

Grace & Poise: A Muslim ballet school in the UK

Keywords: Ballet; Islamic Studies; Muslims in Europe; Migration and art; Islam in Europe; Creativity; Grace & Poise

Abstract: Grace & Poise Academy is a Muslim ballet school with a unique syllabus where students dance to poetry, not music, expectations of female modesty among parents, teachers and students are met and attention is paid to Islamic theology and morals. While cultivating Islamic adab (etiquette), akhlaq (ethics) and Islamic pedagogies, the academy is also inspired by classical ballet training and alternative holistic educational traditions. The result is both traditionalist and progressive, and points to a possible future for Islamic creativity, signalling openings rather than closures. The research for this article is based on interviews, media analyses and participant observation.

1. Grace & Poise is a CIC, Community Interest Company, i.e. not for profit. It became a limited company in January 2020; the CIC status was obtained 28th November 2023. A CIC requires a non-paid, volunteer-based board that is being set up in spring 2024. Becoming a CIC is prompted by legal, ethical and economic reasons. As a CIC, Grace & Poise better meets requirements to receive funding from external actors. It is facilitated by having a board and Miss Maisie employed as CEO rather than owner.

2. In the academy's communication and at classes, the teachers and assistants are known as Miss this or that. Thus, in her professional capacity, Maisie A. Byers is 'Miss Maisie' and this is how I refer to her.

3. <https://www.royalacademy-ofdance.org/people/maisie-byers-uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

4. For more information on London's commercial Muslim festivals, see Otterbeck 2024.

Grace & Poise Academy CIC¹ is a Muslim ballet school founded by ballet educationalist and choreographer Maisie Alexandra Byers (henceforth Miss Maisie²), a 2016 graduate of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) with a special focus on ballet education.³ Miss Maisie is the current CEO of the academy. Grace & Poise is probably the very first ballet Academy in the world to follow an Islamically inspired curriculum. I first noted the academy at the annual London Muslim Shopping Festival in 2022 where their poster (Figure 1) attracted my attention. The following year, I saw a performance by some Grace & Poise students on the main stage at Eid in the Square (London City's celebration of the end of Ramadan in Trafalgar Square).⁴ As a self-described 'ballet dad', I wanted to know more and initiated an exploratory study.

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Miss Maisie converted⁵ to Islam in August 2018. Soon after, in September, she founded the academy; it was ready to start trading and arranging classes in January 2019.⁶ As COVID-19 hit in spring 2020 classes were forced online, but the school survived and developed. Currently it organises classes at six London locations and one in Birmingham (since February 2022).⁷ The academy now has 15–20 regular employees on different contracts and some who freelance for specific classes. There is no requirement for students or employees to be Muslim, only to support the general vision and ethos of the school, although most seem to identify as such.

Grace & Poise is one of many initiatives undertaken by ‘Muslim creatives’⁸ working in the cultural industry in the UK, initiatives that are shaped by the economic conditions and laws of the country, but also by visions of the arts and crafts that the Muslim creatives believe will be appreciated by ‘the Muslim community’⁹. Clearly, there is a growth in new Muslim taste communities which value arts and crafts in non-traditional forms, leading to the renegotiation of aesthetics and also ethics among Muslims in the UK. This development encourages a cultural creativity wherein new forms are employed either to ex-

5. Some converts use convert, some revert. Miss Maisie uses both. I use convert, the more common term in writing.

6. The academy was started by Maisie Byers, initially in partnership with a Dr. Sajedah Shubib who left the company in February 2021 and is no longer associated with the academy.

7. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 4th February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZka5UwINWE/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

8. ‘Muslim creatives’ is borrowed from Morris 2023. It is shorthand for Muslims who are engaged in creative work and either profile themselves as believers or who actively relate their craft to Islam.

9. There are several competing, parallel and sometimes overlapping Muslim Communities in the UK, at least from a sociological understanding of community. But the linguistic trope ‘the Muslim community’ is strong and ever-present among both non-Muslims and Muslims.

10. https://www.instagram.com/p/CcFw-Hrlif_/.



Figure 1: From graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 8th April 2022.¹⁰

press Islam directly or the artist's active relations to Islam (Morris 2023; Warren 2022; Otterbeck 2021). Grace & Poise is an example of the latter.

This article narrates the remarkable story of Grace & Poise and opens with a thick description of the school before contextualising and analysing its visions and practices. The article then discusses what Grace & Poise represents, finally developing an argument about how such creative endeavours relate to the continuous reconfiguration of Islam in England.

Aims, methods and material

If nothing else is indicated, information about Grace & Poise stems from a) my interviews with Miss Maisie,¹⁰ b) classroom observations by a research assistant,¹¹ c) Grace & Poise's webpages¹² and Instagram¹³ and d) media interviews, reportage and stage performances by Grace & Poise.¹⁴ Facts have been checked by using a variety of independent sources. Both interviews with Miss Maisie were conducted online. The first was an open-ended explorative conversation centred around a few themes deduced from the available information from webpages, social media and previous journalism. The second interview followed up the classroom observations to ensure understanding. As the academy is a new, small business, this article has taken extra care not to share Miss Maisie's intellectual property without authorisation; she kindly commented on a draft before the second interview and approved the information shared. It does not include any identifiable information about parents, students, teachers or assistants, apart from Miss Maisie.

I trained my research assistant, Anna Otterbeck¹⁵ – who has a BA in modern dance from Dundee and Angus College – in ethnographic methods of field observation. During and after observation sessions, she made written and audio notes, later transcribed and shared with me. She also took snapshots of objects and places, while avoiding photographing teachers, assistants, parents and students. We engaged in critical discussion and interpretation before, during and after the sessions. She has also read through a draft version of this article suggesting changes and additions for which I am very grateful. Grace & Poise webpages are approached knowing that they contain promotional material. Further, media interviews with small, struggling busi-

11. I have formally interviewed Miss Maisie on two occasions, 15th January 2024 and 10th June 2024.

12. Observations were made 6th–21st March 2024 at different locations in London by my research assistant Anna Otterbeck, presented below.

13. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

14. Grace & Poise's Instagram account has archives back to autumn 2019; posts before that were erased because outdated or not professional enough.

15. Grace & Poise has been covered by both Muslim and non-Muslim media in the UK. I have seen two public performances: one at Eid in the Square (Trafalgar Square), 29th April 2023, and one at the Eid Festival at Westfield (Shepard's Bush), 14th April 2024.

nesses are generally very positive and again are used with caution. The short performances observed by me were parts of larger programmes at family friendly Eid celebrations in London where I was in the audience.¹⁶

Grace & Poise's activities

16. For more on Anna Otterbeck, see Lutra Dance & Movement Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/lutra_danceandmovement/. Visited 24th June 2024.

17. This subproject has been ethically tested and approved by the Aga Khan University's Ethical Review Committee for the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts.

18. In this article I will assume that Grace & Poise are referring to assumed biological sex. I have not discussed the definition of girls, women, boys and men with Miss Maisie. The issue did not surface, neither in interviews nor observations and trans- or non-binary gender identities were not the focus of the study. It is however possible to conjure up situations that could be challenging for any biological sex segregated teaching institution today but none of that were observed.

19. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 8th February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZuLmAgItoQ/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

20. In the UK, students of, for example, music and dance proceed through grades that represent skill stages. In ballet, according to the RAD curriculum, there are eight grades (plus two pre-grades) for non-professional dancers. There is another scale for vocational training.

21. Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 29th September 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjFZopClva3/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

22. Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 28th September 2022, for example. https://www.instagram.com/p/CjDvT4lIDp7/?img_index=2. Visited 11th June 2024.

Grace & Poise primarily focusses on girls and women.¹⁷ Currently, the academy offers regular classes up to the age of fifteen but envisions developing more classes in the future. Since February 2022, the academy has also arranged classes called 'Mummy and me' for infants up to two years old if accompanied by an adult woman.¹⁸ Boys may participate in ballet classes until year two, which implies an age of 6–7 years in the UK, after which classes are girls only. In early 2024 the academy developed and launched a 'creative movement' syllabus for physical education (PE) offered to Muslim primary schools and meant for all genders.

From the age of 4–5, the academy offers annual ballet exams so students may receive recognition of their progress.¹⁹ These form a regular reference point in the classroom, with students training to perform the exam in mock situations. The academy also caters for those who wish to take up ballet professionally, noting that in order

...to support our students in a career pathway, we intend to provide training and graduate programmes for them to train as Ballet Teachers. This will enable them to join our Ballet Teaching Faculty and teach our Ballet to Poetry Syllabus, in line with the values of our Academy.²⁰

Note that Grace & Poise does not support a career as a stage dancer as this would, as staged ballet is organised now, require a different ethos. The 'Ballet to Poetry Syllabus' mentioned is the original dance curriculum of the academy (discussed below). Apart from the regular classes, Grace & Poise organises shorter workshops for both younger and older children. At times, they have arranged 'ladies' ballet' classes, but these are not held regularly.²¹ For example, in 2024, the academy cooperated with the charity Muslimah Sports Association²² and offered ladies' ballet classes over a twelve-week period.

As for all small-scale business that must compete commer-

cially, the reality on the ground is challenging. Classes need to reach a certain size to be sustainable and competition when applying for funding support is harsh. Grace & Poise has been successful thus far and is currently stable and financially independent. It works hard for funding to keep fees down and enable all interested students to join regardless of economic situation. Many classes are in fact full and there are even waiting lists, although in some locations there are classes with fewer students.

The academy cooperates with and is recognised by professional organisations like the Muslim business organisation Sisters in Business²³ and the Empowered Women Network, which awarded Grace & Poise the Rising Star of The Year award in July 2023.²⁴ Many of these associations provide important network opportunities for small, local businesses, allowing them to share their experiences and seek advice from each other. Grace & Poise has won some even more prestigious awards. For example, The Islam Channel²⁵ named the academy the ‘community business of the year’ in 2022 and The Muslim News²⁶ awarded it for Excellence in the Arts, 2023. According to Miss Maisie, the academy has expansion plans, possibly even overseas, but only when they are prepared and the situation is right.

Visions of a Muslim Childhood

In its self-presentation, the academy expresses its vision in declaratory terms: ‘With a unique Ballet to Poetry Syllabus the Academy is founded upon a passion for Child Development and raising the Muslim community to make a positive impact in the world.’ ‘Child development’ is explained as aligning ‘mind, body and soul’ for positive development. It is further specified as nurturing cognitive, social, emotional and creative development. This is seen as corresponding to ‘Life Skills & Positive Islamic Identity’, stressing that a positive faith resonates with a healthy body and active mind.

When interviewed, Miss Maisie uses typical educational language when underlining that she aims to make ‘ballet accessible to girls from impoverished backgrounds’ as it will provide them with ‘transferable skills that will help them change their financial circumstances.’²⁷ She observes that there is scepticism about the performing arts and an emphasis on medicine and STEM subjects²⁸ within ‘the Muslim community’ (cf. Morris 2023; War-

23. <https://muslimahsports.org.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

24. <https://www.sistersinbusiness.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

25. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cu6bWpnopiG/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

26. The Islam Channel started in 2004; it is one of the most established Muslim TV channels in the UK. <https://www.islamchannel.tv/>. Visited 11th June 2024. See Morris 2023.

27. Muslim News started in 1989 as a newsletter and is now one of the most established channels online for Muslim news in the UK. <https://muslimnews.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

28. https://www.arabnews.com/node/1882006/art-culture?mc_cid=93c73b1c75&mc_eid=UNIQID. Visited 11th June 2024.

ren 2022). To raise awareness of the potentially positive impact of ballet, she and Grace & Poise refer to studies showing that activities like ballet strengthen academic results and physical and mental health (see Figure 2).

There is a separate page on the academy webpages briefly presenting a normative understanding of Islamic identity. It starts by declaring that in contrast to a generic understanding of religion, Islam is more; it is a complete outlook on life meant to be nurtured from childhood until death.²⁹ The text then stresses the importance of ‘Muslim etiquette’ in both manners and appearance, emphasising ‘modest wear’ as a female ideal.



Figure 2: Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram, 20 January 2023.³⁰

This is then extended to the grace and modesty of the art of ballet, with its elegance of movement perceived and presented as a moral quality. Islam is also connected to a ‘strong work ethic’, in turn associated with ballet training. Teachers and assistants are to inspire students to encourage and support each other. Thus, the text proclaims that training ballet will ‘support children in everyday life as they [i.e. work ethics, etc.] ensure they

29. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

30. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnpkaxmoR2l/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

pray on time, fast through Ramadan!’³¹ The webpage evokes the Islamic concept *ihsan* – excellence in morals and deeds – claiming it is reflected in the attention to detail and work ethic needed to become proficient in ballet. Further, success is connected to having the right intention in your deeds and trust in Allah who holds the ultimate key to development as ‘all strength and ability is from Allah’. The aim is to strengthen the children who will be humble in success and show *sabr* (patience) in hardship. By being taught to use common phrases like *mashaallah* (Allah has willed it) and *alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) the group is made aware of the importance of the two qualities (humility and patience). The Islamic profile is stressed in a passage on the Grace & Poise page ‘Our Story’ that I quote in full:

We feel passionately about contributing to Islamic Arts and honouring the significance of Poetry within Islamic heritage. Grace & Poise Academy offers the beautiful art form of Ballet in a way that is shaped by our Islamic ethos. Our values are founded in Islam and we are committed to working with passion, excellence and integrity to make a positive impact in all we do.³²

At the very heart of the above is the stress on ethical heritage. Heritage here should not be understood as continuity of the traditional arts in established forms but as a theologically established ethical heritage that – if taken seriously and approached responsibly – can be paired with forms of expressions previously unutilised in Islam, like ballet. Creative cultural forms like theatre, film, music and stand-up comedy are increasingly, and globally, being appropriated by Muslim creatives or Muslim movements for a variety of purposes (Rashid and Petersen 2023). Central to the theological debate about the possibility of doing so – and also important for Muslim creatives taking such initiatives – is a stress on ethics, especially the holistic understanding of Islam as a tradition primarily providing sound overarching principles and excellence (*ihsan*). This is observable throughout the first decades of the 21st century, not least in cities like London (Otterbeck 2021, 2024). It is also notable in the ethical virtues invoked through English rather than Arabic terminology, for example etiquette rather than *adab*, morals instead of *akhlaq*, intention not *niyya*, trust in Islam instead of *tawakkul*, humbleness rather than *tawadu’*, concepts that the Muslim target group likely associates with the English words. Only *sabr* and

31. Evidently, the statement aims to clarify how important Islam is to Muslims, but it also overlooks that many adherents of other religions make the same claims about their faith.

32. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

ihsan are in Arabic, although Miss Maisie points out that there is no specific strategy behind making these words stand out. The main goal is to communicate the values. I cannot, however, help noticing the similarities between this text and the general contemporary stress in Islamic discourse on ethics as a set of key principals taking precedence over established, rule-based readings, not least in key questions about environmental responsibility and cultural creativity (Kersten 2019; Otterbeck 2021). Yet the rule-based interpretations are still important, and some community-specific, important rules are honoured, both generally in the discussion and by Grace & Poise.

In this case, two main adjustments to general ballet classes in the UK have been made. There is no music, only poetry, in class and at performances, and there is a separation between girls and boys from the age of about six–seven, for moral reasons. From then on, classrooms are all-female spaces.

From music to poetry

The reason for reimagining ballet to be danced to poetry is that music may not be ‘promoted or encouraged within their faith’,³³ ‘their’ being Muslim, ballet-interested children and families.³⁴ Rhythmically spoken poetry is instead used to enable the student to hit the beat and find flow. The academy claims that ‘Our poems explore Islamic Values and Celebrate the creation of Allah سُبحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى’,³⁵ The Arabic reads *subhanahu wa ta’ala*, meaning ‘may he be praised and exalted’, a formula traditionally added after saying or writing ‘Allah’.

To use accompanying sounds other than music is not unheard of in dance, especially contemporary dance. Before converting to Islam, Miss Maisie had already used poetry in her own ballet choreography. As she says, ‘Poetry is very rhythmical so when I am talking about rhythm and poetry I’m talking about the poetic rhythm; poetry naturally requires rhythm.’³⁶ She points out that it is a different kind of rhythm, not technically music, and continues, ‘But I write poems on music scores, so it is just a creative way of transferring a rhythm that would apply to movement to poetry.’ Miss Maisie writes the poems herself with specific choreography in mind. She has already written hundreds of them. All the poems are recorded for use in class.

Having observed 36 classes and danced in some of them, the

33. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/about>. Visited 25th June 2024.

34. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/poetry-and-cognitive-development>. Visited 11th June 2024.

35. Many scholars have examined why music may be considered a problem; for my main contribution, see Otterbeck 2021.’

36. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/ballet-to-poetry-syllabus-exams>. Visited 11th June 2024.

research assistant attested that the words and pauses of the poems skilfully created rhythms that were simple to find and follow. As poems are specific to certain exercises and repeated during training, the rhythm of a specific poem affords certain movement: a drawn-out syllable may invite an arabesque, a row of quickly pronounced consonants forming a rhythm may invite a *pirouette*, *plié* or *petit jeté*. In fact, the research assistant found the poetry surprisingly like music as it was both tonal and rhythmical; however, she also stressed it was different from music in that it seemed easier for beginners to follow since the rhythm was carried only by the voice instead of by tonally rich compositions. However, it was harder to give instructions when a poem was read as words had to compete with words, not tones.

Another aspect of the poetry is its storytelling. Both poetry and storytelling are celebrated art forms in many Muslim contexts and are also specifically embraced by Islamic thinking, something Miss Maisie is quick to point out, underscoring that these art forms are central to ballet too. The stories of the poems help form the choreography. For the smallest dancers, storytelling will be concrete and might be about animals or nature, often with a subtle moral message about good character or good behaviour, but these poems do not have explicit Islamic messages, so they may be accessible to everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims. As the students grow older, there is more room for abstract ideas. Miss Maisie considers that poetry increases independent, intellectual reflection and builds confidence in her students; this is an effect of the curriculum that many might fail to notice, but that Miss Maisie particularly emphasises. To prepare the students, the class first listens to the poems together to get the message but also the flow.

When Grace & Poise conducts thematic workshops, narratives from the Quran, for example, are introduced and dramatised for the stage without depicting the characters themselves. A salient example of this is a workshop based on a yet-to-be-published book by Miss Maisie called *Grace & the Story of Yunus (alayhu salam)* (peace be upon him) (Figure 3). In it, a little girl called Grace defies her mother's instructions and goes to play in the woods. She then gets trapped when having a pretend tea party with her imaginary friends. To comfort them – and herself – she tells them of Yunus who was trapped inside a whale but was released when he had found his way and prayed a *du'a*,³⁷ which Grace does too. Soon after, her mother finds her and res-

37. First interview.

cues her. Grace apologises fully, in line with the story in which Yunus accepts he has made mistakes and asks for God's forgiveness. The moral, in a nutshell, is, 'It is ok to make mistakes, but you own your mistakes, you say sorry.'³⁸ The story is also about the act of forgiveness. Indeed, workshop participants collaborated in writing a poem about forgiveness, later posted on the Academy's Instagram, as a reminder of the tradition to forgive those who you think have wronged you before Ramadan starts.³⁹ Currently, Grace & Poise has not had many opportunities to hold workshops, not least due to the harsh economic conditions affecting many in 'the community', but in future, Miss Maisie has the ambition to offer full packages like classical ballet shows: the show, the book, the gadgets and memorabilia.



38. There is a well-known and beloved prayer in the Islamic tradition called Yunus's du'a.

39. First interview.

40. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 29th March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CbrwOMPIgNd/?img_index=1. Visited 11th June 2024.

41. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CixZhAyo-Zu/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Figure 3: From graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 21st September 2022.⁴⁰

Modesty and religious practices

Segregation along the lines of assumed sex lies at the academy's core. Up to about the age of six, when classes are based on 'play and establishing fundamental movement and expressive skills',⁴¹

boys may participate. When formal ballet teaching commences and as the students grow older, to guard the *‘awra* (the parts of the body that one needs to cover to maintain modesty) of the students, teachers and assistants, neither boys nor men are accepted as students, teachers, assistants or visitors. Men accompanying children to the academy meet the class assistant and sign in the children but are not present in the room during the class. Then again, women bringing children to the ballet will not be in the classroom either, apart from with the youngest children when adult women are allowed. As many of the classes are held at art centres, there are usually integrated cafés parents may frequent for some social time. When Grace & Poise offers its creative movement syllabus at primary schools, classes are mixed. This is in line with how Muslim schools envisage PE classes.⁴² Thus, the reason for the early age of segregation at the ballet training at Grace & Poise is curriculum based rather than seen as a necessity for maintaining modesty.

The academy’s recommended uniform is regular ballet school garb but, instead of nylon tutus, the younger girls wear blue skirts that cover most of their thighs⁴³ and the older wear burgundy, calf-length skirts to cover their *‘awra*.⁴⁴ In class during the observation sessions, some of the girls did not wear ‘the uniform’, which was accepted as the academy was in the process of changing it and did not want to pressure anyone into buying something merely for the short term. As the Grace & Poise classroom is an all-female space, teachers and assistants generally do not wear hijab, but if they have to leave the classroom regularly, the hijab may stay on. The students who wear them take them off in class. Miss Maisie claims to look ‘exactly the same as a ballet teacher as before I became Muslim’,⁴⁵ also the case for the other teachers and assistants if they wear a hijab at all.

The ideal of Grace & Poise is that ‘our work is a means to drawing closer to Allah (swt⁴⁶) and fulfilling our purpose to worship The One who created us’.⁴⁷ Ballet may be a passion, but as Allah comes first ‘even amidst our favourite pastimes, hobbies and passions’,⁴⁸ those who pray take time to do so at prayer time, even during lectures. Teachers and assistants take turns so lectures are not paused. As working-day classes are held in the evenings, and weekend classes around noon, this happens in at least one class out of the three to four they generally hold at each location. During Ramadan 2024, teachers and assistants broke for a very quick *iftar* with the fasting students, eating dates and

42. Second interview.

43. Second interview.

44. See the main image on the homepage of <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

45. As the older girls are undergoing puberty, some of them experience growth spurts, and ballet equipment is an expense, so the length of the skirt varies as students grow.

46. First interview.

47. Swt is a common abbreviation of *subhanahu wa ta’ala* in “Islamic English” texts, meaning ‘may he be praised and exalted’, as pointed out before.

48. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

snacks, rounding off with a prayer before continuing the lecture.

In our first interview, Miss Maisie underline that the academy does not impose values on the children; it caters for those who prefer a ballet school based on Muslim values, but does not demand them of teachers, assistants or students. The research assistant confirms the inclusive atmosphere but also emphasises that there is an Islamic normality in the classroom that finds outlet in language, rituals and character preferences (see below). For example, lectures are introduced by saying *bismillah* (in the name of Allah) and often end with a *mashaallah* (Allah has willed it, i.e. the task is completed by the mercy of Allah). An interesting example of a non-religious ritual which has become Islamic is that the students, especially the younger ones, do a kind of *révérence*, a curtsy directed at the teachers and a universal tradition in ballet at the end of lectures. However, at Grace & Poise there is a twist. Generally, a *révérence* includes a bow, but this is not included at Grace & Poise as students are taught not to bow to anyone but Allah. Instead, they line up, hold their hand over their hearts and then open their arms saying, ‘Thank you, Miss ...’

Ballet studios are rented in art centres, so both inside and outside the classroom, other agendas are clearly visible – a condition of not owning a place of your own. Miss Maisie stresses that the staff of Grace & Poise ‘respect those around us even if the values may be different to our own.’⁴⁹ The research assistant confirmed the live-and-let-live atmosphere at the art centres. A more central difficulty, one crucial in the choice of space, is whether the dance studio can guarantee the privacy of the class. Doors with a window will be covered up and a note on the door will declare that there is a Grace & Poise ballet class in progress, ‘Please knock for assistance’. Some spaces are equipped with curtains that can be drawn. Without these possibilities for privacy, spaces will not be considered.

Yet, occasionally, the academy opens its doors or has its students perform in public. For example, several media channels have covered (filmed and photographed) the dance school (e.g. the BBC, British Muslim TV, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*) and the academy’s students have performed on stage: at the Eid in the Square festival at Trafalgar Square, London, in 2022 and 2023, for example. Miss Maisie stresses that at any public display modesty and health and safety are carefully considered. For example,

49. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

the many images of the students on Instagram, or taken by visiting journalists, are arranged outside of regular classes. Only children who volunteer, with the permission of their parents, feature in these photoshoots, which is primarily a safeguarding issue. There is however a cut-off date for public photos and performances, which occurs when girls hit puberty, something that is clearly a question of modesty. In images meant to be made public, most teachers and assistants wear the hijab, even some of the students. Thus, the images from photoshoots are imbued with more Islamic semiotics than a general class. Apart from stressing modesty, this also serves the purpose of signalling to potential customers that the ballet school offers an Islamic safe space.

Thus, Islamic religious practices and moral agendas are clearly accentuated in the academy and form the backdrop for how it makes space. The gendered Muslim body and *‘awra*, the ritualised phrases, the ritual prayer, the private and public space associated with the gendered gaze, all index Islam and the Islamic profile of the academy. Yet, the research assistant also noted that students, assistants or teachers who did not want to pray or fast were not pushed to do so. After all, the emphasis was on the ballet training.

Islamic ballet aesthetics

I asked Miss Maisie about the use of Islamic aesthetics versus the established aesthetics of European ballet, which led to a discussion on culture and art. Miss Maisie prefers a less obvious Islamic branding. She appreciates Islamic schools that choose the name of a flower or plant rather than using one more associated with Islam, which partly explains the Grace & Poise name, but this also provides a clue to the general lack of Islamic semiotics on Grace & Poise’s Instagram account.⁵⁰ The exception is the veil, which is common, and the posts celebrating Eid which occasionally have, for example, a crescent. I was particularly surprised that the medal received by the students after an exam was devoid of Islamic aesthetics, something I pointed out at our first interview. The next time I met Miss Maisie, she told me with a big smile she had now ordered a new type of medal with some added Islamic design on it, as she thought it a good idea. But her

50. Second interview.

overall reasoning is still that she does not want to present a particular, culturally defined Islamic aesthetics. On the contrary, she wants the ballet aesthetics to dominate, and she claims the students want that too. Thus, much of the art work is cute and pink. Many of the elaborate illustrations are by Zonrana Zivic (zoki.art⁵¹) or Noemi Manalang (noomiedoodles⁵²), two illustrators who are often engaged. Yet there is a modesty to the cute. In our interviews, Miss Maisie recurrently expressed the idea of ‘living Islam, not fitting it in’ in different versions; that includes appropriating aesthetics from ballet and living it as Islam. At the performances I have seen, and in the classes observed by the research assistant, the dominant aesthetic is drawn from ballet. Instead of a range of visual, decipherable semiotics, character building is the clearest example of the Islamic ethos at Grace & Poise. Miss Maisie captures the complexity:

I never want them [the students] to say, ‘I don’t do that [ballet]’, because something got in the way, I want them to feel confident in their Islamic identity, in and of itself, and feel happy and satisfied with everything because we’ve just adapted anything that may not be aligning. Not that *you* have to adapt to fit in; we can actually change the world around us to put our values at the forefront for ourselves.⁵³

Character building

The Grace & Poise understanding of character is well summarised in the following Instagram post: ‘We raise children in line with an Islamic Ethos and encourage them to be kind, considerate, supportive and respectful towards others.’⁵⁴ Islamic character preferences are not to be understood as separate from values like friendship and team spirit but rather as the same or possibly to a large part overlapping. That is, being kind, friendly and cooperative are values upheld in ballet classrooms all over the world; the difference is that there is religious motivation in the stance of Grace & Poise mentioned by adults and students alike. This can take the form of the reminder, ‘Allah is always watching us’, or simply that it is an Islamic virtue to be kind-hearted and cooperative.

The younger students frequently do teambuilding exercises.

51. I have browsed the 583 posts of Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 2019–24 to make this point.

52. <https://www.instagram.com/zoki.art/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

53. <https://www.instagram.com/noomiedoodles/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

54. First interview.

One is ‘the ballet train’, a recurrent image on the Grace & Poise Instagram account. Miss Maisie explains that the ballet train aims to build friendship and nurture the feeling of security and belonging. She likes to begin to build awareness of morals using an exercise based in pedagogical tricks. For example, students sit and open an imaginary ballet book, but it is slammed shut. This builds expectations. When it shuts, all pretend to be shocked. ‘What happened to the ballet book?’ The teacher tells it off, calling it naughty. But, with the words ‘please’ and ‘*bismillah*’ (in the name of Allah), it opens, making clear that one should be polite but also initiate things by saying *bismillah*. It stresses the importance of intention in Islam: that one should prepare and start a task consciously.

The idea that all the dancers are a team is also nurtured with the older students in ways recognisable to the research assistant. Phrases like, ‘Don’t do a solo’, and encouragement to wait until all are ready but also not to make others wait, are recurrent. Naturally, as in any educational environment, interests, skills and the ability to work hard vary more as students get older, creating friction in small groups that teachers and assistants work hard to control. In this, sisterhood and friendship become important reference points, seen as virtues according to Islam.⁵⁵

As mentioned above, many of the poems and plays – like the one about Grace – centre on character building. A poem for the younger students, posted on the Grace & Poise Instagram account 16th July 2021, reads:

These little steps,
 These little feet,
 Do you know what it takes,
 To be prepared to meet
 A goal, a dream,
 To face a challenge so great
 To climb that mountain
 To explore and create
 To never give up
 To not say we can’t
 To trust in Allah
 No matter how far
 So lift your eyes,
 Reach as high as you can...
 With every moment you trust in his plan

55. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram, 13th January 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYr6sz2IP-Vu/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

So lift your eyes....
 Because Allah can raise you
 To the skies.
 © Maisie A. Byers⁵⁶

All the poems for younger students that I have read or heard are straightforward and easy to interpret. A key passage here is 'to never give up, to not say we can't, to trust in Allah'. Ballet techniques are demanding. They require precision and discipline, and at times students simply do not get a technique even if they are skilled and have tried. Teachers encourage students by pointing out that they are in a learning process and that they should not say that they cannot, rather that they are learning how to do it. Sometimes, ballet words are introduced into the poems. The research assistant noted that the word 'snatch' was part of poem that included a snatch, a movement of the feet used in a *relevé* when quickly raising the body by letting the heels leave the floor. This allowed the students to time the snatch, anticipating the passage of the poem.

The following poem is for the older students. On the surface it is about an orchid, but metaphorically it is about patient striving and growing.

- 1)⁵⁷ Orchid you endure all inconstancy
- 2) Baring all with quiet assurity
- 3) Lips sweetly pursed delicately refined,
- 4) A blush upon cheeks so modestly inclined
- 5) Will this beauty last, or fall and fade away
- 6) Sabr and trust you reply to say,
- 7) As dullness overtakes
- 8) A ropy capturing embrace
- 9) The vibrance of your flower
- 10) A drooping headdress towers
- 11) So fall and shed and weep
- 12) A collapsed pillowed heap
- 13) At the bed in which you sleep
- 14) From where hope may creep
- 15) A lush new journey peeps to begin
- 16) And bursts forth beyond what is lost
- 17) A hope like the coming of a new spring
- 18) That follows the harshest of frost
- 19) Orchid you endure all inconstancy

56. Graceandpoiseacademy
 Instagram 4th October 2022
 September <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjTDVqxIau2/>. Visited 11th
 June 2024.

57. This poem and the next are
 both reproduced with the explicit
 permission of Maisie Byrnes.

- 20) Baring all with quiet assurity
 21) A glimpse of perfection that is only truly known
 22) When travellers find their ever lasting home
 © Maisie A. Byers

A religious framework is evident in the poem. *Sabr*, or patience (line 6), is a keyword in Islamic ethics but also in training and in rituals. With *sabr* one may endure hardship; eventually, patient travellers will find their home (line 22). The poem also evokes associations with nature as Allah's wonders are glimpsed through the perfection of the orchid as part of creation (line 21). Thus, the dancer becomes both orchid and patient traveller: created, rootlessly wandering, yet rooted through the soul in an everlasting original home.

Character building has been a central educational value all through the Sunni revival in the UK, finding its shape in the 1970s and 1980s and simultaneously in the global discussion of Islamic pedagogics (Roald 1994; Janson 2003). It taps into the genres called *adab* (etiquette) and *'ilm al-akhlaq* (deontological ethics, or morals, based in religious advice about right and faulty behaviour). Grace & Poise approaches character building in another way, finding inspiration in European alternative pedagogics and so-called holistic pedagogics, and in various European ballet training programmes like RAD, Vagonova (a Russian school)⁵⁸ and Cecchetti, which has long been influential in the UK, not least within ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing).⁵⁹ However, this unique blend is framed by Islamic *adab* and *akhlaq*, foregrounding the ethical principles of friendship, hard work and politeness. Yet some gendered ideas about *'awra* remain important. The curriculum is further approached through discussions about Islamic pedagogy. Although not Montessori trained, Miss Maisie had encountered its tradition before conversion and knows enough about it to be baffled by the parallels between Islamic and Montessori pedagogies.⁶⁰ Miss Maisie has developed Grace & Poise as a continuation rather than a break with her past; thus, my argument is not that *adab* and *akhlaq* are plastered onto something per definition alien to Islam, but rather that the Grace & Poise curriculum has meticulously created something new out of existing material that is considered to align with Islam. Evidently, how this is received is another question.

58. The numbers were included in this poem when I received it from Miss Maisie. They are not read as part of the poem.

59. <https://vaganovaacademy.ru/index/eng.html>. Visited 11th June 2024.

60. <https://www.istd.org/dance/dance-genres/cecchetti-classical-ballet/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Reception and recognition

As already mentioned, Grace & Poise has received several prizes and managed to reach out through reportage and interviews in a wide variety of media channels. The academy has already rearranged its business model twice to meet the demands of the market and donors, as well as legal requirements. Grace & Poise frequently uses Instagram to highlight the support it gets: the positive response from parents and students and the favourable media coverage.

I asked Miss Maisie if she also receives negative feedback. She immediately told me about Islamophobic messages they have received as comments on social media. Most comments seem to be accusations that Grace & Poise excludes non-Muslims, which Miss Maisie is adamant that it does not. I was, however, thinking about negative reactions from Muslim communities, so I rephrased my question. Miss Maisie shared that one of the few recurring issues was a concern about where ballet lessons would lead the girls, especially the fear that the girls will eventually not be able to practice their Islamic values due to being encouraged or coerced to join ‘Western ballet companies’ which is assumed to operate with other modesty ideals around the female body. Miss Maisie then explained Grace & Poise’s position and elaborated on the trajectory of becoming a ballet teacher. She also shared her plans for a future ballet company that also takes into account Muslim sensitivities on performance, which has reassured parents for now, according to Miss Maisie. Further, the research assistant witnessed one of the teachers being questioned by a Muslim man that I interpret as a revivalist Salafi preparing another Islamic activity in one of the art centres. He wondered whether doing ballet was not challenging the purity of Islam by introducing *bida*‘ or innovation.⁶¹ The teacher invited him to have a discussion via email with Miss Maisie about Grace & Poise’s approach to ballet and its Islamic basis.

61. Grace & Poise is not alone in drawing parallels between Montessori and Islamic notions of pedagogy. In the UK and the US, Islamic Montessori Education is a growing trend, see for example the webpages of The American Islamic Montessori Association which is among the more ambitious: <https://theaima.org/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Generally, if parents raise an Islamic issue that Grace & Poise has not encountered before, Miss Maisie replies that she will explore this further instead of just sharing her personal thoughts. She seeks well-grounded answers and advice through online lectures and attending study circles, meanwhile stressing that she does not want to tell others what Islam is. London has a lot to offer when it comes to publicly expressed Islamic thinking, be-

lievers need to pick and choose. Miss Maisie is part of some discussion networks that offers lectures and debates that she trusts more than others. However, most discussions with parents are about health and safety and data protection; those things are more common parental concerns, according to Miss Maisie.

In flux

As Grace & Poise Academy is rather unknown to most, I have provided a thick description of it before discussing what it represents. In many respects, it is like other small, niche, ‘ethnic’ businesses, albeit in this case religious, started by an enthusiast with a vision, surviving the first hard years, expanding and having to ‘professionalise’ in accordance with the rules of the market economy to survive. It is tempting to use terms like ‘acculturation’ to imply that Grace & Poise is a result of cultural adaptation, but acculturation is too blunt an instrument, although the demand for leisure time activities for Muslim girls – which frames the economic conditions of Miss Maisie’s initiative – is probably a result of social acculturation. But as Grace & Poise is driven by a unique creative combination of ideas about ballet which forms its distinctive vision, it is clearly more than just another ‘ethnic’ business or fallout from an acculturation process. Ballet is highly international, both as a profession and as a leisure time activity or exercise; moreover, London is one of the world’s centres for ballet – both in terms of education and professional opportunities. Ballet has a long history; it was professionalised at the French court when Louis XIV was a youth (mid-17th century) by teacher-choreographers initiating very specific, demanding techniques making it a special artform (Sennett 2024). It has since developed into many overlapping traditions and morphed these into new forms in conversation with aesthetic ideals in other dance genres. In a way, Grace & Poise is yet another development in a strong London ballet scene that is open to different parallel ballet traditions.

The empowerment of the child lies at the heart of Miss Maisie’s communication and teaching practices at Grace & Poise where it is thought to be reached by a) respecting the child, b) trusting in the child’s abilities and c) nurturing the religious ethics (*akhlaq*) and etiquette (*adab*) of the child. Miss Maisie considers Montessori pedagogy and Islamic pedagogy align in

62. In Islamic legal discussions there are two kinds of innovations, allowed and disallowed; further, these two types of innovation can relate either to worldly or religious matters. Innovations in religious matters are seen as the more problematic. Contemporary Salafi inspired people generally only use *bida’* as the equivalent of heresy.

terms of a) and b); she is not alone in this. Besides being among Italy's first female physicians, Maria Montessori was a devout Catholic who theorised about the spiritual completion of the children she observed. The holistic and cosmic education promoted served to encourage children's inner teacher (Montessori 1989). As Islamic pedagogy has carved out its own specific language over the last forty years, Montessori pedagogy has become a close ally and a way for UK Muslims to communicate their pedagogical convictions to each other and to the rest of society. Practically, this means that Grace & Poise consciously tries to help students to develop through training and achieving goals. The pedagogy informs the choice of words as 'I can't' is not encouraged, but 'let me try again' is, thereby stressing the competent child. The elements of c) are manifested in the manners that are inculcated, attitudes to *ʿawra* and the role models set by teachers and assistants. Thus, Grace & Poise aims to emphasise an Islamic ethical empowerment that will enable the students to participate in and contribute to the society in which they live with grace and dignity. In both Montessori and Islamic pedagogies this aspiration is motivated by the goal of attaining one's inner potential and becoming part of the natural state of being human, or *fitra* in Islamic terms. The starting point for both is the evaluation of all human life as equally important and worthy of growth, given that it is divinely initiated.

Art and popular culture are created, produced and experienced through forms in flux. As forms, they can be filled with new ideas or new combinations of ideas, which are crucial for the continuity of the change of the forms. Grace & Poise complements, or perhaps expands, the ballet form, both through an ethical Islamic reframing and by reimagining ballet pedagogies. The resignification of general ballet virtues – such as grace, poise, hard work, discipline, kindness and sisterhood – as Islamic ballet virtues is a creative act built on established traditions combined to produce something new (cf. Negus & Pickering 2004).

While the above obviously makes sense to Miss Maisie, it also seems to resonate with many in the Muslim communities. As far as I can tell, there are no protests when Grace & Poise students perform in public. On the contrary, the girls are supported and appreciated. Obviously, those who disagree with the direction taken will not send their children to the academy, but neither do they seek the academy out and try to close it down;

then again, it is, to date, a phenomenon restricted to two large metropolises in the UK and does not pose a broad major challenge. Yet it should be noted that Islamic-inspired pop music, for example, has spawned global discussions on the legality and appropriateness of this kind of music (Otterbeck 2021) and, if anything, dance, especially female dance, seems to be even more sensitive within a number of Muslim communities, albeit not in all Muslim contexts (e.g. Stellar 2011; Silverstein 2016). By carefully controlling the moral issues raised by dance, Grace & Poise has succeeded in developing a form of ballet that has generally met with approval and positive curiosity.

Meanwhile, Grace & Poise is an example of a broader trend among Muslim creatives who are expressing themselves confidently in forms that have not previously been connected with Islam. Miss Maisie and her team are immersed in contemporary ballet culture and the general cultural climate around professional dance. They live and breathe the same reference frames as the dance-trained, non-Muslim research assistant of the same age. This is a precondition for the creativity as the academy moulds the dominant ballet culture and Islamic ideas into something culturally new (cf. Lewis 2015: 49). One could possibly frame this with a reference to Stuart Z. Charmé's (2000) discussion about existential authenticity in contrast to essentialist authenticity. While the latter seeks to express a prescriptive, normative authenticity valid for all times but quite often simply romanticising one of many time-bound contexts as the authentic one, the former accepts a fluid and contextual authenticity. This authenticity is brought forth by genuine and honest reactions to contemporary issues in relation to a living tradition and is in flux, like all identities, yet in one form or another maintains continuity. In such a logic, being authentically Muslim today may include engaging with ballet and trying to creatively understand its potential as an Islamic expression. Seen as an existentialist authenticity project, Grace & Poise is both perfectly straightforward and quite revolutionary, both traditionalist and profoundly progressive in its approach to ballet, and to Islam.

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