Bringing Consent to Ballet, One Intimacy Workshop at a Time

Touch is a requirement of a dancer's job. Now when choreography involves simulated sex or violence, some companies are bringing in intimacy directors.

By Laura Cappelle

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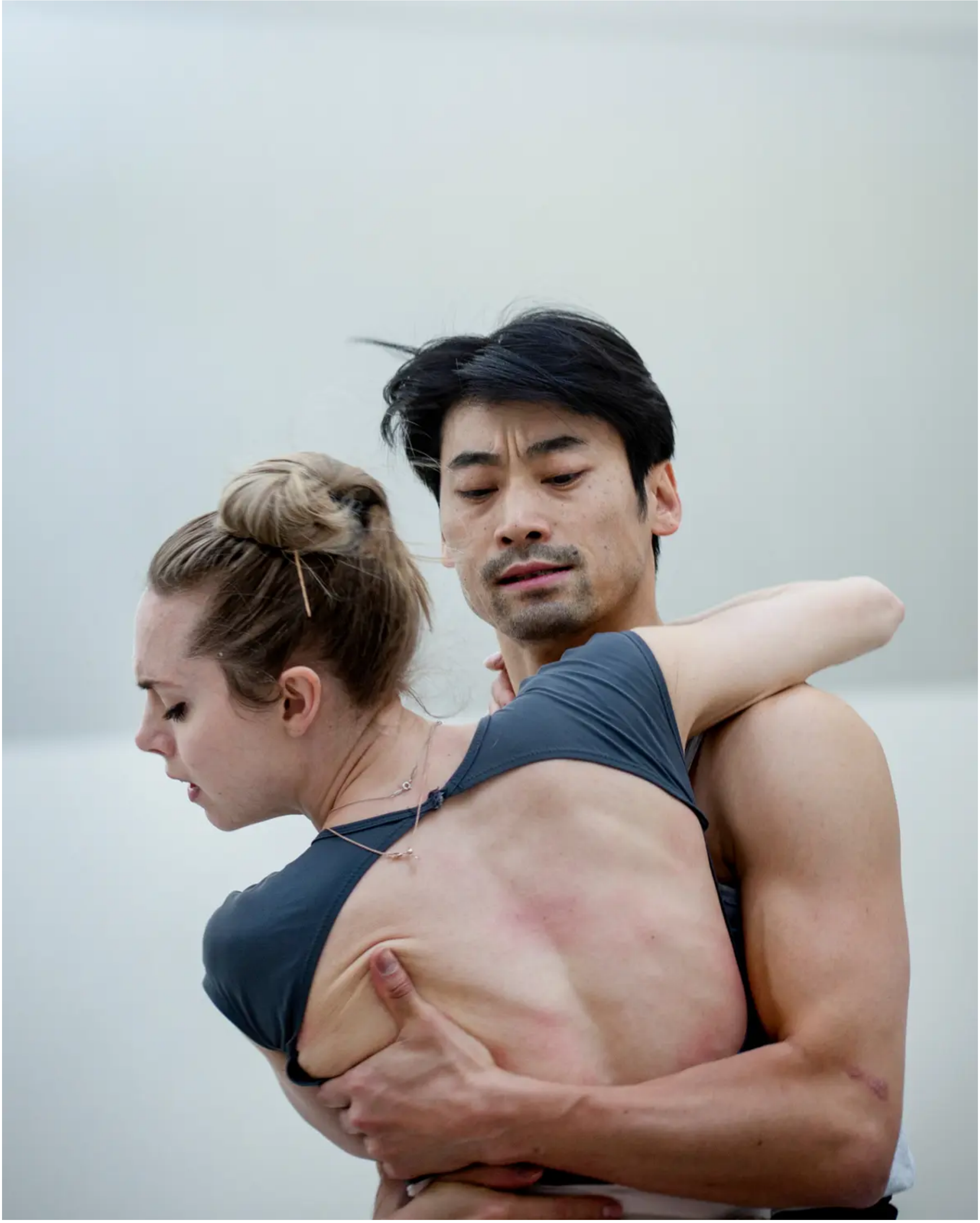
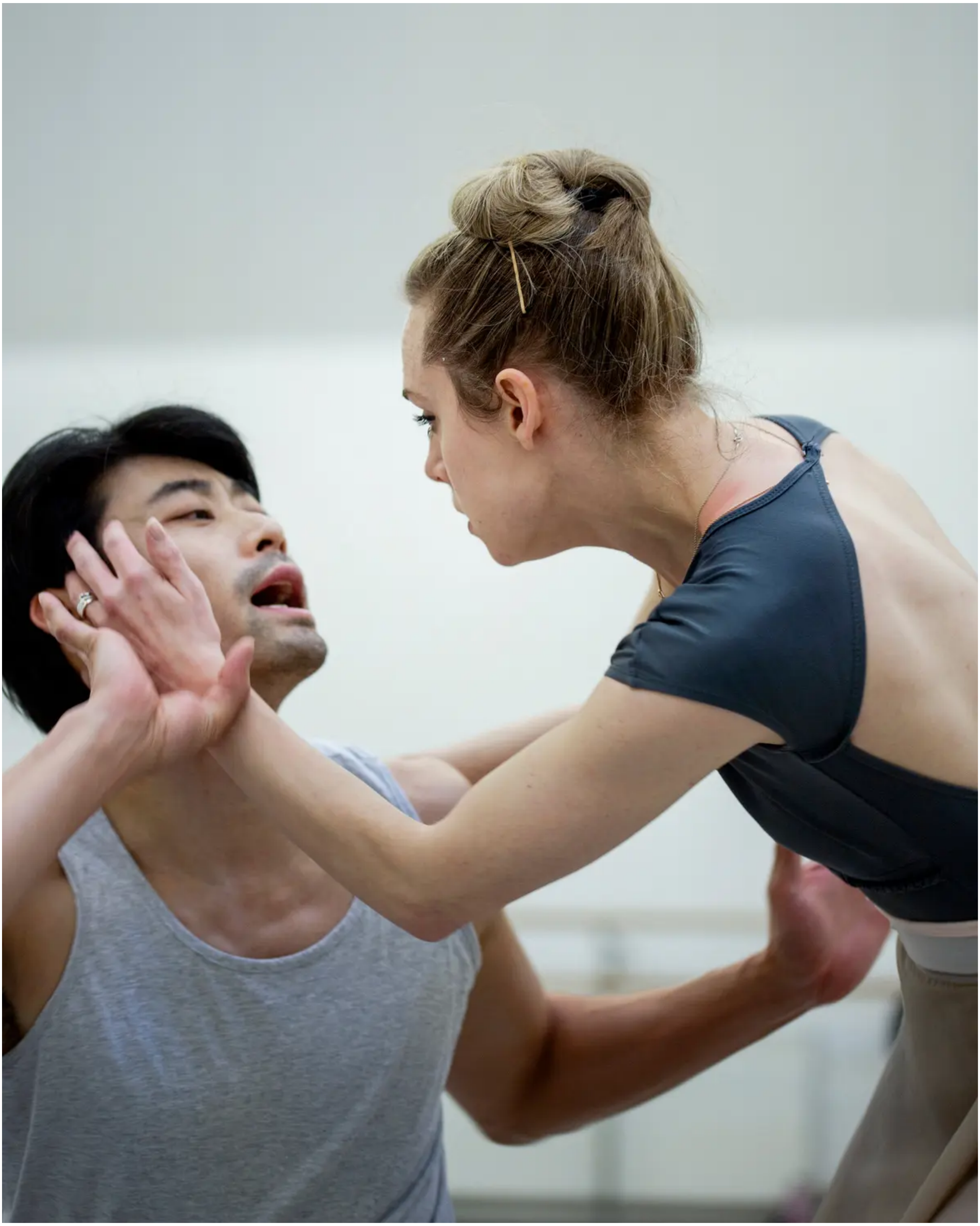
GLASGOW — The intensity of the choreography left visible marks on Bethany Kingsley-Garner's body. On a recent afternoon in the Glasgow studios of Scottish Ballet, she was running through an upsetting scene in Kenneth MacMillan's 1978 ballet "Mayerling." Her character, Stephanie, is violently assaulted on her wedding night by her husband, Crown Prince Rudolf. As she was grabbed, thrown and lifted, Kingsley-Garner's back, visible through a cutout in her leotard, grew increasingly red from the rough — sometimes audibly so — skin-to-skin contact.

Just five weeks before that rehearsal, Kingsley-Garner, a principal dancer with Scottish Ballet, was still apprehensive about tackling the role — her first since having a baby last summer. "I felt that anxiety of being touched again," she said. "I didn't feel like I was ready for the extreme positions just yet."

Unlike previous generations of dancers, she had a place to voice her concerns: intimacy coaching sessions. For this new, shortened production of "Mayerling," renamed "The Scandal at Mayerling," which has its premiere on April 13, Scottish Ballet brought in two intimacy directors, Ruth Cooper-Brown and Rachel Bown-Williams, for companywide workshops as well as private discussions with dancers. They encouraged Kingsley-Garner to take control through conversations with partners and a slow buildup to the more uncomfortable parts of the choreography. "Ballets like this tap into physicality and traumas, so the training is a great, solid layer to build on," Kingsley-Garner said.



Hirano with Bethany Kingsley-Garner, her back red from being grabbed, thrown and lifted. Emily Macinnes for The New York Times

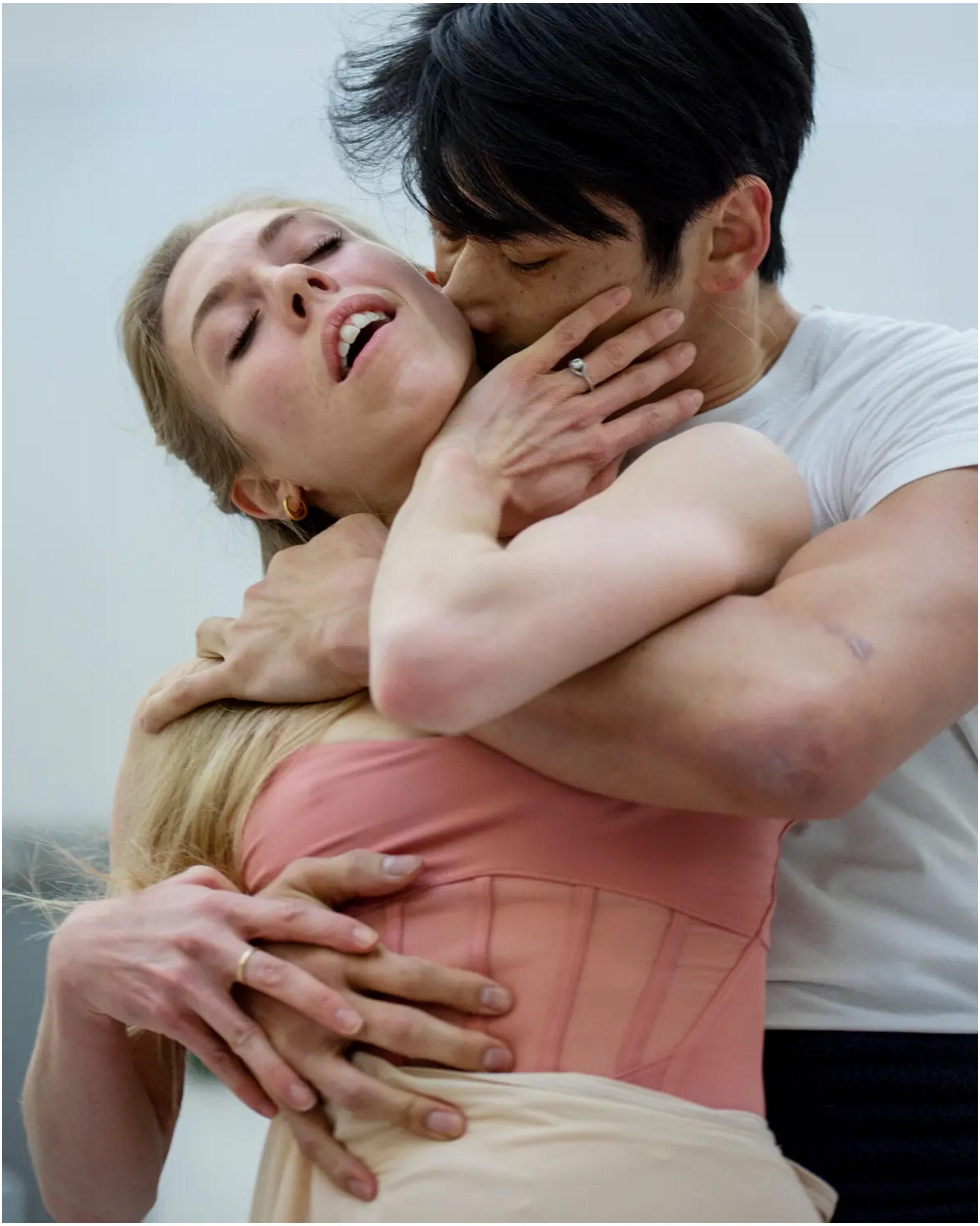


Hirano and Kingsley-Garner. Emily Macinnes for The New York Times

The job of an intimacy director is to look after the physical and emotional well-being of performers and ensure that informed consent is given, especially in productions with simulated sex or violence — or, as in “Mayerling,” both. While film and theater have in recent years embraced the use of intimacy directors (or coordinators, as they are called on film sets), the dance world has been slower to adapt. A few companies, though, have come onboard: Over the past year, American Ballet Theater, the National Ballet of Canada and Rambert, a British contemporary ensemble, have all hired intimacy specialists to consult on narrative-driven productions.

Intimacy work for screen and theater doesn’t entirely translate to dance. In those fields, intimacy directors choreograph sexually charged scenes by setting the performers’ moves in advance, but for existing dance works, the choreography mostly can’t be altered, which limits their potential input. Dancers are also much more accustomed than other performers to close contact; some frequently performed ballet lifts, for instance, require men to hold their partners high up the thighs, or even by the crotch. Yet because touch is a requirement of the job, dancers have historically been discouraged from speaking up when they feel uncomfortable.

That is especially true in ballet, where training starts at a young age and many companies maintain a strict hierarchy. Members of ballet ensembles have little agency over what they perform and an ability to silently adapt to any situation is prized. (One of the biggest ballet stars of recent times, the French dancer Sylvie Guillem, was nicknamed Mademoiselle Non for daring to express disagreement with her directors.)



Hirano rehearsing with Devernay. Emily Macinnes for The New York Times

Hirano and Devernay. Emily Macinnes for The New York Times

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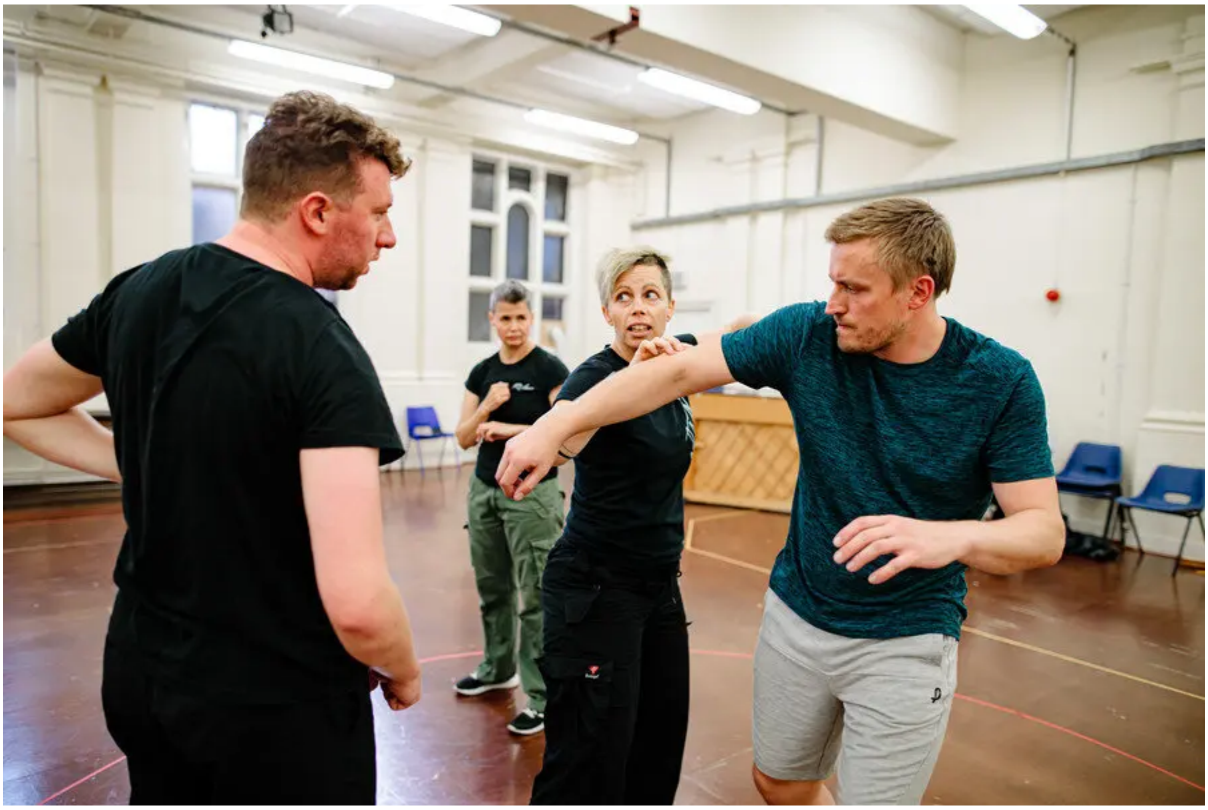
Ballet abounds with what dancers often euphemistically refer to as “the horror stories” — tales of boundaries being crossed or ignored altogether. Ballet’s #MeToo moment, around 2018, brought some of them to the fore, and they are hardly confined to the past. There are glimpses of change, said Christopher Hampson, the director of Scottish Ballet, but the road is long. “I still don’t feel like the industry has accepted responsibility for the holistic challenge that it’s produced,” he said. But dancers are increasingly eager to shake things up: After the intimacy sessions, Hampson said, the change was “instant.”

On their first day with Scottish Ballet, in February, the intimacy directors encouraged the dancers to practice setting boundaries and to check for consent. Kingsley-Garner said a simple exercise helped her. The dancers each had a piece of paper with a person drawn on it, and were asked to use the drawing to mark the areas of their bodies that felt vulnerable, and then communicate what they were to colleagues. For Kingsley-Garner, having recently returned from maternity leave, her back stood out. “To see it in black and white, and to speak to your partner, it opens up that whole trust,” she said. “And it wasn’t just me saying it. It was the whole group.”

Some performers are more ambivalent. Ryoichi Hirano, a guest from the Royal Ballet in London who is Kingsley-Garner’s partner as Rudolf, welcomed the intimacy training but said he worried that rules might prevent spontaneous expression onstage: “I always feel like every performance is a new adventure.” For Bown-Williams, though, the idea that intimacy direction limits creativity is “a massive misconception.” “If we teach everybody to find the edges of their boundaries and to give consent on everything,” she said, “their work can flourish more.”

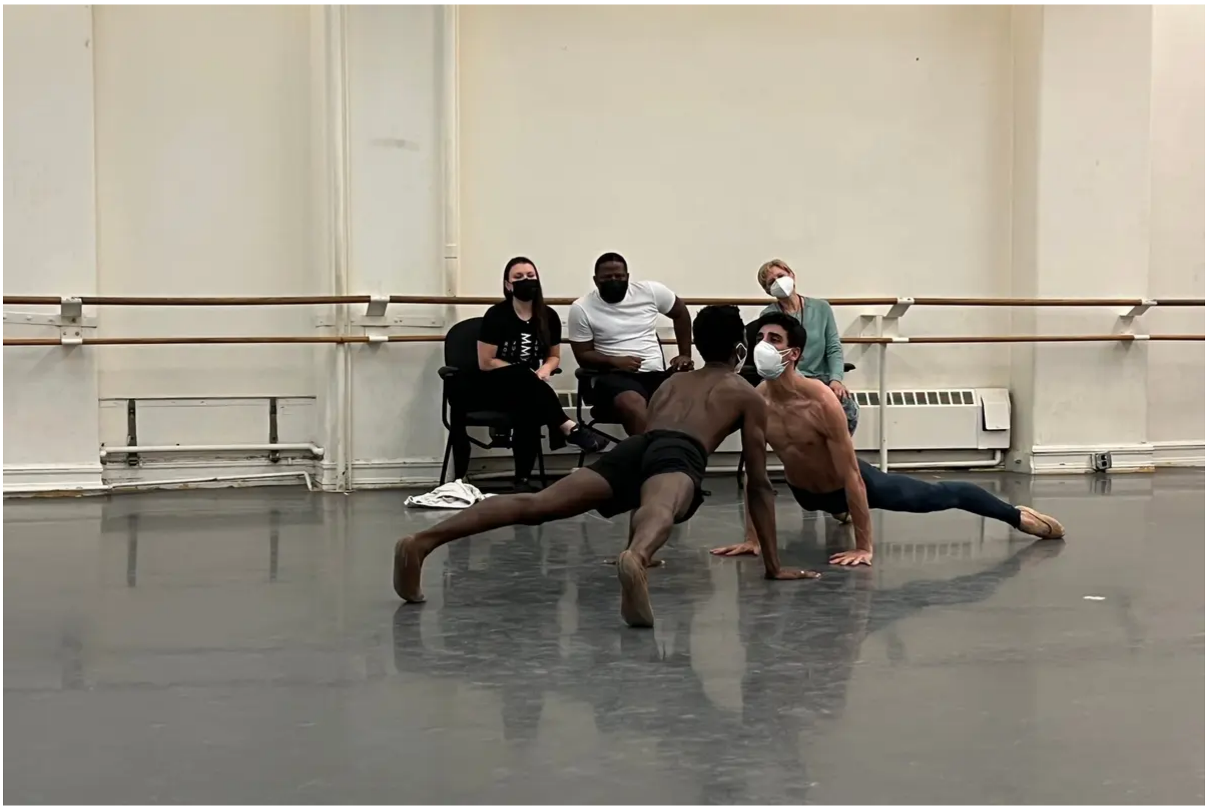


Ruth Cooper-Brown (background) and Rachel Bown-Williams working on a production of "King John" with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Steve Tanner/Royal Shakespeare Company

Since intimacy work is still new as a stand-alone job, there is no standard path to it. Cooper-Brown and Bown-Williams have backgrounds in fight training, involving things like blunted swords and replica firearms. (They also handled the gun work on "Mayerling.") After creating their theatrical combat company, Rc-Annie, in 2005, they found that they were also being asked to "set scenes of an intimate nature," because of the crossover in stories involving domestic violence, for instance.

Other intimacy directors hired for dance productions, like Yarit Dor, Sarah Lozoff and Anisa Tejpar, were professional dancers who started doing intimacy work while working in theater and film. In addition to consent and boundary practice, they advise about modesty garment options when partial nudity is involved. They also institute regular check-ins with partners and closure rituals at the end of the day; they remain on call if performers need to talk. (Intimacy directors also typically have mouthwash and mints at hand for kissing scenes, when dancers decide to do them full-out.)

Several intimacy directors said the first ballet choreographer to rely on this training was Christopher Rudd. A Jamaican-born dancer, Rudd founded his company, RudduR Dance, in 2015. In late 2018, after a year of work on "Witness," a three-part piece inspired by the African American struggle for equality, he had a rude awakening: One of his dancers quit because reliving that history was harming her mental health.

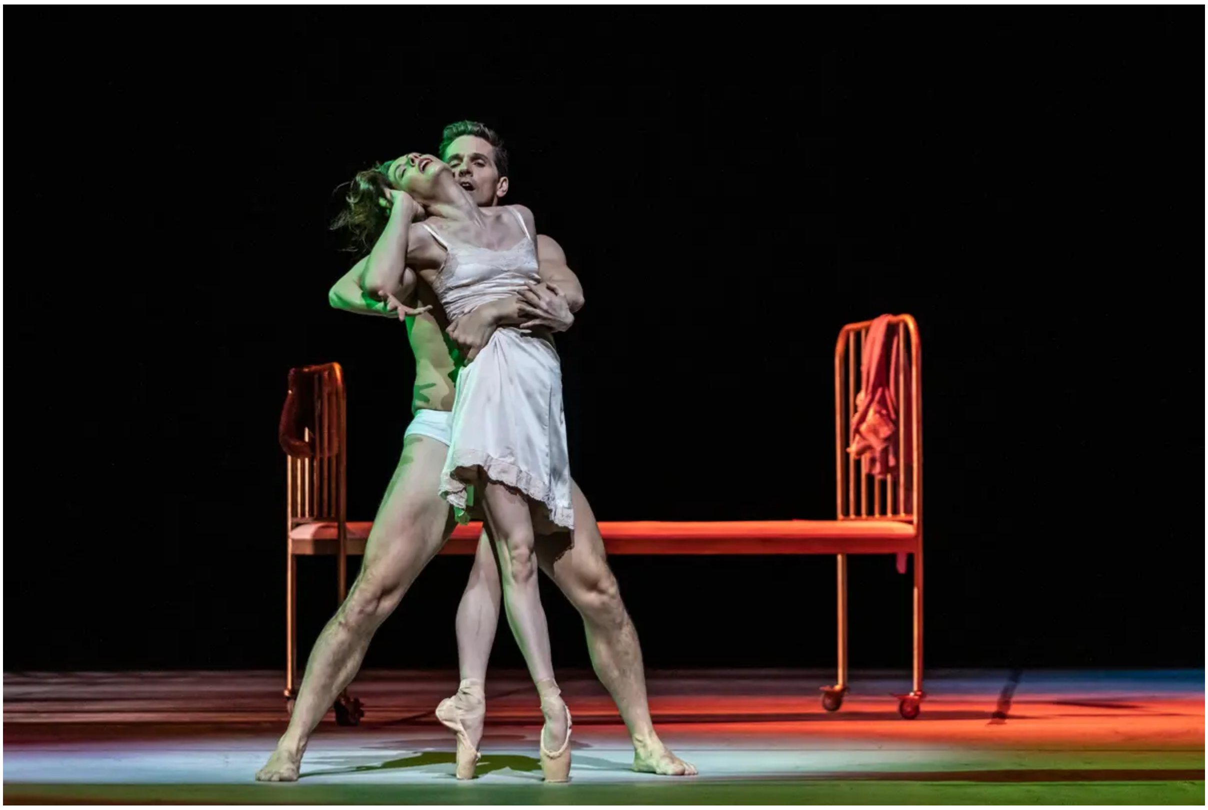


Calvin Royal III, left, and João Menegussi rehearsing Christopher Rudd's "Touché," with (seated, from left) the intimacy director Sarah Lozoff, Rudd and Nancy Raffa. Connor Holloway

"I was traumatizing my dancers," Rudd said in a recent video interview. The dancer in question had been afraid to talk to him, he said, because of the power dynamics: "There's this belief system that choreographers are the gods of the room, and you must not speak your truth." So he called Lozoff, a childhood friend from the ballet world, who eventually became the resident intimacy director at RudduR Dance.

In 2020, when Rudd was commissioned by American Ballet Theater to do a dance film in the middle of the pandemic, he asked that Lozoff be present, too, over Zoom. The result was "Touché," a tender and sensual same-sex pas de deux for Calvin Royal III and João Menegussi. "Without Sarah, we could have done the same steps, but for me, watching it, there's something different about it," Rudd said, adding that the dancers were able to "tap into a deeper part of who they are as artists and bring more of themselves to a work, in a way that was more safe. They consented to everything."

Kevin McKenzie, American Ballet Theater's director, was so impressed that he brought Lozoff back as a consultant for the company's 2021 fall season. "We did these mini workshops for the bulk of the company," Lozoff said. "I am very mindful that this is a hard time to ask people to think about change, and their schedule is fast and furious. It was a tiptoe in."

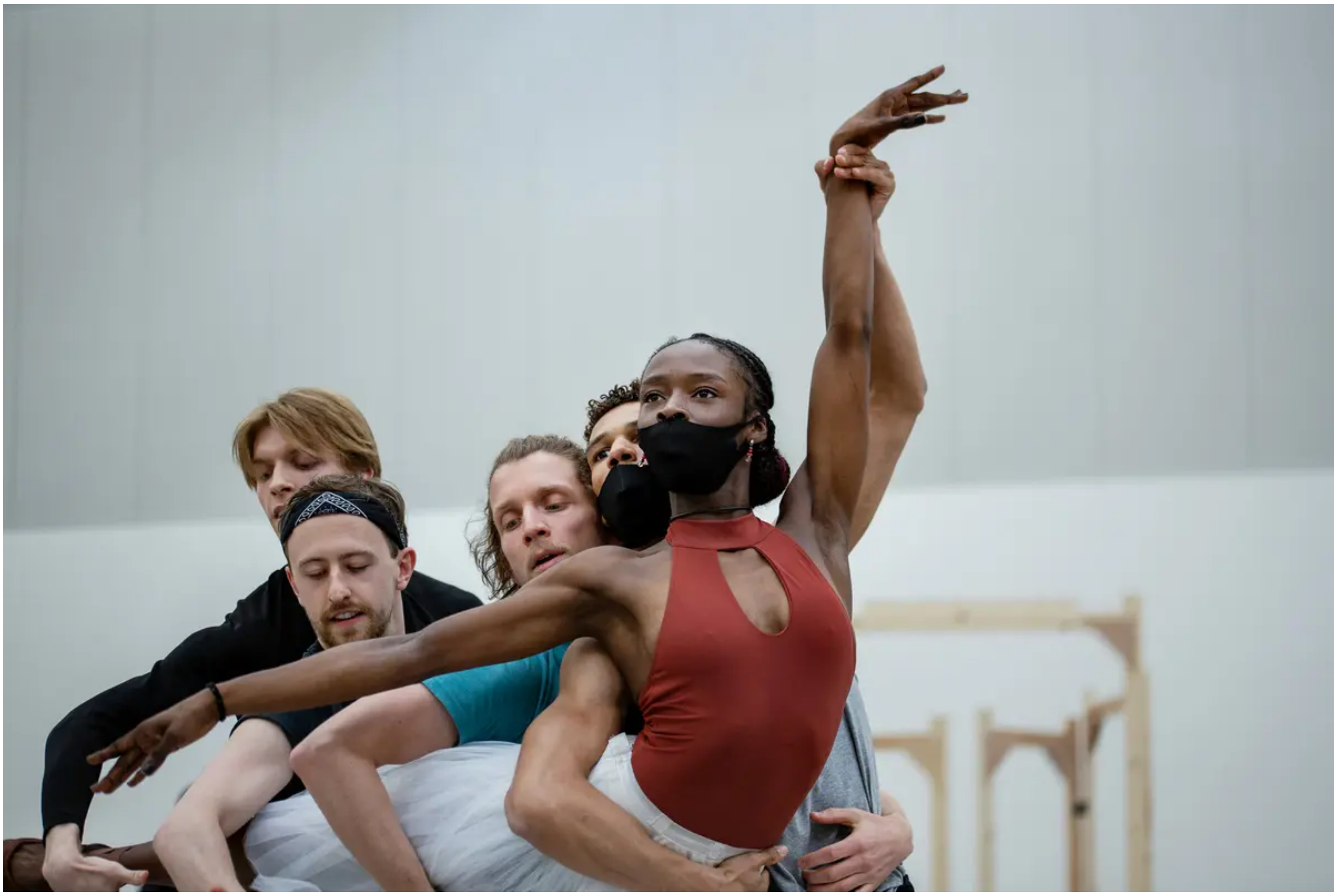


Guillaume Côté and Jillian Vanstone in the National Ballet of Canada's "A Streetcar Named Desire." "I was having a hard time with the role, because of what it means the audience sees me do," Côté said. Johan Persson, via National Ballet of Canada

For now, intimacy work in dance is primarily a North American and British phenomenon, although intimacy and fight training companies like Dor's Moving Body Arts are spreading the word through online workshops. At the National Ballet of Canada this past winter, Tejpar's presence opened up conversations about sexual violence that happens onstage in John Neumeier's 1983 dance adaptation of "A Streetcar Named Desire." The company had already performed the ballet in 2017.

When she decided to implement intimacy coaching for this staging, the company's director, Hope Muir, said she didn't ask for Neumeier's permission. Tejpar observed rehearsals and generally worked on the sidelines: "I used to joke that we do all of our work in the hallway and during the five-minute break."

The ballet culminates in a six-minute sexual assault scene that sees "Stanley just really, really hauling Blanche around and bashing her onto the bed," said Guillaume Côté, a veteran principal dancer cast as Stanley. During the recent run, in March, Côté called on Tejpar for mental health advice: "I had a conversation with her after opening night because I was literally in tears," he said. "I was having a hard time with the role, because of what it means the audience sees me do." Tejpar reminded him of one of her favorite tricks, now shared by the whole company: a high-five (with her or with colleagues) to signify closure and detach from the character.



Rishan Benjamin, front, rehearsing the tavern scene in Scottish Ballet's "The Scandal at Mayerling." Emily Macinnes for The New York Times

While leading roles in narrative ballets typically involve the heaviest character development, intimacy direction also has its benefits for the corps de ballet. In some popular ballets, like MacMillan's "Manon" and "Mayerling," scenes set in a seedy underworld are populated with background characters whose interactions have historically been improvised. "I've definitely seen boundaries crossed in ballets I was performing in," said Scottish Ballet's Hampson. "It just felt like it was a free-for-all. And if a corps de ballet woman spoke out, she was difficult, or a troublemaker."

The situation is compounded by the dancers' youth: In a production like "The Scandal at Mayerling," teenage ballet students are called upon to fill some roles. "When I was in school, it didn't feel like I could say 'no,'" said Rishan Benjamin, who joined Scottish Ballet in 2018. "We're just used to being thrown into a situation and having to do it."

For a tavern scene involving prostitutes in "The Scandal at Mayerling," Cooper-Brown and Bown-Williams insisted on creating characters for each dancer and planning interactions ahead of time. It was "much needed," said Benjamin, who added that she had never kissed anyone onstage before this production. "The only way I could think of it was how I kiss someone behind closed doors, and it's something quite private."

No amount of careful planning will prevent dancers from going through extreme emotional states onstage, but Kingsley-Garner credited intimacy coaching for bolstering her ability to snap out of them, like in her Glasgow rehearsal: “I didn’t even know what was the front or the back of the room,” she said afterward. Yet when the music stopped, she immediately relaxed, touched her partner Hirano’s shoulder and shared a reassuring nod with him. As “The Scandal at Mayerling” performances neared, Kingsley-Garner said she felt ready to return to the stage: “Now it’s just about letting the story, and the body, go.”