

# **When Men Dance: Communities of Privilege & Cultural Resistance in Dance Education**

Saturday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>: 9-10AM

## **PANEL OUTLINE**

**Draft 061707**

**ABSTRACT:** This panel presentation explores dance education experiences of boys and men as a form of cultural resistance and as an important means for sharing a more common humanity through movement and expression. Recent discourses on male youth in dance indicate prevailing social stigmatization, heteronormative assumptions, narrow definitions of masculinity, heterosexist justifications for males in dance, and internalized homophobia in the field. For those boys and young males in dance education however, choosing to dance may be seen as an important vehicle for challenging dominant notions about gender, privilege, sexual orientation, and the body. The ways in which male youth confront heterocentric bias, gender norms, and gendered bodies, as well as peer pressure and dominant cultural ideology are explored by a diverse panel of male dance professionals.

The panel presentation focuses on key social and community questions of affirmation, difference, physical pleasure, and marginalization. Recent research in dance education and physical education has begun to explore the ways in which hegemonic masculinity (as an institution) can be challenged through the participation and experiences of boys and male youth in dance. Central to this work is the notion that dance education may serve as an important means for disrupting dominant cultural assumptions about acceptable ways of moving for males and to challenge cultural stereotypes about male dancers and non-heterosexual modes of sexuality. Obviously, this is not to say that all boys and young men in dance consciously enter the dance studio with the intention of challenging dominant paradigms of masculinity. Nor can it be denied that some males in dance reaffirm narrow definitions of masculinity and heterosexism through their actions and discourses. Rather, this area of research suggests that the experiences of males in dance education can provide powerful insights into hegemonic assumptions about dance, gender and sexuality, as well as dominant codes that govern all the former.

While we have little doubt that the physical nature of dance is commensurate with that of football or soccer, we are concerned about discourses that colonialize dance with the intention of making dance more accessible and palatable. Dominant discourses often justify male participation in dance with strategies and testimonials that clearly serve to buttress homophobic stereotypes. Panelists from various areas of the dance profession (teacher, artistic director, administrator, choreographer, researcher) will address their own perspectives as men in dance and the possibilities that dance education offers for building communities of cultural resistance in dance education, exhuming the taken-for-grantedness of gendered male bodies, dominant masculinity, and heterosexual embodiment.

## **OUTLINE**

- I. Opening Introduction (Topic, Format): 5 minutes
- II. Five Panelists' Remarks (5 minutes each/max 2 double spaces pages): 25 minutes
- III. Select Panelists' Responses (2 minutes each/1 minute followups): 10 minutes
- IV. Open Floor: 12 minutes
- V. Final Thoughts (Brief) from each panelist (1 minute each): 8 minutes

**TOTAL TIME: 60 minutes**

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## I. Opening Introduction (Topic, Panelists, Format): 5 minutes

**Doug Risner, Ph.D., MFA**

Chair, Maggie Allesee Department of Dance  
Wayne State University

Good morning, I'm Doug Risner moderator of this panel that explores complicated questions about male privilege (often taken-for-granted in our society) and the social marginalization (or being on the fringe in our society as a dancer), as well as the stigma that remains closely associated with males in dance. We address the conference theme by looking at dancing for boys and men as an act of cultural resistance, and the ways in which building a community of males in dance can/should enhance the quality of life for boys and male youth in our programs and schools.

The full abstract of this presentation is included in your conference booklet, as well as the bios of our panelists. A full copy of our presentation, with the panelists' remarks, is also available at [www.dougrisner.com](http://www.dougrisner.com)

Recent research on male youth in dance (Michael Gard in Australia; Saul Keyworth in the UK; Kai Lehokinen in Finland; and my work here in the US) indicates prevailing social stigma, narrow definitions of masculinity, homophobic prejudice, as well as social isolation, peer harassment, and the lack of male role models. Deborah Williams' 2003 dissertation on male adolescents in dance revealed three significant themes: boys (33 participants, age 12-18) felt intense social isolation, have many unmet needs, and that, despite lack of social support from peers and family, as well as negative experiences, they persevere in their dance study.

Williams also found that boys felt a need to keep their dance life a secret from academic peers; felt perceptions of homosexuality regardless of their sexual orientation; and were frustrated with teachers, parents, and directors who justify dance activities by relating them to sports---as one of Williams' participants declared: "I'm an artist, not a football player! Why does everyone keep insisting on comparing me to a sports star who takes ballet for exercise as though that should make it alright?" Good question, don't you think? Let's see how our panelists respond.

Our format today will begin with each panelist, from his own particular perspective and experience, presenting his opening remarks on the topic. Panelists will then have an opportunity to respond to one another, with brief followups as necessary. We will then open the floor for questions and comments; we will close with brief, but highly prophetic statements from each of the panelists.

We'll begin with Dr. Edward (Ted) Warburton, Assistant Professor of Dance, University of California, Santa Cruz, with his remarks entitled, FROM BRAVADO TO BRAVO: BOYS IN DANCE & SOCIETY.

Van Dyke, J. (1996) Gender and success in the American dance world, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(5), pp. 535-543.

Van Dyke, J. (1992) *Modern Dance in a Postmodern World: an analysis of federal arts funding and its impact on the field of modern dance* (Reston, VA, American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance).

## **II. Five Panelists' Remarks (5 minutes each/max 2 double spaces pages): 25 minutes**

From Bravado to Bravo: Boys in Dance and Society  
**Edward (Ted) Warburton, Ed.D.**  
University of California, Santa Cruz

As a dancer, educator and researcher, I am keenly interested in the nature of male development in American society and in the minority status of boys in dance in private and public schools. These twin conditions present unique pressures on boys' participation in dance.

By most accounts, American boys are not faring well in school or society. They have lower grades, lower class ranks, and achieve fewer honors than girls. More boys are involved in crime, alcohol and drugs. They are more likely to repeat a grade and about six times more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). College statistics are similar, if boys get there at all. Boys are on the weak side of a growing education gender gap. The findings are new, but the debate is not. From Carol Gilligan's (1982) book "In A Different Voice" to Christina Hoff Sommers' (2000) book "The War Against Boys," the gender debate continues to burn long and hard on issues of identity and ideology, privilege and equity. Gilligan's seminal work on adolescent girls describes how assertive, confident, and proud young girls "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence. In contrast, adolescent boys seem find their voices, becoming more confident, even beyond their abilities. But it is the inauthentic voice of bravado, posturing, foolish risk-taking, and gratuitous violence. William Pollack, director of the Center for Young Men at Harvard, calls this the "boy code," which teaches boys that they are supposed to be in power, and so they begin to act as if they are. In adolescence, both boys and girls get their first real dose of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it.

Dance and dance educators have long played an important role in reframing these ideologies of femininity and masculinity. Dance has the power to be a great equalizer. There is a reason that female dancers outnumber male dancers 300 to 1. Girls flock to dance classes in part, I believe, because they experience the phenomenon of dance as empowering. They like the way dance builds strength of body and mind. Instead of suppressing ambition, most dance educators champion a healthy dose of determination in girls as a virtue, a means to self-improvement and self-expression. For boys, on the other hand, dance can be a wake-up call, both physically and emotionally.

As a young boy, I was energized by the image of Rudolf Nureyev leaping through the air with the greatest of ease. When I first started dancing, I realized how hard it is to leap through the air with the greatest of ease. A lot of boys at this age experience frustration, often conflating it with humiliation. Fortunately, my teachers understood society's "boy code," knowing that what boys need turns out to be pretty much what girls need. Boys need

us to allow them their emotions; accept a high level of activity; speak their language; and treat them with respect. Instead of allowing my frustration to take hold – instead of inflating my juvenile sense of power and privilege, which I had experienced in sports – my dance teachers taught me the many ways a boy can be a man, using discipline to guide and build, and modeling manhood as emotionally attached. The male dance community, in particular, taught me that privilege was something earned through effort, not an advantage given free of charge.

Gender inequality exists within every aspect of the dance sector in the U.S. Fewer boys and men participate in dance at all levels than girls and women. For this reason, men and boys in dance are most certainly accorded a special status, often afforded more opportunities than our female colleagues. But I do not believe that this is the foremost lesson that men in dance learn. What I learned as a heterosexual white man in dance is that male privilege is *less* about getting what one wants when one wants it and *more* about embracing the opportunity to work hard in a discipline that expands one's emotional and psychological repertoire. The experience of dance can help reframe masculinity as a condition that allows one to express a wider emotional, physical and creative range. This is the message that boys and American society at large needs to hear, and dance educators are well positioned to deliver it.

Helping Boys Find Themselves Through an Education in Dance  
**Frederick Curry, MA**  
Coordinator, Dance Education Program Office  
New York University

My primary lens for the panel is my K-12 teaching experiences--as a freelance teaching artist, faculty in performing arts high schools, and as a student-teacher site supervisor. I believe most boys in the U.S. receive their introduction to dance in a K-12 setting. Consequently, this setting can be a pivotal point for launching them on a life-long critical engagement with dance—as it has been for me.

In terms of privilege and marginalization, dance is a microcosm of the larger society, and hence replicates all the “isms” found in the larger society—sexism, racism, heterosexism and homophobia. On a personal level, these issues are complicated because while being male might be seen to afford me a certain privilege, being African-American would not. I personally never felt a sense of privilege or entitlement in dance, so am not conscious that I replicate it in my own teaching. In teaching, I think it's an ongoing process of acknowledging all the “isms” and their various manifestations and limitations, but not letting them dictate outcomes for me or for my students.

In terms of working with boys in the K-12 environment, what I have experienced and observed is the importance of first “meeting boys where they are,” then facilitating an expansion of possibilities for them—through movement. For example, many boys are comfortable with movement that replicates the high dynamic and competitive nature of certain sports. From a teaching perspective using frameworks that accommodate this type of movement can be an effective starting point—a way of engaging some boys. However, as this approach minimizes or ignores many other aspects of being and doing through movement (especially light, flowing, sustained movements), from there educators have a responsibility to lead boys through an investigation of a much broader spectrum of movement expression and the accompanying emotional states.

From what I have observed, the process of marginalization of boys in the K-12 setting seems to manifest as they progress beyond primary school creative movement. In my experience, the number of boys participating in dance thins out in secondary school when dance tends to become optional in boys' schedules and also more technical, and other educational and budding career pressures start to weigh in. The irony is that, as academic and social pressures increase in secondary school, dance training can play a pivotal role in helping students balance the intellectual, physical, and emotional aspects of their selves.

Another challenge for boys' continued participation in dance is that, in our capitalistic culture, financial wealth is often the arbiter of career success—especially for men. I think the lack of financial gain and accompanying lack of "power" and potential for "fame" associated with careers in dance is a significant factor in reduced participation. I also believe this in part accounts for many boys transferring their attention to sports or into related commercial arts disciplines such as musical theatre.

Those challenges aside, K-12 dance educators can provide boys with a framework for cultivating awareness and critical reflection on issues around male privilege and marginalization in dance. Through the developmentally appropriate creative frameworks K-12 dance provides, boys can learn to relate their inner self to their outer world and develop self-reflection, interpersonal sensitivity, and the ability to critically reflect on the societal and cultural factors influencing their lives. Consequently, through dance, boys would be well positioned to consciously subvert any constraints that don't serve their sense of self or their idea of the men they aspire to be.

Male Dancers, Gender-Specific Movement  
& the Effects of Gender on Choreographic Careers in Dance  
**Ben Munisteri, MA**  
Artistic Director, Ben Munisteri Dance Projects, NYC

My contributions to this panel are considered in terms of my role as a artistic director of a small, contemporary nonprofit dance company based in New York City. My chief responsibilities are to create dances that tour to various venues and festivals, hire and rehearse dancers, teach (mostly in higher education), and raise money. I work regularly with male dance students, most of whom are either in college or recently graduated and studying at a private studio or festival.

I address here three areas: perceived attitudes among audience, funders, and dance presenters about the presence of male dancers within a dance company; issues around choreographing gender-specific roles or movements; and college dance students' beliefs about the differences between male and female careers in dance. Unfortunately, I offer no answers, empirical data, or self-evident facts. My remarks, therefore, are based on my own observations and experiences. I will attempt to discuss each aspect insofar as it relates to the central dichotomy of this panel, i.e., privilege and marginalization.

Does the appearance of male dancers in a company confer status? When I began choreographing ensemble works for various group shows at small, "downtown" dance venues in New York City (c. 1993), I was the only man dancing in my company. At the time, it seemed to me that women dancers were more willing to work with an unknown,

unfunded, unincorporated young choreographer with less-than-estimable gigs than their male counterparts were. However, I concluded from various responses to my work that audiences, funders, and dance presenters might view my dance company more favorably if it contained that precious and rare commodity—good men dancers. Are male dance students who are preparing for a performing career aware of this privileged status?

Are dance roles gender-specific? Are there movements that convey different or even transgressive meanings when performed by a male? None of the movement phrases, gestures, or roles in my dance repertory are gender-specific. (The exception may be during some partnering sequences.) This sometimes means the men in my company are not comfortable doing movements they had learned as “feminine” and would therefore betray their masculinity. As dance teachers, what sorts of movements do we ask girls to do that that we wouldn’t give to boys? Do we limit male dance students’ movements and therefore their experiences?

What do college dance students expect in a future dance career? Several published studies (Adair, 1992; Van Dyke, 1992, 1996; Garber, et. al., 2007) give evidence that men in dance have benefited disproportionately in terms of funding, education, income, and employment. Moreover, mainstream press articles (*Dance Magazine*, March 2001; *The New York Times*, November 4, 2001) that reach the same conclusion may be disseminated more readily among dance students. If our male college dance students expect greater opportunities in their performing careers, do they also expect privilege if they embark on a choreography career? And more generally, are we preparing either gender for the enormous financial and physical burdens of an early-21<sup>st</sup>-century post-college dance career? What can they—both men and women students—realistically expect now?

Men dancers and choreographers perhaps unknowingly engage in acts of cultural resistance in that we embody paradoxes that challenge most hegemonic models. Employment opportunities come to us more easily than to our more numerous female counterparts in dance, yet we earn less money than our male counterparts do in other professions. We are often seen as “other” in educational environments that nonetheless frequently recognize our mere presence in the dance studio—before we even begin to dance—as a serious and defiant act.

Adair, C. (1992) *Women and Dance: sylphs and sirens*. (New York, New York University Press).

Garber, E., Stankiewicz, M., Sandell, R., & Risner, D. (2007) Gender equity in the visual arts and dance education, in: S. Klein (Ed) *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity through Education* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum).

Van Dyke, J. (1996) Gender and success in the American dance world, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 19(5), pp. 535-543.

Van Dyke, J. (1992) *Modern Dance in a Postmodern World: an analysis of federal arts funding and its impact on the field of modern dance* (Reston, VA, American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance).

## Complicated Crises for Male Dancers

**Ray Robinson, MFA**

[Doctoral Candidate, Michigan State University]

Wayne State University

For today, I'm most strongly identifying with my faculty/scholar role. Ben's comments about his "otherness" reminded me of identity development theories—most of which have strong racial, gender, and cultural implications that don't account for being "other," at least in how being "other" plays into identity development. It is clear that the perception of "otherness" begins young and includes both positive and negative experiences. For example, as a faculty member, I may identify [insert gendered quality here] as part of an evaluation, which then must be accepted or rejected by the student as part of his identity.

Erickson talks of identity development as a series of crises, others have argued that it is also largely a social negotiation. O'Neil defines gender role conflict as occurring when "rigid, restrictive gender roles result in personal restriction." I can attribute much of my identity to a perceived lack of rigid, restrictive gender roles. However, I can identify a series of crises in the dance career that have defined me. First, choosing modern over ballet—partly because I enjoyed the sociality, but also because I did not want to perform in tights (later performed in tights, but that was another crisis). How do I answer when someone asks what I do? There is another crisis—I look like a white male who might belong to the majority. Do I maintain that by revealing only that I am a professor? Reveal some by saying I'm in dance? I teach technique? It is a crisis on the other side to be male in a largely female company.

Does my gender give me an "in" if I am a choreographer mingling with corporate America? In this case I am both privileged and marginal, which may advantage me in finding funding over female choreographers.

In my earlier comments, I mentioned viral action. Discussions can be held at global levels and those discussions can affect local dialogue, but locally schools, departments, studios, can loosen the restrictive definitions of gender roles. If it is not a deep crisis to dance, boys can dance. Ted mentioned the value of dance in building psychological skills, which I agree with, and as he said, the teachers are, or ought to be, equipped with that understanding.

One arena I work in is a general education course offered by the dance department at Wayne State University. We do a lot of writing, reading, and discussing, but we also move every week. These classes, which gain popularity because of the perception that they will be easy (another topic altogether), have an interesting outcome. The men, reticent at first to participate in the movement and creative portions of class, transform and become insistent creators and movers. Their reflections as written to me suggest attitude changes—not only about dance, but about their roles in it.

This is not surprising for college-aged male students. In her study of 800 boys and girls in an elementary school dance program, Willis (1995) found that boys are more likely to cover large amounts of space, used more physical energy, moved quickly, took physical risks, involved others in displaying their creations, and approached their own presentations with confidence. Girls worked in limited space, moved at a slow to moderate tempo, did not take physical risks, spent considerable time standing still, and apprehensively showed their presentations. When working in mixed gender groups, boys

frequently assumed leadership positions; girls often complained that boys would not cooperate because they separated themselves from the group (Willis, 1995). Cushway (1996) found that although elementary school girls follow direction and execute movement activity promptly and quietly, boys often demand and receive more attention, validation, positive feedback, and reward in dance class.

Cushway, Diana. (1996). Changing the dance curriculum. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 24(3-4), 118-122.

Willis, C. (1995). Factors that affect dance programs. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 66(4), 58-63.

Intersections of Masculinity & Ethnicity in Dance:  
Negotiating Male Privilege in a Predominantly Female Profession

**Jeff Rebudal, MFA**

Assistant Professor of Dance, Wayne State University  
Artistic Director, Rebudal Dance, NYC

As a dance artist in the performing arts in academia, I find my role(s) constantly evolve year after year. For this panel, I will be addressing these questions mainly as a choreographer, from my experiences as a dance educator in higher education, as well as in the professional setting of concert modern dance and opera.

Starting formal dance training at the late age of 19, I would say that these ideas of privilege and marginalization that I experienced come from being a male student in dance and obviously not Caucasian. As in most cases, as a male I was given more attention by instructors in class and opportunities to perform. I would like to believe it was more about my potential talent as a dancer rather than my gender. However, I believe the latter played a significant part of my training. This preferential treatment probably stems from the dearth of male dancers compared to the amount of female dancers. Therefore, nurturing the male dance student.

Deciding to pursue dance at a university, and later as a career, is not what most first generation Filipino Americans decide for a career path. My decision was received with both encouragement on the one hand, and dismayed concern by my parents and others on the other. As a professional modern dancer in New York, I usually made it through the last rounds of an audition or "got the part." Because modern dance generally tends to be more inclusive of diverse individuals (race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.), I found that, in addition to being a male dancer, my "Asianess" (physical characteristics and mannerisms, outlook) often helped in the audition process. In one experience, my race was not marginalized (particularly in an Asian-based modern dance company). Ironically, in this company, Caucasian males/females were the minority.

As a member of another modern dance Company X, the artistic director was fortunate and proud to have an almost equally gendered and ethnically diverse company (6 men—five of which were gay-- and 6 women; African- American, Puerto Rican, Korean, Filipino, Italian, Irish, Scottish, Jewish, and Greek.) However, in companies group dynamics are important and one's sexuality does impact ensemble situations. As the company grew, the turnover of members would occur, thus shifting the dynamics. Consciously or unconsciously, the artistic director of Company X would gravitate towards gay men as company members. On the contrary for another modern dance Company Y, (the artistic director being a white

straight male) since its inception has had predominantly, if not exclusively, straight men until fairly recent.

When informally surveying (i.e. through discussion) heterosexual male dancers, these individuals initially found the need to establish their heterosexuality in the studio and socially. As a gay individual in the studio setting (dancer/ choreographer), I never felt the need to establish my own sexuality, as this does not fully define my existence as a human being nor as an artist.

As a professional choreographer (modern dance and opera), retaining male dancers is a challenge. Whether it is a personal aesthetic and/or a phemonal dynamic, the presence of men on stage completes an ensemble. When first starting to do work in NYC, I had the privilege of using both professional male dancers and students dancers (the latter as a viable pool, though not seasoned). With at least 50% men, this made an impact on my work. Retaining these males dancer often is a challenge as there tends to be more work for males dancers because of the lack of available male dancers in the field. Knowing this, male dancers would sometime not take their roles seriously if they did not feel invested in the work/project knowing that they could probably get another dance job elsewhere.

Currently, as a choreographer, for me it is less about gender specific roles and privilege. I tend to give parts based upon abilities and talent (and who is present at rehearsal due to scheduling conflict) rather than gender and sexuality. Consequently, because of the dearth of male dancers in the college setting, I have to admit, that the tendency is to nurture the male dance student (and like my own experience, the cycle continues).

Most male dance students in colleges and universities feel the need to establish their sexuality whether they are straight or indeed gay. The latter sometimes dealing with not revealing their true sexuality (“in the closet”). Post- adolescent boys (late teens), are often awkward in nature and continuing to explore and discover who they are (i.e. sexuality), dance can sometimes allow them to express this uncertain phase of their lives.

Having positive experiences in the studio and classroom through movement exploration and follow up discussion /reflection that is integrated into lesson plans that address issues of movement in relationship to gender and sexuality, may be a step towards educating students. Also, having effective positive gay role models for students to seek advice both in dance and self-discovery experiences has the potential to make a beneficial impact in the education setting.

### **III. Select Panelists’ Responses: 10 minutes** **[Three 2- minute responses with 1-minute followups]**

- Curry responds to Munisteri: Responding to Ben’s thoughts on gender-specific movement and how Frederick has addressed these issues in the K-12 environment:
  - Ben [1 minute followup]
- Warburton responds to Robinson & Curry: Responding to the cultural stigma of ‘men in tights’ (which Warburton wore for many years with Boston Ballet & ABT) both literally ‘men in tights’ as Robinson noted and metaphorically, as Curry noted in the progression for male youth from creative dance to ‘technique.’
  - Ray [1 minute followup]

- Curry [1 minute followup]
- Munisteri responds to Rebudal: Responding to his my own policies and company group dynamics that are different from Rebudal's professional company experiences
  - Jeff [1 minute followup]

### **III. Open Floor (Doug moderates): 12 minutes**

Risner: We will open the floor for comments and questions. If possible, please direct your question directly to one of the panelists. If you'd rather make a general comment, please do so as well. We'd like to get to as many of you as possible. Please stand and state your name, thanks.

### **IV. Final Thoughts (Brief) from each panelist (1 minute each): 8 minutes**

We will conclude this session with brief closing statements by each of the panelists. Let's go in reverse opening order: Jeff; Raymond; Ben; Frederick; and Ted.

TOTAL TIME: 60 minutes