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Gender Bias in Dance

Imagine a dance class. In this class, there is one instructor and fourteen students who execute various combinations “across-the-floor.” Thirteen girls, one boy. When the last girl reaches the far side of the room, the instructor claps his hands for attention, and says, “Ladies, were any of you watching your classmates as they traveled across the floor?” Half-hearted “yes’s”, a few nods. The instructor continues, “Good. Did any of you notice how much more height our gentleman was achieving on his leaps? Ladies,” he repeats, “we must all make an effort to do better to match him, alright?” A resounding, though quiet, “Yes,” from the girls. “Excellent. Let’s take that again, please. Ready now, on my count: five, six, five-six-seven-eight.” Then they are dancing again. There are multiple biases in this classroom. One bias is against the boy, because of his minority. The other pertains to the girls, regarding their unsatisfactory execution of the exercise. These biases have been present throughout history. In classical ballet of the twentieth century, male dancers experienced tremendous prejudice as the minority of performers. In modern dance, from the 1920s to present-day, bias against women is present in both the performing and choreographing parts of the dance world. Though modern dance increased the movement vocabulary for dancers, expectations regarding the gender roles

choreographers for women, but the group of present-day choreographers no longer reflects that progress. Modern dance broadened the roles men and women could hold in the professional dance world and decreased the gender inequality demonstrated in ballet, through its choreography, costuming, and job opportunities, but only briefly.

Chapter One: Onstage

The choreography that male and female ballet dancers executed in classical ballet placed women in the foreground and men in the background of performances and formed strict gender roles for dancers. Through the creation of modern dance, it has become acceptable for dancers to move in different ways that did not reflect that societal view of men and women. However, modern dance choreography has failed to completely eradicate the social expectations of gender roles for dancers.

Classical ballet choreography and performances, occurring throughout the 1900s, produced divisions between the roles of male and female dancers, dictating their positions on the performance stage. In an 1965 article of *The New York Times*, when asked to define ballet, renowned American ballet choreographer and founder of the New York City Ballet company George Balanchine wrote, “The ballet is a purely female thing; it is a woman - a garden of beautiful flowers, and the man is the gardener” (Tonguette). Balanchine objectifies the ballerina by comparing her to a flower, and trivializes the role of men in ballet by likening them to gardeners, whose only duty is to showcase the ballerina. Additionally, in ballet, it has been noted that although “they [*men* or male ballet dancers] are occasionally showcased in brief solos and pas de deux (a duet for two dancers, typically a man and woman), they exist primarily to showcase the ballerina. They lift her while she dances and stand there as she spins” (Hseih).

Ballet choreography placed the woman at the center of attention and forced the man to the back of the stage, perpetuating dance stereotypes. This traditional style of choreography objectified women and suggested that the role of a man onstage was aiding the ballerina, rather than acting as a central figure in the ballet. Classical ballet forced performers into strict gender roles through its trivialization of danseurs and its objectification of ballerinas.

However, modern dance choreography broadened the role of performers onstage by allowing male dancers to dance at the front of a performance and therefore making it socially acceptable for men to dance. This difference occurred because the goal of modern works differed from that of ballet. A major goal of second-generation modern-style choreographers was to emphasize the movement of the dancers, rather than to depict a storyline through their choreography as ballet did (Ambrosio 65). This removal from characterization in modern dance, which was not present in ballet, allowed for a separation between dancer and gender role because the audience did not have to recognize who or what the dancers portrayed. Additionally, an increase in the visibility of men in performance dance decreased the preconceived ideas of male and female dancer roles. “Anecdotally, there appear to be more men in the dance field than there were 20 to 30 years ago,” states John Munger in a 2001 [article](#), speaking for national research organization Dance/USA (qtd. in Carman). An increased number of men in the field means that overall, men have become more visible, therefore decreasing the divide between men and women in performance dance that left men backstage. Ted Shawn was a co-creator of the Denishawn, the first modern dance school in the United States which created much of the foundation of present-day modern dance technique. Shawn’s goal was to “gain acceptance for the male dancer by emphasizing masculine movement and displays of strength” through his

work. (“Ted Shawn”). Shawn’s modern dance programs spotlighted men and demonstrated the physicality of dance choreography, allowing audiences to understand how physically demanding dance could be. This physicality was not demonstrated in classical ballet because in ballet, women took center stage while men served mostly as supporters. Shawn also created the first American all-male dance company, Ted Shawn and his Ensemble of Male Dancers. As one of the dancers in the company described it, “There were no ladies to be lifted around” (

). Shawn’s company used one of the revolutionary aspects of modern dance, forcing the dancers to broaden their performance repertoire due to the lack of women there to counterbalance the men. The performers had to hold the audience’s eye without female dancers, who traditionally held the performance spotlight. The company succeeded. A program they performed during the Great Depression did well enough that the company ended the season with only minor amounts of debt. The program “was billed as

, and it offered thirteen works danced by fourteen men” (Mazo 110). The results of that 1913 program, danced in nineteen cities across the country and culminating with performances in New York, demonstrated that it was possible for an all-male company to be successful before a large audience. However, though Shawn showed people that men could be at the front of a performance, he simultaneously reinforced the idea that male dancers are more physical than female dancers. Nevertheless, modern dance choreography and performances made it more socially acceptable for men to dance.

Expectations pertaining to the role that dancers of each gender represent through performance remain. It became socially acceptable for men to dance, to the point where male dancers outshone women dancers in the dynamic of their movement. An article in a 1996 edition

of _____ notes that in modern dance, “Too much emphasis is put on the showy and flashy dives to the floor or high leaps and turning jumps and not enough on all the parts of movement and its inherent subtleties. Sometimes it seems as if the girls are expected to move like the boys, that as teachers we perceive the boys’ movement as the ‘norm’” (Cushway). This perception of men as strong dancers because of their physical ability and women as delicate dancers has carried into the present day. However, this acceptance of male dancers has been unable to change the inherent, gendered perception regarding dance, that it is not an activity for men. Doug Risner, editor-in-chief for the

broaden the roles that dancers could portray through their choreography, an underlying mindset of gender representations still remains, which pushes male dancers to the background.

Chapter 2: Backstage

In the ballet of the early 1900s, the costumes forced the dancers into fitting certain gender perceptions. Ballerinas were forced to appear delicate, while danseurs were portrayed as the stronger and more solid figure of the two. Costuming in modern dance allowed for more freedom of expression and a broadened role for professional dancers that was not restricted to those gender perceptions. It allowed women to look freer, as well as to be more independent onstage.

Ballet in the early twentieth century had strict costuming rules, which reinforced the gender-based roles of dancers. There were certain articles that only women wore, and others that only men wore, which aided the audience in distinguishing between the man and woman onstage. For ballerinas, “the corset worn in ballet helped pull up the body and enabled the woman’s male partner to get a good grip when lifting her” (Hanna 132). This article of clothing reinforced the traditional roles of men and women dancers. It gave the impression that women dressed to aid the men. Additionally, it reinforced the idea that women were the ones to be lifted by men, rather than the other way around, adding to the image of a strong danseur and delicate ballerina. But the ballerinas’ tight corsets were not the only costume piece that reinforced gender roles for dancers. In the early seventeenth century, ballerinas began dancing in pointe shoes: “Pointe shoes make ballet dancing look magical and even daring. They create an illusion of lightness and give a sense that the ballerina is floating on air” (“The Point of Pointe...”). Generally, only ballerinas danced on pointe. This expectation was because they were expected to weigh less, and therefore could dance on pointe without putting too much pressure on their

ankles and arches. This difference between the footwear of danseurs and ballerinas reinforced the lightness and delicacy expected of performing ballerinas. Pointe shoes also reinforced the strong, male dancer archetype. Due to the difficulty of balancing in pointe shoes, ballerinas were forced to rely on their dance partners for balance, especially during the pas-de-deux, or partner dance. However, the ballerinas could have easily danced the same steps in soft ballet shoes (Harris). Ballerinas dancing on pointe were forced by their footwear to rely on their male dancing partners for support. This portrayed the male danseurs as strong and sturdy, while reducing ballerinas to delicate, fragile figures. The costumes of classical ballet reinforced the gender roles of dancers by portraying women as delicate figures and men as stronger, more solid performers.

Modern dance changed the costuming of performers, which allowed women to portray different characteristics during a performance. These changes reflected the social changes of the time: “In the new era of women’s suffrage and greater sexual freedom in the 1920s, American modern dancers were braless, corsetless, and barefoot” (Donnan). The social changes of the 1920s helped differentiate modern dance from ballet, reestablishing the image of the woman dancer as a free, unrestricted figure, which the constricting garments of ballet had not allowed. “Dressed in a loose-fitting, free-flowing tunic, she rebelled not only against the corset per se, but also against everything it symbolized,” writes a New York Times article about Isadora Duncan (“Why Women Dominated Modern Dance”). As one of the forerunners of modern dance, Duncan influenced many of the trends that would later define modern dance. The corset, which restricted dancers during their performance, was cast away in modern dance styles, allowing women dancers to embody characters that were wild and rebellious rather than controlled and delicate as ballet costuming dictated. Modern dance also deviated from the rigidity of ballet

costuming in other ways. A key aspect of modern dance was that it was danced without shoes,

In the ballet world of the 1900s, men held the majority of positions as choreographers because of a lack of visibility of female choreographers. In her novel,

Lynn Garafola, leading expert on the Ballets Russes, writes that women choreographers “tended to work at less prestigious institutions than men” (Garafola 219). This inequality in venue meant that higher-class people were more likely to see the work of male choreographers than female choreographers. This heightened their visibility and in turn caused male choreographers to become more widely recognized, demonstrating the idea that men choreographed what women performed. And inequality in gender distribution added to the view that the place of a woman in the dance world was performing rather than choreographing: “Women’s contribution to the making of dances has not been acknowledged because it tended to happen in the studio, in the private sphere, but it was the ballet master’s name which appeared on the public, printed programme” (Goodman and de Gay 248). In the ballet world of the late 1900s, men held leadership positions such as ballet master, and so were more recognized as choreographers. The Ballets Russes company, created by art critic and ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev, gave much of the United States its first glimpse of ballet through its 1916 tour of the nation. However, when Diaghilev formed the company, Bronislava Nijinska “was the only woman among Diaghilev’s choreographers,” a group that also included eight men (Garafola 221). The Ballets Russes, having introduced much of the United States to ballet, acted as a model for the gender biases in choreographers for American ballet companies. This model was one that decreased the visibility of women as widely-known ballet choreographers, and supplemented the gender roles in ballet. This trend has been visible in much of the following century. In 1963, a \$7.7 million Ford foundation grant launched eight ballet companies in cities across the United

States including Boston, Philadelphia, Houston, and Washington, D.C. The choreography for those companies was and is, for the most part, written by men (Basco). This data reflects the trends set in place by the Ballets Russes, that men are primarily choreographers, not women. Due to a shortage of well-known female ballet choreographers, men tended to be seen as choreographers while women were expected to remain performers.

Modern dance provided women leadership positions in dance that were not available to them in ballet. Modern dance evolved as a way for dancers, especially female dancers, to break free from the restrictions of ballet. Consequently, “most of the modern dance pioneers have been female. This has meant that women have been finally able to attain control of not only dancing but also of choreography” (Walsh 96). This control was something that women had not been given the opportunity to have in ballet, and once modern dance supplied them with the chance, they ran with it. Several women formed the basis of what would later become modern dance technique. Ruth St. Denis, Loie Fuller, and Isadora Duncan “[claimed] the roles of choreographers as well as performers, [and] these women won national as well as international recognition and stirred new consideration of dance as a serious form of artistic expression” (Tomko ix). As modern dance emerged, women took on roles that they had not before. This abundance of female choreographers in the early years of modern dance has been noted. Marcia Siegel, contributing dance editor for *The Hudson Review* writes, “men didn’t begin making significant choreographic efforts outside classical ballet until the mid-1930s” (qtd. in Perron and Woodard 58). This meant that modern dance, which developed in the 1920s, allowed women to take on and to succeed in positions that were not been open to them in classical ballet of the same century.

However, in recent years, women have been losing visibility in the leadership sphere of the dance community as it recurs to the gender hierarchy of ballet. In 1961, critic John Martin

counterparts, who did not receive such grants. This unequal distribution of funding aided men in occupying the positions that they held before, in classical ballet, pushing women out of the positions modern dance had introduced them to. Dance/USA's study of the top four dance communities in the nation notes that men hold a minority in the dance world ("New York..."). This minority allows men greater visibility because they stand out from the crowd. The Gender Project was co-founded by New York choreographers and dancers to create awareness of gender in the arts and to discuss career strategies for women artists. It commissioned a one-year study of

was to choreograph. The developing techniques of modern dance gave women more opportunities to choreograph, which their success caused to become another acceptable role for them. However, gender-based discrimination in American dance society in recent years have seen a return to the role divisions of classical ballet.

Ultimately, the roles of men and women in the professional dance world expanded and then narrowed again through the decades. Classical ballet choreography forced performers into strict gender-based roles, placing women at the front of performances and men at the back. Through the creation of modern dance, it has become acceptable for dancers to move in different ways that highlight men rather than women. However, modern dance choreography has failed to eradicate the social expectations associated with characters that male and female dancers portray. Similarly, costumes for performers dancing the modern style lessened the strict division of genders found in ballet costuming. The costumes of ballet dancers reduced ballerinas to portraying delicate, ethereal figures while simultaneously reinforcing the strength and solidity of danseurs. The costumes of modern dancers subsequently increased the egalitarianism of the dance stage and moved performers away from blatant gender roles, allowing women to portray independent figures. Furthermore, modern dance allowed women the opportunity to hold leadership positions in dance that ballet did not, though not for long. In classical ballet, men occupied the majority of leadership positions, while women were seen as performers. Modern dance provided a source of leadership positions for women in the dance world as choreographers. Despite this, contemporary dance society favors male choreographers over female choreographers. Modern dance broadened the roles that society deemed appropriate for

men and women to hold in professional dance, but was unable to completely remove gender preconceptions and biases from the current dance community.

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