

Dancing (pregnant) in precarious years:
Negotiating pregnancy and working as a theatrical dancer in Serbia

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Abstract

This thesis explores how theatrical dancers negotiate their pregnancy and working in the public theatres in Serbia. The scholarship on dancers/dance and pregnancy is still scarce, particularly when it comes to ballet dancers, and my interviewees are all trained in ballet and they call themselves like that. Dancers' work is typically imagined and researched in terms of its continuities from an early age when the training starts, or injuries are included in these timelines as possible breaks. Time available for professional dance is short and dancers are caught in carefully negotiating the breaks they make. Given this urgency of time in dance, I explore how dancers in Serbia consider, plan, and go through their pregnancies and coming back to work. I am also interested in dancers' (precarious) working positions in underfunded public theatres and with many dancers having experienced work under multiple temporary contracts. Throughout the thesis, I argue that dancers work on their bodies as a form of capital, highly aware of its short-lasting timeline, within which they consider pregnancy as a "compensable" break in a dancer's 20s and early 30s. Dancers work through their daily pain, with those of them under temporary contracts being in a particularly precarious position of prolonged, exhausting waiting for relative security. I show that pregnant dancers can *tactically* use their time on stage and that they negotiate their changing bodies through letting go of control and moral meanings assigned to their new weight. In coming back to work, dancers' bodies were part of the talk about the body and care at work, and they were exposed to others, which was all constitutive for dancers' management of bodily capital. Ultimately, dancers see their work on the post-pregnant body as a predominantly individual responsibility that demonstrates being responsible and control of one's bodily capital.

Key words: dancers, body, pregnancy, bodily capital, precarity, ballet

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Declaration of the original research and the word count

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where the appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis is accurate:

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Signed: Sara Petrović

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Introduction

Pregnancy rarely occurs as part of the stories and research reports we can read about professional dancers who work in theatres, particularly those who are involved in classical ballet. Dancers' work is more often than not imagined and researched in terms of its continuities from an early age when future professional dancers start their training, or injuries are included in these timelines as breaks of a different kind. Time available for professional dance is short and dancers are caught in carefully negotiating breaks they make, while research rarely assesses the meanings and dancers' negotiations of those breaks that are more or less planned during their career. Still, theatre companies and dance studios are working places and "home places" (Hamera 2007, 75-6) to dancers who do consider and plan their pregnancies, decide to leave dancing and exercising to have a child, and eventually go through the process of coming back to work. Moreover, they may go through this process several times, each time managing their bodies, time, and relationships in new circumstances.

Given the urgency around the short time available for professional dancing and the dancers' ageing body, I ask how dancers consider, plan, and go through their pregnancy during career in dance. How do they think about their time in dance and the breaks they can make? How do they negotiate their changing bodies during and after pregnancy? Moreover, I am interested in the position of dancers as (precarious) workers and the intersection of this position with their plans about pregnancy.

I hope to contribute to the scholarship about dancers as precarious workers at the present moment, particularly given that dancers employed in theatres and engaged in ballet are not addressed in this scholarship. Moreover, my hope is to contribute to the understanding of dancers' negotiation of pregnancy as part of their working lives and not primarily an inspiration behind their performances.

From my experience, dancers have a lot to say about these negotiations, which bear great significance for them as workers in the field that heavily depends on the body. As part of this research, I interviewed theatrical dancers in Serbia among whom the majority returned to work and dancing on stage after having one or more children¹. Most of the dancers are currently, and several among them were once full-time employees – members of the ballet companies – in two public theatres in the country, while they also have different side jobs besides this. Our

¹ I also interviewed one dancer, in her mid-20s, who was not pregnant and does not have children. I address this decision in more detail in the Methodology section.

conversations centered around the topics of the body as a site of everyday work in dance, dancers' bodily changes in the periods of pregnancy and "getting back into shape", as well as around their working conditions as theatrical dancers in Serbia. I attempted to put the body at the center of our conversations, which proved to be a familiar and productive approach in talking to the women whose work demands regular attention to and care for the body, and whose working community is saturated with conversations about the body on a daily level. In the thesis, I am primarily (although not exclusively) interested in the "backstage" life and work of the dancers, and not in their performances on stage. In other words, I attempt to focus on how dancers engage with their (pregnant) bodies in the spaces like dance studios and their homes when they are not performing publically for an audience. This resonates with the topic of the study itself since most of my interviewees did not dance on stage while pregnant. My interest draws on the notion of "backstage economies" that dance anthropologist Dunja Njaradi (2014, p. 48) proposes as a way to grasp the domain of her informants – male contemporary dancers – sustaining their work through the pursuit of projects online, constant traveling with unfavorable passports, and physical adaptation to new environments. Moreover, I also align with Njaradi (2014) in the wish to study "ordinary" dancers (p. 190), i.e. dancers who are not internationally known figures.

I recognize that my interest in the topic of this study can be traced back to the experience of being an amateur ballet student in a small town in Serbia for around 9 years, before going to the University. During those years, my participation in dance has generated new self-understandings, a pleasurable sense of bodily control and physical work but has also initiated, throughout the years, dilemmas and contradictions in me as a feminist (for example, see: Hamera 2007, 77-107; Davis 2015). Overall, I believe that such contact with dance has left me with an interest in the physicality of dancers' work and in the practices and relationships that lead to what is eventually performed on stage.

The guiding research and context

Pregnancy and dance/dancers: productive entanglements

As I have noted before, literature on pregnancy and dance is still scarce, particularly when it comes to ballet dancers. It is clear that unwanted pregnancy was a significant risk and barrier in the work of many dancers across history, as some historical studies of dancers as working women of their time show (e.g. Dawson, 2006). For example, working-class dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1820s risked pregnancy as part of their relationship with the so-called protectors and consequently risked a temporary or, in later years, a complete loss of income because of their pregnancy (Dawson 2006, 184, 274). In some of the classic historical studies and feminist analyses of dance, on the other hand, dancers' pregnancies are mostly – and briefly – mentioned as an inspiration for particular performances of dancers and choreographers in the second half of the 20th century in the West, which went against the image of a pregnant body as fragile, light, or not presentable as a performing body (Adair 1992, 186-187; Banes 1998, 228-9).

In the two works I identified as the most extensive ones on pregnancy, dance, and dancers' position (Kirk, 2021; Miller, 2002), some of these same dancers/choreographers are addressed but more extensively and with the inclusion of others, not always known to the international public. The period that both of these works cover is from the second half of the 20th century onwards. In her dissertation titled *Becomings: Pregnancy, Phenomenology, and Postmodern Dance*, dance scholar Johanna Kirk (2021) explores pregnancy-inspired works and performances of the U.S. postmodern choreographers between the 1950s and 2020s. She starts by sharing that her preliminary archival research revealed that many of the choreographers' pregnancies from the beginning of the 20th century onwards were not included in the most prominent sources about their work, which then directed her towards exploring the documents like letters, journals, or interviews (Kirk 2021, 14). These documents, as well as Kirk's conversations with several (predominantly white) choreographers/dancers who worked from the 1960s onwards, demonstrate that pregnancy fostered new questions, and consequently was related to productive intervals in their careers and shifts in style (Kirk, 2021, 14). Drawing on her own dance training, the author recollects that the pregnant body, although not explicitly discussed, was implicitly constructed as the opposite of what a dancer should embody, namely as “messy, leaky, unpredictable, unprofessional” (Kirk 2021, 13). She relies on

phenomenological perspectives, and feminist and queer authors who write about pregnancy and motherhood, and argues that the very fact that women choreographed and danced visibly pregnant is “destabilizing” for, among other things, medicalized notions of pregnant bodies and feminist knowledge on motherhood (Kirk 2021, 487, 495). As she claims, “in contrast to being medically monitored and assessed, these choreographers created dance praxes that involved self-monitoring”, as they fostered a “choreographic gaze” rather than a “medical” one (Kirk 2021, 171, 173).

In her dissertation, *Meditations on public performance and pregnancy: a feminist dance analysis*, dance scholar Gill Wright Miller (2002) similarly starts with arguing there is a need to reclaim the unknown history of women performing visibly pregnant in public in the West, even the history of dancers just being pregnant (p. 4). Still, she notes how, because of the aesthetics and power dynamics in the institutions of ballet, these “subversive” acts were not available to ballet dancers through history – “Rarely do we understand that ballet dancers might figuratively or actually be mothers; nowhere do we see ballet dancers pregnant. To do so would shatter the mythology with reality.” (Miller 2002, 71-2, 37). Miller eventually argues that these women’s stories show different ways of claiming agency over the body and transforming broader ideas of what the pregnant body (not only of a dancer) is able to do (Miller 2002, 201-2). Both Miller and Kirk draw primarily on the examples of dancers performing visibly pregnant on stage, finding subversiveness in the exposure of these *different* bodies to the audience and challenge they represent for the normative dancing body. I will draw on this in the thesis in order to explore what is the space for subversiveness and transformation in dancing not visibly pregnant on stage, as my interviewees did.

Besides these contributions from the fields of dance studies, social sciences and humanities, medically-informed advice on dancing and exercising in pregnancy and closely after appears in the guidelines and sheets produced by medical specialists, dance organizations, dance companies, and individual dance scholars (Sanders, 2008; McCoid, 2013; Quin, Rafferty, & Tomlinson, 2015; Manejias, 2020; Hillyar, 2021). In the face of still insufficient dance-specific knowledge, these guidelines establish what is a “safe practice” for dancers going through pregnancy. These authors generally agree that dancing in pregnancy should not be considered a danger or a risk in itself if the potential contraindications and new signs along the way are followed, and they add that dancing can be beneficial since dancers are attached personally and

used physically to this form of activity (Sanders 2008, 17).² These studies list number of domains where changes in pregnancy can be of particular interest to dancers, whereas some of these changes can appear as pleasing to dancers while others can require further caution. For example, it is said that certain hormonal, musculoskeletal changes typically affect dancers' balance, flexibility (it becomes greater), or they may cause hand pain and increased rate of injuries (Sanders, 2008; Quin, Rafferty, & Tomlinson, 2015).

Theorizing the (dancing) body

In the thesis, I draw on the notion of *bodily capital* in order to address the history of working on the body that accumulates and sustains my interviewees' daily life, as well as to address their understanding of their bodies' finality in the context of a short dancing career. The introduction of the concept of bodily capital is traced back to the work of sociologist Loïc Wacquant and his book *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (2004), based on his extensive ethnography in the boxing gym in the African-American ghetto of the South Side Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Drawing on the work of his collaborator, Pierre Bourdieu, Wacquant develops the concept of bodily capital to assess how boxers, their coach, and people who manage boxers' careers understand boxers' bodies and their value in pugilistic economics.

Bourdieu developed the influential understanding of class-signifying capital as not only *economic*, but also *social* – in the form of relations and social obligations one is able to acquire, and *cultural* – in the form of knowledge, dispositions, objects, and embodied skills that the person in the particular classed position holds (Bourdieu 1986, 16). Cultural capital is most directly read on the body – it is *embodied* in the ways we hold our body, take care of it, move, walk, talk, eat or drink; it is part of the broader system of habitus, as a set of predictable, not-centrally aligned set of dispositions that we hold about the world from the classed positions (Bourdieu 1984, 170; Bourdieu 2013, 72).

On the basis of Bourdieu's embodied cultural capital, Wacquant proposes the notion of bodily capital. As he shows, male boxers in his study invest great time and energy into developing body strength and learning particular bodily skills that will make them competitive among other boxers. In the gym, they spend time running, skipping rope, punching a bag, or sparring, but they also show their dedication in how they manage (and sacrifice) their everyday

² A guideline called "PARmed-X for pregnancy: Physical Activity Readiness Medical Examination" is mentioned as a formalized way of screening relevant antenatal information (Quin, Rafferty, & Tomlinson 2015, 220). The guideline is available at: <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/par-q-plus-form-for-pregnancy-before-exercising.pdf>

thoughts, diet, sleep, social, and sexual life (Wacquant 1995, 71). All of these efforts are accumulated in the embodied form so that boxers' bodies become a form of capital which they can then exchange for other forms of capital, such as economic ones (e.g. prizes) or symbolic ones (e.g. recognition, status). In the gym, the body is worked on in repetitive exercises that imbue it with the metaphors of the machine, weaponry/armory, and tool or instrument (Wacquant, 1998). Boxers and their social network strive for the body to be "made of use without being used up" (Wacquant 2004, 130) during a short time available for competitive boxing, aiming also to keep up with potential opponents' and promoters' career timelines (Wacquant 1995, 67-8; Wacquant 2004, 140). As sociologists Catherine Connell and Ashley Mears (2018) argue, Wacquant's analysis makes it clear that bodily capital is a *relational* concept that cannot be understood as owned solely by an individual person but that rather different groups and institutions claim ownership over this capital and extract value from it (p. 569).

Ashley Mears, in her book *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (2011), explores (primarily women) fashion models' negotiation of bodily capital in the industry that places high value on feminized youth, thinness, and beauty. The book is based on her ethnography among women and men fashion models working in the global centers of the industry around the time of the 2008 economic crisis. Mears (2011) argues that, rather than having someone who would guide them in understanding "looks" preferred by agencies and clients from season to season, models are left to figure out by themselves the fashion's "floating norms" (pp. 88, 103) and work to embody and eventually profit from them. The management of their bodily capital spreads throughout their daily lives and in-between shootings, fittings, and catwalks, where their bodies are primarily the objects for *display* compared to the bodies of athletes or dancers, as Mears argues, which are valued for their presentation of skilled activity. Still, like it is the case with models, care about the body follows dancers throughout their daily lives, and management of bodily capital becomes an ongoing process that one has to constantly negotiate with other commitments.

In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1995), feminist philosopher Susan Bordo argues that caring and controlling the body are particularly gendered in the Western context. Namely, she asserts that medically established eating disorders, which disproportionately affect women, are positioned on the continuum of "being a woman" in the West. Instead of being seen as aberrations, she argues that these conditions expose real effects of gender norms for a slender female body; their final internalization and realization. Bordo reads these conditions as gestures of taking back control over a female body, in a sense that the

perseverance and radical bodily effects in the conditions like anorexia nervosa go against the normative view of the female body as vulnerable and docile (Bordo 1995, 152). In her work among the aerobics participants in the U.S., sociologist Debra Gimlin (2002) shows that women in these classes ascribe moral meanings to their ability to control their bodies. They construct their bodies as “accidents” that they did not have control over, which served them to deny their individual responsibility for the body and potential connections between their bodies and their personalities. I find this scholarship useful in addressing moral meanings and the question of responsibility particularly in the case of dancers who are coming back to work after pregnancy, faced with the professional requirement to “get back” their body and continue performing.

In their research among professional ballet dancers in the high-status ballet company in the UK, sociologists Bryan Turner, Steven Wainwright, and Clare Williams (Turner & Wainwright, 2003; Wainwright & Turner, 2006; Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2005) draw on Bourdieu’s and Wacquant’s work and aim to render visible regular bodily practices in dancers’ work. Their study shows dancers’ deep investment into their bodies as central sites of the vocational identity, as well as the challenging nature of bodily (physical) capital’s decline in the process of ageing and recovering from injuries. In particular, they argue that dancers’ injuries, as a regular aspect of being a dancer, are shared experiences endured with the support of dance collectives. In a more theoretically rich way, the reproduction of *dancing communities* mediated through dance technique is explored in the work of dance scholar Judith Hamera (2007). She argues that the pains and pleasures of everyday dance work require to be continually reproduced as a collective effort and communicable knowledge with the medium of dance technique that dancers know and use. The technique is a familiar language but also a home to dancers’ emotions, mutual relationship, and “hiding places” (Hamera 2007, 22). Within this, pain serves as an “interpersonal currency” (Hamera 2007, 100) that is shared among dancers and that reproduces communities of those who felt it intimately.

Working dancers

As dance anthropologist Dunja Njaradi notes in her book *Backstage Economies: Labour and Masculinities in Contemporary European Dance* (2014), the relationship between dance and labor was typically addressed in dance studies through the prism of labor movements and national politics. Moreover, given the dominant interest in aesthetics and cultural representation in dance, the “totality of dance labor, the everyday body-work of dance and interconnected issues such as body pain, injuries, and aging” (p. 181) remain insufficiently thematized. Njaradi

herself aims to contribute to bridging this gap by following in her study the life and work of four male contemporary dancers from Turkey, Romania, Macedonia, and Serbia in 2008-9. She approaches these dancers as immaterial workers of late capitalism (as first proposed in Hardt and Negri's work) whose work requires multi-skilled bodies that rehearse, perform, move geographically, and constantly adapt to new environments. While their work is praised for its "creative" side that is assumingly devoided of the body, Njaradi (2014) shows how dancers are actually faced with the increased physical demands (p. 167). While expected to be highly mobile, dancers also discover the limits of this mobility since they possess unfavorable passports of the South-East European countries. The project-based temporality is addressed also in other recent studies of dancers as workers, in which most of the participants are, as in the case of Njaradi's study, contemporary dancers not officially "tied" to any particular institution.

In her book *Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance* (2020), dance scholar Annelies Van Assche writes on the basis of her ethnography among fourteen contemporary dancers in Brussels and Berlin, where she discovers a multitude of practices that they adopt to sustain work while in precarious positions as post-Fordist workers. While working on the basis of short-term projects, these dancers also have various side jobs that help them cover living costs and continue their dance practice. Besides this economic precarity, they are in the position of "physical precarity" (Van Assche 2020, 218) – as essentially all dancers – which refers to their bodies as always in a certain risk of injury and always under the influence of ageing. They continue dancing through pain, injuries, and exhaustion, negotiating the limited funds they have available for getting appropriate healthcare.

Dance scholar Anusha Kedhar (2020) worked among the South Asian dancers working in Britain on the short-term contracts, following their efforts to embody the flexibility as mobile workers and dancers who are expected to perform racialized virtuosity of South Asian dance in Britain. In her book *Flexible Bodies: British South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism* (2020), Kedhar shows that dancers' pain and injuries come as a consequence of the urgency of short time they have available in their schedules. They extend their bodies and themselves as workers to the limits of endurance, without the long-term benefits that they would have as company members.

Throughout the thesis, I engage with the scholarship presented here, mainly to explore how dancers in Serbia continue dancing through their precarious positions of being tied to the institutions that do not secure the long-term benefits and continuously exhaust their bodies. As we will see, even the full-time dancers in my study cannot claim proper healthcare benefits as

one of the basics of the care for the body in dance. I am also interested in how dancers' considerations and plans about pregnancy intersect with their precarious positions in theatres.

Working dancers and the labor market in Serbia

For more than 20 years now, dancers employed in the public sector in Serbia face harsh consequences of pension system reforms that create long-lasting problems in the work of dance companies in the country. The first significant change dates back to the year 1996 and the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia when the retirement age for dancers was raised to 50 in comparison to the previous regulations that stipulated the possibility of retirement in their early 40s. This kept dancers in the category of workers with retirement benefits but also effectively kept dancers who are past their early 40s and who do not perform on stage actively anymore, in the companies. This initiated the problem that will be deepened in the years to come, particularly in the years after 2014. In the meantime, starting from the early 2000s and the establishment of the democratic government in 2001, several pension reforms (under the IMF propositions) were introduced, raising the retirement age and minimum age for retirement for workers across the country³ (Stanić, 2010; Bernaciak, Duman, & Šćepanović, 2011; Perišić, 2016).

Still, as workers in a particularly physically strenuous job and recognized as such by law across years until today⁴, dancers remained in the category of workers who receive retirement benefits and their retirement age did not change with these reforms. From 1996 onwards, these benefits for dancers are calculated as 6 months added to every 12 months that they effectively spend at work as full-time employees, which makes them into the category with the highest retirement benefits among other categories of such workers (Stanić 2010, 50-53). Today, the retirement age for dancers thus remains 50.

Still, in practice, women dancers stop performing in their early 40s, particularly the roles of classical ballet repertoire given the physical requirements of the style. As noted before, these dancers remain full-time employees of the companies and perform technically less demanding roles or do not perform at all. They also stay in the companies after the age of 50, given the prospect of small pensions and the legal possibility to retire at 65 according to the country's

³ Officially, Serbia and Montenegro from 2003 to 2006, then the Republic of Serbia from 2006.

⁴ Zakon o penzijskom i invalidskom osiguranju, 2003

<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2003/34/1/reg;>

Pravilnik o radnim mestima, odnosno poslovima na kojima se staž osiguranja računa sa uvećanim trajanjem, 2003
<https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2011/48/2>

Labor law. Moreover, two laws from 2014, part of the broader reform of public administration, additionally worsened the situation in dance companies. First, salaries of the workers in the public sector were cut as well as all pensions in the country. Initially, salaries over 60.000 dinars (then 520 euros) were cut by 20% and the higher ones (100.000 dinars) by 25%, while later all salaries over 25.000 dinars were cut by 10% (Mikuš 2016, 215). Second, the ban was introduced on permanent hiring in the public sector, which was officially lifted at the beginning of 2021 although the hiring still remains highly restrictive. Together, all of these legal decisions make the permanent hiring of younger dancers coming from school very difficult. These dancers thus stay employed under different forms of temporary contracts, which do not enable them to receive retirement benefits available to full-time dancers, as well as, most often, to have monthly income and health insurance during the months of July and August, when theatres are not open. As we will see, some of the dancers in my study worked on a string of temporary contracts for almost a decade, while being fully engaged in the repertoire of their companies.

Dancers working under temporary contracts join a growing number of people in Serbia who are precarious workers under short-term contracts, with poor social security, and low income. In 2017, data showed a high percentage of vulnerable employees (32%) and people working in the informal sector (22%), particularly in the labor-intensive jobs in agriculture (Bradaš 2017, 3-4). With Serbia having one of the lowest employment rates and being the country with the greatest inequality in Europe, overall less than 50% of women of working age are employed (2016) (Bradaš 2017; Pantović, Bradaš, Petovar 2017, 9, 11; Krek, 2018). From 2014 onwards, in particular, working in the public sector has become more precarious, with the previously mentioned reform leading to around 16.200 new short-term workers and 28.600 fewer permanent ones in 2017 compared to 2014 (Bradaš 2018, 6). Women make up the majority precisely in the big parts of public sector hit by the reform, such as healthcare and education. Women working in public theatres in the country make up 47.1% of workers there (compared to 58.9% in all public institutions of culture), while the minority of them occupies the position of director in these theatres (25.6%) (Милановић, Субашић, Опачић 2017, 38-9, 45). The cultural sector in the country is heavily underfunded, with the 2019 study showing that Serbia spends the least on culture in the region, namely 0.74%⁵ of its total budget or 11 euros per citizen (CESK, NKSS 2019, 33). While the institutions of culture like public theatres are the biggest beneficiaries of this spending, their workers also struggle with low salaries and

⁵ 0.76% in the year 2020 (NKSS, 29.06.2021). <https://nezavisnakultura.net/2021/06/29/konferencija-za-mediije-povodom-objavljivanja-rezultata-godisnjeg-konkursa-ministarstva-kulture-republike-srbije-i-sekretarijata-za-kulturu-grada-beograda/>

sustaining a decent living (SEEcult.org, 2019). Full-time *corps de ballet*⁶ dancers in public theatres may earn around 440-460 euros a month⁷, while the salaries of dancers in the highest ranks are somewhere higher. Overall, statistics show that in the expert and artistic jobs in formal sector, where women are the majority, they earn 15% less than men in those jobs (Pantović, Bradaš, Petovar 2017, 14). For the general population in Serbia, the numbers are very low, showing that half of the adult population in the country earns less than 213 euros/month, while 80% of them earn less than 344 euros/month (Krek, 2018).

In the following chapters and after the Methodology section, I discuss the following. In the first chapter, I discuss dancers' bodies as a form of short-lived bodily capital managed through daily, painful work. Also, I address pregnancy as part of the timeline of dancers' bodily capital. After this, I explore the particularly precarious positions of dancers working under temporary contracts and their consideration of pregnancy.

In the second chapter, I explore the period of dancers' pregnancy through, first, dancing pregnant on stage or not, and then through dancers' accounts of their changing bodies in pregnancy.

In the third chapter, I discuss the period of dancers coming back to work after pregnancy, with their bodies being negotiated as part of the dancers' talk about the body in theatres, exposure to other dancers, as well as the prevalent idea of individual responsibility for the state of one's body after pregnancy.

⁶ Ranks (for both female and male dancers) in these companies include *corps de ballet* (French for "body of the ballet") or ensemble dancers – dancers who regularly perform as a group; principals (*prima ballerina* for a female dancer) – dancers of the highest rank in the company, performing solo; and soloists – dancers of the middle rank, who perform bigger or smaller solo parts and divide into the first, the second, and the third soloists (Craine & Mackrell 2010, 107; 358).

⁷ According to the information provided by my interviewees.

Methodology

The main material for this research comes from fourteen semi-structured interviews I conducted with dancers who are either currently or were once full-time dancers of two public theatres in the country and who all, except one, have at least one child. I conducted the first two interviews in March 2020, as part of the course work on the *Feminist qualitative research methods* course at CEU. One of these interviews was in-person, while the second and all other interviews in the study were online, via different applications, and the video call. Precautions around COVID-19 influenced the eventual choice of online interviews and, despite being online, my impression is that they provided space for openness, rich and honest exchanges, and good rapport. After these first two interviews, I conducted the rest of the interviews between September and December 2020. Due to the technical difficulties, the recordings of the first four of these interviews were lost, and I proceeded by writing down notes for each of them and transcribing verbatim all other interviews. In June 2021, I had less structured conversations with four dancers for whom I had written notes from our original interviews, whereas I imagined these conversations as shorter and a way to ask for information that I missed to include in my notes⁸. Still, most of these conversations turned out to be longer than I expected⁹ and valuable sources of new information that I include in the thesis. Finally, in June 2021, I had a conversation with Tatjana, a dancer from one of the dancers' associations in the country (1.5 hours) and still a full-time dancer, in her late 30s. Her knowledge about the dancers' working conditions and history of organizing helped me contextualize more thoroughly what I already knew and added new important information. I include a short testimony by her in the thesis. The original fourteen interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours each, whereas most of them lasted either 1.5 or 2 hours. All interviewees either signed the Informed consent form¹⁰ or I shared the information written there with them before the interview and asked for their oral consent.

In the thesis, I refer to all interviewees by pseudonyms, except for two interviewees who wanted their full names to be included (I introduce them below). Besides using pseudonyms, I have also hidden or changed all information that can expose the identity of my interviewees, as preserving their anonymity was of the utmost importance to me. The dancers' community in

⁸ Throughout the thesis, I refer to all dancers as interviewees, although the exchanges with some I describe here as "less structured conversations".

⁹ Two conversations lasted around 1 hour, one around 2 hours, while one lasted around 15 minutes.

¹⁰ The form included information about the topic and the aim of the research, interviewees' participation and anonymity, as well as information about me as a researcher.

Serbia is relatively small and, when writing the thesis, I was cognizant of the fact that exposing certain information can make it possible to identify particular dancers. On several occasions, I have also discussed this with my interviewees or they themselves pointed out what information about them should not be included in the thesis.

Most of my interviewees – nine of them – are currently full-time dancers in various ranks in two public theatres in the country, and they actively perform in the repertoire. These dancers are between 28 and 43 years old, with a median age of 37; they have either one, two, or three children. Among other dancers, Nevena is in her mid-50s, has one child, and rarely performs although she is still employed as a full-time dancer in one of the theatres. Ivona is in her mid-20s, and she is the only dancer I interviewed who was not pregnant and does not have a child; she works as a full-time dancer. The interview with her provided me with the perspective of someone who does wish to have a child eventually but still faces dilemmas about when and whether at all during her dancing career. This was a glimpse into the reality of dancers whom I did not interview and I made a conscious decision to include one dancer with such perspective in the research. Together, these eleven dancers make up the core group of my interviewees to whom I will refer most often throughout the thesis, given that they all still work in theatres and all, except Ivona, returned to work after having one or more children. In their theatres, these dancers dance classical ballet, neoclassical ballet, as well as contemporary dance.

My three older interviewees are in their 60s, all have one child and were employed as full-time dancers in the past – Julija, Aleksandra Ketig, and Gabriela Teglaši (Velimirović) Jojkić. While Julija gave birth to her child before she became a full-time dancer in the theatre, Aleksandra and Gabriela both did not come back to dancing after their pregnancy in their 30s. Although diverting from the majority of dancers in the study who have children, these dancers' experiences were a valuable perspective on alternative timelines of dancers' work. My contacts during the research led me to these dancers and I decide to include their testimonies about the finality of dancers' bodies as a capital, about pregnancy in dance, and negotiation of bodily changes during pregnancy. Aleksandra and Gabriela are dancers who wanted their full names included in the thesis, and I shortly introduce them below, as they describe themselves:

Aleksandra (60) is a choreographer, a ballet dancer, the initiator, and the first teacher at the Department of contemporary dance in the state Ballet school in Novi Sad (Vojvodina, Serbia). She is also a translator and ballet critic¹¹. She joined the company in 1978 and left in 1993.

¹¹ Aleksandra wanted me to include this description of herself too: “an artist of the movement of body and soul united under creation and education made out of love”.

Gabriela (60) was a volunteer in the Serbian National Theatre from 1970, joined the company in 1978, and retired in 2015, as a first soloist. She was the director of the Ballet in the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad, taught ballet in the company, and in the state Ballet school in Novi Sad. She also worked in Portugal for 2 years, established ballet schools in Bjeljina (Republic of Srpska, BIH) and Sremska Mitrovica (Vojvodina, Serbia). She is the president of the Association of ballet artists of Vojvodina since 2011.¹²

The process of coming to the potential interviewees (through the snowball technique) already positioned me as an outsider in terms of not being involved in the field of professional dance either as a dancer or in some other role. Women from the field of dance, whose contacts I sometimes received from women outside the field of dance, and who knew my interviewees in different capacities, gave me their contacts. Also, these interviewees then relied on their friendships and acquaintances in theatres and referred me to new interviewees. In general, my interviewees were happy to talk about the topics that I announced as part of the research, with many of them asking about the upcoming thesis.

In addition, I talked to my interviewees from the position of someone who was never pregnant and does not have children, which put them in another form of relative authority and expertise. As authors (e.g. Kirk, 2021; Stanković, 2014) who were in the same position argue, this first-hand “naivety” (Stanković 2014, 97) of the researcher about pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood is productively used in interviews as a resource to ask *more*, i.e. ask extensively about the details that are not known to someone who did not experience the same in her own body. I tried to act according to this and, in particular, to be attentive to the aspects of the interviewees’ reality that may fall under the realm of ordinary and self-explanatory for them (Anderson & Jack, 1998). I followed multiple interviewing skills in aiming to construct the interviews as a rich exchange and as a safe space for the interviewees, like probing, asking for a reason behind the interviewee’s opinion or act, and supporting the legitimacy of her point of view (Yow, 2005).

As someone who is not part of the world of professional dance, I am also in the position to be attentive to the “ordinariness” of dancers’ work. Still, as someone who was involved in amateur ballet in the past, I felt I embodied the “halfie” position to some extent (Subedi, 2009), as in the case of speaking the “language” of ballet technique and having experience of training in the studio. When it comes to the language of technique, what I mean is that I was able to

¹² She is also the author of the books “Balet da li se to jede?”, “Pisma iz Portugala”, “Baletska korepeticija Zoltana Gajdoša”, as well as co-author of several books. She published around 150 articles (including ballet critique) and is an associate at Matica Srpska (currently for Serbian biographical dictionary). She had around 50 book promotions in Serbia and abroad.

understand the names of the elements in French as well as the meaning of some commonly used phrases such as “marking the movement”¹³. This lack of need for translation made me into someone who was not a full outsider and who shared with the interviewees some embodied knowledge important to them and foundational for their socialization in the institutions of dance (ballet school, theatre company). Interviewees themselves sometimes referred to something they assumed I “already know” (e.g. the organization of the ballet class, the importance of regulating one’s weight in ballet) or they even commented on one occasion on how my behavior (“being polite” in our communication, according to the interviewee) indicates I trained ballet in the past.

I “knew” some of my interviewees as a member of an audience, from watching them perform on stage. Writing about this position, dance scholar Priya Srinivasan (2009) argues that to be an “unruly spectator” of dance means to be “a corporeal being who critically engages with the female dancing body and is able to view its multiple and material performances even while accounting for the seduction of its aesthetics” (p. 53). In other words, acting “unruly” in this sense means consciously paying attention while witnessing dance to the signs of a dancer’s bodily efforts, exhaustion, and sheer physical work. As an audience member, I feel I did embody this position as someone who trained dance and knew that great physical effort is behind movements on stage. Also, I tried to extend this position into my interviews with the dancers as a methodological stance, and search for *physical work* in our conversations about dance.

I have approached the analysis of the interview transcripts by, first, coming up with the inductive codes and broader themes for each of them, and then, making extensive comparisons between the transcripts. This has helped me to stay close to the material of every interview while also gradually finding patterns across them.

¹³ The way of rehearsing movements without doing them to the full extent but rather doing their reduced version, i.e. without all accentuations, or sometimes by using hand gestures instead of using legs.

Chapter 1. Tracing the embodied timeline of dancers' work

1.1. Negotiating the time left: dancers' "expiration date" and bodily capital

Time is valuable to dancers, particularly for those whose dance training grows to be a preparation for a professional dance career and job in a company. In ballet, in particular, this career is typically short, lasting between a woman's late teens and her late 30s or early 40s (if there are no serious injuries), and it is highly dependent on physical strength and endurance. As dance scholar Judith Hamera (2007) argues, a form of urgency around time in ballet is present from early on. From the time of training in school and later throughout the career, the body is read in "temporal markers" (p. 64) that indicate what technical elements can be introduced to the training, which of them the body can perform, and which elements have to be rather abandoned because they are not suited to the particular age. A dancer's body is either "too young", "too old", or just in time for different elements, and the education is ideally imagined as a set of timed interventions for the markers to be hit and used in the right way (Hamera 2007, 64). Although the meaning of time is always embedded in a broader context of someone's participation in ballet, youth is highly valued in its professional world and the *younger body* from a dancer's past is often referred to as being better in general, i.e. more capable than the present one (Hamera 2007, 64-5). For the dancers in my study too, talking about the body was a way to talk about the timed nature of their work. They work with the high awareness of a limited time they have available to be professional dancers, and, within such framework, the body and they themselves emerge as *expendable* and continuously *consumed*. In their view, this is something that ultimately no dancer can escape.

It ends quickly for us, you know, over the years one realizes that it all ends really quickly, our careers are short. (...) because **we are – to put it simply – like the expendable goods [potrošna roba]**¹⁴. **Someone younger, someone more capable shows up very quickly** (...) you have to be in shape constantly. (...) Once they remove you from a show and replace you with someone else, at my age [late 30s] (...) (laughs) **I'll be replaced very quickly.** (Ljubica)¹⁵

¹⁴ When in squared brackets, the text in *Italic* letters refers to the Serbian original of the word/phrase, while outside these brackets, it refers to something that either an interviewee or I stressed out in our speech. Parts of the quotes that I found to be most illustrative are bolded.

¹⁵ All the quotes' translations to English are mine.

[on what makes dancers different from people in other professions] **Maybe it's only different that we have, like, expiration date** and that we start really early, and then it always hangs over our heads that we're going to end up soon, basically. (Katarina)

Ljubica and Katarina both use particularly striking language to describe the transience of dancers' work and dancers as workers within the company. They articulate how the passing of time feels when one is a part of processes that prioritize youth and young bodies – there is a sense of being replaceable and expendable but also a desire to “keep up” with those who are younger and more capable of enduring physical requirements of the job. While not all dancers in my study expressed these conditions so explicitly, Ljubica's and Katarina's words are illustrative of the dancers' overall agreement that their work progressively spends and exhausts their bodies within a fairly universal timeline that ends around the dancer's late 30s or early 40s. By that time, in my interviewees' words, they are “old”, supposed to finish dancing on stage, and their exhausted body (parts) indicate just that. For example, Zorica, being at the “serious age” (her words) of the late 40s, said her back now feels like a “wooden plate” and thus restricts her from moving as she used to. At the same time, dancers were clear about this temporality being specifically a *dancers'* one, related to dancers' bodies as a resource for work on stage. This is why the 40s can be a dancer's “best years” (Emilija) once she is done performing. For my interviewees, accepting the described timeline is a matter of being in touch with reality and knowing what kind of body is “presentable” on stage.

I'm not kidding myself [*ne ložim se*] I'm going to build a career at the age of 42 or 45. I won't dance the White Swan [one of the two leading female roles in Swan Lake] and I don't have to be in every premiere. (Svetlana)

...for God's sake, I'll be 60 soon, I'm not going to be still dancing at this point. I mean, I am... at home, in a room, just for myself. (laughs) (Aleksandra)

Although the authors have argued that dancers develop new self-understandings and can benefit from using their symbolic capital and accumulated knowledge on dance after retiring as performers (e.g. Wainwright & Turner 2006, 242-4), this is not my focus here. Rather, I want to underline the centrality of the body for how dancers in my study think about their time as workers and, as later parts of this chapter and the thesis will discuss, as workers on a 1.5-2 years-long temporary break from performing on stage.

In doing this, I start from the conceptualization of the body and its value in the ethnography of sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1995, 2004) among male boxers in the late 1980s and early 1990s Chicago, to which I will refer throughout the thesis. As Wacquant (1995, 2004)

argues, boxers' bodies are treated by them and other actors in pugilistic economics as *bodily capital* that boxers – in negotiations with their coach, managers, and families – develop through exercise in the gym and regulation of everyday life outside the gym. Capital made of specifically developed muscles, endurance, and skills of boxing enables these men and, by extension, their coach and managers, to exchange it for economic and symbolic capitals (e.g. status, knowledge of dance). Like dancers in my study, all actors in Wacquant's (2004) study are highly aware of the finite nature of bodily capital, and boxers at the end of career are often called the ones whose "time has passed" or who have "done their time" (p. 142). For dancers, the body is capital that they depend on for daily work. This capital is built throughout the years of daily physical/body work and care for the body outside the theatre. In the case of dancers trained in classical ballet technique – like my interviewees – this capital is made of a muscular, slender, strong body. Although the work of the technique should not be understood as hegemonic and as producing the *universal* ballet body, we can say that it still has some broad "strategic ambitions" in regards to what a *dancer* should embody (Hamera 2007, 136; Green, 1999). What is favored and built throughout the years are long muscles, turned-out positions of legs and feet¹⁶, and the overall symmetry of the body.

Masha, a dancer in her late 30s, was telling me about the difficulties in managing her bodily capital. The increased effort and care that her body requires over the years in order to "get back" into the shape, make the finite nature of this capital more and more obvious to her:

When it comes to me at least, at the time when I was 26-7, I didn't do any special exercises during summer. Sometimes I would stretch, bend, I don't know... whatever felt good. (...) **Now, over the years, I notice how, every year, it's more difficult for me to get back into shape** and I have more and more problems getting the body into shape. And **the longer it takes, the more exhausting it gets.** (...) I notice how, every year, these years... after the summer, I start with 2-3kg more than [at the beginning of summer]. (...) People say to me 'Oh, don't complain' but, **in a long run, what? In some 5 years, I could come [naguram] to 60kg even... with my height.** (...) **It's not like it bothers me that much because I'm not planning to dance for 10 more years.** (laughs) But, in principle... yes, *it's noticeable, it's always noticeable* [bodily changes with aging]. (Masha)

This quote makes it clear how dancers can feel like the subtle fighters with time. A summer break that Masha refers to is the longest one that dancers have during the season, excluding the break during their pregnancy and maternity leave. Getting back into shape after such a break means entering the well-established routine of classes and rehearsals during the

¹⁶ The "turnout" is one of the basics of classical ballet technique, and it refers to the orientation (rotation) of the legs and feet outwards from the hips while the hips stay orientated forwards (Craine & Mackrell 2010, 459-460).

day, which – not only in the case of getting into shape – exhausts the body. Approaching the body as a form of capital helps us to acknowledge this history of working on and with the body before the “expiration date” comes; this history being one of mundane, continuous, backstage practices.

In one of the theatres where my interviewees work, for instance, dancers’ daily schedule, (when there is no show in the evening) includes morning classes between 10 and 11:15 AM and rehearsals after that, lasting until 4 PM or sometimes less, depending on the repertoire. On the days when the show is scheduled, rehearsals after the class finish earlier (around 1-1:30 PM) and dancers return to the theatre around 5-5:30 PM for the preparation and warm-up before the show at 7:30 PM. With the several-acts-long shows and with the dressing room changes after that, dancers would sometimes be home only around midnight. Also, many of my interviewees’ time after rehearsals and on the weekends is occupied with their dance-related side jobs that they get based on the bodily capital of a dancer and embodied knowledge of dance. Overall, this schedule puts the body at the center of these dancers’ working lives.

When it comes to the everyday classes and rehearsals, there are not many reasons dancers can submit for skipping 1-2 days, and the reasons considered justified enough are typically their children’s or their own sickness. Still, they are aware that being forced to skip that much already breaks the continuity of body work and makes a difference in their shape. As Ivona summarized it, even the basic elements of dance technique require regular, repetitive work to establish, even though they are never truly established as final and “easy”:

I mean, it seems to me that **ballet never becomes easy as much as we exercise**. So, the things that were difficult before may become easier with time but they never become easy. (laughs) (Ivona)

Only a small percentage of people in this world have this natural, so to say... turnout. There are people like that, of course. For example, one of my colleagues, she can probably just get out of bed and put herself in a nice position right away, have legs turned outwards totally so she doesn’t have to... (laughs) **All the rest of us – we have to try a bit harder and warm-up and work and get tired.** (Ivona)

Hence, Ivona talks about the building of a dancer’s bodily capital as a virtually non-ending work that rests upon regularity and continuity, embodied first and foremost in dancers’ morning classes with the company. The classes were overall highly valued by my interviewees as a way to stay in shape, although one of them suggested their status as the “most boring” part of the day (still enjoyed by this particular dancer) and something they “have to do”. These exercises and mastering the technique are meant to give shape to what dance anthropologist Dunja Njaradi (2014), inspired by Judith Hamera’s analysis, calls the ballet’s “fantasy of labor”

(p. 154) on stage. Namely, the execution of movements in the case of praised ballet dancers astonishes audiences, looks easy when in the “right body” of the skilled dancer, and ultimately hides the actual effort of the execution. The first-person accounts from dancers, as we can see in the quote from Ivona, reveal the ongoing work that is felt in the bodies of those who create the “fantasy” on stage. It all remains *work* for her, full of conscious effort and exhaustion that follows.

1.1.1. “People end up exhausted”: dancers emerging from pain

The “corporeal terms” (Njaradi 2014, 149) of pain, soreness, tiredness and the needed rest are, overall, are the most common ones in how my interviewees describe the consuming effects of their daily work. In line with the previous studies that explored (ballet) dancers’ relationship to pain and injury (Wainwright & Turner, 2004; Turner & Wainwright, 2003; Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Markula, 2015; Pickard, 2015), my interviewees refer to pain as a regular and rather necessary part of their lives. It follows them in exercises, rehearsals, shows, as well as at home and when they are not dancing. Therefore, in such a reality, the presence of pain is normalized. Julija provided a nice illustration of this. When I asked her about the pain in particular parts of the body, she replied that “something hurts all the time” in dancers’ bodies, thus making clear that pain was a background of her daily life as a dancer. Some studies suggest that enduring pain in professional dance is in fact often taken to be the sign of putting enough effort, making the right progress (Aalten 2007, 115-6), and heroically overcoming one’s bodily limits (Aalten 2007, 116, 122; Alexias & Dimitropoulou 2011, 96-7). Although my interviewees do not openly celebrate pain, they do suggest that the dancers’ relationship to it is, in a way, special and cultivated throughout the years of dance training:

...your [a dancer’s] relationship with your body was formed when you were very young. And **you take care of it, you treat it (laughs)... you destroy it [urnišeš]**, and that’s your way of life. I mean, **I’m not thinking something like: ‘Oh my poor legs’ or, I don’t know... ‘My poor hands’ or ‘My poor spine’**. It’s just that you accept it as normal because you’ve already accepted it from an early age; because it is what it is, **you get used to enduring pain**. I’m telling you, like in any sport. You go through pain, you go through soreness, you get injured, you work every day, train every day. And **that’s something we love, I mean, it’s our routine**. (Katarina)

To do this job, you really have to be, like, *crazy – to come every day to feel pain.*
(Zorica)

In particular, the way Katarina talks about her (painful) body evokes the imaginary of the body as a machine, with its different parts (legs, hands, spine) that are supposed to function efficiently and fulfill their purpose for the whole machine to run smoothly. In his analysis, Wacquant (1998) also identifies the idea of the machine – an automobile in the first place – as one the most common ways in which boxers give meaning to their bodies and work in sport (p. 330). These *machines* need timed maintenance, regular power supply, and harmonized functioning of the mutually connected elements (Wacquant 1998, 330-331). While the image of the machine draws our attention to bodily efforts and exhaustion of athletes and dancers, Katarina's words are also a reminder of the fact that those same things can sometimes be pleasantly familiar to the people as a mode of engaging the body in work. In the quote above, she asserts that bodily spending is something close to the dancers' way of living life (however "crazy" it is, according to Zorica). Contributing to this, with a slight smile, Katarina later added: "When we don't work, we don't feel well (...) the hormone of happiness that comes from exercising... that is produced by daily exercising – it's not produced in that case". Again, she does not celebrate pain explicitly but overall suggests that "enduring pain" is a way of "living sanely in the world" (Asad 2000, 43) that she was socialized in. As anthropologist Talal Asad (2000) argues, this approach to pain takes into account that pain can be the site of activity and agency and not only the site of passive acceptance. In particular, dancers in my study used their exhaustion and painful experiences to convey their special position in contrast with "other" people, people from other professions, to whom the body is assumingly less present in daily life. In this sense, dancers step out as active agents from their painful position to argue that enduring pain is what makes them as a group able to endure what others cannot. This is what makes them (*ballet*) *dancers* in itself. For example, Masha was very decisive about the differences in the working days of dancers and women who "work in the office":

The moment she leaves the office – she's done with that, while my muscle is still in spasm and I'm not able to break spasms by the next rehearsal, and I have to figure out what to do. And if I don't take vitamins in the evening and I don't go to bed on time, tomorrow I will... realize I didn't do everything that I should've done. (Masha)

When we were talking about the retirement benefits that full-time theatrical dancers in Serbia have, Nevena objected to the suspicion of some people outside the dance field about

how justified are those benefits. She draws on the dancers' endurance of pain to claim their deservingness:

They don't understand people [dancers] end up exhausted, with broken bodies, with injuries... Like athletes – they also end up with injuries, so... People only don't understand the same thing happens in ballet. (Nevena)

Masha describes how pain in dancers' daily life creates the “ongoing commitments” (Mears 2011, 92) of managing bodily capital that follow them outside their work in theatre. In the case of women fashion models, sociologist Ashley Mears (2011) discusses their commitment to losing weight, exercising in the gym, and shaping specific parts of their bodies, like limbs, in-between their jobs, i.e. before they appear at castings. Wacquant also shows how boxers' management of bodily capital, besides training in the gym, rests upon the management of the “*trinity of pugilistic sacrifice*, namely, food, social life, and sex” (Wacquant 1995, 76), through which boxers' shape and strength are preserved. As Masha and my other interviewees make clear, the preservation of dancers' bodily capital is also not something that belongs exclusively to certain hours of the day, as it is not possible to go away from the pain. Dealing with pain is time-consuming, and dancers were telling me about their struggle to have enough sleep, rest before a show, have regular meals, and give themselves muscle massages. Dancers like Nevena feel that this work and its exhausting effects remain largely invisible to the general population, as dancers' artistic status seems to obscure the physicality of their work. Particularly for female ballet dancers performing in the classical repertoire – and all of my interviewees performed in this repertoire – what has been called the “ballerina's core ‘image problem’” implies that the “lightweight”, floating aesthetics of her roles and movements contrast the actual sweat and physical strength it takes to embody such movements (Fisher 2007, 12). As Nevena and Katarina earlier asserted, athletes are more publicly emblematic of such efforts, and dancers use them as a point of reference to make their own physical work more visible.

Finally, Jelena also characterizes “all ballerinas” as “freaks” based on their ability to endure pain or, as she formulates it, to “ignore” pain. Still, as she says, her own ignorance towards pain was supported by the inadequate reaction of the doctor, and her experience thus additionally highlights the role of institutional treatment of dancers' pain and, more broadly, dancers' health:

Oh, I think that **all ballerinas are freaks** – and all dancers in general – when it comes to the pain threshold. (...) I'll give you an example of me working for a month with the broken [type of bone] and not having a clue about it. That's the *ideal example* of how much a woman – a dancer – can ignore something that hurts.

Because, like... **it hurts, so it hurts [*boli pa boli*]. I mean, *something* always hurts.** (...) Whatever, I mean, we'll take a few brufens and move on. **The mistake is not only mine, it's also a mistake on the side of the doctor [physiatrist] to whom I went the moment I felt the pain.** (...) He sat on the chair and was telling me 'Now turn to this side, now do this, now do that'. He told me 'It's nothing, go home, take brufens, and everything will be fine'. (Jelena)

In this quote, the endurance of pain is something that makes dancers into almost a different kind of people, who learn to live with pain more efficiently than others. I would hypothesize that there is a sense of pride in the idea of dancers as “freaks”, although the reality of living with pain is strenuous and leaves marks on dancers’ bodies. In other words, this is to say that my intention is not to “romanticize pain” (Kedhar 2020, 157) that dancers endure in any way but to point to the importance of pain as a point of reference that dancers use in talking about themselves as workers. The regular use of painkillers is reported widely in the field of professional dance as a way of dealing with pain, as an anonymous dancer from the Royal Ballet in London jokingly said, referring to his company: “(...) if you shook every single dancer up, they would rattle with the amount of Neurofen inside their body!” (Wainwright, Williams, & Turner 2005, 58)¹⁷. While Jelena addresses this, she also highlights that inadequate medical care can help the alarming pain remain unrecognized as such. Her pain and injury were prolonged and eventually required a more serious intervention, with the whole “saga” – as Jelena called it – lasting a couple of months longer than it would have lasted if the injury was treated in a timely manner.

1.1.2. “We’re not all healthy, really”: dancers on their healthcare

The impression of being examined at various occasions, by different doctors, without much care or specialized knowledge about the dancers’ health, was shared among several interviewees with whom I touched upon these topics. More precisely, there was a sense of not having the needed access to specialized care in the country, at least not in a way affordable to dancers. Some of the basic care was provided in both theatres through physiotherapy available at work, which helps dancers deal with daily pain and spasms in-between rehearsals. Besides this, in one of the theatres, dancers have access to free examinations and therapy in a private medical institution in the field of sports medicine and physiatry. While this last option is financially attractive, I also heard that that dancers feel they need to search for better healthcare in other institutions in the private sector and somehow find finances for those alternatives:

¹⁷ This is how the name of the medication appears in the article, although the official name is “Nurofen”.

There's a man there who examines us, gives the diagnosis, gives the therapy, etc. I mean, it's certainly, you know... **if I would have to pay for 10 therapies, 3.000 [25 euros] or 5.000 or 8.000 [dinars] each, I wouldn't be able to. (...) Most of us [dancers] can't afford it.** So, it is comforting in a sense. (Svetlana)

*Many people go to other places (...) and they pay from their own pockets to solve the problem in the best way possible. **We're talking about the body here and it's our instrument, so to say... and it's not a joke. We must find a real specialist, even if we have to pay a bit more or pay a lot...*** it's important to heal properly. (Ivona)

With the monthly income of around 440-460 euros for full-time *corps de ballet* dancers and with lower incomes of dancers under temporary contracts (e.g. sometimes around 150 or 225 euros a month)¹⁸, potential expenses in the private sector are significant. On the other hand, receiving services like physiotherapy in the public sector is often bound up with long waiting lists of up to several months, which makes the whole treatment lose much of its purpose¹⁹. Also, until a few years ago part of the dancers' national health insurance, visits to the specialists of sports medicine in the public sector are now something that dancers need to pay. As the Jelena put it: "Players from FC [small football club in Serbia] – I'm sorry, with all due respect – have free examinations with sports doctors, while we don't have that right anymore".

For dancers, economic precarity is tied to the precarity of the body as capital, since not having adequate medical care or enough finances for the alternatives amplifies painful consequences of their work and can create strings of injuries. Writing about dancers in a different situation than my interviewees', i.e. about dancers working project-based and "in-between institutions rather than within" (p. 47), dance scholar Annelies Van Assche (2020) notes a similar phenomenon. She shows that, besides the inevitable condition of ageing, dancers' "physical precarity" is reflected also in how their bodies suffer from the lack of budget and time for doctor's visits or secured healthcare arrangements (Van Assche 2020, 219-220). In the study of dance scholar Anusha Kedhar (2020) too, dancers continue to dance through pain and injury faced with the lack of benefits they would have as company members, and they practice self-care of cold and hot baths at home or adapt choreographers' demands in the studio in order to cause themselves and other dancers less pain (pp. 155-156).

¹⁸ Based on the information provided by my interviewees.

¹⁹ For example, in 2018, Serbian newspaper *Politika* writes about the "marathon-long" waiting lists for receiving physiotherapy in public institutions. It is said that, due to the fast filling out of appointments, those who miss out on it at the beginning of the month can expect to wait up to 5-6 months for their first appointment. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/407377/Maratonsko-cekanje-na-fizikalnu-terapiju> (accessed August 20, 2021).

Some of my interviewees particularly referred to yearly systemic physical examinations as something that dancers would highly benefit from if they would have them. For example, Tatjana expressed the thought that I chose for the title of this subsection:

I claim that a yearly doctor's exam is necessary for us. Not only for them to measure our height, weight, and heart pressure but also, like, the performance of the lungs under pressure, the heart, this and that. **We're not all healthy, really. Nor is there a team of doctors trained to work with dancers. In what condition are my bones, ligaments, knees, or hips...?** Those older generations... Many ballerinas ended up with hip surgeries (...) many of them had not one but several surgeries... whether it was knees, this and that... most often it's knees, feet. From injuries, from wearing out... (Tatjana)

Hence, we can see that Tatjana suggests that, although dancers can appear as healthy and capable of hard physical work, this can actually hide numerous health problems that eventually will endanger generations of dancers in the theatre. The institution and the state thus appear as *uncaring*, i.e. exploiting dancers' bodily capital without proper preventive and restorative care. By the latest information that surfaced to the public (2019)²⁰, systemic physical examinations are planned to be introduced on an annual basis as one of the ways to check dancers' capacity to continue performing with the company. Although Tatjana welcomed this in general, the announcement also brings a dose of anxiety and distrust: "I can't wait to see what doctor will establish [*koji će bre lekar da utvrdi*]"²¹ that I'm not capable! What will be the parameters for that? (laughs)".

1.1.2. Taking time and giving meaning to pregnancy

How pregnancy makes sense on the timeline of my interviewees' working lives? To begin with, nearly all my interviewees talk about the decision to have at least one child as something they made a long time ago and largely did not question. Some of them summarized this by saying that they "always wanted to have a child"²² (Nevena) or that, for them, "it was never an option not to have children [*potomstvo*] and a family" (Gabriela). Of course, this does

²⁰ *Proposal of the regulation on the measures of active employment policy and policy of sustaining employment in the field of artistic dance*, available at: <https://voice.org.rs/voice-vlada-priprema-mere-za-prevremeno-penzionisanje-baletskih-igraca/> (accessed May 30, 2021)

²¹ Here, I make a short remark about the translation of the Serbian "bre" and the source I consulted. Since there is no direct translation of this word, I found useful an article that concludes how "bre" is a marker of the speaker's attitude towards the one she addresses (addressee). More precisely, "bre" marks the "speaker's expectation of opposition from an actual or assumed addressee to what she is about to say and her appeal to the mutual manifestness of what she has just said" (Mišković-Luković, Dedadić, Polomac 2015, 28-9).

²² From my notes after the first interview.

not mean that they initially planned to have a child during their career as a dancer but it does mean that most of them expressed the belief that having a child has a unique, and irreplaceable value, particularly for them as *women*. Katarina, who has two children and still performs in theatre, expressed this effectively:

As I see it, if a woman doesn't give birth to a child – of course, under the condition that she's able to, that she's healthy – I mean, **she's not complete [zaokružena]. We're made to be mothers.** (laughs) (Katarina)

I always knew – even though I became a ballerina – I knew that I want children, I mean, it was like... it was the most normal thing. Career is one thing, career comes and goes. And you know, our job is pretty cruel. Very quickly, we... **You realize that every one of us is replaceable.** (Katarina)

These words support the essentialist view of motherhood, where having a child is something that rests upon the biological fitness of a woman to embody the role of a mother. Here, women appear as closer to biological, corporeal, and natural than men (Grosz 1994, 14), and are eventually even seen as “completed” and as fulfilling their purpose by becoming mothers. For Katarina, being a dancer and being engaged in a physically consuming, short-spanned career should not stand in the way of this biological potentiality in women. Not only that it should not stand in the way of it but this career, according to her, contributes that the decision to have a child is a rational one. The career is almost fleeting, inevitably occupying only a small part of a woman's life. A dancer is in the position of *replaceability* because the profession requires a particular capital of a young, flexible, and strong body. In that position, the choice to have a child reaches into the future, after the end of career, and provides certainty and long-term experiences. It is the way to manage the timeline of one's bodily capital in the face of a short career.

...we're all aware it's much more important than a career and all those who didn't realize it or didn't realize themselves [as parents], I think they are... honestly, pretty sad. I mean, I have colleagues who're just not able to... (...) as much as it's, like, no, no, it's nothing... **I think that it's a grief that cannot be cured; in ballet and everywhere else.** If someone wanted it and wasn't able to [have a child]. (Masha)

I never thought about terminating a pregnancy because of work, because of career, to be precise. It didn't exist as... I don't know, **even if they offered me to dance I don't-know-what, there's no such thing that would make me do it.** (Zorica)

The dancers agree that having children has a unique value that cannot be compensated or replaced with other experiences that may be part of being a dancer. Zorica evokes examples that historical studies briefly mention, namely those of the “costs” pregnancy brought for

dancers in the companies (e.g. Banes 1998, 145; Dawson 2006, 274-5), as well as of abortion as something that dancers had when they wanted to continue dancing or escape condemnation as company members (e.g. Adair 1992, 107-109).²³ However, from her perspective, the arguments that would “justify” having an abortion are not found in a dancer’s work.

As Johanna Kirk (2021) notes, all these dancers’ inclusive stance towards potential pregnancy and motherhood in dance can be seen as a way of challenging the “enduring archetype of an undomesticated, untamed, non-conforming, semi-self-destructive, “bohemian” artist who will do anything for art and thus cannot care for dependents” (p. 520). Although their arguments may draw on the essentialist and biologicistic understandings of women’s relationship to motherhood, dancers do challenge the idea of art as self-sufficient or all-absorbing in the artist’s life. For them, being a working *artist* – although they rarely referred to themselves by this last term – means that there are also certain relationships and attachments that escape that realm. Jelena felt the need to underline that she loves working in dance *despite* the fact that she wanted to have children. Her remark shows that the ideas of self-sufficient art and artist can be pervasive in how dancers think about how justified their choices are:

I’m not one of those who could be alone and enjoy my career only. Although I really do understand such people and their choices. I could never make a choice like that myself. There you go. **I think I probably love my job as much as they do. I’m just not ready to sacrifice everything else that I could have in life for something... Especially not in Serbia.** (Jelena)

For Jelena, “especially not in Serbia”, as she explained, refers to the fact that dancers in the country are underappreciated and marginalized as workers in the institutions of the cultural sector. Hence, this makes the “sacrifice” of not having children not worth enough for her. On the trail of this, some other dancers suggested other local circumstances that supported their decision about pregnancy. These referred to the relations within the theatre as an institution, namely to something we can refer to as *relational work*, understood as people’s creation of “differentiated ties that distinguish the relations at hand from others with which they might become confused” and the work people do to “sustain, repair, and renegotiate those ties as new opportunities, threats, and problems arise” (Zelizer 2005, 35). Hence, some dancers saw themselves as being outside the important relations at work or as unable to perform the needed relational work that would help them be taken into account or chosen for a certain part in the show. This eventually motivated them to think about pregnancy as something that comes at the

²³ Moreover, dance scholar Johanna Kirk (2021) discusses examples of dancers and choreographers working with and through their experiences of abortion to create dance. One prominent example is Black choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and her dance *Womb Wars* (1988) (Kirk 2021, 499-502).

right time in their careers, given that they do not have the assets to manage the timeline of their bodily capital. In such a context, working in the theatre was “perverse”, “not so white” as one would want it to be, and it required “knowing someone” (all words of my interviewees), i.e. knowing the right people who will advocate for you. Pregnancy, among other things, was a way to distance yourself from these morally “contaminated” relations at work. Anthropologists Čarna Brković (2017) and Ljiljana Pantović (2019), in their work in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) and Serbia, respectively, research these kinds of morally saturated relationships by their local names of *veze* (or *šteke* in BIH), literally translated as “connections”. These pertain to knowing the “right people”, those who occupy the position of relative power, and are able to provide the service that would otherwise be unavailable to someone.

Basing their consideration of pregnancy in these different realms, the overall framework in which my interviewees eventually placed their pregnancy during a dancing career pertained to the timeline of their bodily capital as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Within this framework, the dancer’s 20s and early 30s were still a reservoir of her physical strength and ability to compensate for the break from dancing. Pregnancy and maternity leave were, together, the longest break in their careers since they started working in theatre, and one of the central questions that pregnancy (especially the first one) brought pertained to – “How well will my body recover after a pregnancy?” (Miller 2002, 71).

...everything depends on age. When you take a break at 25, it’s not the same as taking [a break] at 35. After maternity leave [at 35], the body can’t even return to its previous state; (laughs) the skin, the muscles, nothing. Absolutely, I mean... you can’t compare those two things. (...) a colleague who came back after maternity leave at 38... **there’s no help for ballet there.** (...) Everything over 35 is really tough, really tough. And I think even if she would have an enormous desire [to come back] and everything... it’s just nature. At 28, there are no limits. I mean, no, there’s no... **you can come back and be everything that you were before.** It looks like it’s just 5, 6, 7 years but for the shape and for the body, it’s a lot. (Masha)

The years were carefully counted and the bodily threshold moved between a dancer’s ages of 30 and 35:

...if you look at it, like, it’s not a long period, but it would have made a big difference if I had the first [child] at 24, and [the second child] at 27, i.e. 28. But given the fact that **everything over the age of 30 is like... With the second one, it was harder for me.** (Ljubica)

We can see that extensive changes that pregnancy brings to the dancers’ bodily capital are seen as practically reversible if they happen at the “right time”. In line with the understanding of dancers’ career timeline as fairly universal, here too my interviewees argue

that dancers' effort or determination do not have a chance against in the face of this universality. Still, some of them underlined that pregnancy can directly intersect with the most important years in a dancer's career:

...you're leaving your career, let's say, during what is the most important [period] for you if you're going to do it at the right time. It's exactly when you should be *building yourself up*. It's when you're at your top. (...) It's the age, let's say, between 25 and 35. **That's when a ballerina is building herself up the most.** (Marija)

"Building up" of a dancer includes being present and ready to take chances in the repertoire. It also include continuous work on the body that makes a dancer ready to respond to the opportunities. Taking time for pregnancy takes away from the valuable time of the dancer's bodily capital in dance. Hence, dancers sometimes feel caught between temporalities that both have the young body as a priority. Masha told me about the conflicted advice she heard from other dancers – it is either "first, go and dance a bit" (before having a child) or "the younger the better" (to have a child).

Dancers who did not take a break in a career because of pregnancy, Gabriela and Aleksandra, talked about their plans for pregnancy as precisely falling at the end of their dancing career. When one finished, the second started; and this is how it was supposed to be.

I had performed some significant parts by the time I was 30. From the age of 11 until 29-30, it's an admirable number of years. (...) **And then you feel the need to... become a mother.** (Gabriela)

At some point, I told myself 'OK, it's about time', I mean, there's no point in giving birth after the age of 35 because I'll be a grandmother to my child and not her mom. (...) **By that time [by the age of 35], I reached a maximum in my career, and... the dancing career wasn't supposed to exist anymore, I was finished with that part.** (Aleksandra)

1.2. The "stolen years" and waiting for security: dancers in precarious positions

For part of the dancers in my study, working under different kinds of temporary contracts in the past significantly marked their plans for having children, as well as their life more broadly. Among my interviewees, 4 of them – Jelena, Emilija, Ivona, and Verica – had the experience of working like this, some of them for nearly a decade. As outlined in the introductory part of the thesis, these dancers face greater insecurity, smaller income, the lack of retirement benefits available to full-time dancers, as well as breaks during summer months

in their income and health insurance. This section essentially explores how these dancers continued to dance and plan their pregnancy through these particularly precarious positions.

When dancers describe working under temporary contracts over the years, there is a specific temporality to it. What I mean by this is that their descriptions bring out the sense of working but being stuck in the continuous – what sometimes seems like endless – waiting for life to finally become secure and for them to have the right kind of compensation for their work. Getting a full-time job as a dancer is perceived as a way to achieve this and to end the waiting. Given the character of dancers' daily work and the discussion in the first part of the chapter, *waiting* actually consists of *exhausting* physical work and puts dancers in pain. They perform regularly and, in our interviews, these dancers would refer to themselves as the ones who “carry the repertoire” of their companies.

In July and August, when the theatre's not open, our contracts expire and **we don't get any pay, we don't have health insurance, nothing, a total break.** (...) **We perform more and work more than the full-time colleagues,** who... you know, they don't care, they can't get fired, they're not coming to work, **they're paid more than we are, they have benefits we don't have,** and we... you know, we don't have the same rights. (Emilija)

I would argue that it is useful to approach the condition of dancers under temporary contracts through the notion of “slow death” proposed by queer theorist Lauren Berlant (2007). Berlant (2007) argues that slow death, as “physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population” under “global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (p. 754), characterizes people's ordinary, everyday life. It is the deterioration that happens continuously and is spread through the domain of the mundane. In Berlant's words, the notion of “slow death” serves to shift the attention to this domain as it resembles ants that keep “scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock” (Berlant 2007, 761). For the dancers in my study, although there are “total breaks” (in Emilija's words) during summer that can be particularly difficult, those are only elements of a number of years that dancers spend as precarious workers under temporary contracts. Dancers themselves experience them as only more dramatic symptoms of their broader position.

By drawing on Berlant (2007), I follow scholars, mentioned in previous parts of the chapter (Njaradi, 2014; Kedhar, 2020; Van Assche, 2020), who use theoretical framework of “slow death” to various extent in analyzing the position of dancers working on short-term projects. For example, at the end of her book, Dunja Njaradi (2014) suggests that the “texture of ordinary life” of her informants shows that they are progressively being exhausted by frequent travels, technically demanding rehearsals, and constant working that still earns them

“just enough” (pp. 189-190). Anusha Kedhar (2020) adopts the notion in approaching pain and injuries of British South Asian dancers who also constantly move between countries, experience insecurity, and demands to perform racialized virtuosity of South Asian dance. In comparison to these examples, dancers working under temporary contracts in my study are part of the state institutions and hope to get full-time employment there. They are not constantly on the move but are members of the same collectives where they perform, in practice, the same amount of work as dancers employed full-time. They continue to dance through the years of waiting for a relative security.

Precarity of dancers’ position was reflected in their feelings of social and economic insecurity and instability. They continuously invested hope into getting the permanent contract with the company, and would sometimes receive promises and signs of potential positive outcome that would eventually be betrayed.

...you risk a lot, you never know if... there will be contracts available the next year, if it will maybe happen that, for example, the theater doesn’t have enough money and has to cut the number of dancers with temporary contracts. (Ivona)

What this quote also reveals, and what is characteristic of all my interviewees, is their sense of not having control over whether and when their status will change; something Njaradi (2014) heard from her informants too, as a sense of “helplessness” about changing the condition of dancers’ work (p. 190). My interviewees were rather “lucky” (in their words) if they were in a generation that was offered permanent contracts or, if not, they would see the state as the only instance that can grapple with the existing problems. As Jelena told me, it is something that neither dancers nor ballet directors can change, since someone rather has to “seat down and change the whole law”.

You know, **I don’t want to do it but I’ll be forced to be that same kind of woman...** a middle-aged one, who seats at home, prepares meals, has some other job and receives salary because she’s not able to retire. (Jelena)

[after saying she has a full-time contract now] **...but children [young ballet dancers] are still coming from school and, again, they have temporary contracts and everything starts all over again.** So, all that should be really dealt with in a systematic way. (Verica)

So, we see that, despite occasional gains, the situation is perceived as rather continuing outside the dancers’ control. After many years, dancers approach it as an intergenerational “domain of living on” and not as a crisis that has clear contours in time (Berlant 2007, 759).

What else is at stake here is that dancers who worked under temporary contracts regularly compared themselves in our interviews to their older colleagues who do not perform anymore but who are employed full-time. This served to claim the unjust character of the whole system. It was already visible in the first quote in this section, where Emilija talks about the work of dancers like herself not being recognized as equal to others' work. Moreover, in that quote, she conveys the sense of security that the full-time position brings, where getting fired is supposedly not even an option. Jelena and Svetlana also talked about these topics, rather passionately:

...saying it without false modesty: **they're earning my money**. Don't take me the wrong way. So, they, these women... There are women who didn't put their foot in the theatre for 10 years. (...) [on dancers over 40] She's not needed for every show. OK, you can come, do the exercises, no problem, you'll perform where we need you. But you won't, how can I put it... **you won't continue to occupy the place of an 18-year-old-girl who waits for something to happen to her. They stole so many years of work [godina staža] from me. Nobody can give that back to me.** (Jelena)

Yes, it is awesome not to work and get paid and go forever like that but, wait a minute – **is Serbia so mighty it can continue to pay people who don't work?** I'm also sure that the theater isn't a leader in this nor it is the only one. I'm telling you, I'm sure that all those big institutions, which are still in the state crib [*na državnim jaslama*]... **I'm not at all for privatization, don't get me wrong. I know very well we still enjoy certain benefits of socialism.** (Svetlana)

Jelena describes relationship between groups of temporary-contracted and full-time dancers who are past their early 40s as one where the second group essentially lives at the expense of the first one. In terms of bodily capital, it could be said that dancers perceive the use of their bodily capital in the institution as not the right one since older dancers do not perform but occupy the places of the younger ones. As Katarina put it at one point: "There's always need for new people, always need for fresh blood" while, as Ljubica said: "...there are many dancers who cannot be used and they're on the pay list" (thinking of the dancers who do not perform but are full-time employees). As sociologists Catherine Connell and Ashley Mears (2018) suggest, it is important not to treat bodily capital as an exclusive individual asset which people – its owners – can freely invest in their pursuit of economic and other gains. Such an idea reproduces the neoliberal view of individuals as entrepreneurs of their bodies, and it fails to take into account the interests of other people, groups, and institutions in managing one's bodily capital (Connell & Mears 2018, 562, 565). Svetlana makes something of a moral claim that, although acknowledging the security of positions in the public institutions as a legacy of

socialism, she also constructs these institutions as overburdened places of “unjust redistribution” (Mikuš 2016, 217).

Later, remembering one burst of dissatisfaction she had in relation to her position in the theatre, Jelena summarized the whole period of working under temporary contracts as “years of rage that kept building up” in her. So, besides *waiting* that is physically exhausting and turns into a deteriorating condition of ordinary life, this period accumulates certain affects. I would contend that Jelena and other dancers do not put blame on the other group of older dancers employed full-time. Rather, Jelena’s “rage” can be understood as a collective affect and, in line, with what feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed writes about feminist attachments, it emerges as a way to relate to one’s past and imagine the possible future, and is not directed against something imagined as its cause (Ahmed 2014, 175-176). More than a direct gesture against something or someone, the anger of dancers in precarious positions can be conceptualized as a response to the very reality of being a dancer in Serbia.

I don’t have to think months ahead if I’m going to have enough money. (Ivona)

Well, with this contract that I have now, I see it as a workplace that can offer you the **safety and security** [*bezbednost i osiguranje*] that you need, in that sense. But **with the contracts we had before, this was absolutely impossible. Those two things can’t measure.** (Verica)

This is how dancers eventually approached the full-time positions that they obtained in theatre – in terms of security and predictable future in which they can plan to have children. Some of them said that they strategically delayed trying to get pregnant while they are employed under temporary contracts. The possibility of having the paid maternity leave () was crucial in dancers’

As Nevena said, once in the position of full-time employees, they “don’t have to worry” (at least) about having health insurance as a basic form of security. Although they did acknowledge their still precarious position as workers with small salaries and the need for additional side jobs, these dancers valued the sense of waiting that came to an end.

Chapter 2: Pregnant dancers: changing dances, changing bodies

2.1. (Not) dancing with the other: negotiating pregnancy on stage and in the studio

As noted in the introductory part of the thesis, in the literature that addresses pregnant dancers' performances and dances that engage with the pregnant body, there seems to be a preference given to the analysis of the *visibly* pregnant bodies on stage as subversive or truly *different* (e.g. Miller, 2002; Kirk, 2021). Dance scholar Gill Wright Miller (2002) argues that “Western concert dance performed by women who are visibly pregnant at the time of the performance is an example of an aesthetic rendered invisible by the cultural customs ascribed to women” (p. 25). This aesthetic, as she explains, implies that the female body with additional weight in its upper part can be the performing body worth seeing and capable of expression through dance. She thus locates agency, self-determination, and emancipatory potential (Miller 2002, 201-202) in the performances of her interviewees. Similarly, dance scholar Johanna Kirk (2021) focuses in her research on dancers/choreographers who performed visibly pregnant and chose pregnancy as something to thematize openly in their performances.

Among the dancers in my study who did perform in their pregnancy, there were those who performed into their third, fourth, or fifth month of pregnancy and those who performed only in the first couple of weeks of their pregnancy and then left the stage. Although these dancers did not attempt to show their pregnant stomach on stage and expose the changed shape of their body – and thus their performances were not subversive in the way that visibly pregnant bodies are on stage – I want to argue that there is still subversiveness to their dancing pregnant. Namely, they used the time available on stage creatively, although not challenging the predominant aesthetics of dance in a way that is visible from the point of view of an audience. I draw on the notion of *tactic* in the sense in which Michel de Certeau defines it in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau (1984) proposes to differentiate between *strategy*, as a claim to power based on taking place and thus a productive site of exteriority to the ones who are regulated, and *tactic*, as a way of consuming the time (in the lack of place) made available by the dominant power (pp. 35-37). In one of the examples he gives, a worker who uses the factory machine at work to make something for himself and not as part of the factory production process, is actually – in a *tactical* way – consuming time he has available and resisting the dominant power of the institution (De Certeau 1984, 25-26). Drawing on this, my

interviewees' use of time on stage – their dancing on stage while being pregnant – can be understood as a tactic.

Typically, the dancers wanted first to make sure that dancing in pregnancy is safe and, for this, they primarily relied on their doctors' assessment, although we have seen in the introductory part of the thesis that the medical knowledge on dancing in pregnancy is still not widely shared among the general professionals:

We're in the group of high risk when it comes to pregnancy, like athletes (...) I mean, the number of miscarriages is great and just because [of] difficult physical activities... many of my colleagues have difficulties getting pregnant and so on. (...) **I felt good, I was still working, I was still performing (...) the doctor told me everything's OK – 'You're free to continue working if you want'.** (Emilija)

Like other dancers in my study, Emilija was part of the medical system as a pregnant patient²⁴ and she, like others, expressed general confidence in medical expert knowledge about pregnancy. In the quote above, she seems to ask the doctor for validation of her own experience of feeling good and able to perform, particularly so because she marks dancers collectively as a group with the high risk of pregnancy complications. This is why her dancing could seem as a courageous act to some, as Masha said:

There are cases like that, like, in the 4th month and still on stage. But... *hats off*, really. (laughs) **For bravery and perseverance... because, me – I was sleeping when I was in the 4th month.** (Masha)

Like stories about pain in ballet that Judith Hamera analyzes (2007), stories about miscarriages also emerge as an “interpersonal currency” (p. 100) among dancers; something that leads to their precaution and shared anxieties. Nevena also told me about this anxiety being widely shared and known by the dancers. Still, once reassured by her doctor, Emilija stayed at work and, at my question about dancing in pregnancy, she started with “Oh, there's nothing more beautiful, believe me!”, and then continued:

You feel some animalistic strength, you have more strength at that point. The things I danced while I was pregnant, I danced before pregnancy too, and I found them easier to dance in pregnancy somehow. (...) And also there's this emotional aspect, you completely commit to what you're doing. You know, **if it's something emotional, I literally bring myself to tears on stage, literally... I'm not able to restrain it, you know.** (...) Now, I stopped once they couldn't buckle me into the

²⁴ It is appropriate to use this term (“patient”) given medicalization and pathologization that surrounds women's pregnancy and childbirth in Serbia (Stanković, 2014; Stanković, Skočajić, Đorđević, 2017; Pantović, 2019). Anthropologist Ljiljana Pantović explores their position also as *patient-clients* moving between private and public maternal healthcare sectors; she shows that Roma women are in a particularly precarious position (Pantović 2019; Пантовић, 2021).

costume anymore. (...) **I think it's not OK to go out with the stomach, it's visible in my job, all the costumes are like that, tight.** (Emilija)

Here, although pregnancy is not openly available for the presentation to the audience and it does not have its direct purpose in choreography, it clearly has its transformative potential and, as a way of consuming the time on stage, it is the “art of using” the “opportunities” given within the space of the theatre (De Certeau 1984, 31, 37). Dancing pregnant enables Emilija to feel new things like having great power in her new body and reacting in a particularly emotional way to the movements she is performing (and that she supposedly performed before pregnancy). This means that deploying tactics of dancing pregnant enables her to claim something for herself that she would not be able to claim otherwise. This claim is not directed towards the audience but towards herself as the one who feels the effects of dancing in the new body. She negotiates the changing shape of her body by keeping it invisible to the audience as much as she can (with the obvious help of those – women – working in the costume department). Her body can thus “pass” (Kirk 2021, 132) as a non-pregnant one within the same, tight costume. In her study, Johanna Kirk (2021) argues that dancing visibly pregnant can also fail to be subversive if the audience does not see it as an intentional act of challenging norms of the dancing body or femininity on stage (p. 132-133). Still, if we do not take the audience as those who should “decide” about the potential subversiveness of dancing pregnant, we can see new possibilities and read this act as claiming time for dancers themselves on stage.

Another one of my interviewees who danced in pregnancy, Verica, described her experience like this:

I was only thinking how **the baby feels great and how she listens to the music and will already know whole repertoire once she's born.** (laughs) (Verica)

[I felt] really omnipotent, in that sense. (laughs) (Verica)

Verica also finds new ways of using time available on stage through explicitly sharing it with the “other” that is present in dancing on stage. This is not visible to the audience and does not break total, collective image of slender dancers on stage but it is something that Verica gains for herself. Her enjoyable dancing with the “other” is the position of “quasi-invisibility”, to use De Certeau's words (1984; p. 31).

In my interviews with the dancers, I also heard about dancing with the “other” in a different way while being pregnant and on stage. Namely, dancers had vivid memories of dancing among their colleagues (both female and male) who knew about their pregnancy. Some of them referred to dancing with their partner in a duet while some of them remembered having

a bigger group of dancers around them who were highly attentive to their pregnant bodies. While those, other dancers could be said to form some kind of an audience for my interviewees dancing pregnant, they are still not an audience in the classic sense, judging the dancers' performance from "outside".

...it was something with the partner, he was supposed to throw me like this (laughs), then [I was doing] the split, then he was supposed to turn me around, I don't know what... then some support [*podrška*]²⁵. Back then, I told to some of the colleagues... Actually, **everybody knew I was pregnant and it was a mistake to tell them, because they all had this look, like I was crazy to do all that. And then I... then they inscribed this fear into me.** I remember being afraid back then, yes. (Marija)

Others treated Marija's body as particularly vulnerable in pregnancy and eventually made the stage into a dangerous space for a pregnant dancer. We can nicely see how others are constitutive of the dancer's perception of pregnancy as belonging or not to the stage. In the collective endeavor such as dancing together on stage, others almost need to agree and participate in using the time available in a particular way. Emilija used the metaphor of "kamikaze" to describe how she was a walking danger in the eyes of her partners on stage, while adding:

Men couldn't bring themselves to touch me! (...) 'I don't want to grasp you so that I don't hurt the baby'. I told him 'What's wrong with you, you can't hurt the baby, I mean, you're not going to...' (...) I didn't feel that it makes any problem whatsoever. I mean, of course, **if I had felt... of course I would have changed some things in the whole movement together with him.** (Emilija)

Emilija also describes being seen as vulnerable by others, which was not in accordance with how she felt in her own body on stage. She felt competent in the pregnant body and claimed also the possibility to know for herself when the movement is too dangerous (for the "baby"). In such a scenario, partners on stage engage in an "intentional caretaking" that consists of adapting movements to the need of one dancer's body, with the aim to cause less risk (Kedhar 2020, 156).

Dancers who did not want to dance on stage in pregnancy, being members of the company with the scheduled repertoire, often had to perform in one or a couple of upcoming shows, while during this time another dancer would prepare to take the pregnant dancer's part. Hence, pregnancy is from the start negotiated within the theatre as a shared event in this sense

²⁵ "Support" typically (in the most common, heteronormative duet) refers to the act of a male dancer supporting a female partner in performing the movement, like in the case of lifting her or supporting her balance.

that the pregnancy of one dancer holds importance for the timeline of another dancer's bodily capital. Moreover, a dancer's pregnancy is a significant event for the company as a whole, given that its repertoire relies on the bodily capital of dancers as a collective, as noticed in the previous chapter. Katarina recollected the period after she found out she was pregnant and had to continue performing until another dancer was ready: "I was like 'I just have to finish with this now, because it happened to be like that at the moment', you know, I found out this morning and I have a show tonight. Of course, I'll dance tonight and tomorrow too but already anything that comes in the next few days, when someone else can be ready... [I won't dance in that]".

I think it's really... not something you should be playing with. You know. Even if someone would ask that from you, you refuse right away. **Because terrible complications can occur, really. In the first months, it's not attached properly, it can fall off by itself, without you doing *anything*. Also, let's take into account that it's great, great physical exertion... (...) No one who has at least something human in himself will ask a woman in such a condition to work.** (...) I'm not saying, I did work out, I did. But those are static exercises. If you did ballet, you know yourself that the barre²⁶ is totally, like... easy peasy [*neka limunada*], warming up for what comes later, for those jumps we do at the end of the class... which are actually the highlight of everything. (Jelena)

For Jelena, the first few months of pregnancy are already precarious enough even without the additional risk of dancing. Dancing would thus only be an intentional activity that endangers pregnancy further and this makes the decision to leave the stage straightforward to her. Like women in the study of psychologist Biljana Stanković (2014) in Serbia, Jelena understands early pregnancy as still the state of somewhere in-between, and she is adapting her activity to this in order to reduce the uncertainty as much as possible (pp. 118-122).²⁷

Instead of dancing on stage, Jelena sees the "backstage" space of the studio as safer, leaving room for "static" activities. Exercises in the studio enable her to both maintain the regularity of work and her moral position as a responsible pregnant dancer. Her consideration of responsibility for the condition of the fetus resonates with the prevalence of risk management expected of pregnant women in contemporary societies, which sociologist Deborah Lupton (2012) discusses. Supported by biotechnologies that moved the representation of the fetus to the domain of visual and made possible evaluation of the stages of its development in detail, women are increasingly seen as responsible for enabling the right kind of environment for this

²⁶ "Barre" refers to the bar (usually wooden) at the studio walls that serves dancers to support themselves while doing exercises in the first part of the class. It is also used as a name for this whole part of the class, and this is how Jelena uses the term.

²⁷ This understanding has medical support, since studies show that miscarriage occurs in 15-20% of registered pregnancies, while more than 80% of miscarriages occur before week 12 (Cunningham 2010, 215, as cited in Stanković 2014, 118).

development (Lupton, 2012). Their physical activity, diet, or relationship with expert medical knowledge, are all included in what is imagined as a rational approach to possible risks that could endanger the fetus.

Katarina considered stage (although dancing for a short while there) to be almost a hostile place for a pregnant dancer, referring to dancing pregnant on stage as “pretending to be something she is not”. Her case is interesting because her doctor was explicitly urging her to continue to perform on stage but she claimed vulnerability of her pregnant body in order to stop dancing.

...I’ve seen a lot of ugly stuff with my own eyes. A lot of trying, lost babies, miscarriages, and so on. Now, whether that’s because of dancing or it’s not because of dancing... but I knew it’s just normal, all athletes stop working *to that [meaning: previous] extent*. After all, we deal with our bodies so much **that I knew I was pregnant the day I became pregnant; because I could feel it.** Because... nobody believes me, but when I talk to other ballerinas who think like that, they also tell me they could feel it. (...) **Every day, I know where my every bone is, where my every muscle is, what hurts where... (laughs) And it just didn’t feel good to work.** It didn’t feel good to me, to be on stage, because... you’re afraid, of course, that you’re going to hurt the baby, with the jumps, with the hits, you dance barefoot, you dance in the dirt, you dance in the cold, you know – those are not the ideal hygienic conditions... You sweat, you’re close to other people. (Katarina)

2.2. “Letting go”: dancers about their changing bodies in pregnancy

As the pregnancy progressed, dancers’ bodies moved more and more away from the normative shape of the “squared” dancer’s body (Hamera 2007, 66-67) towards the body that is more “rounded”. Dancers felt the need to adapt to the new ways of using the body which offered less control than they were used to having before. For example, Masha told me about her sharing the need to “let go” of controlling the stomach muscles with other dancers who were once pregnant:

...we, as ballerinas, keep these stomach muscles firm, tightened in a way; and it’s an unconscious process, I don’t know, it’s... it’s like that. Now, the baby grew, everything widened up, and I kept everything, you know (laughs) (...) [her talking to other dancers] ‘Yes, do you remember that moment when [takes a breath imitating the process] you just had to let go?’ It will either break [or you’ll let go]... **You just have to get used to letting the stomach stretch. You can’t keep it in and control it anymore.** It was like... do other women also experience that or their stomach’s just not so strong and tight that they can notice it (...) I remember that

moment when I was holding my hand and I let go and, like, *it's better!* Like, **relax those muscles, it will have to stretch out sooner or later.** (Masha)

Dancers' bodily capital rests upon the control they learn to execute over specific parts of the body at the right time. Similar to enduring pain in the previous chapter, controlling the body here is something that marks (ballet) dancers as a group and that makes them different from people who may not be used to such a control. Because of this, Masha wonders about whether her experience of pregnancy is also different compared to others, non-dancers, and she finds those who can understand among her fellow dancers in whose life bodily control has a prominent place too. Realizing that is more efficient to "let go" of control over the body requires some time and conscious effort. Dance scholar Judith Hamera (2007) argues that gaining the sense of control (although not in some absolute terms) over the body and cultivating the sense of authorship over "corporeal and social beings" (p. 95) can be an important drive behind girls' participation in ballet in the first place. In early pregnancy, as sociologist Meredith Nash (2012) argues, the "in-betweenness" of the body is negotiated intimately by women as an ambiguous and unsettling state, where the body is still not publically pregnant but rather seen as "fat" (p. 311). Although Masha does not refer to her "fatness" explicitly in the cited quote, I read her "letting go" of the control over muscles as still a way to negotiate her "in-betweenness" and actually validate this among other dancers.

Still, "letting go" had another meaning that was particularly bound up with dancers' feelings of freedom. The "ongoing commitments" (Mears 2011, 92) of dancers' daily work that I referred to in Chapter 1 – these were "allowed" to be abandoned for the period of pregnancy. Some dancers described how they happily let go of caring about the weight:

[on pregnancy] **It means being able to take a break (...) from that discipline, you know – when you eat, what you eat, at what time, what you can do, what you cannot do... while once the pregnancy comes, you're really free.** You don't have to go to the exercises anymore, take off your clothes there... (Gabriela)

...the first day, after those 4 months, when I said 'Thank you, goodbye theatre, from now on I'm on maternity leave', my appetite opened. **I used to run to other side of the street so that my colleagues wouldn't see me so fat.** (Gabriela)

And then, for the first time in life – God, you can eat all day. **Oh, nobody's going to tell you that you're fat. I mean, it's really... for the first time, it's some sort of freedom,** I don't know how to explain it. (laughs) (Zorica)

These dancers suggest that pregnancy is the first time when dancers can stop investing in their bodies as a capital for work. In the study of Dunja Njaradi (2014), one of her informants – male contemporary dancers – refer to the ballet dancers' commitments of constantly taking

care of the diet, pain, and injuries, as a total lack of freedom (p. 157). Ballet dancers then resemble workers who are alienated from their labor and engaged in repetitive practices throughout the years of working. Although my interviewees do not perceive themselves as “without freedom” in what they do, their accounts of finding time to *not* care about the body show that continuous attention given to the body in dance can be a great burden. As both Zorica’s and Gabriela’s words show, pregnancy is a space free of the explicit judgment by others, i.e. of their looks that make the body exposed.

The weight gain in pregnancy was, to some extent, part of all my interviews with the dancers. How much weight they gained throughout pregnancy varied greatly, from 10kg to more than 33kg. Julija is an example of the dancer who described her additional weight of around 10kg in pregnancy as not something dramatic in her overall experience of pregnancy. Still, how several interviewees approached their weight gain was through pointing to different elements that make up for this gain, and that ultimately make this gain different from the one outside pregnancy. In this way, dancers acknowledged the presence of the “other” in pregnancy and denied moral responsibility for the “excess” weight that they gained (Bordo 1995, 191).

It’s not like I gained, how can say... 9, 8, 12kg. (...) Placenta weighs 2kg. There’s a lot of water. You know. It’s not, you know, my body mass – my thighs, my arms, you know. It’s a little bit of everything. Which is completely normal and something that no woman can stop. (Jelena)

...the first time was awful, you know, when they put you on the scales, for the first time you see that the needle has went to 70 [kg]... I was in shock, you know, I was like ‘Waiiiit, I can’t!’ With the second [child], then, you know that it’s actually... it’s all amniotic fluid (...) the body, the placenta, the baby. (Katarina)

As Jelena describes it vividly – bigger thighs or arms are not “their own” in the sense that her actions did not lead to them being bigger and in “excess”. Instead, dancers were faced for the first time with weight gain that does not demonstrate their negligence towards work or inability to take control over their bodily capital. As we can see in Katarina’s words, this does not mean that the additional weight is not experienced in a dramatic way, with the time needed for dancers to adapt to their new bodies. Zorica told me how she taped the glass in her house so that she could see only the upper part of her body in pregnancy and not the actual growing stomach.²⁸

²⁸ From my notes after the first interview.

Finally, new weight was sometimes read by the people around dancers or by the dancers themselves as something that makes them “more feminine” or even “more normal”²⁹ – as Zorica told me that her friends used to say about her pregnant body.

For the first time, I had (...) a really good weight; because **we’re always somewhere on the edge to be skinny and we lack weight**, and then I was great, you know, relaxed... like, well, **now I look nice, I even have the stomach...** (laughs) (Verica)

[a person close to her told her this] **‘Oh, you’re so beautiful, you’re finally feminine and you’re all rounded up!’ I went to the room and cried for two days.** Because he said that to me, how I’m feminine and all rounded up. (Katarina)

Dance scholar Alexandra Carter (1999) points to the history behind the contemporary notion of the ballerina’s “skeletal” or “boyish” body, noting how this body is a product of the recent time and place in the overall history of ballet, not similar to, for example, the Russian dancers in the late 19th century (p. 95). Still, my interviewees are faced with this recent image of the dancer’s body as “lacking” weight and normative femininity. Going back to the beginning of this section – the “rounded” body (Katarina) that emerges in the place of the dancer’s previous “squared” body (Hamera 2007, 66-67) can be both dramatically unsettling and pleasantly exciting.

²⁹ From my notes after the first interview.

Chapter 3. Coming back: dancers among others and responsible for themselves

3.1. What others know about the body: dancers returning to work

3.1.1. Dressing room and studio talks

Since dancers' everyday work puts a high value on the body, its performance and evaluation, it is not unusual that body is the topic of conversations at work. This talk fills up the spaces of dressing rooms and studios, and can serve various functions like that of nurturing solidarity, offering advice, judging others, or expressing competition. As Judith Hamera (2007) argues, dancing communities are continuously imagined and reimagined through daily talk about body, pain and dance technique, which makes dance companies and studios into "home places" (p. 75) where affective socialities are built that can last for a long time. Sharing with others where and in what way something hurts, how it was overcome or how to make some movements easier on the body, creates ties and shared vocational knowledge of the community that largely depends on the body. Also, this talk is gendered so that particular kinds of pain and other bodily effects of dance are narrated as more in the realm of female dancers' work than in the realm of that of the male dancers' work. One illustrative case is the talk about pain of *pointe work*, i.e. of doing exercises and performing in pointe shoes, which are part of classical ballet training for female students only (Hamera 2007, 100). I consider the talk about bodily effects of pregnancy and about break in dancing caused by maternity leave to be constitutive of dance communities and, specifically, communities of women's gendered knowledge about the body.

When I asked Ljubica what she was able to hear about getting back into shape from other dancers, she put this into the context of ongoing talk about the body and compared this fact of dancers' work to the work of people from other, "non-body-related" professions:

It's a daily conversation, I mean, especially now, anyone younger who arrives and she's in the dressing room or in contact with some older ballerina who has family and children, [a younger ballerina] can hear about it and **it's a conversation that happens every day**. I mean, when somebody gets injured and even if she/he didn't have an injury – she/he was able to hear about that injury from some other colleague, because it's a constant... **Nobody went through anything that she/he didn't already hear from somebody else before. I mean, because we're all very close with each other (...)** whether that's because of the nature of the job, because we're so physically connected... (...) we're probably, in some sense, like... people from this profession, like, **there are no taboo topics (...) we're much more relaxed in communication, we're not restrained like [people] from some other**

professions, who work in the office (...) I mean, it's not only the physical contact, but we [also] spend a lot of time together. (...) Still, it's very different when someone actually experiences something and it's different somehow... **the talking alone cannot, how can I say that... prepare you for something.** (Ljubica)

Ljubica describes camaraderie that comes from sharing space, time, and common bodily practices intensely throughout the years of work. Specifically, what is gained and circulated is the collective knowledge about the body and shared bodily challenges, always embedded in the common language of dance technique. According to Ljubica, knowledge about the others and usual felt challenges – even if they are not yet actually felt in one's own body – creates an intimacy that is specific to dancers as a working community. In the words of sociologists Bryan S. Turner and Steven P. Wainwright (2003), an individual injury of a ballet dancer comes to signify one's membership in the company, is surrounded by social support, and the body emerges as the “collective location where what we might call the ‘stuff’ of injury receives its social manifestations” (p. 271). The talk about getting back into shape after pregnancy makes female dancers' bodies into these collective locations shared primarily with other female dancers, which makes their struggles mutually recognizable. The body is thus made public and experiences of others are called upon to account for the changes in one's own body. Emilija and Zorica both addressed the “complaining” of dancers to one another after coming back to work:

I didn't talk to others too much. I mean, *I did* [correcting herself], you know, joking with the colleagues who went through that. **You keep complaining and complaining to them about this hell that they also went through.** And we all conclude that it's like that and that now **you have to, you know, just understand that's how it is [pomiriš s tim].** (Emilija)

I have colleagues who, when they return after childbirth and you give them, like, an advice about that – they're pretty much like ‘Oh, nothing is wrong with me’. **Until we all start complaining about the same things.** (laughs) (Zorica)

Hence, other female dancers who went through the break caused by pregnancy and maternity leave are those who would recognize themselves in Emilija's hell-like experiences. They are the ones who listen and understand the “complaining”. Authors writing about shared bodily practices in spheres other than dance also discuss the importance that such practices hold for the creation of communities. For example, writing about women's practice of beading together in the community economy of Kufunda Village in Zimbabwe, Pamela Richardson-Ngwenya and Andrea J. Nightingale (2019) argue that these embodied practices have *value in itself* (p. 147) for women and nurture the embodied ethics (Richardson-Ngwenya & Nightingale 2019, 146) of the community. Using the body and being close to each other during beading

creates a gendered community and complex ethical commitments, including care for each other but also conflicts. Along these lines, the dressing room physical closeness and conversations should be considered as productive of gendered ethical commitments. These make female dancers recognize themselves in others, relate to the bodies of others, and negotiate shared knowledge. Masha told me about the care and closeness that emerge from sharing dressing rooms:

Among us, women... it's maybe somehow specific how that works. Our relationships, between us ballerinas, especially us who are... We're in several dressing rooms and it's us, I don't know... 6 or 7 [in one dressing room] and we change in front of each other, for years. (...) I see my colleague – and none of the teachers [an example of the profession different from dance] can say the same – in her panties, I mean... (laughs) And **she asks me 'Oh, did I do a little... did I tighten up a little or I didn't?'** You know, we're directed to each other and, now, I know who I can talk to, who I cannot... (Masha)

Hence, seeing each other's bodies throughout the years nurtures intimacy that is, for Masha, characteristic of the relationships among dancers. When it comes to the stories that my interviewees encountered about the body of a dancer after pregnancy, several mentioned they heard that the back – strength and flexibility of the muscles in the back area – was vulnerable and particularly affected after pregnancy. For example, Kristina told me how it is known among dancers that those who come back after pregnancy cannot perform their *arabesque*³⁰ as well as they did before. Other dancers agreed with this, with Zorica, for instance, calling the arabesque “the wholly one” that is the main issue after coming back after pregnancy. In the language of dance technique, this points to dancers' back since doing arabesque relies heavily on muscles of the low back. In other words, bodily changes after pregnancy are expressed here in the language that the community of dancers understands and that shows what changes on the body mean for the performance; stories were articulated in the language of technique as a “relational infrastructure” (Hamera 2007, 19).

Verica referred to her conversations with several close colleagues with children as something that reassured her she should give herself time and not follow strict timelines in getting back into shape; as they all agreed. Their words helped her construct her post-pregnant shape not as something she should be chasing specifically but as something that will come along as she is working on her body. As she told me – one day, you are back and “you didn't even

³⁰ From my notes after the first interview. *Arabesque* [Fr., ornament] is among the basic ballet positions, in which the dancer stands on one leg (bent or straight) while holding her/his other leg extended behind, straight and lifted from the floor (Craine & Mackrell 2010, 19-20).

notice it". On the other hand, specific stories she heard about dancers' back were a burden for Verica and she rejected them as her own:

They always used to say how, after pregnancy, the back will never be as flexible as before (...) like, that never comes back. It never comes back at all and...that happens to me a lot – when I start from some preconception, panic hits me and I'll be like 'Oh, there you go, the spine... I can't stand up straight.' And then I decided I'll relax and go little by little and give myself time and then, through that state of relaxation, **one day, I actually just returned that flexibility where it was before. (...) Things like that still depend on a person a lot** and it doesn't have to be true at all that what stands for one person will stand for someone else, so, there you go. (Verica)

Hence, Verica's case implies that one of the ways to negotiate post-pregnant body in the dancing community includes silencing or rejecting the common knowledge about it. At the end of her previously cited excerpt in this chapter, Ljubica also concluded with a warning about the ultimate relevance of the stories she heard from others. The community knowledge was thus regarded to be both constructive and supportive but also bound up with certain limitations concerning the individual body and how it *feels*. In any case, stories like the ones about dancers' back tell us that individual dancers "confront community's ghosts" (Hamera 2007, 8). The ghosts can be particular older dancers who had problems with their backs after pregnancy or more anonymous, collective examples of dancers that younger women would hear about and have in mind in relation to their own bodies.

Ivona, the youngest of my interviewees and the only one who was never pregnant and does not have a child, also mentioned stories about the back. Besides that, her words show how a young dancer grapples with the complexities of taking a break for pregnancy:

...after pregnancy, probably, the body changes; **they say the back usually weakens and the return also takes a lot of time...** but, like, many famous ballerinas in the world have 2-3 children and are still fantastic and manage to... achieve the same level after that [pregnancy] too. It's even the case that... they have a different artistic expression, maybe they're more emotional, they have **some additional experience that totally changes their way of dancing.** (...) And then again, the career is short and years are passing [on maternity leave] when they're in their young age, when they can offer a lot. I mean, I don't know, probably... **it's still a rebus for me, I think about it often...** (Ivona)

In Ivona's words, we see again how body becomes the site of collective negotiations that create stories to be passed on to new generations in the company. This is a collective mapping of potential "weak spots" of dancers' bodies after pregnancy or even a form of oral histories felt in the body. Although a dancer can be aware of the specific strengths and weaknesses of her own body, common vocabularies of movement in dance leave many traces that dancers

collectively recognize as their vocational markers. While some “losses” in bodily capital after pregnancy exist and are counted on, Ivona implies that the overall effects of taking a break are full of contradictions. While the body can lose something and the break carries high stakes given the timed character of dancers’ bodily capital dancing afterwards is rich in some insights specific to motherhood.

3.1.2. Negotiating the “obvious”: being exposed in dance

Some of my interviewees’ descriptions of being back at work relied on the fact that dancers’ bodies are regularly exposed to each other’s looks and evaluation in daily classes and rehearsals. Not only that the conversations with others provided knowledge and expectations for dancers to compare themselves to but others were also present as an audience that could follow changes on dancers’ bodies in real time in the studio and an audience that was thus hard to “escape”. For example, Katarina told me – with a smile – how she did not find the presence of other dancers to be a burden for her after returning to the studio, since it was obvious that she “looked better than the most”. I would relate this to something she said earlier in our interview, about the body in dance as an “evidence” of someone’s abilities, practically impossible to deny:

...the good thing with us, like in any sport, is... you can’t be good without others seeing it. So, if you’re good, you’re evidentially good and nobody can tell you anything. (Katarina)

Masha also addressed the obvious character of dancers’ work – everyone is a witness of the returning dancer’s body and, as I will show in the next section of the chapter, this body is tied to the dancer’s individual responsibility:

You hear and see how others ended up when they did prepare, when they worked hard; you hear and see how others ended up when they didn’t do anything or they relaxed a bit, neglected the body... and the shape and everything. So... **there’s not so much that you need to hear that’s not already obvious, you know. The one who works – she comes back, she’s active; the one who doesn’t work, it’s more difficult.** (Masha)

Throughout the years of dance education, professional dancers-to-be are socialized in an environment that puts the body at the center of continuous evaluation, correction, and judgment made by both the official figures of authority like teachers and by the students among themselves. Authors have shown that these conditions produce in female students and young dancers the need to pursue the notion of an “ideal ballet body” and internalize surveillance in a

Foucauldian sense (Green, 1999; Pickard, 2013)³¹. Relations in the studio with adult professional dancers keep these conditions of visibility and surveillance alive, although dancers arguably have more control to negotiate them than students do. It is still difficult to hide the reality of one's body or succeed in "deceiving" others in a situation where one's work is unwinding in front of the colleagues' eyes. Among the interviewees, Ljubica made the most striking account of struggles with the post-pregnant body and of the role that others in these struggles. It seemed to me that she was the one for whom the unwanted weight after her second pregnancy was the most hard-felt burden. Here, I cite her account of being in the studio again in length:

Catastrophy. A mild depression... I don't know how to describe it differently. (...) when you're home, you're home and when you don't have other ballerinas, the colleagues around you (...) **[it's like having] glasses over (...) you don't have a realistic picture of yourself.** You're used to seeing yourself in the mirror – when it comes to pregnancy – [you're used] to seeing yourself, you don't see others. The moment I set foot into the studio, wearing a leotard, after pregnancy, after the break... I really did know that I was large, but... when I came and got to stand there... those girls who were skinnier than me; **only then did I get the real picture of myself... how I look and how much is that, how much extra kilograms there was;** compared to the time when I was at home. Because, at home, I did look how to lose weight and I guess a woman gets used to herself and when she sees herself, she can maybe even convince herself 'Well, I don't look that bad'. But when you stand besides someone who is... physically in a much better shape, who looks visually better, there are muscles... muscle tone, i.e. a muscle shrinks very quickly [kalira] (...) **[My] physical appearance, physical shape and everything... it was, back then, below all the other ballerinas who were in shape. Really, when I saw that... terrible, catastrophe.** (...) Only in the studio did I basically realize how out of shape I was. (Ljubica)

Other dancers figure here as a condition of having a realistic picture of one's self since their muscular, capable bodies were reminders of how a dancer *should* look like. Unlike the mirror at home, mirrors on the studio walls reflected the body in the vocational context, together with the institutional "background" set by the other dancers and by the assumed bodily norm (Ahmed 2012, 38). For Ljubica, the norm became increasingly visible when she came back to studio and it brought her back into the "reality" of dance. Her body became again visible as a capital for work – something that acquires value in the economics of dance, but also now exposed in its inadequacy. Being the one "without muscles" had a sobering effect on Ljubica in the sense that it made her painfully aware of what she "lost" and needed to compensate to

³¹ Dunja Njaradi (2014), researching herself the work of male contemporary dancers, cautions about the still under-researched area of "male dance experiences" (p. 74) that would include those from the period of dance education and indicate how much norm-setting and body evaluation in dance is gendered.

truly participate again in the community's work.³² Relying on the Foucauldian framework in her analysis of women fashion models' work, Ashley Mears (2011) identifies the fact that they are exposed to other models, casting directors, and clients as a predominant condition of how they shape their bodily capital and adapt to the "floating norms" of what is a valued fashion "look" (pp. 98-9). The words of my interviewees in this subsection conveyed a similar mechanism of shaping bodily capital and assessing its value based on the constant presence of others who commit to the same norms.

3.2. "She alone let that happen to her": individual responsibility and the body

While the community provided common knowledge and embodied norms in the process of returning to work, the actual work and care for the body were delegated to the individual realm. More precisely, my interviewees framed the process of getting back into shape as an individual responsibility and something dependent on the personal will of a dancer to work on her own body. The work of "getting back the muscles" or losing weight was considered to be an individual one, where the individual dancer has an opportunity to show her dedication to the profession and her ability to control her bodily capital.

During maternity leave, and after childbirth, some of my interviewees exercised at home, while the others reported going to the theatre during maternity leave and doing exercises there, together with other dancers in the studio. Some dancers reported they did not exercise at home at all but waited for the maternity leave of around one year to end for them to start going to the theatre classes. Those who exercised at home started exercises after three to five months, and some were going to the classes in theatre around ten months after their childbirth. As Katarina described her routine at home:

After giving birth, my first exercises were on the floor. Stretching out [*istezanja, razgibavanje*], crunches, exercises for the back... then, gradually, I introduced weights for the arms and the legs, the medical ball, the bands. (Katarina)³³

³² Ljubica was also the only one who told me about the direct intervention about her weight from the people working in the main office, presumably the ballet director himself. As she told me, "after 5-6 months or maybe even a year" of her return to work after her second pregnancy, she was asked to "lose a little bit of weight". Ljubica considered this to be a part of the job and made clear to me that she already was aware of her additional weight, accepted responsibility, and even said it out loud in front of the other dancers.

³³ From the written exchange I had with Katarina, as with several other dancers too.

It's their decision not to come back to that level, I mean, that shouldn't be... an excuse. (...) There are still those who give birth and never get back into shape anymore or they're like 'Well, now I gave birth, now I don't care anymore or I can't anymore...' But... **they usually didn't care before the child either, so... that's an excuse. Personally, I don't accept that.** (Katarina)

It's expected... **you know what your job is, get back to normal.** (Svetlana)

It's not an individual training, with, I don't know... the trainer, so that he/she would tell you 'Come on, come on!' ... to make it for you, your plan and that you have to work like that. (...) **You either do it or you don't.** It's your job, your thing. If you dance – you dance, if you don't dance – you don't dance. (Masha)

I think that pregnancy doesn't change things as much as some women like to... get away with saying that pregnancy changed them. (...) when you control your body, when you do what you do [you are a dancer], when you think about everything, you work constantly and **pregnancy alone can't be the cause of a chaos for you.** (Aleksandra)

This is how Katarina, Svetlana, Masha, and Aleksandra explained what makes up for the progress of a dancer who comes back after pregnancy – it is a matter of how dedicated she is as a worker and how eager she is to dance again. They all conveyed similar, morally-saturated meanings of working on the body; Katarina condemned having an “excuse”, Aleksandra – “getting away [with something]”. They both exercised at home during maternity leave, while Katarina told me she did not have an extensive plan of regulating the diet but merely took care to eat until she is just full and not “fill the plate 2-3 times”. Also, Katarina and Aleksandra both imply that pregnancy cannot effectively change the dancer's stance towards her work, i.e. what kind of a dancer she was before making a break. The “problem” with the body thus reflects having a problematic self, i.e. not being able to act responsively and control your main capital. In her research of gendered body work in the middle-class women's aerobics classes in the U.S., sociologist Debra Gimlin (2002) identifies similar moral arguments around women's non-professional body work, with class participants tying their bodies' condition to “accident” and not to their own, deliberate actions or biological aging. In this way, sociologist Gimlin (2002) argues, they aimed to “neutralize moral meanings ascribed to their bodies” (p. 56), namely connections that others could draw between their bodily “flaws” and their character. Taking aerobics classes, they associated themselves with having strong will and being proactive. In dancers' world, meticulous care for the body is a part of formal job requirements, and the evaluation of dancers as workers heavily resides in how they look according to the standards of a long, thin, and muscular physique. Hence, not caring for the body becomes a sign of dancers' negligence towards her work, an indication of not fulfilling her “duty”.

I've also seen some colleagues who let themselves go [*zapustile*] and from the moment when they got children, right away, they... not that she's marked as someone who, like, when she gave birth, she never got back and never returned to the repertoire – but she's definitely outcast from this circle of active ballerinas (...) **They look at her, i.e. they treat her as a person who is... close to retirement, while she's actually my age. (...) But she herself let that happen to her. They didn't see, how I can say... that she was showing some engagement.** (Ljubica)

While caring for the body is part of job requirements, it does have relatively stretchable boundaries and it is articulated further in the informal relations on the ground. Ljubica does not suggest that the dancer will be fired because of her assumingly negligent approach to the body but she does suggest that she will be unofficially pushed to the group of “older” dancers and treated that way, i.e. not considered for attractive performance opportunities and not expected to progress. She will perform but not be – as Ljubica also added – “usable” enough for the company. This example brings to the surface how formal expectations about the “right” kind of body are being negotiated on the ground and how, when a dancer does not seem to respond to the expectations, this is treated as an individual problem that should be solved through the informal relations.

It should be noted that an underlying assumption – cultivated throughout dance education – behind my interviewees' arguments is that the dancer is ultimately in control over her body by the means of physical exercise, diet, and knowledge about the body that she can decide to use. More precisely, controlling the body is big part of what makes someone a dancer in the first place. The body is controllable and malleable in accordance with how dancer decides to act. Katarina and Jelena extended their belief in control over the body to non-dancers too.

I mean, the body is an instrument that you work on, I'll say that again. Everything comes down to exercise and diet. So, if you're prone to gaining weight, you have to eat less and exercise more and that's it. And **I think that's only a matter of decision; of every woman, every man, like, really... to carry his/her body. So, I don't have too much mercy there.** (laughs) (Katarina)

Jelena: There's an equal number of colleagues who come back fat and stay fat, and women who come back... already skinny. So, they [the second group] return from maternity leave already with the old weight. (...) **Well it's related to the constitution, to the genetics, there's... there's a bunch of factors, really.** (...)

Sara: Is that something you can *fight*, so to say?

Jelena: I think you can. I think you can. **There's only a problem of how much you want to do that.** Your body changes so it changes. Some things never come back and that's just how it is. For example, I don't know... stretch marks, scars, this and that... that's something you'll carry with you forever. (...) But I really think that **there's not a person in the world who's not able to correct his/her weight.**

Maybe I'm overconfident but I think that **if someone really wants it... but, I mean, really really wants it – it will happen.**

While control over the body brings pleasure and sense of accomplishment to dancers, it can also be a burdening expectation that is a source of anxiety. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (1995) points to the embeddedness of this ambiguity around the female body in its broader Western understanding and she focuses particularly on the figure of a woman/girl battling with anorexia nervosa. As she shows, exercising personal control over the body and its shape means claiming power over oppressive gender regimes but, at the same time, does not exclude actual suffering and anxiety, being ultimately dangerous. For dancers, being in control over the body carried the meaning of being a dancer again. The body after pregnancy, although it brought challenges and struggles to some, was believed to be ultimately controllable as it was before pregnancy.

Prominent topic in the interviews were muscles, perceived as something that was supposed to be regained or even created anew. This meant claiming control over the body again and was framed as an individual body work that was challenging but also rewarding. This approach resonates with what sociologist Sophie Merit Müller (2018) argues about dancers' relation to their bodies in daily work. As she shows, effort is made in dance classes (classical ballet, in particular) to establish communication with muscles that are "there", inside the body, but have to be called upon and controlled (Müller 2018, 878). In this way, different body parts come to life and become knowable to dancers, whose attempts are directed towards gathering the *distributed corporeality* they initially face (Müller 2018, 872).

You feel powerless, you feel like you've never lifted a match in your life, you don't have... because a muscle... everything atrophied (...) it really takes time for actually this connection between the brain and the muscles to start working, like, 'OK, now I have to activate... the hamstring muscles, there are no any, wait, easy, like...' (laughs) Months pass, you still don't feel that this muscle does anything... no, like, it doesn't exist, you know. (...) you don't have that control over the body, you don't have that coordination (...) And then you simply feel powerless. (...) But then you're like 'Well, OK, it's not going to come back, so what?' You're like 'You gave birth to a child, for fuck's sake! You have a child at home, you gave birth, who cares for ballet?!' Those are, like... I always find the other side that will lift me up... (Emilija)

And then, at some point, you wake up, like, wait, I'm also here. I exist, I have to think about myself a little bit. So, you remember that you have to take care of yourself a little bit, then after few months, you really look into the mirror, you say 'Oh, wait, let me see where I am my legs now... if that still exists.' And then, you find something. You find your body different... (Masha)

Hence, challenges that these dancers face are in the realm of *communication* with parts of their own bodies, getting to know again where what is and how to control it again. The groups of muscles are brought back to functioning, like the stomach muscles, quadriceps, or back muscles. Dancers feel the need to reclaim their position as the ones who are in charge of the body and not being able to do that is emotionally challenging. Outside the specific field of dance, studies show that women can experience the whole pregnancy and postpartum period in terms of losing control over their body, faced with its unruliness and unclear boundaries (Neiterman & Fox, 2017). At the same time, women in the cited study were faced with the calls to act as responsible, self-regulatory actors in a neoliberalized understanding of pregnant and post-pregnant subjectivity.

Concluding remarks

In the first chapter of the thesis, I argue that dancers and the institutional context in which they work construct dancers' bodies as a form of short-lived bodily capital. Dancers are highly aware of the finite nature of this capital and they engage in its management throughout their time in the theatre and outside. The timeline of dancers' work, dependent on their bodily capital, is understood by the dancers to be fairly universal, falling between a dancer's late teens and early 40s. I have argued that dancers emerge from their painful positions affected by daily work in order to claim that enduring pain makes them different compared to other people, non-dancers. After this, I have touched upon the healthcare that is available to dancers in Serbia to deal with their pain, showing that they struggle to find proper care and they suggest their bodily strength and endurance are merely something on the surface and not necessarily indicative of their true health. After this, I have discussed the ways in which dancers make sense of their pregnancy as part of their career and the longest break from dancing. While all dancers have referred to pregnancy as something that has been their long-standing wish and some have considered it to be a part of being a woman, dancers also found support for their pregnancy in being out of control over their bodily capital timeline in the theatre. The broad framework in which all dancers situated their pregnancy was the one of dancers' bodily capital on the timeline that ends in their early 40s, where the pregnancy was negotiated as a break that can be compensated if it happens at the right time. In the second part of the first chapter, I have argued that the position of temporary-contracted dancers can be understood through the notion of slow death, as a continuous deterioration of the group in the domain of ordinary. The physically exhausting waiting that these dancers experienced was invested with the hope to receive a full-time contract, which was seen as an important condition for dancers to plan their pregnancy.

In the second chapter, I looked into the period of dancers' pregnancy and argued that we should understand dancers' performances on stage while pregnant as a *tactical* use of the time available in the institution established on the non-pregnant dancers' bodies. The use of this time includes negotiations with the „other“, understood as both the fetus and as other dancers and dance partners. Dancers who do not perform on stage see it as a dangerous space imbued with risk. After this, I have explored how dancers see their pregnant bodies through letting go of the control, and their weight gain being purposeful and not tied morally to them.

In the third chapter, I have looked at the dancers' coming back to work as embedded in the processes that reproduce the dancing community. The dancers' negotiation of their post-pregnant bodies participated in the talk about the body and care at work, while also being

exposed to others, which was constitutive for dancers' management of their bodily capital. Finally, I have argued that dancers see their work on the post-pregnant body as a predominantly individual responsibility that will show that they are in control of their bodily capital and responsible as dancers.

In this thesis, I have attempted to show that the research that includes dancers' pregnancy is a productive way of engaging with the existing scholarship on dancers' bodies and dancers' working positions. I consider this research to be exploratory to some extent, given that the research on dancers' negotiation of pregnancy as part of their career is very scarce, and virtually non-existent in the case of ballet dancers who work in theatres. Moreover, I hope that this research can contribute to positioning (ballet) dancers in Serbia within the existing scholarship on the precarity of dancers' position and indicate some specifics of dancers' work and temporality in the context of long-standing issues of the profession in Serbia. This thesis does not address the position of dancers that came to work in Serbia from abroad, as it also does not address the question of racialized positions among dancers in Serbia.³⁴

Finally, I turn to several aspects of dancers' work and relationship to pregnancy that were part of my interviews with the dancers but did not end up in the thesis. I consider these to be possible future research directions. First, although shortly touched upon in one part of the thesis, I did not extensively discuss the importance of relational work for the timelines of dancers' bodily capital. Still, my interviewees almost universally pointed to the importance of knowing the "right" people and developing strategic friendships and, as some of them suggested, strategic intimacies (Mears, 2020) in the theatre in order to claim some opportunities and efficiently manage one's timeline of bodily capital. Second, my findings suggest that the productive line of research pertains to the medical representations of dancers' pregnant bodies, as several among my interviewees have suggested that their bodies were commented on in the medical context as being "too muscular", "too strong", or even exotic. This was particularly the case when doctors were suggesting to many of my interviewees that their childbirth will eventually have to include C-section because of their "too strong" muscles in the pelvic or abdominal area. Third, my interviewees had different side jobs that I did not discuss in the thesis. Dancers were motivated to take them from the economic reasons or reasons of preparing their future career, after dancing in theatre. Doing these jobs opens up a big space for dancers' negotiation of their bodies and the moral meanings they ascribe to that.

³⁴ See, for example: Tomé, 2019.

In the end, I hope that this thesis can be useful in some way to my interviewees and the dancers working in Serbia.

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