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Gender and dance majoring

How adding a gender studies major helps you see the way dance promotes only two ways to be in the world

by Samantha Scheller

Going into college as a dance major came with stipulations from my parents. If I was going to get a degree in dance, I also needed to get a degree from somewhere else on campus—one with “real world” application and “security.” Their concern came from multiple angles: the desire for a back-up plan, in case I either got injured or decided one day that I didn’t love dance as much as I used to; and also their desire for me to be continually challenged intellectually. Either way, I agreed to their conditions; it was worth the extra work to be able to continue studying what I loved.

My first attempt to find another major was Psychology, the only other area of study that piqued even a fraction of my interest the way dance had. But I discovered I didn’t find topics such as the development of an adolescent’s psychology to be particularly relevant, especially to my studies in dance. Second, I thought I’d try my hand at Neuroscience, which related to some areas of psychology I actually enjoyed studying, like the inner workings of the brain. But I quickly discovered that where there is neuroscience, the entire Biology core curriculum soon follows, requiring me to take Physics, Math, Organic Chemistry, etc. etc... need I explain any further? Given the competitiveness of the bio-core and my late start in neuroscience, I was already at a disadvantage, and ultimately decided it wasn’t an option.

My third and last futile attempt at adding to my Dance major was English. Getting to read and discuss books all day? Count me in! My dad burst into laughter at the thought of me graduating with not one but two economically feeble degrees, and his amusement disqualified English as an option for me. As I considered each of these options, I discovered that I could not imagine myself pursuing anything else but dance. Or, at least, I wanted to be able to link my daily life as a dancer to the new major, and be enriched by an additional area of study. Finally, I found the answer.

From the start, Gender and Sexuality Studies was different than my other attempts to find a second major. It was a field I was actually passionate about. For the first time in an academic class outside of the dance major, I did not feel like the time I was spending away from the arts school was making me a lesser dancer. In fact, I quickly found that it enriched my experience and understanding of myself as an artist, dancer, performer, choreographer, student, and any other hat we dance majors find ourselves wearing. I had ideas that had never occurred to me in my dance studies. But I’m here to tell you that they should have. After over a hundred readings in ten courses, I can vouch for the relevance of the expansive and intersectional field that is Gender and Sexuality Studies for our dance education.

Gender, sexuality, and race are all socially constructed concepts. And yet, this social construction does not make them any less real or relevant in our daily lives. As dancers, our art is our bodies, and categories like gender and race are visual markers on these bodies. To ignore the role gender plays in the identities we form as dance artists could be detrimental to achieving a deeper understanding of ourselves in relation to the larger dance culture we exist in. Gender has been embedded in dance from the start, just as its influence is embedded in ourselves. These influences affect our everyday lives as dance majors, from the clothes we wear, to the training we receive, and the expectations of our movement.

On the first day of every course, in every quarter, we are handed a syllabus. Along with expectations for participation, attendance, and assignments, the syllabus has a section somewhat unique to the dance department's studio classes: a dress code. Unlike the dress code for a bio lab, which provides safety guidelines for lab personnel, this section of the syllabus could be disregarded as arbitrary. It's true that our parents used to have to get us ready for dance class, picking our outfits, pulling our hair tightly back, and packing our dance bags with the necessary shoes for the day's classes, but most of us have been successfully dressing ourselves for years now. Still, the dance dress codes—only a few related to safety—survive. And our dress codes are often divided, by gender. This structure serves to perpetuate the gender binary that is historically fundamental in the dance styles we are training in, especially in ballet.

In ballet, we are conditioned to remember that men wear pants, “ladies” wear skirts, men wear black and white, “ladies” wear pink. Nowhere is there left room for gender expression beyond those norms, nowhere is there left room for androgyny. Something arguably superficial becomes a facet of our daily lives. It's so deeply embedded in the gender normative expectations that align with our societal standards, we hardly even notice it. Our dress code is a simple but pertinent example of how binary gender expectations pervade our everyday lives. Even without looking at the roles we are expected to perform on stage, we can examine the gender we are expected to perform everyday beginning in the classroom.

We can all draw on personal experience to imagine who stands around us in a classroom. Early on, for every 20 girls you train with, there may be one boy present. As you move into higher levels of training, this ratio may become slightly more levelled, but only slightly, and only for a specific reason: while girls need to be perfect, boys just need potential. Keeping the roughly estimated 1/20 ratio in mind, think about how much individual attention is distributed to each portion. With almost every *grande allegro* combination, for example, there is a slight variation introduced for the men of the class, different than the standard one taught to the “ladies.” Men are usually given extra teaching time *and* additional corrections after they cross the floor—often alone, getting more scrutiny from the professor. So, 5% of the class room is now receiving at least 50% of the attention. And the division of this time is determined by gender.

I've also noticed how gender appears in dance history courses. At the start of one quarter, as I was teeming with excitement about getting a better intellectual understanding and foundation for the movement we embody in the studio every day, I found we were starting by learning to dance 16th-century Court Dances. Welcome to Dance History, today we'll be learning about dance's historical roots as a heteronormative mating ritual from hundreds (or what feels like thousands) of years ago. This introduction to the evolution of ballet was a reminder of the essential role that gender—and the distinction of two, separate genders—still plays in our dance education, even today. In these court dances, there are the female roles and male roles, and although there are normally not an even amount of boys and girls to pair up, and same-sex couplings are allowed, the distinction is still evident through the qualities each role possesses. The “man” of the pair is

expected to lead, to hold a tight frame, stand tall, take up space, and exude strength and stability. The “woman,” on the other hand, must exude grace, must fit within the frame her partner creates, and gently soften the edges of her body and limbs to create a curved imagery of intertwining between her partner and herself.

Is it just about performance of roles? Or are we expected to learn historical gendered qualities established centuries ago as part of our identity? Isn't the artistry with which we dance supposed to reflect our individuality? How can it accurately reflect our individual selves when not everyone accepts these gendered qualities (grace versus power, fluidity versus strength) at face value? The answer: it can't. And the explanation? We don't talk about it. I'm not critiquing the history we are taught, but more so the lack of discussion about the role that gender (as well as race, class, sexuality, etc.) played in the histories we are learning. And if it weren't for the critical lenses and knowledge I acquired studying gender and sexuality in Humanities, I never would have questioned what was missing.

Personally, I've found the most harmony between my two majors while studying modern dance or creating my own choreography. Given the roots of the modern dance movement in America, its founding accredited to the work of three women, its connection with gender seems inevitable. In fact, there is even a linkage between the development of modern dance (from early modern, to postmodern) and the different waves of feminist thought. As Susan Manning writes in *Feminism and Early Modern Dance*, “modern and postmodern dance are probably the only art forms in which various stages of feminist thinking are literally embodied” (156). In this movement, women were empowered to not only be performers, but also free thinkers and feelers.

But even beyond the female empowerment of the modern dance movement, it offered an appealing androgyny in movement vocabulary that had the potential to allow anyone to express movement qualities that weren't defined by gender. There are plenty of dancers who find empowerment through ballet, and I have the utmost respect for those people. However, in my personal journey here at university, as both an artist and an aspiring academic, modern and contemporary dance is where I found myself feeling the most empowered. Adding a major in Gender and Sexuality Studies has done nothing but enrich, enlighten, and support that decision.

Source cited:

Manning, Susan. 1997. “The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 153-66.

Samantha Scheller is scheduled to graduate in June with a BFA in Dance Performance, a BFA in Dance Choreography, and a BA in Gender and Sexuality Studies. She hopes to dance professionally in a company after college and eventually return to school to earn her MFA or PhD in Dance.