

The Ballerinas, by Rachel Kapelke-Dale
Six Core Questions Analysis by Valerie Francis
(as explained in The Story Grid: What Good Editors Know by Shawn Coyne)

Genre:

- **Content - Global (internal):** Worldview > Disillusionment
- **Content - Secondary (external):** Performance > Sports/Arts - NOTE: it doesn't quite work as a performance story which is unfortunate because performance stories are always crowd pleasers. Because the performance story is off, the global worldview story doesn't quite land as it should.
- **Time:** Long
- **Reality:** Realism
- **Style:** Drama - NOTE: could also be Literary if you equate literary with the quality of the line writing
- **Structure:** Archplot

Value at Stake:

Belief to Disillusionment (belief in the POB/dance to disillusionment about the POB/dance)

Conventions and Obligatory Scenes (now called Obligatory Moments):

CONVENTIONS

- **Strong Mentor Figure:** Stella, although Delphine doesn't listen to her. Instead she listens to mentors in the form of POB teachers, her mother (who is part of the system), Dmitri (who perpetuates the system)
- **Big Social Problem as Subtext:** the way women's bodies are perceived by society (as represented by the POB, Jock and Daniel) and whether a woman has agency over her body
- **Shapeshifters as Hypocrites:** Jock, Margaux, Daniel, Nathalie.
- **A Clear Point of No Return:** Delphine meets with the journalist about Jock's behaviour (although the meeting is off page and the Jock storyline mostly dissipates)
- **Ironic Win-but-Lose, Lose-but-Win Bittersweet Ending:** Because this is a disillusionment story, the win is mostly bitter and not very sweet. Due to the genre confusion, it doesn't have the impact that it could have. If this had stayed true to the performance genre, Delphine would have gotten a professional win; society (the audience) and the POB board (who condoned Jock's behaviour) would have recognized not only Delphine's talent, but that

their treatment of women and opinion of women's bodies, needs review. Instead, since there is no public performance of Delphine's ballet, she is simply cynical of the world and everything she'd grown up believing (as evidenced by the prologue). Even the police officer who helps her, doesn't make her realize that not all men take advantage and that not everyone objectifies women.

OBLIGATORY SCENES

- **An Inciting Opportunity or Challenge:** Delphine is hired by POB to choreograph a brand new ballet.
- **Protagonist Denies Responsibility to Respond:** Nathalie asks Delphine to work with the POB to choreograph a brand new ballet because she was impressed by the freshness of the Medusa production. Nathalie wants a feminist dance, and Delphine creates a show that is much like classic ballets that have come before her, and she features Jock as Rasputin (Margaux is one of the characters who calls her out on this).
- **Forced to Respond, the Protagonist Lashes Out:** Margaux calls Delphine out for creating "a derivative ballet, that's a piece of 19C misogynist fuckery". She says it's not about a woman anymore, it's about a charlatan. Delphine denies this and they argue.
- **Protagonist Learns External Antagonist's Object of Desire:** The external antagonist is society, as represented primarily by the POB. Typically when society is the antagonist, there are a number of characters who embody various attitudes/beliefs. In this novel, characters are wonderfully nuanced so the role of antagonist constantly passes hands. Many of the characters in this story are shapeshifters taking turns fulfilling the antagonistic role. Nathalie represents women who have risen to a position of authority but who are ultimately powerless. Delphine learns that Nathalie wanted to get rid of Jock, but the POB board overruled her. Nathalie wants Delphine to present a new, feminist view of dance. Jock and Dmitri represent the entitled male. Delphine learns that Jock wants to collect women, and Dmitri wants to be the alpha. Daniel represents tradition, or the way things have always been done; society's marital status quo. He's a "traditional" husband who believes he is head of the family and therefore can dictate what his wife can, and can't do, with her body. While he does support Delphine after Jock's attack (recognizing that Jock's control over Delphine's body was wrong), he believes his wife should want and have children. Margaux represents the feminist who challenges Delphine when she unknowingly perpetuates society's outdated beliefs. Margaux wants her to create a truly innovative choreography.
- **Protagonist's Initial Strategy to Outmanoeuvre Antagonist Fails:** Who is the antagonist? Generally, it's society and society's attitudes toward a woman's body and a woman's agency over her own body. The POB is a microcosm of society. When society is the antagonist, there are characters

within the story that represent societal attitudes. In this case we have Jock, Dmitri and Daniel representing predatory men, and Nathalie as a woman in authority who enables their behaviour (willingly or not). Delphine tries to outmanoeuvre the antagonist (society as represented by the POB) by casting Lindsay (an older dancer who is seen to be past her prime) as the Tsarina. It fails when Lindsay kicks Camille in the face.

- **Protagonist Changes Worldview (During an All Is Lost Moment):** Delphine's AILM is when she realizes Jock has recorded them having sex. Her view of Jock changes. But her worldview (how she sees the ballet) doesn't completely change until she speaks with Nathalie and realizes that the board condoned Jock's behaviour and that the idea for a feminist ballet was an attempt to mitigate it. Delphine never does become fully aware that she's perpetuating the cycle. So, her worldview changes but it's to become disillusioned with what she had once believed in. She doesn't really mature or take responsibility for her own actions.
- **Protagonist's Gifts Expressed:** Lindsay encourages Delphine to express her gift, but Delphine never does. (Chapter 26 - "Succeed," Lindsay said, nodding at the music. "Do your work. That's how you win. That's the *only* way you win. You work. He doesn't.") Delphine's gift is choreography. She didn't quite rise to the level of star as a dancer, but as a choreographer, she has a new view of the art/sport (Medusa).
- **Protagonist's Loss of Innocence Rewarded with Deeper Understanding:** Delphine may have a deeper understanding, but it's a jaded and cynical one that has made her happy to leave the ballet. She is disillusioned with the ballet and when she sees the children dancing, it's unclear whether she is able to embrace the innocence and the girls' love of dance, or if she fears for them because they too will become objectified.

Point of View:

First Person, with second person "slips".

Very effective use of first person because Delphine is blind to the truth about the POB, Jock, Margaux, Daniel, and her own behaviour. With first person, the reader only knows what the protagonist knows. Our view of the world is coloured by the protagonist's view, so her beliefs and perceptions are ours.

Technically, Kapelke-Dale's use of "you" (denoting second person) is a POV slip. If an author is going to mix POVs it's essential that it's done deliberately. That means having a deep understanding of point of view and narrative device so that the changing POV enhances the story rather than detracts from it.

Narrative Device: who is telling the story, to whom, why and how. This is very easy to identify in first person narratives, and epistemological novels. In third person narratives it's more challenging and most authors aren't aware that this needs to be considered. However, when you are very clear about who is narrating the story and why, your story will stay on track and will be a much more enjoyable read. Note, the reader may never know who the narrator is.

In *Your First Page: first pages and what they tell us about the pages that follow them*, author Peter Selgin writes:

"First person" and "third person" aren't points of view: those are just handles by which a point of view can be grasped. Point of view is something much deeper than pronouns; it's that crucial lens or filter through which experiences are conveyed to us by a narrator, who, unlike the author (who inhabits a desk, typically), inhabits the world of the story.

Simply put: point of view is the difference between the author and the narrator. For this reason it is sometimes referred to confusingly as a work's "voice." If that is so, it's the voice—the awareness, insights, and diction—of the narrator, not the author.

Objects of Desire:

Delphine wants to launch her career as a choreographer. She knows she's good, she knows she has something new and different to offer the world of dance.

Delphine needs to learn that in order to express her gift (as a choreographer with something to say), she must see the world of dance (and by extension the POB and those in it) for what it is. (A world that exploits and controls women's bodies.)

Theme/Controlling Idea:

Story Grid's General Theme/Controlling Idea for Worldview Stories: Ignorance, naivete or meaninglessness reign when we fail to mature past a black-and-white view of the world.

Whereas Nathalie has matured past a black-and-white view of the world, Delphine has not and this is what gives rise to her disillusionment which dictates the global story genre. As a child, Delphine is "all in" with POB and the world of dance. By the end, she's "all out". Nathalie however, remains.

THE BALLERINAS is a story about women's agency, or lack thereof, over their own bodies. Kapelke-Dale's choice to set this story in a ballet company is brilliant because few other industries exploit a woman's form so explicitly. For Delphine, a woman's control over her body is a black-and-white issue. Unlike Nathalie, she doesn't see a grey area. Therefore, she becomes disillusioned with the world of dance and must leave it.

Beginning, Middle, End:

The Math: BH (14%), MB1 (40%), MB2 (36%), EP (10%)

ACT 1

Beginning (roughly pages 1-40, includes prologue): Emerging choreographer, Delphine Leger, is hired to create a brand new ballet for the POB. Against the advice of the artistic director (Nathalie Dorival), Delphine casts her friend Lindsay Price, an ageing and injured dancer, in the principal role and has one month to make it work.

ACT 2

Middle Build 1 (roughly pages 41-154): During rehearsal, Lindsay kicks her understudy in the face and Delphine is forced to remove her from the show, replacing her with 19-year-old, Camille. The ballet was to have been "about a woman with enormous potential. A brilliant woman, a funny woman, a loving woman." (page 43) However, it now becomes more about the male lead (Rasputin) danced by Jacques (Jock) Gerard, the man Delphine has loved since adolescence. Nathalie doesn't like the new direction and cancels the project, asking instead for a series of short "feminist" dances.

Middle Build 2 (roughly pages 155-259): When Jock secretly films himself having sex with Delphine, she retaliates by exposing him as a sexual predator to the press. (Jock had done the same thing with many other POB dancers.) She informs Nathalie as a professional courtesy only to discover that Nathalie knew of Jock's behaviour but was unable to have him removed from the POB. Jock is dismissed and Delphine choreographs a raw, Janis Joplin, dance for Lindsay to showcase her own vision as an artist and Lindsay's talent as a dancer. Lindsay posts a video from rehearsal on Instagram and her followers love it. Lindsay announces that she's pregnant but plans to abort the baby.

ACT 3

End (roughly pages 260-288, includes epilogue): After the abortion, Delphine accompanies Lindsay to her birthday supper with their friend Margaux and Lindsay's husband, Daniel. Angry that Lindsay aborted their baby, Daniel accidentally knocks over a bronze statue, crushing Lindsay's foot and ending her career. This presumably spells the end of Delphine's choreography too. In a rage (over Daniel's treatment of Lindsay, not the fate of her ballet), Delphine shoves Daniel, he crashes through the window and falls to his death. Delphine is found not guilty of his murder and the three friends (Delphine, Margaux, Lindsay) quit dance forever.

NOTE: It's difficult to divide THE BALLERINAS into clear acts because the main storyline loses its thread. It starts as a tale about a woman wanting to step out and be noticed in her field. However, a secondary storyline (Lindsay's pregnancy and career) featuring a secondary character, takes over at the end. Whereas Margaux's storyline holds steady as a minor plotline that enhances Delphine's arc, Lindsay's storyline

eclipse's Delphine's entirely. The reader is never told whether the Janis Joplin dance was ever performed. Clearly Lindsay couldn't do it, but Margaux (or another older ballerina) could have. Yes, Nathalie suggests that they part ways until things calm down, but it isn't clear that it's a permanent break (Epilogue, page 287). Also, the reader only knows that Delphine has become disillusioned because of the tone of voice in the prologue. Delphine has obviously come to hate Paris, and presumably for her Paris is synonymous with the POB and dance.

Pages 226-227, Delphine states:

I think it's just—dance is the only thing that interests me. the only thing that I'm really good at. The only thing I've ever done that matters. So, I have to keep going. Regardless of how famous or obscure I end up...I can't stop doing it. I could try, but there'd be no point. It's who I am. You know?

And thinking of being famous, or becoming rich because of dance—I want it so much it hurts. I want to leave a legacy, and dance is the only way for me to achieve that, so all I can do is just...not think about it too much. Try not to want it too bad. Because if I let myself want it and then I failed, the failure might destroy me.

Delphine fails to express her gift as a choreographer with a new perspective (cautionary tale). Yes, she does create the Janis Joplin piece, but it is never performed. In the Epilogue, Nathalie suggests that they put "this relationship" on hold at least until the bad press blows over so it's possible (though not probable) that in the future Delphine will get a chance to express her gift and affect change. Within the novel however, the world doesn't get to see her creation which means there's no hope that the POB/society will change its perspective. Delphine, Lindsay and Margaux (characters who have the potential to redefine what it means to be a professional dancer) all leave the industry. The dancing girls at the end, representing the new generation, are therefore doomed to a fate of being objectified and disenfranchised. The cycle continues.