

The Performance of Gender in American Dance

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Abstract

With kinesiology defined as the study of human movement, then dance, as one of the oldest forms of physical activity, should be considered. Dance permeates contemporary American culture—from social dancing, to community dance studios, to popular television shows. Dance scholars and cultural theorists agree that the way a society dances elucidates cultural values. If we accept the notion that a culture's dances reflect the values of that culture, then a scrutiny of American gendered dance practices is warranted. Contemporary society views gender differently than the societies of the socio-historical context in which common Western dance genres, such as classical ballet, were born and developed. By highlighting ways that most dance training reinforces gendered codes of behavior, this paper contributes to discourses surrounding the evolution of dance in America and evolving notions of gender, while also providing a lens that might be applied to a multitude of physical practices.

INTRODUCTION

In light of contemporary interests in evolving notions of gender, understanding how students are influenced and informed about their gender within dance training during the formative years of childhood might inform discussions about the future of dance education and demonstrate how physical practices may serve as a means of reinforcing gendered behaviors. Commonly taught Western dance forms, such as ballet, often reinforce traditional binary gender norms. Since contemporary society views notions of gender and the educational process quite differently than the individuals of the socio-historical context in which many traditional dance forms were first born and developed, methods of teaching various genres of dance and other physical practices might adapt to more adequately reflect current societal beliefs and practices. Due to the brevity of this paper, we will focus specifically on ballet as an example of how gender is performed through physical practice—understanding that the examples we give often translate to other gendered physical activities.

Performing the Gender Spectrum

Gender is a timely and ubiquitous topic in American popular culture, and recent discourses focusing on gender have become even more complicated with the recognition of transgender and gender-fluid individuals. Although traditional ways of thinking about gender in Western culture assess gender as a bipolar concept, recent scholars argue that gender might more adequately be represented on a spectrum (Monro, 2005). Even when gender is argued as a biological trait, and thus labeled correctly as sex and not gender, the notion of gender as one or the other is highly debated; for even in biology, variations exist creating a continuum of possibilities rather than an either/or scenario. Further, when biological variants intertwine with the psychosocial concepts of gender identity and gender expression, a gender binary is exposed as obviously overly simplistic, and an even more complex and nuanced model becomes necessary—thus the metaphor of the gender spectrum.

In addition to considering gender as existing on a spectrum, contemporary notions of gender also promote theories of gender as a social construct that it is taught, produced, and reproduced through performative acts. In her 1988 essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler argues that gender is a “historical situation rather than a natural fact” (p. 188). Claiming that gender is not simply a reflection of an innate or natural state, Butler reasons the performative acts we are taught and expected to exhibit actually *create* or *construct* gender. Butler writes:

...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. (p. 187)

Examining notions of gender through this contemporary lens, gender may be viewed as a social construct, existing on a spectrum, and created through performance. Our genders are learned and inscribed on our bodies through the repeated performance of learned gendered behaviors that reflect cultural and societal expectations, and we perform our genders in a multitude of ways—some are conscious choices, while others are subconscious iterations.

A Brief Exploration of Critical, Feminist, and Embodied Pedagogies

Paulo Freire, more than any other theorist, contributed to the way contemporary scholars understand critical pedagogy as a concept. Believing the central theme of the current historical situation is domination, Freire argued that since the practice of domination is often perpetuated in

conventional classroom settings, the goal of a more just society might be realized through educational reform. Freire was a proponent of empowering students, rather than dominating them.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks follows Freire's line of thought, incorporating a feminist perspective and focusing on education as a means of liberation. Promoting a sense of "engaged pedagogy," in which students are encouraged to find joy and inspiration in educational practices, hooks illuminates the significance and potential of disrupting conventional pedagogical boundaries. Following hooks, many feminist scholars have elaborated on ways to create an educational environment that fosters notions of liberation, equality, and social justice. Defined as a philosophical approach to the teaching/learning experience, rather than a prescribed method, feminist pedagogy generally focuses on three themes: 1. resisting hierarchy; 2. using experience as a resource; and 3. education as a transformative practice.

To push these philosophies of education closer to our discussion of dance, another group of scholars such as Ellsworth, Giroux, McLaren, and Shapiro promotes the idea of the body as a site of knowing and knowledge production, rather than a passive instrument submissively inscribed by ideological discourses. These scholars challenge the perspective of earlier theorists of the body such as Mauss and Foucault. Mauss believed bodily training should be studied as biological, sociological, and psychological and argued that educational practices were dominant factors in bodily training (Mauss, 1973). Foucault, focusing on the body primarily as a site of power negotiations, defines "docile bodies" as those bodies that are subjected, used, transformed, and improved through systems of control and coercion (Foucault, 1977). But neither Mauss nor Foucault regarded the body as an active site of knowing and knowledge formation. Mauss tends to refer to the body as a tool or apparatus separate from the mind, and Foucault is primarily interested in the body as an entity that might be controlled for the purpose of exerting power. Both of these theorists held an outdated assumption that there is a separation between mind and body, i.e., dualism; and in contrast, postmodern ideas concerning embodied learning allow for a more holistic understanding of individuals as complete beings rather than a mind-body duality.

In an article titled "Schooling the Postmodern Body" McLaren (1991) argues bodies are cultural products imprinted with cultural ideologies, but also argues the body is a significant part of the learning self. Further, Ellsworth argues that knowledge formation, as an ongoing process, occurs through bodily experiences; in how we absorb the way our senses perceive the world that we inhabit. Throughout her text, *Places of Learning* (2005), Ellsworth refers to the self as

“mind/brain/body” unwilling to distinguish these elements from one another. Shapiro (1998) takes this thinking a bit further by denying the mind-body dichotomy and arguing that all knowledge is mediated through the body, that learning is always a somatic practice.

Many dance scholars have adopted and/or adapted ideas concerning critical feminist pedagogy and theories of embodied knowledge construction to apply specifically to dance pedagogy. Lakes (2005) and Smith (1998) have called out the overtly authoritarian nature of Western dance teaching practices; Dyer (2009) and Alterowitz (2014) have argued for a more democratic means of teaching ballet; and Stinson (2011) and Risner (2008, 2011) have unveiled the hidden curriculum of gender, which is often prevalent in the dance classroom. These authors effectively challenge ballet teachers to re-evaluate their own pedagogical heritage and question any inherited values. In an effort to continue the line of thought introduced by these scholars, we highlight specific instances in which the expected performance of gender during early ballet training creates an environment that might be considered antithetical to the liberatory and empowering educational experience championed by critical feminist pedagogy.

In the Studio

The art of ballet is gender specific and rife with examples of gender performance (Novack, 1993; Foster, 1996; Daly, 1987). However, the literature generally focuses on how gender is reinforced through stage productions and specific choreographic examples, rather than pedagogy. In an effort to establish a more pointed inquiry, we are focusing on how the performance of gender onstage is shaped through years of early dance training—not only in the actual physical training, but in learned expectations of appearance and behavior that are often taught beginning at a very young age. As Alterowitz (2014) writes: “Although it is evident that ballet’s philosophies and beliefs about the body are illuminated in performance, they are taught and learned long before being presented on stage” (p. 11).

Before proceeding further, we should make it clear that we have no intention of offering a simple solution or finding some sort of theoretical closure in this short discussion, we merely intend to raise questions, instigate awareness, and prompt a conversation about how traditional ballet training contributes to the bodily inscription of gender assignments on children. To that end, we shall examine a few common practices in early ballet training—practices that are so common and embedded in ballet culture, that ballet teachers usually take them for granted, assume them as normal, and do not notice them until there is non-compliance.

While we assume many ballet teachers and ballet schools have similar training procedures, we are aware not all instructors or institutions are the same; hence, we are drawing on the experiences of one of the authors as a ballet student and a ballet instructor, and we also use the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (JKO) School of Ballet, the affiliate professional school of American Ballet Theatre (ABT), as a specific example of a traditional pre-professional ballet school. We have selected to use the JKO School as an example for the following reasons: 1. It is an organization with which we are familiar; 2. As this institution is a professional school geared toward training professional dancers, rather than recreational dancers, this is the type of school that perpetuates traditional modes of ballet training; 3. Due to its prestige the JKO school is often used as an example by other schools, especially since the creation and proliferation of ABT's National Training Curriculum, which is currently training teachers internationally.

Perhaps the most obvious gender specific element in early training for young dancers are standards for personal appearance, including dress codes and hairstyles. It is common practice for professional ballet schools to adhere to some variation of a gender specific dress code. At the JKO School for instance, female students wear pink tights, pink ballet slippers, and a leotard that is color-coded to specify the level at which they are training. At one of the youngest levels, the girls' leotards are pink and have a short skirt attached. As the girls move up in level, the color of the leotard changes, and the attached skirt disappears. During one of the author's training sessions for ABT's National Training Curriculum, one of ABT's instructors was asked about the pedagogical purpose of the skirt. The instructor replied that training the young girls to lightly hold the sides of the skirt between the thumb and middle finger while lifting the elbows to the side trains the students to establish a *demi-seconde* arm position and to shape the hands into a curved ballet position. Although this answer makes a certain amount of sense from a pedagogical and physiological perspective, these arm and hand positions are not gender-exclusive within ballet curriculum. The skirt, despite the instructors attempt to justify it through pedagogy, plays a part in the performance and construction of a feminine gender.

Unlike their female counterparts, male students of all ages wear the same uniform: a fitted white t-shirt, black tights, white socks, and white ballet slippers. Although all students must wear tights, girls wear pink tights, while boys wear black tights; and it is worth noting the girls' tights are sheer while the boys' tights are opaque. We have often heard ballet instructors justify the sheer pink tights by asserting that this specific kind of fabric allows instructors to better see the musculature of the leg; this in turn enables the instructor to better evaluate and assist in improving a student's technique. This may be true; but the expectation for boys to wear opaque black tights is

another example of performing a specific gender identity. Further, the fact that male students wear the same uniform throughout their training years, while female students are ranked by colors, seems to signify that the male students are special in the sense that they are beyond the color-coded ranking. Females are ranked. Males are, at least as it is visibly signified, not.

Another gender-specific expectation of appearance is the manner in which the students style their hair. Although different schools have different rules, there is a general expectation at most schools for female dancers to have longer hair that may be fashioned into a bun, while male dancers have shorter hair. From one of the author's experience, even when there are not hard rules for these hairstyles, noncompliance is generally viewed as undesirable and often treated as an annoyance. Taken as a whole, these examples of managing the physical appearance of students demonstrates that, prior to these children even beginning to study the movement practice of ballet, they are trained to perform gender through their appearance.

In addition to the method in which the physical appearance of students is gender specific, the actual physical training is also gender specific. Although most male and female students train in class together on a regular basis, often around the age of twelve students are separated by gender for specific classes at least once per week: boys take *men's class*, and girls take *pointe* class. These classes focus on gender-specific dance training: the male students focus on jumps and turns, while the female students focus on pointe work. In classical ballet, certain steps are only performed by females, such as *bourrées*, small hummingbird like movements of the feet while on pointe; while other steps, such as *tours en l'air* in which the dancer jumps straight up in the air making a full revolution before landing, are only performed by male dancers. This gender-specific dance vocabulary is evident throughout the canon of classical ballets in which female dancers are expected to exhibit grace, appearing light and delicate, while male dancers exhibit strength, force, and power. To this end, Aalton (2004) writes:

The masculinity and femininity that is enacted through the bodies of male and female dancers can be seen as a reiteration and reproduction of cultural norms that assign strength and independence to men and weightlessness and passivity to women. (p. 270)

What is perhaps most interesting for the purposes of this discussion is the fact that gender specific expectations during training reach beyond the obvious—appearance and physical training—and often extend to the manner in which students are expected to behave in the dance studio. When analyzing the accepted etiquette within the process of ballet class, gender is constructed and performed in several ways. In traditional ballet classes, boys are trained to

perform behaviors that serve as an early effort to establish the male role of the cavalier in classical ballet. Although male and female students might be mixed together during *barre* work, when center work begins usually segregation occurs. When students establish themselves in lines, male students are generally expected to assume the back line. When exercises are practiced in groups, the male students are usually expected to dance last. In addition, when portable *barres* are used for a class, the male students are commonly expected to remove the *barres* after the warm-up is complete. While this behavior may be defended as gentlemanly, the expectation of the behavior reflects the manner in which the male dancer often is portrayed as the protector, the stronger sex, a masculine hero in the classical ballet canon...or in a much more mundane sense, the guy that carries things around—be they *barres* or ballerinas.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on common practices of gendered expectations, we see traditional approaches to ballet training reiterating a bipolar notion of gender and inscribe gendered behaviors on young bodies. However, when considering contemporary notions of the body/mind as fluid rather than separate entities, it becomes apparent that the expectations for the performance of opposing genders is an actual, but sometimes hidden, part of the ballet curriculum. If we accept the notion that knowledge construction is always an embodied experience, then the ways we are informed about ourselves through repeated gendered practices, especially as young children, become instrumental in how we learn our value, our identities, and our place in society. In a society that accepts, or at least is beginning to accept, gender as a spectrum, educators must respond and adapt. Butler (2004) argues that if gender is indeed constructed, then it is “capable of being constructed differently” (p. 188). Rather than reproducing a historical situation of gender, educators must acknowledge that reinforcing outdated gender roles is an act of domination. To promote awareness and sensitivity to gender as constructed and performed rather than innate, educators might apply contemporary educational philosophies, like those of critical feminist pedagogy, to their education approaches.

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