Is The Derision Of Danseurs Now A Delusion?
Examining Contemporary Perceptions Of Male Ballet Dancers’ Masculine Identity

1. **JOURNAL REVIEWS**

*Make It Maverick: Rethinking the “Make It Macho” Strategy for Men in Ballet*
Jennifer Fisher

In this article, Fisher identifies the “Making It Macho” strategy, which the ‘ballet world’ uses in response to the stigma about men in ballet. For our Documentary, examining attitudes held towards male ballet dancers, we conducted interviews of both a danseur and total strangers to ballet. In my paper, I plan to excogitate the representation of male ballet dancers and its response from society.

The art form’s strong associations with an ultra feminised world of women, ensued Western society to adopt a negative view of male ballet dancers, stereotyping ‘danseurs’ as weak, effeminate, or homosexual, consequenting in men receiving abuse for not choosing a more conventional occupation. The strategy implied condoning ballet, by defining it as ‘as tough as football’ (a “real” man’s game) providing close proximity to scantily clad females (implicating provocation) and uncanny resemblance to “the marines only with briefer uniforms and pointed toes” has resulted in no noticeable change in men’s attitudes towards ballet, thus, she suggests other ways of gestating the plight of the male dancer should be implemented. We found the opposite was evident in our interviews, as the majority supported male ballet dancers by mentioning women and comparing it to sport.

Ted Shawn ignored the warning that ballet was “hardly suitable for a red-blooded American male” and pioneered the American Dance movement: addressing choreographic and homophobic attitudes through his portrayal of dance mirroring work not feminine fun to “ennoble the masculine aspects of dance”. Fisher believes ‘making it macho’ is a strategy that will never work, because “ballet is not macho” danseurs accept they will wear tights, play princes, and point their toes. Stating it is undeniably manly and athletic whilst remains light, precise, and “more delicately attentive to the music and the muses than a strictly macho man could hope to be”. Our interviewed danseur made clear that conjectural ‘macho’ athleticism and dedication is mandatory as a professional ballet dancer.

In what she describes as a brazen “Hooray For Heteros”, the suggestion that gay men are not athletic, was made in controversial 1996 article “Ballet’s New Men”, provoking Fisher to disagree to the responding protests that “only the dance matters” by suggesting sexual preference does matter when one is favoured over the other to ‘improve’ the reputation of ballet. She later points out several male dancers she spoke to conversely did not encounter such prejudices: never having been teased or faced negative stereotyping. As our danseur could attest to having constantly been surrounded or protected by the ballet world since age eleven.

Using Freudian terms Fisher analyses the female dancer as the ‘standard body’. Her “lack” (of male genitalia) becomes the “norm” suggesting that in the aesthetic ballet universe, classical dancers should have “smooth bodies that have no inconvenient bulges” that possess “a type of
ideal beauty, strength, and form” namely, “there is no penis envy in ballet”. Evident in our interviews as every description of a ballet dancer began as female.

In a Graham Jackson essay, he is frank about ballet's limitations of a “straight” aesthetic: qualities of masculine gentleness going unnoticed; calling gay men to arms, stating “choreography won't ever reflect more than limited realities until they speak up by supporting, attending, and making more diverse dances for the ballet”. In our film we will depict the effeminate descriptions of male dancers through choreography, humouring the obvious comedy whilst remaining respectful.

Fisher mentions the standard associations between ballet and “less-than-masculine” men are still regular occurrences in movies and television, illustrating how innuendo and standardised identities are used as comedy and anxiety: for example “he's a ballet dancer” becoming code for “he's gay” etc. Her research found fifty percent of male ballet dancers were straight and felt she often sensed a need for politeness or political correctness in avoiding such a topic during interviews. During the interviews we conducted, to our almost disenchantment, we encountered no such derogatory association with homosexuality, the need she speaks of, was unmistakable and demonstrated a flaw in documentary of a constructed truth.

In Fisher’s hypothesis she proposes a solution to the dead ‘Make It Macho’ strategy, that does not have to redefine dancing for men or men in ballet, by replacing ‘macho’ with ‘maverick’. Defining a maverick as a person who “thinks and acts in an independent fashion, often behaving differently from the expected way” explaining that “men in ballet have to cross a line into what is largely perceived as a feminized world” and so she suggests, ‘maverick’ is a more appropriate description of men in ballet. Her solution epitomises the quintessential personification we plan to depict in our film and offers a valid elucidation I plan to discuss in my paper, of the future representation of the danseur.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598095
By comprehensively addressing masculinity represented in twentieth-century theatrical dance through analysis of the various social, political and cultural contexts that influence both our reading of male dancers in terms of performance and choreographers' choices of representations; Ramsay Burt presents multiple theoretical perspectives by looking at spectators points of view, other than just the dominant heterosexual male. Similarly to Fisher, Burt seeks to reveal within dance, dominant and oppressive representations of masculinity and thus encourage "alternative, non-oppressive representations" whilst remaining sensitive to both women's inferior position of power in theatrical dance and negative attitudes toward male dancers. We address precisely the spectator's or non-spector's impressions of masculinity within ballet, in our interviews, whose opinions I will report in my paper.

Burt constitutes a theoretically arduous contextual framework for reading dances, referencing the "gendered gaze" idea developed by film and feminist theorists, providing a provocative theory of spectatorship in dance. He uses this to examine the work of choreographers like Nijinsky, Graham, Bausch, while relating their dances to the social, political and artistic contexts in which they were produced. Within his readings, he identifies three distinctions between institutionalised modernist dance which evokes an essentialist, heroic, "hypermasculinity"; one which is verified with reference to nature, heterosexuality and religion; and radical, avant garde choreography which challenges and disrupts dominant ways of representing masculinity. The interviewees gaze could be interpreted as affecting their opinion of danseurs, however, some have literally never spectated a ballet so it is possible the could alter their view after witnessing one. Most of the references made are of traditional ballets like *Swan Lake* so analyses of their socio-standings would not be viable as I would be considering a non modern ballet unrelated to their current context.

He points out the “widespread reluctance to talk about dance and homosexuality” might have been an attempt to protect the ballet institution from threatened taboos among donors; for example in 1988 Judith Lynn Hanna characterized homosexuality as a “problem” for ballet men, as opposed to a problem existing as a result of the sociopolitics surrounding Western society's homophobia. Burt claims, the origins of danseur prejudice arose from bourgeois men of the nineteenth century who may have felt that “to enjoy the spectacle of men dancing [was] to be interested in men,” so that “the pleasures of watching men dancing became, in the mid-nineteenth century, marred by anxieties about masculine identity” because of confusion between just being friends with men and the fear of being thought homosexual. An opinion that could undeniably be interpreted in our interviews.

Later Burt mentions, Freudian theories of constructed gendered identity that underlined the complexities of masculinity, for example, the romantic cultural notion of "artistic genius" allowed men to express "feminine" emotions; Burt suggests it was not until Nijinsky's genius this century, that it was recognised as integral to male ballet. Finally, he points out the contradiction between homophobia and the societal and capitalist need for acceptable, non-sexual homosocial relations, which was brought on by the gathering of large groups of men. He suggests that Judith Lynn Hanna's 1988 consideration of the topic suffers from a characterization of homosexuality as a “problem” for ballet men, as opposed to a problem existing as a result of the roiling sociopolitics surrounding Western society's homophobia.
Which is the problem we sought to investigate within our interviews and what I will discuss within my paper.

He challenges the formalist and modernist critical approaches that, he claims, reject dance as a representational expressive practice, where inquiry "about the nature of femininity or masculinity has appeared irrelevant to what has generally been thought to be the true nature of dance as art". Early ballets such as, *L'Apres-midi d'un faune* (1912) supposedly represented "natural" masculinity in contrast to *In Sacre de Printemps* (1913) represented "masculinity at its nastiest and most abject" conveying men in an animalistic quality dragging "their left feet across the floor like an animal". He concludes that the radicalism of early modernism was the main disruptive force behind the reintroduction of the male body into theatrical dance. A force Fisher possibly suggests should be somewhat re-implemented through her ‘Make It Maverick’ strategy.

Burt's analysis of post-modern choreographers such as Pina Bausch's *Bluebeard* (1977) in which he questions the norms of permitted masculine representations on stage, depicting the danseur’s insecurities through inappropriate and violent actions to control women, and the British group DV8’s 1988 controversial *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*, which uses sadomasochistic scenarios to depict the sterility in male relationships, gay or straight, representing homosexual mass murderer Dennis Nilsen manipulating dancers, whereafter Burt states "to present such an image obviously subverts the idea that masculinity is an unproblematic, unquestioned norm". These analyses have lead me to examine modern ballets, choreographed recently to gather an idea of current ‘masculine’ depiction.

*The Male Dancer* corresponds well with feminist perspective, treating the depiction of women in theatrical dance simply by focusing light on masculinity, which, as he demonstrates, is far more complex than culturally acknowledged. These complexities are what I will address further through my research into modern masculine identity within dance.

Rehearsing Masculinity: Challenging The ‘Boy Code’ In Dance Education
Doug Risner

Risner’s essay researches the experiences of boys and young men in Western dance education. It examines the “dominant constructions of contemporary Western masculinity” examining the potential limitations these hegemonic discourses may have on male participation. He finds evidence to suggest there is a “prevailing social stigma, heteronormative assumptions narrow definitions of masculinity and internalized homophobia” in the male dance world. Risner’s analyzes the ways in which male youth in dance challenge heterocentric bias, gender norms, and gendered bodies, as well as peer pressure and dominant cultural ideology in dance training and education, including key social questions into difference, pleasure, marginalization, and the larger effects and limitations of contemporary masculinity.

By dehumanizing discussion and the implications they continue to hold for male youth dancers belong to a “cultural re-evaluation” Risner believes urgently requires participation by the dance education community. He states “choosing to dance may be an important vehicle for investigating dominant notions about masculinity, gender, sexual orientation, and the body”. Reflecting Fisher and Burt’s similar findings. Prevailing social stigma associated with boys in dance have created a harmful mythology about all males in dance, regardless of sexual orientation. Risner postulates these heterocentric paradigms require larger studies on boys’ self-construction in dance educational environments. An idea I aim to investigate to the best possible degree.

He states “though well-intentioned, masculinist comparisons have most probably forfeited opportunities for educating the dance profession about homophobic prejudice and heterocentric assumptions” a concept we found palpable within our resulting interviews. Sighting “when recruitment strategies ignore important issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and homophobic attitudes, dance education may unintentionally reproduce narrow derogatory stereotypes of gay dancers” and in effect demean male dance population altogether. Strongly suggesting the benefit research “investigating current male population’s attraction and retention to dance training and education” would have.

Instructional approaches identified teaching dance, overlap critical feminist approaches, explains Risner, include “choreographic exploration of the body as a living laboratory” encouraging male and female students to express themselves” through movements; openly “discussing gender identification and the experiences of dance students; and exploring gender-bias, sexism, homophobia, elitism, and power relations”. Suggesting future research might investigate approaches for teaching practices that address “non-gender-specific movement, gendered bodies, and the social construction of gender, and gender identity”. Concluding dance educators would prosper from noting their own “unwitting heterosexist beliefs, gender assumptions, and taken-for-granted actions” which might create an unintentional “environment of shame, humiliation or embarrassment for males in the studio and classroom”. An aspect I could investigate through research into a young male ballet dancer we have previously interviewed and whom was the inspiration for our documentary.

Risner’s aim was to identify and combine findings about male youth experiences in dance education, concerning social pressures of dominant masculinity, or what Risner ascribes as “boy code” which contains questions of gender, difference, pleasure, and marginalization. Much of the literature reviewed emerges from recent studies with small sample sizes; drawing generalized conclusions, thus he sought to assemble a useful, (alas limited), body of
knowledge, to “provide some significant resources in an under-researched field for further inquiry”. Precisely why I chose this journal.

Risner states it is important to see that ‘boy code’ extremes (individualism, independence, emotional detachment, and bravado), may also influence our own individual interactions, relationships and teaching practices through social reception. He says “dominant discourses prevail and hold sustained sway because they often remain unquestioned”: he therefore intended for his journal to “heighten readers’ sensitivity to issues of males in dance education, and more specifically, motivates awareness of the need for continued questioning and future inquiry”. An inquiry in which I intend to attest towards through my own possible field research into the danseur’s (my brother) place at the Royal Ballet School.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The Disappearing Danseur

Article Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27607146

This article discusses the harsh treatment of male dancers, examining critics (particularly Andre Levison) and ballet's (such as La Sylphide and La Jolie Fille de Gand) parts in what she describes as a “sympathetic portrait of the danseur explaining what he was doing and why it mattered”. Before suggesting possible directions for future research into the topic of nineteenth century ballet to go.

2. Dancers, Mostly Male

Kerensky, Oleg. (1985). Review: Dancers, Mostly Male (The Great Russian Dancers by Gennady Smakov; Baryshnikov in Russia by Nina Alvord; Irene Huntoon; Men Dancing: Performers and Performances by Alexander Bland; John Percival; Far from Denmark by Peter Martins; Robert Cornfield; Fernando Bujones by Fernando Bujones); Dance Chronicle. Vol. 8 (Issue 1/2), p104-108.
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Article Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567567

This review examines numerous books proving information about the recent renaissance of male dancing. Including two highly successful stars of 1980s American ballet; perceptive studies of most of the principal male dancers of this century, and critical essays evaluating the evolving role of danseurs.

3. A Queer History Of The Ballet


This book explores the popular perception of a connection between ballet and homosexuality (often, strategic reasons, denied by those in the dance world. It focuses on how, as makers and as audiences, queer men and women have helped to develop many of the texts, images, and legends of ballet. Additionally exploring the ways nineteenth century (into the twentieth) ballet has been a means of conjuring homosexuality – of enabling some degree of expression and visibility for people who were otherwise declared illegal and obscene.

4. Interpreting Jean Borlin's "Dervishes": Masculine Subjectivity and the Queer Male Dancing Body

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Article Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567950
This journal investigates compares early twentieth-century avant-garde performance practice
and late nineteenth-century medical ideas about homosexuality (which occur in ballet *Dervishes* by the Swedish choreographer Jean Borlin).

5. **The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory**


This book makes connections between a burgeoning interest in the body in social and cultural analysis and a variety of dance forms and practises. It uses dance as a means of reflecting on the possibilities and limitations associated with the ways in which the body has been conceptualised in social and cultural theory.

6. **Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction. David Gauntlett.**


Media, Gender and Identity is an introduction to the relationship between media and gender identities today. Assessing different ways in which gender and identity have previously been studied and providing new ways for thinking about the media's influence on gender and sexuality.

3. **RELEVANT MATERIALS/ EXPERIMENTS**
References

FILMOGRAPHY

- ‘Pina’ (2011) Wim Wenders
- ‘The Ballet School’ (2011) BBC.
- ‘Agony and Ecstasy A Year with English National Ballet’ (2011) BBC

Experiments

FILMING

Basic recording of the male ballet dancer we interviewed: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU6yAVNgZyw&feature=youtu.be

ANIMATION

Early rotoscope tests: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmlCTQ-nvAA

INTERVIEWS

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIOUTQ9M69Q
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg1Qw3cF4eI
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoWKKgO-5f8
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