light and some mainstream film and television shows perpetuate a stereotypical view of stage mothers as pathological. For example, in the 2010 blockbuster film, *Black Swan*, Barbara Hershey depicted a mother who was controlling, overbearing and cruel towards her dancing daughter and the reality television series, *Dance Moms*, showed stage mothers as excessive and unreasonable but lacking in agency. Paradoxically, the stereotype of the "bad" stage mother functions to uphold the image and myth of the "good" mother and a better understanding of this polarization can deepen insight about twenty-first century, middle and upper-class North American mothering practices more generally.

In this paper, I investigate—but wish to resist perpetuating—the dominant view of the stage mother as the Other. Drawing on my experience and perspectives as a feminist dance scholar, as a former dancer, mother of two young dancers, dance educator, and Certified Movement Analyst, I utilize feminist theories of maternity (including Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1998; Ladd-Taylor 2004; Ruddick 1983) to support my argument that much can be learned from a deeper understanding of the ways in which stage mothers are socially constructed and the ways in which they interpret the messages and mandates of mainstream twenty-first century mothering. My argument is further illustrated by ethnographic interviews and focus groups I have conducted in three privately-owned suburban dance studios.

Keywords: Stage mothers, competitive dance, maternal thinking, intensive mothering, daughters, performativity, feminist ethnography.

Introduction

"Remember when you first started? If I hadn't taken you to each of your classes you would have been completely lost," Erica Sayers tells her neurotic ballerina daughter, Nina, in the 2010 blockbuster film, *Black Swan*. Throughout the film, the domineering mother, played by Barbara Hershey, embodies and exaggerates all the stereotypical characteristics of a classic stage mom. Aggressively promoting, infantilizing, and obsessing over her ballet dancer daughter (played by Natalie Portman), Erica tightly controls her daughter's schedule, diet, wardrobe and friendships. She lives in a spiral of narcissism, pining away for her own former life as a dancer, embittered and yet proudly

defensive of the narrative she has manufactured: that she gave up her dance career to have Nina.

Barbara Hershey's commentary on the role she played in *Black Swan* highlights the contradictory ways in which stage mothers are often constructed in popular media.¹ "She lives vicariously through Nina, is competitive with her, yet worries about her and tries to protect her," states Hershey. They need each other. Nina needs Erica to function and to be a ballerina; Erica needs Nina to live. It's a symbiotic relationship" (Carr 1).

Another well-known example of stage mothers is *Dance Moms*, a televised program first aired in 2011 that shows glamorous mothers of dancers vicariously living their own dreams through their children—dreams that play out in terms of gendered fantasies projected on their dancing daughters. In the upper-class, heteronormative, primarily white community featured in *Dance Moms*, the dance studio is an arena where mothers can pass along to their daughters their values and beliefs about appropriate paths for becoming women. However, though they are highly involved, the mothers have very little sway with the overbearing dance studio owner, Abby Lee. Abby Lee's word is absolute in all decisions about how the young girl dancers are presented in competitions ("The Competition Begins") and, though the mothers disagree and complain amongst themselves, they rarely push back directly against her.

Stage mothers are not just fictional representations in film and television; they have a real presence within the cultures of privately-owned dance studios. The ways in which they are depicted in popular media sets them up to be stereotyped or othered, and they are often brushed off or ostracized by tightly-knit communities of mothers in dance

¹ Iconic representations of stage mothers in twentieth century films about dancers demonstrate how irresistibly intriguing this maternal figure is to audiences. For example, the 1926 film, *Gypsy*, presents a controlling and domineering mother as does the 1933 film, *Stage Mother*. The 1977 film, *The Turning Point*, features Shirley MacLaine in the role of a doting stage mom and former dancer whose relationship with her dancing daughter is fraught with conflict and ambivalence over her fateful decision to give up the stage to have children.

schools. Furthermore, stage mothers tend to be categorized as "bad mothers" and are not well-understood as products of the same contradictory expectations navigated by many white, middle to upper-class suburban mothers across Canada and the United States. In this paper, I argue that stage mothers are frequently misrepresented or misunderstood and that a deeper analysis of their motivations and lived realities can offer a great deal of insight into social constructions of mothers and other maternal figures more broadly. Theories of motherhood by Douglas and Michaels (2004), Hays (2007), Ladd-Taylor (2004), Ranson (2004), Ruddick (1983), and Vigier (1994) guide me in making this case. Data from interviews with mothers of young dancers and my reflections on my own role as a mother of two young dancers also help me assess the ways in which mothers engage with issues arising from unrealistic expectations that they will provide volunteer labour and make considerable financial commitments to their child(ren)'s dance studio.

Dance Mothers and Stage Mothers

Many mothers of dancers, or "dance mothers" as they are sometimes affectionately known in dance schools, are intensively invested in their children's dancing. Their active presence in studios is often assumed and studio directors generally expect that mothers will participate in a continuous volunteer capacity. Most dance mothers, myself included, devote a substantial number of hours to driving children to classes, rehearsals, and performances, preparing costumes, applying make-up and styling hair for performances, planning fundraising events for the studio, and sometimes agonizing about how to pay the high fees associated with dance training. We may sacrifice many other aspects of our own lives in order to enable our child or children to fulfill the requirements of being enrolled in a dance program. Dance mothers' activities are usually accomplished in addition to other mothering responsibilities which may

include unwaged care giving, domestic labour, income-generating employment for our families, or a combination of all.

The volunteer labour that mothers do for dance studios is sometimes considered to be a duty, but it may also be a way for us to fulfill our desire to be what maternal scholars such as Ladd-Taylor (2004) and Ruddick (2007) have referred to as the "good mother." The drive to be a good mother—which sometimes may be conflated with being a busy or highly-involved mother—can be taken to extremes and some dance mothers become more involved than others. Those mothers within dance studios who exhibit and model very competitive attitudes and behaviors may be regarded as "stage mothers." They tend to seek out auditions and other opportunities to advance their children's dance careers, go to great lengths to prepare their children for each performance event, and become preoccupied with comparing their own child(ren)'s performances to that of other dancers. Usually regarded in a negative light, they are often viewed by other mothers as controlling and aggressive and as placing undue pressure on their children to achieve. Stereotypically, stage moms are believed to be vicariously living out their own dreams through their children.

The Role of the Maternal in Dance Studios

Stage mothers may become excessively involved in working at tasks for the studio, competing with other mothers to be busiest or most productive, or to be recognized for their over-the-top contributions. To a lesser degree, the majority of dance mothers show their dedication to their children and to the dance studio by offering numerous hours of volunteer work as costume seamstresses, backstage supervisors,

make up artists, and drivers.² Why do mothers of dancers tend to play such a prominent role in dance studios and contribute so many hours of unpaid labour?

The complex manner in which dance mothers navigate our roles within in dance studios is always mediated by our own positions within the hierarchical structures of gender, heteronormativity, race, and class. In her essay, "Paid Work, Family Work, and the Discourse of the Full-Time Mother," Gillian Ranson describes the white, middle and upper-class North American model of motherhood as fuelled by a pervasive discourse of full-time mothering, where working mothers attempt to maintain full-time mothering activities and even "full-time mothers" are not always doing mothering, but a "welter of other activities" (95-96). Mothers operating within diverse social and material realities, Ranson suggests, aspire to this model and myth of intensive motherhood, a model which firmly establishes the identity of the mother as the primary caregiver during their children's formative years and constructs children as needy of the constant attention and care of their mothers (88).

Ranson further proposes that in an increasingly globalized world, mothers may lose actual or perceived control over their children's formation. By performing volunteer labour at their children's dance studios, some dance mothers can secure a feeling of control over their children's activities. However, when mothers are kept busy, it leaves them little time for questioning, thinking about, or engaging in meaningful discussion about their individual or collective roles in shaping their children's dance experiences. I assert that dance mothers who might be quick to judge stage mothers for being overly-involved in the work of the studio could benefit from awareness of the gendered,

² Some fathers are also involved in their daughters' or sons' dance lives. However, fathers tend to spend much less time performing the work of their children's dance studios while mothers take on the bulk of volunteer responsibilities.

racialized, classed constructions of motherhood that demand their participation as volunteers at all.

Those mothers who have been told by studio instructors or the director that their daughter or son is talented may be motivated to assist in fulfilling their child's potential as a dancer. For example, in an interview a mother named Yolanda³ noted that there is a tendency for mothers with children in competitive programs to “get caught up in a sense of pride and accomplishment that their daughters or sons have been given this opportunity.” Moreover, some mothers are acutely aware of their daughters or sons love of dancing and they prioritize cultivating that passion, even if they have to sacrifice or compromise in other areas of family life.

Reflecting on her observations of some of her fellow mothers of competitive dancers, Jasmine asks, “How much of their self-image and self-esteem is caught up in what their kids are doing?” and wonders if some of them “get some sort of satisfaction other than seeing their child as an accomplished dancer.” An instructor named Shelley notes that there are “always one or two [who are] having their dreams fulfilled through their kids.” However, Shelley believes that the majority of dance mothers choose to be very involved in the life of the studio “purely out of love for their children and their sense of family at the studio...” even if it makes their lives “hectic and busy” (2).

According to Ranson, many mothers fulfill their sense of being a “good mother” by giving “unselfishly of their time, money, and love” (88). In other words, a busy mother may feel she is being a good mother, a useful mother, and a productive mother. Young dancers learn attitudes from their mothers about strong work ethics, productiveness, and busyness. In fact, mothers are often motivated to involve their children in dance to keep them, in the words of Yolanda, “busy and “out of trouble.” However, Yolanda feels largely responsible for her own daughter’s inclination to overextend herself and

³ Pseudonyms were used for all respondents who were interviewed.

describes dancers' lives as, "always achieve, and go, and do—even if you're tired, you're sick..." Mothers of dancers, while sometimes conflicted about the negative physical toll and the suffering that intensive dance training can exact, will still often attempt to "support" their daughters in competing at all costs. When in the thick of her involvement in her daughter's dance experience, Yolanda remembers expressing her desire to be supportive by propping up her daughter's body and pushing her to attend rehearsals and performances even if doing so risked further health complications. She expresses regret about the ways she allowed her eldest daughter to develop "unhealthy habits of pushing herself to the limit" and she feels responsible for normalizing these behaviours, asserting that "as a mom, I've trained her poorly for years." While Yolanda assumes a high level of personal responsibility for her own role in her daughter's habitual busyness, she also acknowledges that "when you're in it," it can be difficult for a mother to be aware of when things are "going too far."

Money

In addition to providing many hours of volunteer labour and maintaining a vital presence in studios, mothers are expected to exemplify unwavering financial competence. Thus, the maternal body is also a paying body in dance studio culture. Families who make the extensive financial commitment necessary for their child to fully participate in competitive dance receive a great deal of validation. The fundraising efforts of mothers are also typically acknowledged publicly as major accomplishments. At the same time, mothers who seem to have no boundaries in terms of the money they are willing to spend on fees for special opportunities for their children such as solo competition choreographies may be regarded as stage mothers within their studio.

It is not only stage mothers, however, who go to great lengths to pay for their children's dance fees. In fact, many dance mothers feel the need to do whatever is

necessary to pay the fees for their children's participation in dance. For example, Nadia confesses that when her husband complained the dance studio was taking too much of a toll on the family and on their pocketbooks, she “bullied him into going along with it.” She would “cajole him and encourage him and whatever [she] had to do to keep him on board” because she was convinced at the time that their two daughters were having such a positive experience in competitive dance. In this instance, it is interesting to note that Nadia’s assertiveness regarding her family’s financial commitment to the studio was directed at her husband in the privacy of their own home. She did not lobby the studio for more affordable alternatives. Instead, she pressured her husband into agreeing to pay the high costs to cover competition fees, costumes, and weekends spent staying in hotels and eating out in restaurants during competition season.

Mothers, Daughters, Dancing, and Maternal Consciousness

Feminist dance scholar Rachel Vigier asserts that clear links between mothers, their daughters, and dancing can be traced all the way back to prehistoric times. Referring to theories developed by Marxist feminist anthropologist Evelyn Reed, Vigier traces the evolution of dance itself to ancient societies where women’s lives “revolved around securing and maintaining life of the body” through childbearing, caring for the young, gathering food and farming, healing, and developing domestic arts such as cooking, weaving, and building (29). Vigier associates physical production with the gradual development of movement, dance rituals, and cultural practices which closely mirrored bodily rhythms of work done by women and mothers (30). Indeed, she views dance as one of the most fundamental expressions of what she calls “maternal consciousness,” an awareness developed through care of the body and activities that support the survival of human life (27).

Currently in white suburban communities in Canada and the United States, dancing is regarded and structured as an activity for children and adolescents, the vast majority of whom are female. Mothers tend to enrol their daughters in dance programs at an early age and dance is considered to be a desirable past time for girls because it teaches them confidence, poise, and skills for presenting themselves as attractive by heteronormative standards of beauty. Dance programs in privately-run studios are supported by mothers and their involvement could, indeed, be viewed as part of the continuum of dance as a form of "maternal consciousness." A critical distinction, however, is that while mothers in previous eras danced to express their maternal role, currently mothers who are involved in developing their daughter's dance careers do not usually dance themselves.

While Vigier identifies dance as "an art in which women have been and are strong, physically and psychically" (26), she also locates dance as a function of patriarchy. Over time, she notes that patriarchal forces have reduced dancing done by women to codified "feminine" movement done to serve men's sexual and reproductive needs (26). I assert that one effect of the increasing sexualization of girls and young women that has been evident in competitive dance performances and in dance reality shows like *Dance Moms* since the 1990s is a firm denial of the power of the maternal. Vigier states that sexual objectification "interrupts the development of dance as a spiritual and philosophical expression of the body central to women's culture, and it disrupts an order of knowledge based on the maternal body (27). Indeed, in competitive dance studios, maternal bodies rarely dance at all.

Vigier's account suggests that mothers have had to increasingly plot their own courses while being pulled by two oppositional forces—maternal consciousness and patriarchy. This has produced a tension in how they have transmitted embodied knowledges to their daughters and this tension has continued as a thread in the lived

realities of mothers over the last half century. In this recent time period, feminist and scholarly debates about the significance of mothers have been happening in the context of changes in earning opportunities and obligations for women and men, family structure, and neoliberal tenets of competitiveness and meritocracy in North American mainstream cultures.

Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels propose that while mothering in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is often romanticized and glamorized, in fact many mothers feel pressured to be extremely vigilant in supervising all aspects of their children's lives. Dance mothers may also be responding to social pressures to practice "intensive mothering," a term used by Sharon Hays to describe mothers who set aside unrealistic amounts of their time and energy for their children while also pursuing demanding careers in the paid employment sector (412-414). Arising from these theories is the possibility that dance studios provide an ideal environment, particularly for mothers in middle-class or affluent neighborhoods who, with many demands on their time, feel they must manage their child(ren)'s activities, their social worlds and, in particular, their emerging sexualities. However, as Yolanda realizes years after having been a dance mother, a sense of pride "can overshadow good sense around looking after them [children who dance], emotionally and physically" suggesting, perhaps, that high levels of involvement in competitive dance may be, in fact, quite counterintuitive to mothers' "maternal consciousness."⁴

Through her analysis of various approaches mothers have for coping with contradictory notions of motherhood in twenty-first century North America and processes by which mothers experience maternal achievement, maternal scholar Sara Ruddick offers further insights that can be applied to understanding the ways dance mothers and

⁴ This raises questions about whether a daughter's developing sense of boundaries may also become compromised if her mother does not encourage or model healthy boundaries.

stage mothers tend to operate within studio settings. Ruddick's theory of "maternal thinking" suggests that many mothers may paradoxically "fulfill the values of the dominant culture" (103) even if these values may, at times, be at odds with their own. Ruddick also acknowledges that mothers experience maternal achievement in the context of contradictory notions of female sexuality in twenty-first century North America. Within this context, dance mothers need to cope with changes in the ways we experience our own sexualities in a society that glorifies younger female bodies. Ironically, though still operating within a societal mandate of compulsory femininity, mothers are expected to subdue their own expressions of sexuality or at least make them more private or hidden - and increasingly so as we age. Meanwhile, some of us may project our own girlhood experiences of feeling attractive—or not—onto our daughters by involving them in competitive dance where there are opportunities for girls to learn how to present themselves as glamorous and attractive in everyday performative practices and in stage performances.

Agency

Many dance mothers may not want to rock the boat at their child(ren)'s dance studio, potentially disrupting social circles or jeopardizing relationships with the studio owner, instructors, and other mothers. Mothers who do exert their agency may be categorized and judged as stage mothers. However, while stage mothers maybe outspoken and assertive, they may be exercising agency in a way that could be used by more dance mothers to initiate or demand positive changes within dance studios.

A dance instructor named Shelley acknowledges that while stage mothers can be vociferous as a result of their own competitive tendencies, she considers it strange that more dance mothers do not speak out more pro-actively about issues within the competitive dance studio setting. She believes many mothers remain silent because they

simply want to avoid confrontation and conflict. A mother named Nadia described a time when, together with some other mothers with “stronger personalities” at her studio, she approached the studio instructors about what they considered to be inappropriate lyrics in a song that had been selected for their daughters' recital and managed to have the song changed to a different one. In contrast Jasmine, the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl dancer at the same dance studio, did not feel she could voice her concerns about what she considered to be erotic choreography in one of her daughter's dance pieces because she did not have any prior knowledge about dance.

Conclusion

As Molly Ladd-Taylor highlights, there are "good mothers" and "bad mothers" and mothers typically regard each other as being in one or the other of these categories. Increasingly in competitive dance, a mother is classified as "good" if she partakes in the labour that mothers do at the studio, pays the fees needed for her child(ren)'s participation in dance, and if she shares the dominant values and goals of the other dance mothers. These include being part of a larger project that gives daughters opportunities to "shine" on stage through the production of glamorous, and often highly feminized or sexualized performances.

Hand-in-hand with dualistic constructions of good and bad mothers, there is a tendency in patriarchal cultures towards what Molly Ladd-Taylor has termed "mother blame" (660-666). Thus, it can become all too easy for dance mothers to judge or "other" stage mothers for being excessive; and to put them in the category of "bad mother" in order to secure our status and our own sense of ourselves as being part of the "good mother" group.

In examining the ways stage mothers embody, enact, and perpetuate certain problematic narratives such as intensive, self-sacrificial, inauthentic, or competitive

mothering, we must also recognize that their behaviours and attitudes may be in direct response to powerful social norms of twenty-first century intensive mothering that we dance mothers are all figuring out in our own ways. In addition, we might all benefit from bearing in mind that stage mothers may be acting as agents of resistance to persistent, prevailing, and contradictory notions that mothers should be docile, passive, domestic, hidden, and lacking in authority. Indeed, in contemplating social constructions of "good" dance mothers and "bad" stage mothers within privately-operated, competitive dance studios, we should remember that mothering always involves the negotiation of multiple and often contradictory discourses and that empowered mothering can be best achieved through acceptance, respect, and cooperation among mothers.

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