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Author

Choong, Jemima

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What's it mean to "look like a dancer"? What if you don't?

Looking perfect for a part sometimes means your body has to fit into impossibly "ideal" specifications. But sometimes...the way you dance can mean more

by Jemima Choong

Whenever someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, without hesitation, I told them that my dream was to be a dancer. It's what I've always wanted. Most people have been surprised at my response, maybe because I don't look to them like a typical dancer—tall and slim. I can remember vividly when I told my high school physics teacher I wanted to be a professional dancer, he looked quite surprised and said, "You dance? It never occurred to me that you dance because you don't seem like a dancer."

At that moment, I remember feeling hurt and somewhat offended by the comment that he had made. I thought to myself, "What does that even mean? Do I really not look like a dancer?" This comment has really made me think about the biases and prejudices people about how a dancer should look. It has even affected the way I think dancers should look, especially in a dance company.

So, what is bias? According to the Oxford dictionary, bias is an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair. Biases happen everywhere in our daily lives. We cannot deny that it is our human nature to detect differences between each other as our brains are designed to organize and compartmentalize the different body types, gender and race that we see.

Bias in the dance world is evidently more prominent as dance is very visual, and it depends a lot on aesthetics. Physical appearance is very important in a selection process as auditioners choose dancers that fit into the company's image and style. It is understandable that they have their own preferences for dancers with a specific look—but is it fair? Sometimes, a dancer is cut even before they are seen dancing, for not having the right look. This process does not allow "equal opportunity" for dancers, even if they are strong and talented. But how can we overcome this constant concern and problem? Will there ever be a solution?

The idea of there being a supposedly ideal body stems from classical ballet as dancers needed to be slim, fit, and light enough to be able to support their weight as they dance across the stage on their toes and to produce the beautiful lines in dance poses. Then, this ideal of what a dancer's physique should look like moved into the modern and contemporary dance world. Yet, modern dance was formed to break free from the structure and ideology of classical ballet. This liberation came from Isadora Duncan, who is considered a founding mother of modern dance and was mostly self-taught. Yet over the years, it seems that modern dancers needed to have the same "ideal" physique as ballet dancers, perhaps due to the similar demands of modern dance, now requiring a high level of fitness and strength to execute the intricate dance moves.

The fact that dancers need to look alike remains a crucial factor in a selection process for many kinds of dance. With this unconscious bias in mind, lots of dancers have the idea and perception that they would not fit into the company before even attempting to audition for it. These ideas have been embedded into their minds. That's what it feels like to me. Before I even audition, I feel like I would not be able to get the job because of my height and size. For example, I would never imagine myself being able to get into world-renowned modern/contemporary dance companies like Alvin Ailey Dance Theater or Batsheva, because most of their dancers have a similar look, taller and

leaner. Watching the Ailey company, you expect to see dancers who are mostly African American, tall, slim, and muscular, performing their famous signature piece *Revelations*. When going to watch the Batsheva dancers perform *Echad Mi Yodea*, you expect dancers who are thin and muscular to perform this exquisite and difficult piece.

Who is to blame in creating these biases? Is it us, consumers, who crave these dance aesthetics? Or is it the artistic directors and presenters who believe that looks and physical appearances are so important in creating the perfect dance?

Many companies and choreographers still have the mentality that their dancers need look a certain way, the perfect ideal body type according to current tastes. But perhaps times are changing a little. At least, it seems that way when you see a dancer seemingly hired for ability despite not conforming to existing ideas about ideal bodies. A classic example is Misty Copeland who is an African American principal dancer for American Ballet Theatre, who has a non-conventional “ballet body.” According to Forbes, Copeland was able to achieve her aspirations in becoming a prima ballerina through various challenges despite her “skin colour and nontraditional physical features.”

Even with bias and prejudice present in this competitive dance world, sometimes all it takes is pure talent. In the past, ballet dancers with nontraditional ballet bodies were given opportunities and succeeded wildly. Like Anna Pavlova, ironically considered too thin for the Russian ballet world during her era. And Marie Taglioni, who was described by ballet historian and former dancer Jennifer Homans in her book *Apollo's Angels* as “poorly proportioned.” These dancers overcame their perceived physical shortcomings, proving that talent exists in “imperfect” bodies.

What can we do to solve this constant issue? How are we to change people’s perspective and biases in an audition process? I believe that one way we can slowly help change this unconscious bias is to educate dancers and artistic directors. When we become aware of having a natural tendency to look for dancers that have the ideal physical appearance, we can consciously expand our notions of what’s acceptable. You can decide to be open to dancers of different sizes and skin tones. With this conscious effort in the mind, I believe that we can slowly reduce the tendencies of this unconscious bias that we all possess.

Meanwhile, we, as dancers, most likely have to learn to deal with the biases and preferential treatment of the dance world. It is difficult to change ingrained biases, and physical appearance can seem like an obstacle in achieving our dream to dance professionally. However, through persistence and hard work, I believe that we can be as successful as Misty Copeland, Marie Taglioni, and Anna Pavlova, with their “imperfect” bodies.