

IMAGE



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LINED UP

On the cover and this page

Dancers of the Los Angeles Ballet. Cover from left to right: Paige Wilkey, Boo, Nick Sedano, Cleo Taneja, Natalia Burns, Chloe Oronoz and Abigail Gross. This page: Abigail Gross. *Photography by Joelle Grace Taylor. Movement direction by Charissa Kroeger. Creative direction by Elisa Wouk Almino.*

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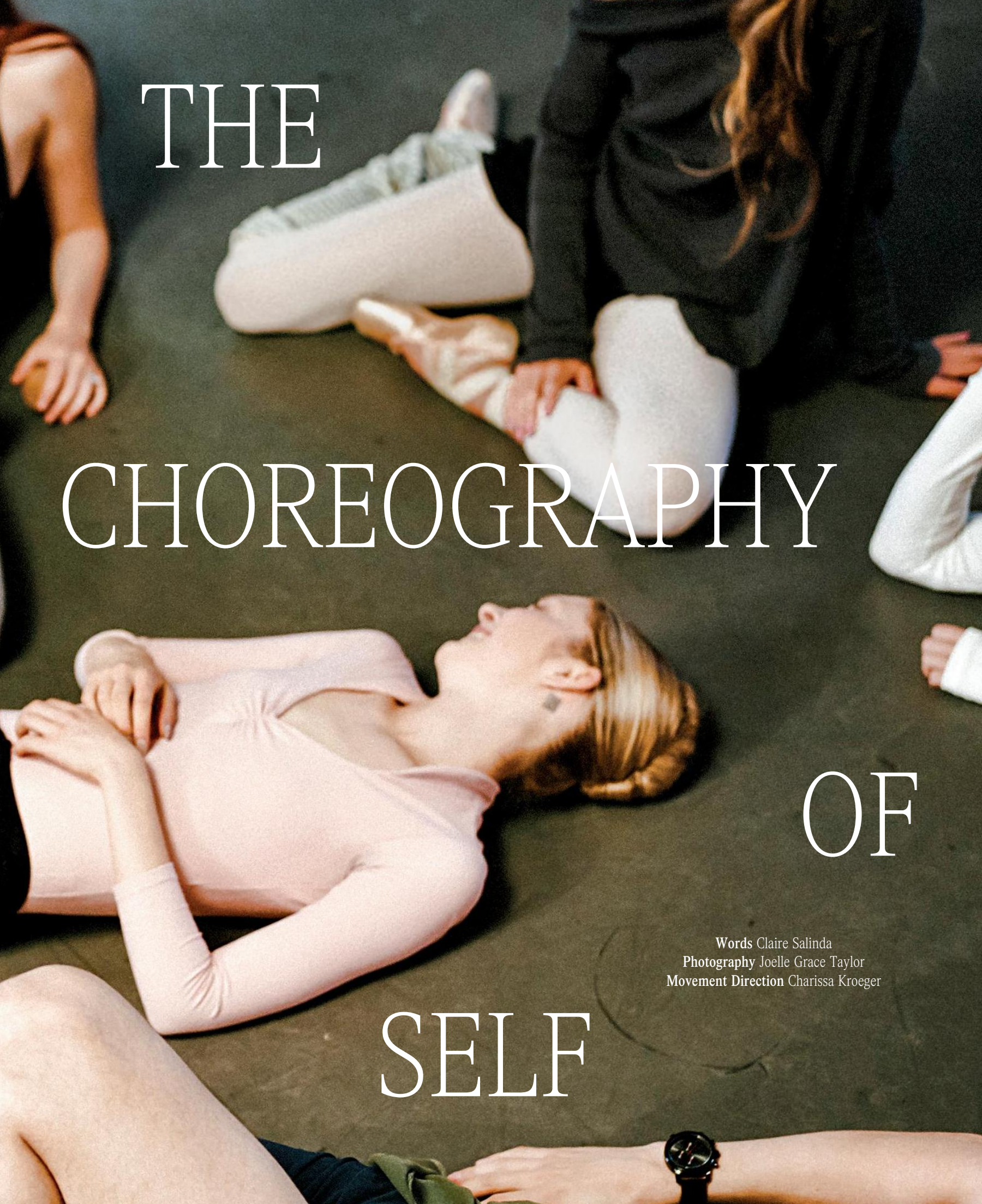
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AT
REHEARSAL
WITH THE
LOS ANGELES
BALLET



THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF SELF

Words Claire Salinda
Photography Joelle Grace Taylor
Movement Direction Charissa Kroeger

Timothée Chalamet was obviously wrong about ballet no longer being a cultural force when he made his ill-fated comments earlier this year. For one, he simply needed to look down at his girlfriend Kylie Jenner's shoes; she's been credited with making ballet flats ubiquitous again via a single pair featured in a 2023 Instagram post. As evidenced by Jenner and countless other women, ballet core — the aesthetic inspired by the off-duty and rehearsal style of professional ballet dancers — has transcended its origins as an early 2020s trend rooted in lockdown comfy clothes to become something like everyday closet staples, from bodysuits and bodices to satin skirts and bows. Just this summer, Repetto debuted a collaboration with Birkenstock that includes a pair of pale pink "Boston" clogs reimagined as ballet slippers, if you can believe it, complete with satin ribbons and renamed "Opera" for the occasion.

Ballet core may be a recent trend in name, but little girls, including me, have always revered a ballerina. When I made the tiny dancer in my music box turn pirouette after pirouette, I was captivated by more than just her pretty miniature tutu. I was imagining what it would be like to be her, so perfectly balanced en pointe, the embodiment of feminine beauty and grace. Alas, while I took ballet lessons as a child, I did not grow up to join a company. I learned instead that ballet is grueling, often painful work made to look effortless by the incredible professional dancers who dedicate their lives to the art form. But with a ballet core wardrobe, I can dress like one anyway, play the part of sophisticated dancer — sophisticated woman — in my spandex and satin. There is something about stepping into my Steve Madden black leather ballet Mary Janes (dupes for the Row's classic pair, bien sûr) that makes every outfit, and therefore myself, feel that much more composed — a little taller, even though they're flats. And if, in reality, wearing my ballet-inspired pieces is more akin to Carrie Bradshaw's bus-splashed tutu than real ballerina core, there's something inviting about turning toward elegance when getting dressed in a world where, these days, unprecedented chaos and uncertainty reign.

Of course, when the dancers of the Los Angeles Ballet dress for rehearsal, they're not concerned with defining a trendy aesthetic. The snug yet stretchy fabrics of their leotards and tights allow artistic director Melissa Barak to observe the nuance in their movements as they perfect her new ballet, set to Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz's "Kauyumari." The dancers' slouchy leg warmers and trash bag pants keep their muscles supple and ready for the energetic spirit of George Balanchine's "Who Cares?" With Gershwin's jazzy accompaniment, the ballet has been described as "tap dance on pointe," and staying warm is a requirement. **The LAB will perform both sets of choreography as part of their program on Sept. 8 at the Hollywood Bowl. Not only will the performance mark the start of their 2026-27 season, it's also their debut at the iconic Bowl.**

When I observed the LAB dancers in the studio as they prepared for their upcoming program, there were no tiaras or tutus, no pretense of easy perfection. It was something more intimate, more alluring. If the stage is where ballet dancers embody their characters, then rehearsal is where they embody themselves.

Every bag the dancers carried into rehearsal — from Trader Joe's totes to a Target shopper — overflowed with layer upon layer of real ballet core, each piece serving a purpose for that dancer's practice, but also

expressing something more personal. One ballerina selected from her stash a leotard whose gray velour later read as metallic silver under the studio lights during her grand adagio. Another considered a deep-green leotard whose verdant shade complemented the florals of her wrap skirt. There were the delicate necklaces that dangled from their elegant necks as they stretched at the barre, the specificity of the charms lost at a distance but no less special, perhaps made even more so by the intimacy required to really see them.



Holly Bratkovich



Cassidy Cocke; Below from front to back: Chloe Oronoz, Holly Bratkovich and Abigail Gross.





Clockwise from
top left corner:
Taylor Hugens,
Holly Bratkovich,
Chloe Oronoz and
Abigail Gross.
Opposite page:
Paige Wilkey.



Left to right: Chloe Oronoz, Abigail Gross, Cassidy Cocke; Below from left to right: Abigail Gross, Cassidy Cocke, Taylor Hugens and Chloe Oronoz. Opposite page: Taylor Hugens.



Male danseurs weren't exempt from this display of personalized fashion, with their silkscreened T-shirts announcing YMCA branch preferences and long-sleeve layers tied at the waist. Someone had discarded a handmade crochet poncho in soft earth tones on the back of a chair. Scattered along the walls of the studio were tidy heaps of scarves and mesh, rainbows of stripes, every shade of ballet pink, Uggs of every height. One dancer even brought her little dog.

Watching ballerinas apply lipstick next to one another in the mirrors lining the walls, while others smoothed out their French twists or retied a bow, I thought of Degas' famous paintings of the dancers of the Paris Opéra, specifically "The Ballet Class." In the piece, young ballerinas are captured during a studio class. All are listening to their ballet master, some more intently than others, but not unlike the LAB dancers, most are engaged in another activity: chatting with one another, stretching, adjusting their outfits in the mirror, fixing their hair. (One of these dancers also has her little dog.) Degas is said to have preferred watching ballerinas in the rehearsal studio as opposed to performing on stage, as he could then witness the "little events that occurred in the background." At the Los Angeles Ballet Center, I witnessed the dancers not as the titular Nutcracker or Giselle, or any of the other roles they perform, but instead as themselves.

In the ballet rehearsal, they warm up, they finesse, they practice and pretend. And over time, from their tinkering comes their version of right and good. I'm reflecting here on their dancing, and on the dancers themselves. It seems not so different from the fiddling I do in my own mirror before leaving my house, making a small tweak here or there in an effort to more accurately portray who I wish to be perceived as, and to embody, that day.

How we get dressed goes beyond style. It's how you hold yourself, how you want to be seen. It's how your body moves, whether or not you're a professional dancer looking into a wall of mirrors or just a woman passing her reflection on her way out the door. And if costumes help you pretend you're someone else, your own clothes and accessories help you to become yourself. Rehearsal is formally a space where you practice a role; informally, it is where, in the background moments, you rehearse your version of yourself.

Creative Direction Elisa Wouk Almino
Dancers Holly Bratkovich, Natalia Burns, Cassidy Cocke, Abigail Gross, Taylor Hugens, Chloe Oronoz, Nick Sedano, Theo Swank, Cleo Taneja, Paige Wilkey
Videography Trace Taylor
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