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Gender Problems in Western Theatrical Dance: Little Girls, Big Sissies & the “Baryshnikov Complex”

Doug Risner
Wayne State University, USA

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Abstract

General education programs, in postsecondary institutions, provide a broad base of learning in the liberal arts and sciences with common goals that prepare undergraduate students for living informed and satisfying lives. In the United States, dance units in public institutions, offering general education coursework for non-majors (dance appreciation and history, dance studies, world dance), generate 50 percent of their total credit hours per year from these courses (HEADS 2012). Rooted in the body, culture, society, and performance, dance provides ample opportunities for investigating gender. The purpose of this study was to develop an accessible, research-based essay written specifically for and directed toward students enrolled in general education courses in postsecondary dance by drawing upon qualitative data gathered from five years of discussion board postings on the topic of gender compiled from the author's courses. Student (n=312) narratives illuminate the complex relationships between dance and gender, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The essay, intended for student readers, concludes with additional discussion questions and prompts.



Audio Clip 1: For teachers ~ Research problem and methodology

Preface

If you're like most undergraduate students across the United States taking a general education course in dance, chances are: you're female, have an interest in dance or took dances classes as a child or teenager and are completing this class to satisfy your general education requirement in the visual and performing arts. If, on the other hand, you're a male in this course, it's likely that you are in the definitive minority, struggled about even registering for this "dance" class, and have given some serious thought to dropping it and taking a popular music history survey course next semester. Let me ask you to stay through this essay before deciding.

Dance and its training teach us many things about the cultures and societies in which we live. One of the most powerful lessons that dance offers is about gender, specifically: Who should dance or not dance, and why? Does dance simply reinforce what is taught elsewhere in society about what girls do and what boys do? Let's face it, dancing bodies on stage bring up questions about traditional gender roles and sexuality. If we look more deeply into these questions, we can see that they rest on gender stereotypes: Dance (at least western theatrical dance such as ballet, and modern, jazz, and musical theatre dance) is for girls, and "only sissy boys dance."

These stereotypes probably have less to do with dance than with how we think about gender in our society. In particular, we assume that only a narrow range of behaviors are "normal." When we speak about sexuality, normal is almost always defined as heterosexual; people who study gender often use the term heteronormative to refer to this assumption, and use the word heterocentric when discussing practices that emphasize heterosexuality as a central value and dominant standard.

The dance profession in many ways reinforces the value system found throughout the rest of society: this is evident in choreography, performance and training, where heterosexual themes, content, and sensibilities, as well as heterosexual male dancers, are privileged. These heteronormative values maintain and glorify heralded straight male dancers (called *danseurs* in ballet) through, what this essay describes as, the Baryshnikov Complex. In contrast, Mark Morris's *The Hard Nut* (1990) and Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995), among other choreographies, provide substantial challenges to heterocentric discourses and offer new ways of thinking about dance, gender and society.

My teaching of university general education courses in dance history and appreciation¹ provides the grounding for this essay's focus on perennial gender issues that remain troubled in western theatrical dance and its training. The voices that you will hear in much of this essay emerge from actual class discussion boards.² Therefore, you may sometimes recognize yourself or your classmates in the words and conversations that follow, or you may hear new perspectives and insights.

Dance and Gender: What's the Problem?

Dance training and performance have long been associated with gender and gender roles in world culture (Hagood, 2000; Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon, 1991; Posey, 2002; Stinson, 2005). Although dancing in many cultures has been and continues to be viewed as an appropriate "male" activity, the western European cultural paradigm has situated dance as primarily a "female" art form since the 18th century (Hasbrook, 1993). Today, the overwhelming majority of the student population engaged in dance education and training is female (Adair, 1993; HEADS, 2012; Van Dyke, 1996). The social construction of gender, or what society dictates as socially-appropriate behavior for girls and boys, plays an important role in students' attitudes regarding dance study and whether or not they participate in dance (Green, 2000, 2002-03; Smith, 1998; Stinson, 1998a).

So, what's the problem? Let's look at the experience of the majority population in dance first. For many young girls, dance classes are an assumed part of their childhood. Girls often grow up in dance, beginning as early as two or three years of age, adopting values "which teach that it is good to be obedient and silent, good not to question authority or to have ideas which might conflict with what one is being asked to do" (Van Dyke, 1992, p. 120). Susan Stinson

¹ Little is known about general education students' attitudes and beliefs about dance and dance history. Most educational literature on dance in higher education focuses upon the intrinsic values of professional western concert dance training and education for students actively pursuing competitive careers in performance and choreography. The findings of this descriptive study add to the educational literature on the instrumental values of studying dance and its history from a liberal arts perspective of general education students at the undergraduate level. Teachers will benefit from understanding undergraduate student perspectives and attitudes about contemporary issues in dance and dance history.

² Methodology: Existing data from Blackboard discussion board posts on topics of contemporary issues in dance from the author's undergraduate, general education course (Dance History 1800 to Present) over the past five years were obtained from eight sections of the course (312 students) taught from 2008-2012. Data presented here are from a wide range of students that is characteristic of this large, urban university including: traditional aged undergraduates, returning students and non-traditional students completing degrees later in life. All posts were de-identified. Narrative data were coded for emerging themes. Students are identified here by pseudonyms only. Human subject approval was granted from the author's institutional review board (IRB).

(1998b) cautions that traditional dance pedagogy and training emphasize silent conformity in which dancers reproduce what they receive rather than critique, question, or create it, and that “there is a kind of freedom in obedience, the freedom from responsibility” (p. 118). This hidden curriculum in dance reinforces traditional gender expectations for girls, including passivity, obedience, and escapism (Smith, 1998; Stinson, 2005; Van Dyke, 1992). While dance provides girls with important outlets for self-expression, creativity, and performance, this environment can also produce passive followers rather than active leaders.

A second and related gender problem presented by girls and women in dance is the idealized female body, known in western concert dance for its iconic beauty, heightened expressiveness, graceful docility, eternal youthfulness and svelte frame, as well as its extreme flexibility—all of which are presented as completely natural and thoroughly effortless. Of course, we know that this is not every woman’s body; or even close to most. Nor is it produced and maintained naturally or without effort. Puberty, maternity, aging, and all natural processes produce significant challenges for the idealized female dancing body (Arkin, 1994). The traditional, gendered dance body (always female) is frozen in time, a statue of idealized perfection. Ideals of any kind are rarely met by flesh-and-blood people. What’s important (and sometimes harmful) about them, however, is the way they function—to provide constant reminders of what is most valued, most important, and usually unattainable. At the same time, we see that idealized values vary greatly depending upon gender.

Students in my introduction to dance history course begin to discuss gender issues during the first week of the class. I open the conversation by asking, “What comes to mind when you think about ballet?” Immediate responses include “ballerina,” “pointe shoes,” “princess,” and “little girls dancing on their toes.” I follow by asking them why they associate ballet so strongly with the female gender:

Jacqui: Because of the romantic notion of it. Little girls dream of being a ballerina, it’s a fairy tale for girls to be dressed in pink tutus and ballerina shoes twirling on the stage gracefully.

Macayla: Ballet is thought of as sensual and beautiful and basically describes everything that a woman is supposed to be. With specific "gender roles" set in our minds, men should not be doing something beautiful and delicate; they should be doing "manly" things, which would never include dancing.

Anee: That’s because society pushes certain views on each gender. From the day that we are born, certain rules are given to us based solely on the fact of whether we are male or female: pink for girls, blue for boys. The little boy should play sports and the

little girl should dance or do gymnastics. Ballet is such a beautiful dance and it certainly would not be the same without men who are brave enough to defy the view that “real men don't dance.”

Marin: But what if a girl isn't delicate, tender and sensitive? If she behaves as a strong person, she's seen as a "tom-boy."

Robbie: Dance isn't like competitive sports. There is no physical contact between opposing sides trying to dominate over each other. Rather, dance is more about creativity and self-expression. Men who dance are often stigmatized and even have their sexuality questioned. “Real men” are seen as having physical strength, dominating others, and taking big risks. I'm new to all of this but I can tell you, it is very hard for us to imagine a “real man” ever being a dancer.

Maurice: I have never seen any ballet until this class but my first impression honestly is that these guys are sissies. I guess it's because they do not exhibit masculine behavior. But to see them jump around waiving their hands and arms like women takes some getting used to. I guess some of us have a lot to learn.

Siedah: Men will always play an important role in dance, but I don't think we'll ever get past the soft, delicate waif-like image of the ballerina. Any man thought to embody those qualities will have a hard time proving his “manhood” in today's society.

Rebekah: People tend to think women's bodies are more fit, beautiful and pleasant to watch—look at advertising and magazines—the focus is always the woman's beautiful body. Even though ballet takes an incredible amount of strength, the whole point is to make it look easy and effortless, which takes away from the idea of male strength.

We summarize our lively discussions by noting that most romantic and classical ballets preserve and maintain traditional gender roles, gendered bodies, and societal expectations for women and men that may, in many instances, no longer reflect society's current views.

Dancing in the Margin

Let's now look at the experience of the minority population in western concert dance. Some significant problems emerge from the stereotype of dance as an activity for girls. These problems center on the ways in which dance is marginalized in society and then, more specifically, on the minority male population in dance. Because western theatrical dance is a feminized profession (think: nursing, hairdressing, and public school teaching), male participation remains a culturally suspect endeavor (Gard, 2003; Risner, 2002; Sanderson,

2001; Stinson, 2001). Helen Thomas (1996), a sociologist who has looked at concert dance, asserts that understanding “the ‘feminization’ of theatrical dance in the west is critical for studying gender and dance” (p. 507). Because it is viewed primarily as a feminine activity, dance, when performed by males, is always in danger of being classified as effeminate.

Due in large part to dualistic thinking which separates mind from body, intellectual activity from physical labor, and the close association of dance to girls and women, it is often perceived and denigrated as part of women’s domain (Adair, 1992). Historical notions about the body often link the *feminine* with intuition, nature, the body, and evil; conversely, the intellectual, cultural, and mind historically have been perceived as *masculine* (Risner, 2001). Dance education scholar Edrie Ferdun (1994) summarizes:

The term “dance” is usually associated with girls and feminine qualities by a significant portion of the dominant culture. Labeling dance as female prevents dance from functioning fully as an educational medium. It limits participation by anyone, male or female, who does not want to be associated with stereotyped gender images and practices. (p. 46)

While the feminization of dance begins early in children’s lives, its pervasiveness extends well into adulthood. For example, in the United States, although men are just as likely as women to attend music concerts (jazz, classical, opera) and theatre productions (plays and musicals), women are twice as likely as men to attend ballet performances (NEA, 2004). According to the *National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)*, Americans are three times more likely to attend a ballet performance than all other forms, defined as other than ballet, including modern, folk, and tap (NEA, 2004).

As our class discussions on gender continue throughout the semester, we focus on developing a more comprehensive understanding of the feminization of western concert dance and, from such, the marginalized place it holds in American society. I begin this conversation by asking, “Why do you think most people automatically think 'ballet' when they think of dance?” Their responses reveal that issues of social class, economic status, and education level come into play when we attempt to understand the links between traditional gender stereotypes and dance’s place in the margins of society.

Devona: It’s about what ballet represents. Looking back, people who attended ballet were the educated people, the royalty and the rich. You had to be able to mingle with the higher echelons of society. Attending a ballet today gives the sense of accomplishment and being a part of a world that many can’t experience. In short, it’s still a fairy tale for dreaming about love and romanticism.

Meghan: I'm really shocked by the NEA survey. Personally, I would rather go to a modern dance performance than a ballet. Maybe more people prefer ballet because it tends to tell a story. But I must say that modern dances that don't tell a story have literally brought me to tears because they were so powerful and physical.

Jenna: With ballet performances, I know what I am going to see. Even though the stories differ, ballet is always ballet, and it's always entertaining. Like most people, when I am spending money on a performance, I want to make sure I will enjoy the show no matter what.

Ali: Ballet has a long history and is viewed by society as upscale and high class. The performances are also very traditional with the ballerina always front and center.

Starkesha: I think more people think of dance as ballet and are likely to attend a ballet more than any other style because America is Eurocentric. Were the people in the (NEA) survey mostly white?

Therese: Personally, I'd rather go to a ballet. For me, it's because the gracefulness and beauty of the dancers absolutely captivates me. It's amazing how much poise and balance they have, especially while dancing on their toes, doing difficult lifts and the synchronicity of all dancers on stage.

Marcus: Where does National Endowment for the Arts get its statistics from? Do they gather data from all cultures or just a few? How many low income families did they ask this question to? I just know that ballet would not be my first choice. I believe that they got their information from upper society.

Geoff: With contemporary or modern dance, people are afraid—they don't know exactly how the performance will play out. It's a comfort level thing. I don't think people have yet opened up their minds to other forms of dance—like we've watched in this class—especially dances where females are strong and athletic.

Sudha: Ballet still provides a night of escape from the drudgery of daily life with fantastic stories and ethereal ballerinas, ballerinas that many little girls have dreamed of being.

Jason: Perhaps a man knows his wife likes dance, so for her birthday he decides to buy her tickets to a dance performance. While he's at the box office or ticket website, he plain and simple does not know what he is looking for. When he finds a ballet on the

list he will be inclined to choose it because he's probably heard the title before, like *Swan Lake*. I could be way off, but I truly believe people are not aware of concert dance styles—I know I didn't before this semester.

Maurice: When this class started with ballet, I didn't know what to think. But now, I seem to scratch my head more times watching modern dance than ballet. To me modern just does not seem very spectacular, at least not enough to spend my money on.

Jacqui: I feel that a lot of this—people's lack of information and knowledge of other dance types—has something to do with demographics and SES (Social Economic Status).

Throughout these discussions, students begin to identify other factors that emerge from and surround gender problems in dance. Most notably, their conversations illuminate the socioeconomic and educational issues that contribute to dance's marginal status. In fact, income level and formal education figure prominently in predicting dance performance attendance; most people who attend dance performances have high incomes (over \$75,000) and attended graduate school (NEA, 2004).

Between the lines of the students' discussion, we also hear the beginnings of racial asymmetries operating in western concert dance and its audiences. Audiences of ballet in the United States have the smallest representation of racial and ethnic minorities of all performing arts [88% of ballet audiences are non-Hispanic whites] (NEA, 2004). Today's major ballet companies in the U.S., like *American Ballet Theatre*, *New York City Ballet*, *San Francisco Ballet*, *Atlanta Ballet*, and *Houston Ballet*, are comprised primarily of white American, Europeans, and South American dancers. African-American and African dancers are significantly under-represented in the professional ballet world. Of these ballet companies, Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2010) reports only one African-American principal ballerina since 1990. This problem, a big one, requires that we look carefully at race whenever we attempt to consider gender. Because when we do, we see that many times the feminization of dance also inherently values a particular, white femininity.

However, a few smaller contemporary ballet companies are comprised of African-American and other ethnic group dancers, like *Alonzo King LINES BALLETT* and *Complexions Contemporary Ballet*. Still, the vast majority of working professional ballet dancers in the United States is white. Therefore, recognizing the complexity of studying gender and dance also means looking carefully at social and economic status, race/ethnicity, and education.

More simply, it is impossible to examine dance from gender perspectives without considering the whole of social issues.

Dance and Masculinity (“Dance is for Sissies”)

To a certain degree, all stereotypes begin with a particular aspect of a certain population that is then applied to the entire group uniformly (e.g. “all male dancers are gay”). Assumptions about men and boys in dance are part of what D. A. Miller (1988) describes as the “open secret,” a knowledge that is present and understood, yet unspoken and unarticulated. More simply, an open secret is one that everyone hides because everyone holds (p. 207). For males in western concert dance, we needn’t say more—you already know it—the assumption is that they’re all sissies (queers, fags, homos).

To open this discussion with students, I ask them to respond to the following Blackboard prompt based upon estimates from my own research: *For ages 12-17 in professional dance training in the U.S., girls (93%) significantly outnumber boys (7%). Why do you think this is?*

Annette: There are fewer males involved in dance because they are afraid of being stereotyped as gay. I think that if we look at hip hop, you’ll find that there are more males because it is viewed as masculine dancing. But when it comes to standing on your toes, this is looked at as feminine, dancing that should only be performed by women.

Dani: There are so few boys because of the sociological issues with society. I don’t think it’s because they don’t have talent. I think it’s because of the way that parents influence their children. Girls are born to play with babies. Boys are born to play with trucks. It’s always been like that and it probably always will be.

Sanit: Parents' attitudes, for the most, steer their children where THEY want them to go, not necessarily where or what the child is most interested in.

Patti: But I don’t want my son to become gay and most men do not want their son becoming a dancer because they believe he's going to become gay. A lot of male dancers and teachers are openly gay and that just does not sit well with parents. I myself am having that same problem—I want my son to dance but I don’t want him to be gay nor do I want him to think it’s ok to be gay.

Joshua: A young male growing up just wants to fit in with their peer group, period. He wants to play soccer with his classmates and be considered cool. Anything that would make him un-cool he will not want to do. Gay stereotypes are a big part of it, but it

goes much deeper than that. If the majority of males at a certain school were involved in dance, then certainly more boys would join. However, that is not the case in our society today, nor do I expect it to change in our lifetimes.

Valerie: People don't know how much physical strength and stamina it takes for dancing. Male dancers are just like athletes. I mean dance is a kind of sport. I don't understand why a heterosexual male wouldn't want to spend most of his day with cute chicks in spandex, when he's outnumbered 20 to 1.

Alicia: Many male dancers are gay, so most people assume that all of them are gay. For a straight male, it can be very embarrassing when people are questioning his sexual orientation. Also, many parents think that boys belong in sports where there is aggression involved. Dads don't let their sons dance because they are afraid they will turn out gay. But I can't understand how any parent could ignore or discourage their son's dance talents.

Natalie: Dads don't want to brag about their son's dance performance. They want to brag about their son scoring a touchdown.

Eileen: Well, I have three daughters and one son and I already know that when my son is old enough he's going to be entered in football because his father wants him there. That's just the way it is, but my daughters have already started dancing.

Micki: Homosexual stereotypes are a large reason why boys are not a part of the dancing world, plus all the bullying that goes with it. Considering how much strength it takes to be a male dancer, this is really sad.

Beth: I'd be very hesitant to put my son in a dance class. I'd fear that he would get picked on from other kids and maybe even some of the nastier parents. It's hard enough for young boys. As he would grow older I would be afraid that he would get called gay and get bullied in school for being a male ballerina. It would make my son way too easy of a target for the other kids and I wouldn't want to be the source of his teasing and bullying.

Justin: There are many mothers and fathers that label dance as a feminine occupation or art, so they keep their sons from pursuing dance.

Erin: The male-to-female ratio in dance plays in the male's favor... I mean they have their choice from all the females that they dance with. I personally loved all the guys that I danced with. All of them are far from being gay and are very masculine.

Rochelle: I just feel parents, especially the male figure, is going to be totally against their son participating in dance.

Students quickly identify the gay stereotype attached to boys and men who dance. Like all dominant stereotypes, there is some partial truth to the gay stereotype in dance. While gay males make up approximately 9 percent of the US population³, research indicates that gay and bisexual men comprise approximately half the male population in professional dance and training in the US (Bailey and Oberschneider, 1997; Hamilton, 1998; Risner, 2009). While much of the dance field accepts that there is a higher percentage of gay men in dance than in the general population, meaningful discussion within the dance profession has begun to emerge only recently (think: "open secret").

In their class discussions, students assert that the gay stereotype, and all the social assumptions that come with it, may bring harm to all males in dance—whether they are gay, straight, or questioning their sexual orientation. Stereotypes aside, what I notice is missing from their responses is: If a person actually is gay, what's the problem? And if it is, whose problem is it?

Parents, as you heard many students suggest, hold significant influence on boys' participation in dance (Risner, 2009). Whether they support their son's desire to dance or discourage it, parents' attitudes and behavior carry a lot of weight in boys' decision making and significantly impact their feelings about being supported in dance. Consider this: in a recent study of students (age 13 – 22) in pre-professional dance training in the U. S., male dancers were eight times more likely than female dancers to report dissatisfaction with the support they receive for their dancing (Risner, 2009). Understanding the experiences of boys and men who dance requires that we pay attention to the lockstep relationship between dominant masculinity and homophobic attitudes. In his book *The Male Dancer*, dance historian Ramsay

³ Estimates in the US have varied since Alfred Kinsey's 1948 book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which suggested that 10 percent of the male population is gay (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, 1948). The 1993 Janus Report estimated that nine percent of men had more than "occasional" homosexual relationships (Janus and Janus, 1993). The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (2010) reported that 8 percent of men identify as gay or bisexual.

Burt (1995) explains how prejudice toward males in western theatrical dance developed and the ways that homophobia continues to surround boys and men in dance today.

Burt argues that homophobia arises from the need for males to rationalize their close attraction to other men. In this scheme men can only bond socially when homophobic attitudes and language accompany closeness, intimacy, and attraction in their social relationships with other men (think: Monday Night Football). In other words, cultural norms require that males profess an absolute repulsion for same-sex desire or attraction and to vocalize this disgust openly and repeatedly.

Therefore in dance, men watching and enjoying other men dancing presents a particularly difficult impasse. While men might certainly enjoy viewing and affirming other men in dance, this kind of attraction to males in the feminized environment of western concert dance sets in motion the required repulsive responses men have learned as socially necessary from a very young age (think: bullying in elementary and middle school).

Burt's explanation helps us better understand the problems that boys in dance confront with male family members and male peers. For example, boys in pre-professional dance training often report feelings of being different or being perceived as different in social and family contexts (Earl, 1988; Risner, 2002; Williams, 2003). Often these perspectives include feeling different in the boy's own family, especially with fathers, brothers, and other male relatives (Risner, 2002, 2009; Williams, 2003). Therefore, parents and family members need to look carefully at their own personal prejudices and biases about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and then evaluate how they condone or reaffirm anti-gay prejudice in their children.

For students like Patti and Beth (quoted earlier), it's important to understand that a dance teacher's sexual orientation does not determine his or her ability to be an effective and respected professional. All parents and family members will benefit from exploring the ways in which they support or discourage their son's or brother's choices, including the possibility of dancing. Research indicates that the underlying reason for this lack of support is rooted in heterocentric cultural beliefs and homophobic attitudes (Risner, 2002, 2009; Williams, 2003). For the young male dancer, this stigma and marginalization is often experienced both at home and in his wider social world.

Rehearsing Heterosexuality in Dance (“The Baryshnikov Complex”)

For an individual or a group of people on the societal margin—like dancers or dance in general—one approach for making your way to the society's center is to show how similar you are to those who hold power and rights in the culture's dominant center (think: Equal Rights Amendment for women, which, by the way, is still not part of the US Constitution; or

the Americans with Disabilities Act). While there is no legislative mechanism to elevate the social value of dance to that of music or visual art, dance has frequently sought its rightful place in society by emphasizing traditional heterosexual values and highlighting heterosexual male dancers and choreographers. To do so, however, the dance profession has often harbored and affirmed heterosexist and homophobic attitudes.

You may be asking how this would be possible given the significant gay male population in dance. The answer is—like what most marginalized groups do—erase your difference as much as possible. To be a part of the dominant center requires re-positioning yourself or group to be as similar to the people in the center as you can. For western concert dance over the past century, this has meant developing strategies that negate or hide non-heterosexual males in dance and attracting more boys to the profession by making dance more “masculine.”

Encouraging increased male participation has historically involved well-intentioned but frequently heteronormative approaches: these focus on “manly” sport comparisons between male athletes (presumably heterosexual), and male dancers (Crawford, 1994), encourage greater male participation by minimizing or ignoring the significant population of gay males in dance (Risner, 2009), and idealize noteworthy heterosexual male dancers (Hanna, 1988).

As noted in the student comments earlier, some of these heteronormative strategies circulate in the general public. Valerie argued that “male dancers are just like athletes.” Speaking from her personal experience with male dancers, Erin stated that they were “far from gay” and “very masculine.” Both students emphasized the heterosexual benefits that would attract and retain straight males to dance (outnumbered 20 to 1 by “cute chicks in spandex”).

Taken together, these heteronormative approaches project and glorify heralded straight male dancers through what I call the Baryshnikov Complex—a phenomenon based loosely on heterosexual ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov’s (b. 1948) penchant for womanizing in the 1970s and 1980s, and the larger public mythology that developed from his bad-boy brilliance and tyrannical reputation. Three decades later the heteronormative message of the Baryshnikov Complex continues, as Joseph Carman (2006) of *Dance Magazine* recently noted:

Lest anyone think that men in tights are always gay, let’s not forget that ballet’s biggest box-office attraction was Mikhail Baryshnikov, a ladies’ man who made a number of straight men think ballet class might be a good way to meet chicks. (np)

Because the dance profession confronts the desire and need to attract more males to dance when at the same time many male dancers are gay, the “macho man” heterosexual messages

of the Baryshnikov Complex seek to refute the open secret about gay male dancers. It's used by teachers, directors, schools, programs, and dance companies, some parents and family members of male dancers, and male dancers themselves confronting the gay stereotype. But, do these approaches effectively recruit all males (gay, bisexual, questioning, straight), or just heterosexual males?

As a researcher who has interviewed many male youth pursuing serious dance training (Risner, 2009), I am sympathetic to efforts for increasing male involvement. However, I believe that most of the field's approaches have likely made matters worse, exacerbating the homophobic stereotyping that most males in dance repeatedly encounter. It is one thing to promote dance, for example, as an activity of self-expression and physical challenge for all children, both girls and boys. It is quite another to encourage male involvement by denigrating boys who do not conform to dominant notions of masculinity and heterosexuality. What's more, over the past ten years of my research I have found no evidence that would suggest any differences between what attracts straight males to dance and what attracts gay or bisexual males to the art form.

A real commitment to cultivating increased male participation, one that would enrich the art form and its audiences, would center on questioning the ways in which western society discourages all young boys and men from participation. Without such questions about dance, we ignore important social issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, homophobic attitudes, and bullying and harassment (Risner, 2014). Rather than trying to increase male numbers with strategies that attempt to re-gender dance in traditionally masculine ways (i.e., dance as sports, competition, jumping and turning), or to recast dance in misogynist ways for "real" boys, a more responsive inquiry into male students' social context and what, in fact, attracts and affirms them in pre-professional dance study is needed. The findings of a recent research study of young males (age 13 – 22) in pre-professional dance training in the US give us a good starting point:

Male participants articulate their attraction to dance for its expressive qualities, movement opportunities, physical and emotional pleasure, and for their own desires for encountering the world in more creative ways. In terms of enjoyment and satisfaction, participants' narratives illuminate the significance of dance as fun; as achievement through performance, physical challenge, and expression; and as a creative outlet opportunity otherwise not part of their daily worlds. (Risner, 2009, p. 141)

By not only acknowledging, but also acting upon the educative potential the profession holds for reducing homophobia and antigay stigmatization, dance education has the ability to play a

profoundly important leadership role in re-shaping our culture's negative messages about difference and prejudice.

Troubling Traditional Gender Assumptions

The complicated gender problems you have thought about in this essay are sociological ones: how people see themselves and others in society. We have looked at how these play out in dance performance and training, especially from dance's place in the margins of society. Much of the profession's response focuses on showing its similarity to societal norms and gender assumptions (think: fitting in), rather than questioning them.

However, some pockets of western concert dance challenge assumptions about gender and society, seeking to "trouble" traditional ideas and the status quo. Because males in western concert dance present great challenges to dominant western masculinity, let's conclude our discussion of "troubling gender" with two evening-length works that reinterpret revered classical ballets. I hope you might view these dances in your class or on your own.

Using the holiday ballet *The Nutcracker* (1892) as his starting point, modern dance choreographer Mark Morris (b. 1956) turns gender and social class upside down in *The Hard Nut* (1991). In his caricature version of the beloved ballet, coveted roles reverse to the opposite sex, sometimes in parody (think: RuPaul's Drag Race), other times in strikingly poignant critiques of traditional female beauty and masculine brawn in which both genders don tutus and pointe shoes.

Carefully crafting humor with satire, Morris troubles the very notions of what we think is feminine and masculine—really, what gender is equated with love, tenderness, or sensuality? In many ways, Morris's questions heighten our understanding of gender philosopher Judith Butler's idea that all of gender is a learned performance (Butler, 1990), in which socially appropriate performance of gender, when matched exactly with dominant social and cultural norms, is both affirmed and rewarded. As Butler (1988) notes, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p. 522). *The Hard Nut* gets through to us because we laugh at how we judge people daily, and then because we reflect more seriously about how another person's difference consumes us as a society (think: Defense of Marriage Act).

Many of my male students get a big kick out of Morris's gender parody, noting that it helps them begin to understand their own performance of masculine behavior as something they *do*, rather than who they *are*. *The Hard Nut*'s gender-bending snow scene (always a rousing piece in the original *Nutcracker* anyway) is a highlight for female students because of the athleticism and power of both female and male snowflakes.

Matthew Bourne's (b. 1960) re-telling of the classic *Swan Lake* (1895), originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, moves beyond gender parody by directly challenging preconceptions about masculinity and opposite sex attraction. Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1996), unlike the traditional story of Odette with the princess transformed into the Swan Queen by an evil sorcerer, turns its focus to the prince and his struggle from boyhood to manhood in modern day London. The Swan Queen, as well as the entire flock of swans, has changed from female to male: "bare-chested, barefoot and hairy, they [dance] sharply and aggressively around the stage under the reign of The Swan [male]" (Drummond, 2003, p. 236).

Although the sex of the swans changed, the new *Swan Lake* did not eliminate the attraction and desire between the Prince and The Swan, now both males (Drummond, 2003). However, unlike the traditional ballerina swan—elusive, shy, ephemeral, in downy headdress—this male Swan is "a hunk with a buzz haircut, a gleaming bare chest and lush, feathery thighs" (Hohenadel, 1997, np). Dancer Adam Cooper, who created the role, believes that the Swan, through the Prince's eyes, represents masculinity, power, and freedom (Fisher, 1997). Bourne himself has described the role as a combination of "father figure, lost love, alter ego, unattainable ideal" and an "omnisexual, whip-wielding gate-crasher in black leather pants" (Hohenadel, 1997, np).

This *Swan Lake* repeatedly shows us unresolved longings for intimacy between two men; well, a man and a male swan, that is. Still, the notion of homoeroticism (think: same-sex fantasizing without acting upon it) comes through clearly. But to call this a gay ballet is too simple-minded, because Bourne's choreography depicts "a spectrum of ways of being masculine" (Drummond, 2003, p. 244) through "parts that were lyrical without being emasculating and sexually charged without being hyper-macho" (Bourne cited in Lancioni, 2006, p. 710). These nuanced depictions are rarely seen in western theatrical dance. At the same time, the critical and commercial success of the new *Swan Lake* tells us that mainstream audiences may be more open to shifting gender norms and accepting of wider notions of sexual attraction. While you might think that student discussion of Bourne's *Swan Lake* would focus primarily on gay issues, my previous students have centered on how the ballet brings up contemporary questions about what is considered "beautiful," "emotional," and "expressive," and how societal views on gender norms and traditionally female ways of being are changing.

Reflections

Throughout this essay you have learned how western concert dance encounters a number of gender problems when it's seen traditionally as only something for little girls and big sissy boys. Gender norms and homophobic stereotypes are challenged by the relatively large population of gay boys and males who dance, but at the same time the profession (and some

of the public) continues to rehearse the “hyper-straight dude” image of the Baryshnikov Complex. Choreographers like Mark Morris and Matthew Bourne trouble these gender assumptions on a deeper level, creating new ways of seeing femininity, masculinity, attraction, intimacy, and even freedom.

You have also seen, maybe unexpectedly, that looking critically at western concert dance brings up a number of larger social questions in current public debates—many of which are political (think: who’s got the power?). The heated politics of gender, sexual orientation, race, and social class have not been as hotly debated since the 1960s (think: your grandparents). Dance serves as a cultural TiVo, if you will, recording and replaying both highly traditional social values as well as alternatives that challenge and resist “the way things are.”

Knowing what you know now, I leave you with a few questions to think about on your own or to discuss with classmates:

- From your own experience, can you identify situations in which your own gender identity or sexual orientation was questioned? If so, what was this like for you? If not, why do you think it wasn’t?
- In your own life, has your gender-race-social class ever determined what you could or could not pursue? How so? And how did you know?
- After reading this essay, has your notion about male dancers and masculinity changed? If so, in what ways?
- What connections do you see between sexual orientation in dance and larger public debates about gays serving in the military and marriage equality? How are these discussions similar and different?
- If/when you become a parent, how will you address gender norms and social pressures as you raise your own child?
- For dance students, how does this knowledge about gender and dance impact your own work as a dancer and choreographer?



Audio Clip 2: For teachers ~ General education in dance today⁴

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⁴ As referenced in this audio, see Aleman, Frichtel, Gerdes and Warchal-King (2010), Bond and Etwaroo (2005), Bond and Gerdes (2013), Dils (2004, 2007), Frichtel (2012), Morgan (2011), Narva (2004) and Stark (2009).

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About the Author

Doug Risner, Ph.D., M.F.A., is Professor of Dance, Maggie Allesee Department of Theatre and Dance at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA. He contributes regularly to *Research in Dance Education*, *Arts Education Policy Review*, *Journal of Dance Education*, *Teaching Artist Journal*, and numerous international volumes. Risner is the author of *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance* (2009), *Hybrid Lives of Teaching Artists in Dance and Theatre Arts* with Mary Elizabeth Anderson, and Associate Editor of the international journal *Research in Dance Education*.

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