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MDP: Male Dancer Privilege—it really exists

With girls still outnumbering boys in most dance studios and universities, is it inevitable that male dancers are given special treatment to encourage them to stay in the field?

by Randolph “Andre” Rivera

As dancers we spend countless hours in the studio honing and refining our technique and craft. We rely heavily on the feedback and corrections from our professors and teachers because they give us an outside perspective on what we need to work on. This feedback inspires and motivates us to work harder and ultimately makes us better dancers. Sometimes, however, the bulk of this feedback is geared toward the male dancers in the room. Additionally, male dancers will often not be disciplined when they break the rules, for the sole reason that there are so few of them. This special attention and treatment is sometimes intentional, when teachers try to retain male dancers and help them develop for the good of the field. Whatever the reason, male dancers receive special privileges every day in many aspects of their dance careers.

It's not news to anyone when they hear that the number of female dancers in the dance world is significantly larger than the number of males. This could be partly because the notion of dance as a female art form still plagues society, and it's still generalized that if a guy dances, he's gay. Though the number of men who choose to pursue a career in dance has increased significantly in recent years, the sheer lack of men has historically led to a need to attract more males into the field. Teachers and professors have evidently learned that the best way to do that is by giving them special attention and treatment. Dance scholar Doug Risner describes this phenomenon in his book *Rehearsing Masculinity: Challenging the “Boy Code” in Dance Education*, when he states “because of the seeming legitimacy men bring to dance, although they comprise a definitive minority, males often receive more attention and cultivation in their classes, training, and scholarship awards” (Risner, 141).

As a male dancer, I have directly experienced this difference in treatment. When I first began dancing, I immediately felt that I was valued by my dance teachers and peers. I was constantly encouraged in technique classes and given solos in my first year of competitive training, which was unheard of among the girls. I assumed this was because I was a “naturally” good dancer. I was always told that I would have so many opportunities if I pursued dance professionally. It wasn't until I entered college that I realized that I had not been valued because my technique was amazing, but because I was a male dancer that they could use to their advantage in competitions. I was babied and frequently cast for the sole reason that I was a male. That's MDP, male dancer privilege.

In preparing to write this essay, I interviewed fifteen dancers to get more perspectives, asking if they had seen male privilege in their dance careers. Of these fifteen, twelve were female undergraduate dancers at the University of California, Irvine, and three were male dancers, one an undergraduate dance major at UC Irvine, one a graduate student there, and the last an undergraduate dancer at California State University, Long Beach. This sampling of dance majors echoes the male-to-female ratio of male to female dancers in our dance community.

My interviewees all agreed that male dancers are often given a false sense of entitlement in their early years of training, due to the significant amount of encouragement and support they receive from teachers and studio owners. Particularly in the competitive dance setting, it is not unheard of for men to place high, or receive coveted scholarships solely because they are male. It's common, 4th year dance major Megan Bowen said. "When I was younger in competition, it was kind of just a thing, that I would assume that a male dancer would place for solos in the top 10 just because they were male. Most often they did, even if they weren't even good. It was literally because they had a penis. I didn't see it as discouraging. I saw it as something that was odd."

I learned from my past artistic director that this higher scoring of pieces in the competition setting was noticed by studio owners, and male dancers were incorporated into typically all-female pieces so that they could receive what is known as "penis points." In other words, even if a male was not significantly good at dancing, the inclusion of them in a piece would warrant a better score from judges simply because they wanted to encourage males to continue dancing.

As a male dancer who consistently placed first for solos that were not technically advanced, I can now see I gained a false sense of confidence when competing. I was seen as the token male of my studio because I was one of the few who enjoyed competing in the genres of jazz and contemporary. This was a benefit for my studio, as most other boys only wanted to compete in hip hop pieces. As a result, I was placed in higher-level technique classes and given special attention to build my confidence for the stage. Meanwhile, the other boys remained in the lowest level technique classes. The studio then placed me in technically advanced pieces with women that required little to no dancing on my part, earning the piece "penis points" which helped them place first. In these competitive settings, men are not held to the strict rules that require dancers to attend technique classes, and if they did attend, they were often not pushed as hard, because they were not being asked to execute technically advanced combinations in their pieces.

It wasn't until I entered college that I realized how far behind my technique was, and how much I still needed to learn. It was a truly humbling experience, and one that undergrad dancers John Barclay and Nathan Gonzaga could relate to. In our interviews, the three of us agreed that we entered the collegiate setting feeling like we would succeed because our technique would be at the same level as the women we had trained with. When we were placed in lower level courses, we were told that our technique was not yet developed enough to warrant placement in higher levels. One dancer revealed to me that though the women he entered the program with were initially placed in the same level as he was, they were able to advance in the ballet courses each year, while he remained in the lower level for two years before he could move up.

Oftentimes, the false sense of entitlement bred in male dancers can cause trouble with colleagues in the dance world. Guys grow up being told that they are amazing and getting awards in competitions while never being pushed to truly work on their technique and develop their craft. Then they go out into the real world and have horrible attitudes. Undergraduate dancer Skye Schmidt experienced this when working on *The Nutcracker* with a hired male dancer. She described his attitude as annoying and extremely selfish, but that she and the other girls had to put up with his diva-like qualities because, even though the director was aware of the issue, "she needed the boys."

Male dancers are a commodity that many studio owners and dance teachers do not want to lose because they bring so much validity to the art form, while inspiring other men in the area to start dancing. In most studios, the maximum age at which a male dancer can continue training and competing is now significantly longer than it is for females. At the studio where I trained before college, female dancers were asked to leave after age 18 and find a different means of training. For men, this age limit was raised to 21, with instances of 23-year-olds still training there. When interviewing John Barclay, a first-year dance major at UC Irvine, I learned that his previous studio allowed women to train until they were 18 or 19, and men could train until they were 20. This gap could be due in part to the fact that many male dancers start dancing later in life because of the stereotype that “only girls dance.”

Of the three men I interviewed, two began dancing at 17, as I did, and only one started at the early age of 10. Males will often get into dance through a high school dance course, or maybe only after they start to become comfortable with their identity. A huge factor that encourages men to dance later in life is the lure of the full-ride scholarships to studios and even universities. When interviewing grad student Leslie Bitong, I learned that nearly all male dancers at the University of Arizona received funding, even if they had little to no dance training, while highly trained female dancers received little to no funding.

Even in university dance programs, men may be shown a great deal of leniency in many dance situations. One female dance major said she “experienced male dancers getting away with choreography mistakes or coming to rehearsal not warmed up, and the choreographer let it slide.” She expressed her frustration with how men were treated because “women would never be allowed to get away with that.” During my time as a dance major, a female dancer was punished for dropping out of a concert piece claiming injury that was later found not to have occurred. She was removed from other projects, and no choreographer wanted to work with her again. Interestingly, that same year, a male dancer was consistently unreliable in choreographic projects, but he was never penalized and was much desired among student and faculty choreographers for the remainder of his time as a dance major, even afterward being invited back for performance opportunities.

It’s worth noting that two of the three men I interviewed felt that the special treatment they experienced was limited to their home studios. Undergraduate dancer Nathan Gonzaga from Cal State, Long Beach said, “As a male dancer, I’ve noticed a difference in how I’m treated. I feel as if I have been given more opportunities and chances than I see women are, because there are so few male dancers.” But, he continues, “I only see this in the high school and competition fields of dance. In college I don’t get a glimpse of this gender difference at all.” The fact that Nathan felt there is no difference in treatment at the collegiate level is odd to me, and to the twelve women I interviewed, who all recognized some form of unequal treatment.

MFA student Joshua Romero also felt that there was no significant difference in treatment at the collegiate level. “Students would complain that I would receive more attention,” he says, “However, looking back now, I know those students weren’t trying.” I think that Joshua’s idea offers some insight into the mindset of some male dancers who feel that they are simply working harder, which warrants the extra attention. It’s also possible that they just may not notice their privilege.

When I asked my interviewees how they felt we could change the way that male dancers were treated in the studio and in university settings, the consensus was the predicted “I don’t know.” How could we possibly encourage young men to continue dancing without providing

them with some form of personal benefit that would take away from the bullying and teasing they might experience? Perhaps this special treatment is actually necessary, but when is it crossing the line between being beneficial to being harmful to the dancer?

Dance major Kristy Dai said that she felt the “coddling” of male dancers was actually warranted, to an extent. “The stigma that dancing is a ‘girly’ sport still has yet to be broken,” she said, “even though more male dancers are beginning to take on dance as a passion and viable career. At a young age, boys tend to be teased and bullied, so I am all for doing whatever it takes to support male dancers pursuing dance during their younger years.” She suggested that once a male dancer is able to recognize that the art form is not specific to women, that’s when the “coddling” should stop. We agreed that by this point, male dancers have likely matured to a point where they can effectively work on their own, without the need for teachers to “overly” nurture their talents and privilege them.

Nearly all the dancers I interviewed agreed that there will probably never be a time in which male dancer privilege ceases to exist. Until the social stigma of dancing being only for girls is overcome, men will struggle with entering the profession and need encouraging. As gender lines continue to be blurred, more traditional works may become gender-neutral, much like Mark Morris’ snow scene in his version of *The Nutcracker*. It will be interesting to see how the difference in treatment between male and female dancers evolves. Until then, MVP, male dancer privilege, will continue to exist, whether we like it or not.

Work cited

Risner, Doug. “Rehearsing Masculinity: Challenging the ‘Boy Code’ in Dance Education.” *Research in Dance Education* 8.2 (2007): 139-53. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.
