

# Masculinity in modern dance essay sample



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“Dance is a manly sport...” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 231), said Ted Shawn, a distinguished forerunner of modern dance. Male modern dancers have been fighting for their masculinity in dance for ages. They have arduously exerted to characterize dance as a worthy profession for men through press reports and hype enthused (Jowitt, 2010). However, there has been a shift in the way masculinities have been portrayed within modern dance.

### History of Modern Dance

Modern dance, born from the rebellion of the rigidities of classical ballet, brought about refutation of the male gaze on women. Martha Graham, a prominent figure in modern dance, “built her famous technique and early repertory techniques on the female body” (Bannerman, 2010, p. 32). As females are more lithe in the pelvis than men such that men have claimed to have “vagina envy”, thus showing the men’s aspirations to have the same litness as women (Bannerman, 2010).

### Hegemonic Masculinity

In society, masculinity is defined as having the inherent qualities that a man should possess. These qualities include gender domination, having authority as well as holding roles appropriate for men within a patriarchal society.

Masculinity has traditionally been classified in dancing as the authority enacted through men’s control over women in which he partnered (Jowitt, 2010; Jordan, 1996). Having power in dancers’ movements validates mannish audacity (Jowitt, 2010; as cited in LaBoskey, 2002). The power in movements showed that men had control over their lives. Characters selected embodied traditional masculinity evidenced by how the “roles they chose affirmed masculinity.” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 231) and to fit typecasts of the

male (LaBoskey, 2002). These confirmatory factors meant dancers require portraying traditional masculinity in order to satisfy the gender mold fitted onto men by a patriarchal society.

However, in recent years, there has been a change from such traditional masculinity to one of a “ New Man” model that is not inconvenienced by customary masculine stereotypes, and has the ability to empathize, even articulating a feminine side of his character (Jordan, 1996). The new models allowed men to be more expressive in terms of gender characteristics. This led to blurring of gender demarcations through “ loosening the prescriptive meanings of... masculinity (in)... modern and contemporary approaches to movement” (Kelly, 2011, p. 52). The freeing of typecasts, allow for portrayal of softer manliness, which has been categorized conventionally as feminine.

If the “ New Man” model is as liberating as it seems, why do men still have to portray distinctly stereotypical masculinity to gain acceptance by the public audience? Even though the “ New Man” model of masculinity has been gaining greater acceptance within modern dance, through portraying softer masculinities, is this really the case? Male modern dancers have been portraying less traditional concepts of masculinity in particular, the “ New Man” model, however, there are still underlying traits of hegemonic masculinity cloaked beneath this new model to allow for society’s acceptance.

## Power

Modern dance provided equal footing in terms of power and representation of men and women. This was due to a wave of “ Feminism... radical

philosophy of equality between the sexes in all spheres of life” (as cited in Bannerman, 2010). To certain extremes, allowing women to overtake men in terms of power as well. As women are more flexible in the pelvis than men, male dancers have claimed to have “vagina envy”, and to yearn to be able to be as lithe as their female counterparts, thus totally opposing the Freudian Theory whereby females are jealous of males who have a penis (Bannerman, 2010). This opposition in dance has tipped the scales in terms of gender domination, whereby females have the power over males instead. A form of modern dance called Contact improvisation (CI) gave women a chance to demonstrate and exercise strength over men that has traditionally been the opposite, exemplified through “women [whom] might safely lift, balance and carry the weight of men’s bodies” (Kelly, 2011, p. 59), thus subverting the “traditional role of men... supporting the woman” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 238)

However, it is still the “male choreographer who created and imposed the vision of movement on the female...” (Kelly, 2011, p. 52) Hence, the power that was supposed to be at the hands of women who created this new form of dance was still under the mercy of the males who choreographed it later on, as the males are the ones commanding their image thus they may impose on males, traditional stereotypes of how a male is supposed to dance, as how it was “rigidly defined what kind of dance movements were appropriate for men” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 238). Graham too allowed for men to “create their own material on the grounds that they were ‘too different from women’ to permit her to portray them accurately.” (as cited in Kelly, 2010, p. 32) Thus, males still had authority over their own movements in dance, and

were not subjected to female choreographers. Since males were considered as too contrasting to women, they are not able to portray a feminine side of their masculinity because of these dissimilarities; hence they would not be able to portray a “ New Man” model through portrayal of their feminine sides.

### Movement

Male modern dancers have matched their female counterparts in terms of fluency in dance to equalize the playing field within modern dance. As men and women can do duties on the same level, choreographies should be equal too (Jowitt, 2010), and incorporating equality within modern dance through movements portrayed could be exemplified by “ when alone, the performers moved with equally precise athleticism” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 238). An aspect of modern dance, contact improvisation (CI) was a “ social movement, exemplifying... resistance to planning, authority and hierarchy” and this allows for the insurrection of masculine domination within dance. However, its core quality is the managing of intuition, which is feminine (Kelly, 2011, p. 60). CI blurred further gender roles within dance, as “ avoidance of manual manipulation make men and women equal partners” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 237). The dance “ form breaks with long-standing gender conventions in dance” (Kelly, 2010, p. 59). Jowitt further elaborated stating how “ showing emotional states in dance... were promising directions.” (2010, p. 239) It offered a movement for men to be more sensitive and in touch with their expressive side. Through dancing out expressions, softer masculinities can be portrayed.

Even though, male modern dancers are not perceptibly masculine, there have been improvements in technique in practices of dance and generally, “men... were ‘capable of stronger more intricate dancing’ than women” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 233). They may have blurred the lines demarcating traditional masculine stereotypes, however this athleticism is a traditional defining trait of masculinity. CI was still about lifting which was athletic strength in movement, hence masculine characteristics, and it provided men with an avenue to express femininity and yet retain hegemonic masculinity (Kelly, 2010). The public audiences have become more accepting of this blurring of masculinities as the difficult training that the dancer faces have been publicized, evidenced through depiction of dancers’ weariness and the perspiration gleaning captured through media (Jowitt, 2010). This portrayal of athletic fatigue again exemplifies hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, audiences choose to focus mostly on the athletic aspect of the movement instead of the more emotional movements portrayed by the men in modern dance. This is evidenced by how it was “primarily ... muscular power... high jumps... expressiveness which audiences focused on” (Jowitt, 2010, p. 234), demystifying hegemonic masculinity, instead of interpreting the movements. Underlying this is also a cloak, whereby the “New Man” model of movement such as through portrayal of feminized movements will be hidden over a more traditional masculinity, through muscle prowess of the dancers.

## Roles

Audiences choose to concentrate on the masculine side of male modern dancers that they portray instead of the feminine side that he wishes to project through dancing, especially through the roles he play. On stage, roles

are merely roles and do not signify a person's gender off the stage. "[A] boy does not feel he has to dress in a certain way or ' he will not be a man'; he is not that anxious or concerned about his masculinity" (as cited in Jordan, 2002, p. 2). Woolf also proclaimed that " it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (as cited in Bannerman, 2010, p. 34) There have been more androgynous portrayals of male modern dancers. This is through portrayal of feminine expressions of male dancers, to the point whereby roles that they took up were androgynous in nature, to establish a " New Man" model of masculinity, whereby a man exemplifies both masculine and feminine traits. Androgyny led to " distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity" (as quoted in Bannerman, 2010, p. 35), and as such, allowed for a " New Man" model of masculinity to take root when roles portrayed are not reflective of the gender behind that role.

Satires of gender performances are aplenty, however, when a male dancer tries hard to portray effective womanliness, he would not be taken seriously. This could mean " choreographers and the public believed that no woman... could be grotesque or comical enough to play such roles convincingly" (Jowitt, 2010, p. 240), such that what is portrayed by men can only be viewed upon as funny, and the fundamental aspect of male dancers showing expression in dance is ignored. The " New Man" model may not necessarily be easily accepted as " some gender presentations may query common standards or behavior accepted by the public at large, even though much of that public may be tolerant and less rigid about so-called norms" (Jowitt,

2010, p. 241). Thus the initial purpose of expressing sensitivity through portrayal of another gender or androgynous characters within modern dance is cancelled to null because of how society only wants to perceive what is normative. Thus hegemonic masculinities still underlie the concept of a “New Man” model.

However, there is a negative social stigma attached to men who portray excessive feminine traits to be called gay. “[H]omophobic social stigma begets a system of compulsory heterosexuality maintaining the hegemonic gender norms” (Anderson & Perterson, 2012, p. 5), which subverts the portrayal of expression and other feminine traits portrayed within modern dance, and funnels it back to the traditional stereotype of traditional masculinity. Jowitt concurred stating that a man should be wary of projecting his feminine side in search of magnificence onstage (2010), unless he wanted to be labeled with a stigma from achieving that excellence on stage. Freedom of expression was curbed because of this stigma on feminine traits such that men have to appear macho, which is sad (Jowitt 2010). Men are therefore suppressed from being able to express themselves because of such societal standards imposed upon them. In addition, “boys and men wishing to avoid social stigma generally do not work or play in feminized terrain” (as cited in Anderson et al, 2012, p. 5), thus stigmas are already attached to those who have been in such a modern dance environment that it is important to justify their masculinity through dancing gender-appropriate roles.

In conclusion, modern dance may not have allowed males to portray a “New Man” model as effectively as initially thought. Instead, they have been



blurred and still retain its traditional masculinity roots. Power within gender conclusively remain within male's grasp and hence, since men control that power, they are not as equal a partner as discussed. Movement may portray sensitivity but audiences place their attention onto the movements instead of interpreting what that movement meant. Males have also portrayed femininity through portrayal of androgynous roles, but audiences choose to believe that such portrayals are for comedic effect instead of expression of self. Males have been subverted from ballet, which initially was to showcase men (Fasick, 2007), but do they have to also be downplayed in modern dance just to fit society's mold of masculinity? (1966 words)

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