Policing Masculinity and Dance Reality Television: What Gender Nonconformity Can Teach Us in the Classroom

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Policing Masculinity and Dance Reality Television

What Gender Nonconformity Can Teach Us in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT This article examines the phenomenon of reality television and how So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD), in particular, promulgates gender norms about masculinity. The proliferation of reality television and its attraction of millions of viewers, however, carry specific risks where dance in popular culture primarily serves as a vehicle for entertaining, and not necessarily as a platform for educating audiences. Using the first episode of the premiere season of SYTYCD (2005), the article focuses on the executive producer and head judge Nigel Lythgoe’s critique of the contestant Anthony Bryant for not dancing “masculine.” Both Lythgoe and Bryant’s resultant heated exchange, and the language used, reveal a contestation over masculine representation that exposes the policing of the male dancing body. This case illustrates the tension between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities as well as the disavowal of gender nonconformity. As a result, it provides an exemplary pedagogical tool for dance educators.

In a quest to make dancing a more palatable affair for American audiences, dance reality shows regularly assure us of its safety for the primary uninitiated and most speculative demographic—men. Perhaps no artistic form unsettles American masculinity more than the Western theatrical dance tradition. For many, the act of men dancing produces anxiety due to the stigma of gayness and effeminacy attached to male dancers (Fisher and Shay 2009). Although it is true that gay men make up a significant number of the male population in dance, stereotypes persist (Risner 2009). That the stereotypes exist necessitates the work of dance professionals and educators to engage the broader social and cultural issues affecting male dancers. Moreover, without this necessary intervention and sustained efforts to change the perception of men dancing, the status quo will remain.

The importance of these issues takes on greater significance with the proliferation of dance reality shows. These shows regularly attract millions of viewers, a feat that makes dance far more accessible. As a result, dance has expanded its reach beyond its historically marginalized status in American culture, which in fact persists despite the visibility of dance reality shows (Risner 2008). The national spotlight and widespread availability of dance, however, carry specific drawbacks because dance in popular culture primarily serves as a vehicle for entertainment and not necessarily as a platform for educating audiences. In this capacity, judges on So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD), for
example, act as officiators, experts, and as interlocutors between dance contestants and audience. They promulgate dominant gender norms—often without accountability.

Given SYTYCD’s wide viewership, its judges’ policing of masculinity exposes a deep-seated unease about the expressiveness of the male dancing body outside certain social strictures and the compulsive heterosexuality enforced by the show (Pascoe 2007). Indeed, the judges’ repeated critiques of male dancers’ questionable masculinity constitute efforts to regulate gender performance. For example, in season seven, Mia Michaels assessed Robert Roldan’s disco routine performance and found him lacking masculinity (which she defined as “bearing weight”). Other manifestations include season eight, in which Justin Giles promoted choreographing a male ensemble dance that was strong and masculine (if men possess these qualities naturally, why the needed emphasis?), and vastly Mary Murphy’s response to Marko Germar’s performance, calling him “domination man.” I therefore argue that the first season of SYTYCD (2005), in which the executive producer and head judge Nigel Lythgoe critiqued contestant Anthony Bryant for not dancing “masculine,” provides an exemplary case study with which to examine anxiety over the male dancing body. Bryant’s performance on SYTYCD uniquely illustrates the risks of dance in mass media. On the one hand, Bryant dared to expand popular perceptions of the male dancing body; on the other, he faced the policing of masculinity because Lythgoe denounced his “unmasculine” performance and, worse, discriminated against him. For this reason, SYTYCD provides dance educators an excellent lens for in-class instruction that raises critical awareness of issues concerning gender performance and social justice.

**SYTYCD AND GENDER PERFORMANCE**

Although I believe that television audiences perhaps gain appreciation for the myriad dance forms and styles on exhibition in SYTYCD, the show arguably offers shallow perspectives on dance as an art form and, by extension, provides a platform for legitimizing entrenched ideas about gender through popular culture. Thus, dominant expressions of masculinity are reinforced and circulated, giving new lease on an unchecked hegemonic hierarchy (Connell 2005; McCormack 2011). To this end, Mark Hopson (2008) insightfully points out television’s power in shaping our worldview. Roy Rosenzweig examines the role of media in educating the public and finds television has become critical to the formation of national memory (Taddeo and Dvorak 2010). With reality television (RT) becoming a programming staple of major networks and cable, analyzing representations within the genre becomes increasingly imperative for understanding the pervasive reach and implications of RT as a cultural phenomenon.

Recent media studies affirm RT as a site for scholarly analysis and a fertile ground for exploring social inequalities (Taddeo and Dvorak 2010). The influx and rise of reality shows establish the genre as “the ‘hot commodity’ dominating television programming” (Moorti and Ross 2004, 203). According to Steven Reiss and James Wiltz (2009), a defining quality of RT lies in its focus on ordinary people, and not professional actors. Because ordinary people constitute the regular casts of these shows, Heidi Penzhorn and Margaret Pitout (2007) assert that the genre’s central appeal is related to themes of love, conflict, competition, and fear of failure, which determine key elements for creating on-screen drama. More so, RT attracts the average person who can envision gaining celebrity status by being on television (Reiss 2009).

Another defining aspect of RT is audience participation (Penzhorn and Pitout 2007). By voting, for example, audience members can participate, giving them a connection to the show and what Lisa Lundy and others claim to be a sense of belonging (Lundy, Ruth, and Park 2008). This characteristic, along with the draw of watching ordinary people, highlights the appeal of shows like SYTYCD. Viewers are encouraged to vote for “America’s favorite dancer,” which ensures that voting takes into account not talent alone but the personality and the connection that each contestant builds with the audience. Although judges on the show offer their critique of the contestants, the audience exercises its power by choosing its favorites, and one winner ultimately prevails. Acting as guides, judges repeatedly cue the audience on what to look for in their favorite performers; in so doing, the show cultivates a spectatorship that requires gender and sexual norms to be performed in ways that are acceptable in public (Windle 2010).

The anxiety over masculine representation on SYTYCD plays out publicly: the policing of masculinity and explicit critiques about its performance or lack thereof circumscribe its expression, at the same time reinforcing gender norms. Judges noticeably reference masculinity in a way that does not single out femininity, whereas explicit references to female dancers rarely, if ever, make specific mention of them not being feminine enough. On the contrary, female dancers—especially the winner of Season 7, Lauren Froderman—are lauded for their expressive range. However, the same range of expressivity is not extended to the male dancers who venture into territory typically associated with the feminine; neither are they similarly rewarded. Thus, any critical feminist or gender-studies approach to SYTYCD must raise issues of gender parity.
FAILED "MASCULINITY" AND THE MALE DANCING BODY

The first season of SYTYCD captivated me for one reason: a critique that the executive producer and head judge Nigel Lythgoe leveled at Anthony Bryant, a black male dancer, for not dancing “masculine.” Lythgoe’s criticism exposes rigid notions of gender that carry particular social, cultural, political, and historical relevance, especially in a new media landscape that influences our perceptions. His criticism and the resulting heated exchange with the dancer frame my analysis for this section. In addition, the language used unveils a contestation of masculinity that underscores its significance in shaping gender performances (Kiesling 2005). The description that follows summarizes and provides contextualization of Bryant’s audition.

Bryant, a slender dancer, entered the stage dressed in a tight, midriff-baring unbuttoned shirt and form-fitting dance shorts that exposed the long lines of his legs. Expressing a certain confidence yet also a discernible coyness, he danced a lyrical contemporary solo. Tall and graced with a supple body, Bryant performed a routine that showed a combination of his unique skills and talent. The opening sequence displayed his virtuosity with a series of turns in second position. After multiple turns, he released his head, arching into a backward arabesque turn. Next, he performed a series of emotive gestures with his arms, then reached out toward the audience and walked to the upstage right corner.

Then he took a deep lunge to the floor with his legs turned out to pick up a ribbon, revealing beautifully pleasing lines and his balletic training. Taking the ribbon in hand, he executed a series of turns, cutting the space with his arms as he crossed the stage, whirling and circling the long ribbon. Keeping the ribbon in constant motion to his side and above his head, Bryant curved his torso forward and backward, all while smiling. Here the camera cut to Nigel Lythgoe, whose grimace expressed confusion. Another shot cut to Bonnie Lythgoe, who looked on in wonderment. At the end of his presentation, Bryant walked diagonally upstage, keeping the ribbon in motion, and ended by sliding into a backward split. Overall, his dancing demonstrated a high level of virtuosity and athleticism.

Upon finishing their solos, contestants immediately receive direct feedback about their performances. Head judge Lythgoe took the greatest offense to Bryant’s dancing. Although he recognized Bryant for his “incredible technique,” Lythgoe highly disapproved of the “Russian gymnastic Olympic routine,” emphasizing, “I didn’t like the second part of the routine at all, at all.” And although he expressed reservation about Bryant’s dancing with a ribbon, all judges unanimously agreed that he should move on to the next section of the audition process, wherein dancers are given choreography and partnering work.

Subsequently, dancers all learn movements together and then perform them in groups divided by gender. After that, dancers pair up to learn a combination consisting of male–female partnering. This element of the audition and the driving narrative of SYTYCD’s competition tend to promote compulsive heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007). While Bryant danced with his partner, judges singled him out for not dancing strongly enough. Furthermore, they agreed that his partner not only danced stronger, but led the pairing better. Standing before the judges, Bryant received positive comments from all three. For the purposes of my analysis, however, I specifically draw from the dialogue between Lythgoe and Bryant to show pointedly how the language of masculinity polices the male dancing body. The following records their exchange:

**Lythgoe:** That’s the good news. The bad news is you are not coming with us to Hollywood. I worried about you when you brought out that [gesturing to the ribbon] and started dancing with it. I need boy dancers to be strong—masculine.

**Bryant:** [confidently] I am strong.

**Lythgoe:** You didn’t look like a masculine dancer with your partner.

**Bryant:** Really? [He is emotional, eyes watering.] What—dressed with that shirt with your partner.

**Lythgoe:** That’s the good news. The bad news is you are not coming with us to Hollywood. I worried about you when you brought out that [gesturing to the ribbon] and started dancing with it. I need boy dancers to be strong—masculine.

**Bryant:** [interrupting and moving with strong jazz arm gestures] So you’re saying doing this [gesturing to the ribbon] and started dancing with it? Will that help?

**Lythgoe:** [does not hear] Sorry?

**Bryant:** Really. [He is emotional, eyes watering.] That’s interesting. I’ve never gotten that before.

**Lythgoe:** It did not come across with your partner.

**Bryant:** [interrupting and moving with strong jazz arm gestures] So you’re saying doing this [gesturing to the ribbon] and started dancing with it? Will that help?

**Lythgoe:** [does not hear] Sorry?

**Bryant:** Really? [He is emotional, eyes watering.] That’s interesting. I’ve never gotten that before.

**Lythgoe:** But why didn’t you? You’re a male. Why should I have to ask you to dance [more masculine, or like a man]?

**Bryant:** [interrupting and moving with strong jazz arm gestures] So you’re saying doing this is not masculine.

**Lythgoe:** What—dressed with that shirt with your chest out like that? And with what you’re doing?

**Bryant:** What do you expect? Look at Hollywood. Look at media. Everyone’s dressing like this with their shirt [gesturing to it being open]. What? Do you want me to button it? Will that help?

**Lythgoe:** Do I think you’re masculine when you dance? No, I don’t.

**Bryant:** Well, can you give me a chance to be more masculine?
L: You were dancing with a partner, young man. You were dancing with a partner. Was that partner male or female?
B: She was female.
L: Which one do you think I would want to be masculine then?
B: Me, and I was.
L: Well, that’s your opinion. Mine was not.
B: You need to review the tapes a little more I think. Thank you [walks off stage].

The camera, ever hungry to expose the dancers’ conditions, closed in on Bryant after receiving the judge’s criticism. Emotional and crying, he talked to the camera. He said, “I didn’t make it. He said he didn’t think I danced masculine. And, it’s hard to take. But I definitely disagree with him. I’ve never heard that before. I’ve never heard anyone tell me that I don’t dance masculine. I’ve never, no one has ever told me that I look feminine when I dance with the ribbon.” This emotional moment closed the scene and the previous showdown between Lythgoe and Bryant.

CONFRONTING MALE DANCER STEREOTYPES

Bryant’s audition on SYTYCD and his defiance of conventional masculinity are highly instructive for looking at gender performance in dance and culture. The anxiety and the implication inherent in Lythgoe’s critique are widely known within the dance world yet are not publicly acknowledged (Risner 2009). Thus, exposing this tension and its consumption ultimately focuses our attention toward how RT reinforces and propagates inflexible and narrow masculine representations. Examining this case offers dance educators a practical guide for challenging male dancer stereotypes. This example therefore provides an opportunity to intervene in, and illuminate these practices, which deserve wider scrutiny.

What does not dancing “masculine” mean—or look like? How is a challenge to masculine identity, whether on or offstage, intimately tied to homophobia as well as to suspicions of effeminacy and homosexuality? How is language used in the construction of dominant masculinities?

Lythgoe’s unequivocal denunciation raises the specter of homosexuality and effeminacy in the tradition of Western theatrical dance. Here, old prejudices against the male dancer, ever haunting, surface in the mass media environment of popular culture. In so doing, the male dancing body becomes a site for contemporary discourse on the body. As a result, Lythgoe’s unchallenged critique of masculinity risks leaving it wide open for interpretive possibilities.

Addressing these possibilities and their interpretations gives further context for this section. For instance, was Bryant’s outfit the source of Lythgoe’s discontent, or was it the role he was playing, the style of choreography, the choreographer’s intention, his movement quality, his height and stature, the ribbon, the rhythmic gymnastic component, or a combination of all these elements? How does Bryant’s choice of dancing with a ribbon, a practice commonly associated with female rhythmic gymnasts, offer a commentary on hegemonic masculinity? As part of my dissertation research, I interviewed Bryant, who stated that he intentionally danced with a ribbon.

Lythgoe’s language establishes strength and domination as central to the construction of masculinity, where men control and exert authority over women (Collins 2006). The failure of the other judges and the media to critique or hold Lythgoe accountable establishes hegemonic masculinity as an apparatus determining the relationship between dominant, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities. SYTYCD offers clear evidence of R. W. Connell’s (2005) definition of hegemonic masculinity where he contends, “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual” (77). Lythgoe embodies these dual imperatives by demanding conformity to masculine ideals, while also presiding in a position of power to enforce them. In addition, Lythgoe’s criticism offers a telling glimpse into the ways narrow definitions of masculinity operate to reinforce dominant notions of how men should think and behave. Therefore, analyzing rigid masculine expectations exposes the complicit nature and power structures that often conceal male privilege, dominant and subordinated masculinities, and the fact that these in turn work in concert with homophobia to define male behavior, attitudes, and expression. For gay men who contest conventional masculinity’s representation and hierarchical status, the silence takes individual and collective tolls.

Indeed, the failure of American contemporary dance to confront homophobia shifts attention away from issues of homosexuality and effeminacy and instead onto issues of perception—namely, to the embodiment of a hypermasculine ideal. American contemporary dance becomes a staged public relations campaign, so to speak, of how to present and represent men in dance. These approaches, however, fail to deal with the unspoken associations of dance and homosexuality. More pointedly, the continued assumption of the inextricability of men dancing, homosexuality, and effeminacy needs thorough debunking. American contemporary dance’s eschewal of effeminacy and homosexuality is intimately tied to perceptions dictating how dance is to be received publicly.
Bryant’s performance might present a visionary expression of masculinity. That is, his actions expose the limitations of democratic ideals that celebrate the individual freedom of expression. On the one hand, individual freedom is touted as a hallmark of American democracy, yet on the other hand Bryant’s example shows a curtailment of those freedoms. Daring to express his singular voice reveals Pickett and Broughton’s (2000) observation of a “culture that worships the individual but still fears those who are different” (1). Nevertheless, his defiance confronts the fear of men dancing outside the norm, particularly in American contemporary dance. A world known all too well for avoiding the unavoidable—gay men in dance—must now approach the unapproachable: the stereotypes, stigmas, and myths attached to men dancing. To continue on the path of avoidance only reinforces much of what we already know. And although the dance world embraces significant numbers of gay men, their lived experiences remain constrained by homophobia (Risner 2002). As long as we silence and hide gay men in dance, denying them a voice that elevates their experiences—not only regarding their sexuality but inclusive of it—dance will not be free of its prejudices.

For these reasons, dance educators must incorporate new approaches to advance gender and sexual equality with our students. Dance education and pedagogical practices offer some of the best ways of tackling these issues head-on.

**PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES**

Bryant’s performance, the discourse about the male dancing body, and the broader social and cultural issues examined serve multiple purposes for dance education: (a) they further illuminate that men are, in fact, gendered (often a taken-for-granted assumption); (b) they reveal the performative nature of masculinity and its social construction; (c) they underscore the contingent, contextual, and changing nature of gender performance; (d) they show the inextricable links between gender and sexuality; (e) they situate both homophobia and effeminacy as crucial factors determining the policing and “reading” of normative masculinity; and (f) they upend stereotypes about the male dancing body.

Dance educators’ engagement with these six areas demonstrates a commitment to the practice of democratic education and social justice that builds knowledge, inspires action, and challenges all forms of domination (North 2009). As educators, it is incumbent on us to offer our students critical perspectives about the nature and dynamic of macropolitical forces that shape American culture—as well as how artists work to create a more humane world (Pryor 2006). Using feminist strategies to teach about sexism, Copp and Kleinman (2008) argue for “sociologically mindful” practice and pedagogical frameworks that advocate eliminating social injustice. In sum, efforts to challenge the stigma and prejudice faced by male dancers—and the more pervasive forms of marginalization that occur for gay men in dance—reveal the actions needed for sustained intervention by dance educators and professionals alike.

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