

Male dancing body, stigma and normalising processes Playing with (bodily) signifieds/ers of masculinity

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Based on a multi-sited ethnography on Western theatrical dance, the article focuses on the “problem of the male dancer”. Once discussed the historical genealogy of the stigma and its effect on men's participation in dance, I consider three stigma “antidotes”. Two of them – artistic-professional excellence, manifest in structural inequalities, professional practice and social discourse; and athleticism, involving discursive and representational strategies – consist of emphasising the masculinising aspects of dancing-as-art/profession (virtuosity, creativity), and dancing-as-leisure/body-activity (prowess, self-control). Neither of them presents as legitimate alternative masculinities; they are normalising strategies. The third antidote leverages on the choice of the dance style/s, and the use of the markers of embodied identity that styles as bodily, kin(aesth)etic sub-cultures provide. The increasing variety of styles not only changed Dance's representation in the West and thus affected men's presence, but also provides semiotic resources for expressing gender and, more generally, for forms of identity construction and self-presentation that may be alternative to dominant models.

Keywords : Dance, Embodied identity, Masculinity, Normalising strategies, Stigma

I. Introduction

“Dance is stuff for queers!”, a sentence we've all heard at least once. The process of practical and symbolic feminization that Western theatrical dance¹ has undergone since the XIXth century (Burt, 1995 ; Thomas, 1996)

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¹ Such expression points to those dance forms that have emerged in Europe and (then) North America since the XVth century and have undergone a process of artification (SHAPIRO R., HEINICH N., 2012). This involves dance styles – ranging from classical and neoclassical ballet to modern and contemporary dance, jazz and musical, theatre-dance, hip-hop, *etc.* – that are socially regarded as art forms, and intended to be represented onstage (differently, for instance, than dancesport).

has led to the so-called problem of the male dancer (Adams, 2005). On the one hand, the majority of (aspiring) dancers are women : in Italy (Bassetti, 2010), France and UK (Rannou/Roharik, 2006), US (Risner, 2008, 2009a, 2009b ; Van Dyke, 1996), and many other countries. Moreover, the same goes for dance audiences (e.g. for Italy Istat, 2008). However, the number of male dancers has increased in the last decade or so. On the other hand, the male dancer suffers from a stigma (Goffman, 1963) which appears indelible, throwing his primary identity into crisis (*i.e.*, gendered, and thus sexual, identity). And yet, as I shall demonstrate, this can be downsized at both collective and individual levels through manifold strategies, normalising and not.

The article analyses the social processes which help to legitimise men's dancing. What are the normalising strategies for the men-who-dance and the dance-danced-by-men ? What are the symbolic and material resources from which one can draw ? What are the bodily and embodied signifieds and signifiers that one can exploit to express and communicate (hegemonic) masculinity (Connell/Messerschmidt, 2005) ? Of relevance here, are not only the extraordinary performances taking place onstage – often criticised, especially in classical ballet, for gender role representation² – but also the everyday ordinary performances (Butler, 1993 ; Garfinkel, 1967 ; Goffman, 1977 ; Martin, 2003). The body, indeed, presents itself as sexed, equipped with specific physical characteristics, dressed and decorated, used and moved in a “certain” manner, the sub/object of some body techniques (Mauss, 1936) and not others. Though incarnated in the individual in infinite combinations, properties tied to corporeality and bodily acting tend to be associated, at the level of social representations, to femininity or masculinity. They constitute, therefore, semiotic resources for (de)constructing and (re)presenting gender.

Starting from such considerations, I elaborate on in the third section, the article will then focus, in the fourth, on the male dancer's stigma, its historical genealogy and its effects on men's participation in dance. In the last sections, stigma “antidotes” will then be discussed : artistic-professional excellence, manifest in structural inequalities, professional practice and social discourse ; athleticism, which involves discursive and representational strategies ; “wise” choices among dance styles and exploitation of the semiotic resources they provide for expressing gender.

II. Data and methods

The article is based on the multi-sited ethnography I carried out from 2006 to 2009 on the world of Western theatrical dance – in particular, the Italian field. I conducted fieldwork and video-based research with two companies and the related schools – differently placed in the national sce-

² «Ballet is one of the strongest models of patriarchal ceremony» (DALY A., 1987, p.16). Many scholars claim this (ADAIR C., 1992 ; FOSTER S., 1996 ; HANNA J., 1988 ; NOVACK C., 1993), whereas BANES S. (1998) challenged such an argument. See also THOMAS H. (1996, 1997).

nario in terms of centre/periphery – as well as, though occasionally, about ten international companies and dozens of national companies/schools. Moreover, for the first time in my life, I participated in classes and shows as a full-fledged member – mainly in Italy, but I also spent 3 months at the Dance Department of the University of California Riverside, attending theoretical and practical courses. Data also includes in-depth interviews (n=23) with professional practitioners. Whereas both observed companies engage in modern and contemporary dance, some schools also offer courses of classical dance and hip-hop, and most of the interviewees, though expert in one main style, (have) practise(d) the others as well.

Finally, I conducted secondary analysis of quantitative data concerning the Italian labour market (Enpals, 2008), and “mapped” the i) institutional (e.g. companies and academies), ii) commercial (e.g. specialised firms and editions) and iii) imaginary (e.g. art and advertising) branches of the national field by surveying their components (Table 1). Some of the latter, such as forums and blogs, movies, and printed advertisements, constituted the basis for further document analysis, focused on both content (themes, characters, plots) and form (discursive, narrative, visual features), and concerned with both style comparison and historical change.

DANCERS (TAXPAYERS/AUTHOR'S SURVEY) :	10.060/1.245	SPECIALIZED FIRMS :	702
COMPANIES :	276	SPECIALIZED JOURNALS :	21
ACADEMIES AND SCHOOLS :	2.181	SPECIALIZED EDITIONS (BOOK, DVD, CD, ETC.) :	1.264
ASSOCIATIONS, FOUNDATIONS, ETC. :	108	WEBSITES, FORUMS, BLOGS AND WEBZINES :	34
SECONDARY DANCE SCHOOLS :	8	LITERATURE :	115
UNIVERSITY DANCE COURSES :	13	FIGURATIVE ARTS :	76
MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES, ETC. :	10	MOVIES (PRODUCED/DUBBED)	19/213
FESTIVALS AND EXHIBITIONS :	79	ADVERTISING :	67
CONTESTS AND AWARDS :	36	TELEVISION SHOWS :	7

Table 1 : Italian dance field(s) mapping.

III. Gender and corporeality : normalcy and deviance

In common sense culture, masculinity and femininity constitute two dichotomic categories, equipped with their dominant models and more or less appropriate and illustrative bodily properties, bodily doings (movement, gesture, body, techniques, *etc.*), and activities (e.g. Connell, 1987 ; Goffman, 1979). There are, therefore, female bodies that exhibit bodily and embodied characteristics regarded as feminine (e.g. from slenderness and scarce muscularity to body techniques like waxing or crossing legs), and other – deviant – bodies which do not, and maybe, instead, present

some of the properties that are socially associated with masculinity (e.g. muscularity, ample movements, shaving). Similarly, male bodies may exhibit or not characteristics regarded as representative of masculinity/femininity. As a matter of fact, each body occupies a specific position along the axis of the bodily properties and doings regarded as masculine and, simultaneously, on that of those considered feminine. Women who, though defined female, are regarded as non-feminine, are generally called “tomboy” or masculine. This is often the case of women hip-hoppers. In the same but opposite way, those who are identified as sexually male but regarded as scarcely masculine are called “wimp” or effeminate. This is the male ballet dancer's fate.

If we construct a semiotic square (Greimas, 1970) of the male/female dichotomy (Figure 1) by negating each of the two terms, we then obtain two more categories, which are in turn in a relation of mutual sub-opposition : not-male and not-female, that we may identify with what, in common sense discourse, is defined as wimp and tomboy respectively. We immediately note the problem of the deixis (vertical lines), which would presuppose the identity, in (formal) logical terms, of male and not-female/tomboy, on the one hand, and, on the other one, female and not-male/wimp. Since biological sex – on which the mainstream discourse (Foucault, 1971), or socio-logic, that constructs gender as a dichotomy is based (Butler, 1990) – differs between the two terms of each couple, logical identity collapses, and reveals the complexity underlying the classificatory abstraction and the distance running between (bio-logical) sex and (socio-logical) gender.

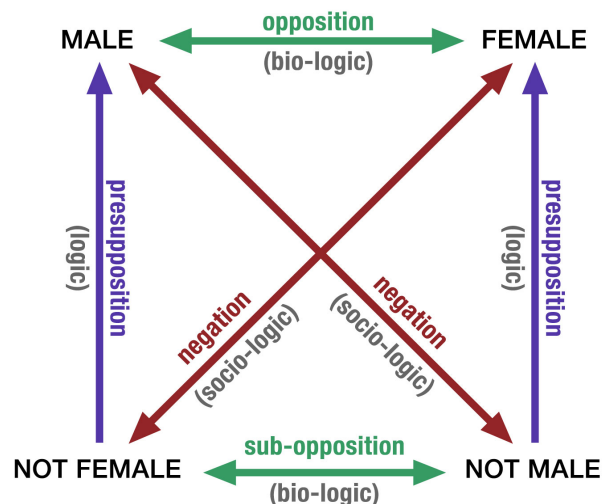


Figure 1 : Semiotic square of male/female dichotomy.

Nevertheless, in common sense culture, whilst in the upper cases the individual, regarded as “normal”, reproduces the hegemonic model, in the other ones, s/he is considered “deviant”, and stigmatised. Part of the stigma consists of presuppositions and prejudices concerning sexual orientation : whereas the heteronormative model is taken for granted in the upper

cases, the inappropriateness to one's own sex/gender displayed by the lower ones involves homosexuality-related assumptions, to which male ballet dancers – and, to a lesser extent, female hip-hoppers³ – are subject. Bodily and embodied properties are sometimes simply associated with the choice – regarded as morally neutral – of practising a dance style, and sometimes instead linked to a certain lifestyle – negatively marked in moral terms.

IV. Stigma : the problem of the male dancer

Concerning men, the relation effeminacy-homosexuality came to be established in Western common sense discourse through specific historical processes, in the midst of what has been almost unanimously defined as the “crisis of masculinity” of the late XIXth and early XXth centuries (Carnes/Griffen, 1990 ; Fout, 1992 ; Mauge, 2001 ; McLaren, 1997 ; Mosse, 1996). Similarly, male dancer stigma arose at a particular time and went through diverse phases, having its foundations in cultural plots and conceptual dichotomies that were becoming progressively dominant.

The prejudice about men who dance crept in, for the first time in the West, in the XIXth century. With Romanticism and the invention of “points”, women became ballet's true stars – and came to personify femininity's quintessence – and ballet itself became “women's stuff”. Men, who till then had dominated the (noble) dance world, began to leave it, and by the end of the century almost completely disappeared (Bland/Percival, 1984 :12-13). At the beginning of this process, however, the stigma was not based on male dancers' supposed homosexuality, which, furthermore, was not yet regarded as an identity trait. On the contrary, the stigma had its foundations in the increasingly dominant bourgeois culture. First, the dance-danced-by-men belonged to an aristocratic world which the bourgeoisie was standing up to (Burt, 1995 :17). Second, the most appropriate leisure activity for the bourgeois man came to be identified with sport, which underwent a real boom from the second half of the XIXth century on. Third, and in particular, male dancers were challenging bourgeois expectations concerning what a man should or should not do with his body, and they were doing so by systematically occupying the female/feminine side of the conceptual dichotomies on which gender was constructed in the society of the time. The male dancer, in fact, uses his body to expressive rather than instrumental ends. He exploits his body in order to express emotions and feelings – shame with which a man, as a supremely rational individual, should not soil his hands. And he does so publicly. Finally, he displays his own body – this being an aim in itself, not the consequence of a different end – and, therefore, he makes it an object to be admired for its beauty (vs. prowess/utility) – a treatment usually reserved for the (passive) female body (Bordo, 1999). In so doing, he does not occupy the position he should, *i.e.* the masculine, and thus masculinises-

³ On lesbian dancers see MOZINGO A., 2005.

ing, one of the spectator (Mulvey, 1989 :29), and, perhaps worse, embarrasses those who, as such, find themselves looking at male bodies besides/rather than female ones. Such an issue would become even more relevant in the late XIXth century.

From then on, in fact, effeminacy ceased to be connected with luxury, idleness and lust – till then, effeminate was for instance Casanova – and came to be regarded as a mark of homosexuality. The latter ceased to be considered a “mere” matter of sexual choice, just a particular kind of forbidden act (Foucault, 1976), and, being entangled with effeminacy, became a popular concept and produced the idea of the homosexual as a kind-of-person, a “character”⁴. Once this cultural plot became dominant, it did not take much for signifiers to be associated to signifieds, for “signs” of effeminacy-and-thus-homosexuality to become recognisable and detectable – a whole, new horizon of sense making through which to perceive and interpret reality. A fundamental role in this process was played by the figure of Oscar Wilde and the trial he underwent (Sinfield, 1994). Wilde's displayed mannerisms and affectation, the dandy attire he shared with Lord Brummel, and his artistic interests were no longer interpreted as choices but as physical marks (Adams, 2005 :73), bodily – thus natural – signs of his homosexuality and, by extension, homosexuality as such.

At the beginning of the XXth century, when artistic inclinations were by then regarded as a homosexual trait⁵, the visibility of Serge Diaghilev, his lovers and his *Ballet Russes* – with the male bodies he reintroduced among the ballet stars, made to exhibit onstage in a role different from the *porteur*'s, and celebrated for their beauty and erotic charge – did the rest in crystallising the equivalence of theatrical dance with the binomial effeminacy-homosexuality.

That is why engaging in dance may be problematic for men. As the following excerpt shows, an interest in dance, just as such, might be read as a sign of deviation from mainstream masculinity, not to mention actual dancing, which leads one to be (regarded as) “a little bit... like that”. Yet, starting to dance in one's twenties, practicing with a group of male peers, and choosing the most masculine among dance styles, as well as growing older, may downsize the problem :

I started dancing [when I was 21] because I had friends who were dancing hip-hop. Probably, if I had friends dancing modern, or contemporary, or tango, I would have done other things [...]. So it has been casual in sum, it's not that hip-hop was my dream, absolutely not. When I was younger, the male dancers... I regarded them a little

⁴ The common use of “sissy”, indeed, dates back to the late XIXth century (HARPER D., 2010).

⁵ Krafft-Ebing (KRAFFT-EBING R., 1903) described the effeminate “type” of homosexual as subject to neurasthenia and emotional disorders, often employed in “women's jobs”, and having artistic interests. Art, as a representation of one's inner world, was more and more regarded as feminine. The romantic idea(l) of the artistic genius is just the exception confirming the rule ; it's precisely the exceptional, extraordinary geniality attributed to the male artist that works as a stigma antidote (cf. BATTERSBY C., 1990).

bit... like that – to be honest. So I wasn't very pro-dance, let's say. [...] my mother is interested in dance, she has VHSs, DVDs – yet of classical ballets, obviously [...] but she didn't pass her passion on to me.

Question : Are you sure ?

I was completely disinterested in dance. Now indeed I'm moving closer to her, she shows me movies, videos ; earlier I completely refused this idea, of dance, of dancing anyway (M, 31 ; Mar. 2006⁶).

Among male interviewees, this is not a lone voice. Most of them – and many male dancers I met – started dancing relatively late in life, and in most of their biographical narratives chance plays an important role⁷. For some, like the below quoted interviewee who reached dancing through acting, this happens even to the detriment of one of the discursive hinges of dancers' biographies, *i.e.*, destiny, predestination, natural predisposition⁸ :

I started when I was 16 and a half [...] Earlier nothing, I had a passion for dance but I didn't do anything. When I was 15 I attended a theatre course, and it included dance lessons and I was attracted to dance. The teacher told me '[...] go to this school, do a try-out [...]'. So, that's how it started.

Question : What does it mean you had a passion ?

I always danced as a child, in front of the television [...]. A great need of movement, following the body, the music, the rhythm ; when I was very very young too, I had a record player, I took it all around the house and danced [...]

Question : Yet until you were 16 you didn't ?

Well, no. You know, I was really good at school and my parents didn't want me to be distracted with other stuff. Maybe they had in mind a sport, or some leisure activity, rather than dance intended not as sport but full-time activity (M, 38 ; Mar. 2006).

Both a) late involvement with dance, and b) the chance-grounded – thus de-responsibilising – identity performance of self-narration (in front of a woman) enacted during interviews, point to a certain discomfort among men, especially heterosexual ones, with regard to their interest in dance. Those who started dancing relatively early, more or less explicitly allude to discrimination :

⁶ Gender, age ; interview date. The excerpts from interviews as well as field notes are translated from the original Italian by the author.

⁷ Recent research on Italian male primary school teachers reports the same chance-groundedness in biographical narratives (ABBATECOLA E., 2012, pp.366-367).

⁸ Such a hinge is fully pervasive in woman dancers' narratives, though usually evenly shared with that of chance.

I was one of those few who did start dancing when they were young, and I was definitely picked on as a child for dancing up through all of middle school (Posted 10th Nov. 2012)⁹.

Someone joked like ‘Should you really dance ? You could be a soccer player!’ (M, 26 ; Feb. 2006).

What lies behind such a joke is the soccer player being better not only *qua* sportsman, but also *qua* hot-chicks-puller, so to speak. In fact, heterosexual regulations are at play in the dance world too, even if in a particular way, and they produce a tricky side-effect. Physical contact being very frequent, and the body being exposed to the gaze of others «at various stages of undress» (Wulff, 1998 :114), dancers (are taught to) enact what Federico (1974 :252) calls «occupational minimisation of sexual attraction»:

The teacher invites us to “be curious” [...] “Paul, don't be afraid of the breast!” (Field notes 19th Dec. 2007).

Minimisation of (hetero)sexual attraction coupled with maximisation of physical contact constitute stigma strengthening elements. Traditionally, the tacit requirement is for men to be sexually attracted by sexually attractive women, and to be so anytime in their presence, not to mention when touching them (an action which they moreover should not be afraid of or embarrassed by). One of the questions male dancers are implicitly required to answer is the following : How can you call yourself a (straight) man when you spend hours everyday among semi-naked, attractive young women and you do not pull them ?

V. Antidotes : normalising strategies and the role of dance styles

On the basis of my empirical research, I have identified three main antidotes. Two of them have been observed mainly at the collective level and consist of emphasising the masculinising aspects of dancing-as-art/profession, such as excellence and creativity, and dancing-as-leisure/body-activity, like athleticism and self-control. Neither of them tries to present alternative masculinities as legitimate. They are “normalising” strategies, and aim to (re)present the male dancer as endowed with (all the) mainstream masculine characteristics. A third antidote, that primarily works at the individual level, makes leverage on the choice of the dance style/s, and the use of the markers of embodied identity that styles as kinaesthetic sub-cultures provide. The increasing variety of styles – that represent gender roles in more or less traditional ways, and present differences with respect to body movement and decoration – have not only changed and made the representation of dance in Western societies more complex, but have also provided semiotic resources for expressing more or less stereotypical masculinity/femininity.

⁹ <http://rootshalfhidden.blogspot.it/2012/11/gender-inequality-in-dance.html>.

*A. The regime of artistic-professional excellence :
creativity and virtuosity*

The relative percentage of men in a given group of practitioners rises with the increase of the context's degree of professionalism and excellence. I observed that in Italian peripheral private schools it is hard to find even one boy, while in (semi-)professional, centrally located¹⁰ ones, male presence is higher. As for the labour market, the picture does not change. In trying to debunk what she regards as a myth, Wulff (1998 :110) claims that «the majority of women dancers over men in classical companies was [...] rather small»; the anthropologist, however, refers to three European ballet companies of utmost rank – a small part of the dance world, though central in the classical ballet sub-world. But most of the professionals I met work outside major institutional organisations, as “free dancers” (often in diverse sectors, ranging from theatre to television, and in diverse dance styles) and/or in independent companies : the more prestige and degree of institutionalisation decreases, the fewer men are found¹¹. Wulff's claim is rather a confirmation of men's higher presence at the centre of the field (Bourdieu, 1992), in the “contexts of excellence”. As further corroboration, consider Adams' (2005 :66) claim that «athleticism and muscularity were to have brought male dancers mainstream acceptance and respect [...] but] have yet to do so at any but the most elite levels».

Men dancers, furthermore, are favoured in many respects when compared to women colleagues. Awards and scholarships are mostly allotted to men, in Italy¹² and elsewhere (for the US, see Risner, 2008 :109) ; more generally, as I observed and others reported (Cushway, 1996 ; Risner, 2009b), men receive more attention, positive feedback and rewards during education and training. As for the labour market, they are systematically favoured in terms of employment and income¹³, and tend to reach success more quickly and easily. They also occupy most of the authority positions in schools, academies and companies – in Italy and the US at least (Risner, 2008 ; Van Dyke, 1996).

The situation is similar to that in other feminine and feminizing jobs (e.g. Abbatecola, 2012 ; England/Boyer, 2009 ; Reskin, 1993 ; William, 1992). Choreographers of famous and funded companies¹⁴, chefs of pres-

¹⁰ For an analysis of the central and peripheral poles of the Italian dance field see BASSETTI C., 2010, pp.93-96.

¹¹ On the characteristics and typical uncertainty of the dance labour market, see BASSETTI C., 2010, pp.124-134 for Italy ; RANNOU J., ROHARIK I., 2006, 2009 for France and the UK. On performing arts' labour markets, see e.g. BUSCATTO C., 2008; MENDER P.-M., 1999, 2005 ; SHAPIRO R. *et al.*, 2009.

¹² Consider the prestigious Premio Léonide Massine : each year (considered period : 2002-2010), more than half of the awards went to men.

¹³ Enpals' (2008) data on Italy reports average annual working rates of 61 and 51.1 days for men and women respectively ; average daily income is 96.17 vs. 68.56 euros.

¹⁴ See, for instance, BREMSER M., 2011. Consider also two newspaper articles, concerning the UK (JENNINGS L., 2013) and US (LA ROCCO C., 2007) respectively, that confirm the author's data on Italy (BASSETTI C., 2010).

tigious restaurants¹⁵, as well as directors and designers of renowned fashion houses¹⁶ are usually men. It is not only that men get higher positions once a trivial activity or profession becomes a national symbol, thus moving closer to culture than nature (Ortner, 1974 :20) ; it is also that – when it comes to activities traditionally assigned, and thus symbolically linked, to women – precluding the latter’s access to apical positions enables male colleagues not to get “too” close, nor blend in “too much” with the dichotomically opposed gender ; it is, moreover, also that, at the level of mainstream, stereotypical social representation, a man should occupy a central position as long as he engages in such “womanly” activities – and this works as a normalising strategy.

Apart from the structural elements of gender inequalities, excellence furthermore takes on different nuances for men and women, both within the professional field and, in a relationship of mutual influence and reinforcement, in the broader society : gender roles «are not only apparent in the reception dimension of dance, but are constantly part of its everyday production» (Saura, 2009 :44). Recent research on auditions and recruitment (Sorignet, 2004), as well as rehearsals and choreographer-dancer(s) interaction (Saura, 2009), shows that, not only in classical but also in modern and contemporary dance, whereas women are judged by their beauty and technical perfection – as “aesthetic sub/objects”, might one say – men, who often spent far less time in training, are evaluated by «less normative criteria, following their strength, creativity or energy» (*ibid.* :40) – as “creative subjects”. The male dancer’s body cannot, of course, completely evade an aesthetic judgement concerning its beauty, yet that is exerted on the basis of less strict categories than with respect to female bodies : similarly in the case of UK actors/tresses analysed by Dean (2005), the “accepted spectrum” is wider, as well as more nuanced and varied. This constitutes a stigma antidote, since it distances male dancers from one of the opposite gender’s defining features : sexual productivity (Adkins, 1995). Technical abilities, on the other hand, are not at all irrelevant, but might be compensated for by subjective qualities such as creativity, energy and passion. These, moreover, are generally framed in terms of artistic geniality or athletic prowess (see also Gard, 2001 :218).

One might claim that whereas the female dancing body is itself regarded as an artwork, as a moving object, so to speak, the male’s is considered as not just a body but “the body of” a subject – a subject which, with that body but thanks to his artistic/physical talents, creates and makes art. This claim is strong, voluntary drastic and carried-to-extremes. Actually, it is a matter of relevance, of figure-ground relationships in Schutzian terms.

¹⁵ In the US, for instance, women fill only 19% of chef positions (BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, 2010 : Table 11). Consider, as another example, the case of the restaurant sector in Portugal (CONFEDERAÇÃO GERAL DOS TRABALHADORES PORTUGUESES - INTERSINDICAL NACIONAL, 2008, p.20).

¹⁶ We need merely think of Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Givenchi, Armani. At the Council of Fashion Designers of America’s awards, in 2011, 18 men and 3 women were awarded. *The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* (STEELE V., 2004) includes entries on 36 female and 69 male designers.

Yet, such a polar tension exists. Now, if a male body as the spectatorial gaze's object constitutes, as we have seen, a problem, then transforming such a body into an active subject may be a partial solution : the dancing man does not display his body, whose appearance is not that relevant in the end¹⁷, but his art. The spectator does not risk looking at the male dancer's body as he would a female's (a legitimate object of gaze and desire) ; he looks instead at "the body of" an artist who is making art, an athlete who is testing his capabilities (though to aesthetic rather than instrumental ends). In other words, the male dancer is legitimated as a virtuoso ; his genius, the exceptionality of his talent may constitute, as it did for Nijinsky (Burt, 1995), a de-stigmatising element, and one capable of compensating for an otherwise inappropriate behavioural exceptionality¹⁸.

*B. Dance as athletic-sportive activity :
self-control and self-overcoming*

Of equal exceptionality, however, the aesthetic/artistic domain remains more ambiguous and problematic for men than the athletic/sportive one. Starting from its mass diffusion since the mid XIXth century, sport has become a fundamental site of masculinising practices (Whitson, 1990 :28), in terms of both the use he makes of his own body and the masculinity those practices can inscribe on such a body, thus making it "visibly" more masculine.

Therefore, as variously noted (Adams, 2005 ; Gard, 2001 ; Risner, 2008), attempts at normalising dance-danced-by-men – and fostering male participation in dance (Crawford, 1994) – through "sportivisation" have been numerous. Since Ted Shawn, many "dance experts" have endeavoured to present dance as a sportive activity, in stressing its demands in terms of athletic prowess, bodily challenges and, consequently, the overcoming of one's own physical limits. Gene Kelly hosted a TV show, "Dancing is man's game", in which famous sportsmen were asked to execute some typical movement of their discipline, and male dancers then repeated such movements in a full display of self-control, elegance, strength and effortlessness.

Think, more generally, of the display, onstage and not (cinema, TV, visual communication), of athletic and muscular bodies, engaged in ample, forceful and energetic movements¹⁹, and dressed to increase their visibility and make them visually closer to athletes' bodies. As time and dance styles have come and gone, dance apparel has in fact changed as well : though diversely "conjugated" in each style, men's style has moved

¹⁷ It is not selected by participants (whether the casting choreographer, or the attending audience member) as immediately salient in/for their practices of appreciation, evaluation and judgement.

¹⁸ Virtuosity and geniality have been justifications for artists' deviant behaviour in both men's and women's cases. However, for male dancers, they serve as justifications for a specific kind of deviant behaviour, for a gender-related stigma. For female dancers, virtuosity can instead compensate for alcoholism, for instance, as it does for (men and women) singers.

¹⁹ Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Bolle are indeed renowned for their astonishing leaps.

towards athleticisation/sportivisation. Ideal typical references range from the gymnast of classical antiquity, to the Greek-Roman wrestler, to the Olympic athlete ; from the contemporary gym-goer, to the martial arts practitioner, to the sports champion (simply search for “male dancer” on Google Images).

Such a normalising strategy exerts leverage not only on categorising sport as an appropriate activity for men ; nor only on the notion according to which a strong and muscular body is – or should be – a male one (and vice versa) ; but also on two cultural themes of utmost relevance in modern discourse that are symbolically linked to masculinity and can be brought to the surface of both sport and dance : self-control and self-overcoming.

As Goffman (1967) noted, controlling oneself and one's own body – something that dance as well as sport or martial arts can enhance²⁰, and the dancer as well as the sportsman or the *judoka* can display – constitutes a fundamental value of disciplined (Foucault, 1975) Western modernity. Self-control, moreover, rests on the male/masculine side of the gender dichotomy : in modern mainstream discourse, whose legacy is still at work beneath common sense culture, whereas the woman is enslaved by her own uncontrolled emotionality (to the point of hysteria), the man is the one who is able to master himself (and indeed possesses a publicly displayable Self). Therefore, self-control represents a potential antidote. The underlying tacit plot is the following : by dancing, the man does not so much express his emotions and let himself go, as the woman is supposed/allowed to do ; rather, he enacts his – exceptional – self-control, mastering himself and his body.

Secondarily, if, via self-control, one overcomes oneself by definition, we should also consider that dancers, like athletes, face many bodily challenges, which all constitute opportunities for overreaching oneself and one's physical limits. Jumping higher could be a dancer's goal as it is a basketball player's. Overreaching one's limits and managing the pain that usually follows constitutes another, definitely masculine myth of Western modern culture, especially in sportive and performing art's sub-cultures. The ideology of pain lying behind the romantic figure of the virtuoso (Alford/Szanto, 1996 :6-12), and the normalisation of injury and pain typical of both sport (Nixon, 1993) and dance (Aalten, 2007 ; Wulff, 1998)²¹ symbolically refer, as much as strength and muscularity, to masculinity –

²⁰ Renaissance dance concurred to discipline court society's members (ELIAS N., 1969 ; FILMER P., 1999). Later, sport took up such a role. We might suppose that, in Eastern societies, martial arts played a similar one. Perhaps it is not by chance that in recent decades dance became popular in the East as martial arts did in the West.

²¹ «Many dancers experience pleasure in pushing themselves until they get pain» ; the counterbalance is «the pleasure of being able to move and control one's body beyond ordinary motor activities» (WULFF H., 1998, p.107).

irrespective of the fact that sportswomen (e.g. Malcom, 2006) and women dancers too appropriate such an ethic²².

Despite the huge collective endeavour, this normalising strategy has not fully succeeded. Stigma is still there (Gard, 2006 ; Risner, 2009a ; Williams, 2003). This depends on the enormous relevance of corporeality and embodied identity, as we shall shortly see, as well as on context. By framing bodies, in fact, context introduces further meanings, which in turn are able to impress different nuances upon the same semiotic resources. If worn by Yuri Chechi on the springboard, rather than Adam Cooper on-stage, the same tight suit takes on different meanings. The visibility of the male dancer's body at the swimming pool needs no legitimisation but that provided by a context in which the visibility of any and every body is socially allowed beyond common norms. And his body is admired – by both men and women – as a male one. On the contrary, in theatre, where the body's visibility is dramatically asymmetrical, the dancer's bodily display, though legitimised by the ritual occasion, suffers from the absence of non-merely-aesthetic reasons. Precisely thanks to the framing power of the ritual, furthermore, the muscularity of the dancer's body is primarily regarded as an attribute of the dancing body, rather than of the male body, and thus loses much of its masculinising charge.

C. The stylistic continuum : in/congruence playing

I define style as the maintenance of expressive identifiability, and consider the in/congruence playing it allows as the key to self-construction and self-representation. Dance styles provide systems of signs that the individual dancer as well as the collectively understood dance world can exploit in order to represent themselves.

As each gender does, each style has its own ways of moving and using the body. It is about different movements (e.g. *fouetté* vs. kick) as well as different ways of doing the same movement (e.g. fluent vs. fragmented rhythm). For those who dance, therefore, style – which, once embodied, crosses the thresholds of the dance world and penetrates everyday life in habitual form – and gender – an early “theme” in socialisation – combine, and create a complex matrix of kinaesthetic identities, on the basis of which each dancer negotiates on her/his own in the work of “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) s/he does.

There is more : each style makes a different use of the male and the female body, and considers the two more or less similar and interchangeable. Choreography can reinforce or challenge the common sense

notion that there are specifically male and female styles of movement. If a choreographer believes that they are inherently different,

²² From the point of view of identity construction and, especially, identity performance, whereas for women to appropriate such an ethic means to demonstrate being a real dancer or sportswoman, for men it is a means of demonstrating that they are “real men” (despite being a dancer).

then she or he will design for each sex different steps, which, of course, will reinforce the original notion (Adams, 2005 :76).

This is the case of classical ballet, whereas contemporary dance “deviates” more often²³ : for instance, the soloist role of the famous *Bolero* (Bjart/Ravel), a piece endowed with strong erotic charge, has been created for, and enacted by, both men and women, with no single change in choreography. This can certainly contribute to “queering” (De Lauretis, 1991), so to speak, gender roles’ representations as produced in the world of theatrical dance ; more specifically, it can contribute in representing such a world as less women’s, and can thus work as a stigma antidote for the latter’s male members.

Clothing too – costume and, especially, practice-wear – involves perceptible differences, and therefore constitutes a semiotic resource able to mark and produce gender (Barnes/Eicher, 1992) and, more generally, identity (Keenan, 2001). At the individual level, therefore, such a resource, as we will come to see, can also be used as an antidote via incongruence playing. By moving from classical ballet, with its tutus, tights and the jubilation of pink and other delicate colours ; to modern and jazz, with colourful leotards, shorts and leg warmers ; to contemporary dance, with its almost-naked bodies, wrapped in tight, neutrally coloured clothes ; up to hip-hop, with its vests, low-waist cargo trousers and the prevalence of dark or bright colours, we also move through diverse ways of dressing and decorating the body. Such ways may be more or less attached to the social representations that are dominant with respect to each gender. For men, tights are, or should be, more embarrassing than bourgeois’ (Flugel, quoted in Burt, 1995) dark suits, or “robust workman’s” sleeveless shirts. Whereas someone may choose modern over classical dance, at least until a certain age, for others wearing the garb of the ballet dancer may be traumatic, or at least presented as such :

[...] a series of crises in the dance career have defined me. First, choosing modern over ballet [...] because I did not want to perform in tights (later performed in tights, but that was another crisis) (R. Robinson, dance professor)²⁴.

My first dance lesson was super embarrassing. Tights and jockstrap : dreadful, a trauma (M. 38, Milan, Mar. 2006).

In sum, the ideal-typical Man is best represented by the hip-hopper, whereas the ideal-typical Woman by the classical ballerina ; *vice versa*, the female hip-hopper and the male ballet dancer are regarded as mannish and effeminate respectively (Figure 2). One can spot a *continuum* running from classical ballet, marked by the maximum degree of feminization (and thus women’s presence), to hip-hop, characterised instead by masculinisa-

²³ Yet it deviates. There still is a norm(alcy) by deviation from which contemporary dance is, or can be, defined by explicit or implicit comparison.

²⁴ From the abstract of his presentation at “When Men Dance” (www.dougrisner.com/articles/NDEO07-Mobile-WhenMenDance.pdf).

tion (and maximal male presence), passing through modern, contemporary, theatre-dance, and so on.

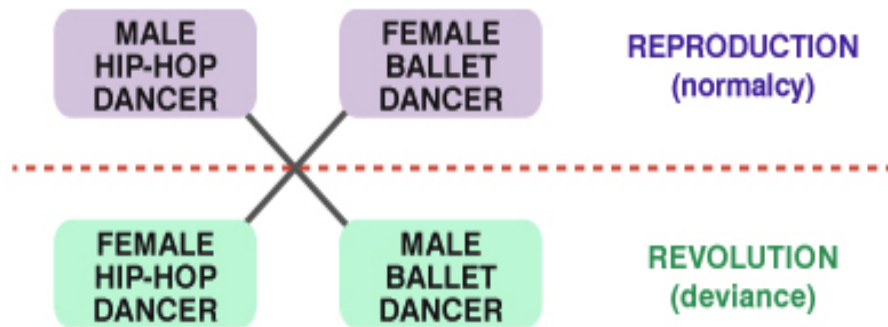


Figure 2 : Semiotic square of male/female dichotomy applied to dance

As evidence of such polar tension in social representation at the intertwinement of gender and dance style, consider for instance dance-themed advertising. Out of 67 printed advertisements I collected (1959-2011), only 12 (also) represent men. Among these, 4 refer to classical ballet, 8 to contemporary dance : whereas the latter show dancing dancers, the former show watching spectators²⁵.

As for cinema, most of the numerous movies that have been realised in the US in the last decade or so involving the commingling of academic, theatrical dance and hip-hop²⁶ tell the story of a girl who wants to become a ballerina, attends (or wishes to) courses in a famous academy, and then discovers streetdance by chance. On the contrary, the main male character belongs to the latter world, and hence only sometimes engages in some theatrical dance. In one of the rare cases with reversed roles, the young man is subject to some degree of mockery, which he is however able to manage thanks to the fact that, in order to please his father, he is taking a double major, dance and business – the latter being much more masculinising than the former.

Choosing one style over another, therefore, can work as an antidote at the individual level. If different dance styles socially evoke and actually stage different masculinities/femininities (Banes, 1998 ; Fisher/Shay, 2009), and demand and everyday reproduce different dancing bodies, with different habituses, which inevitably are socially characterised in gender terms, then it is not surprising that a higher or lower men's presence depends on the style. The steady increase in the number of male dancers in the last decade is largely based on the progressive increase of hip-hop's

²⁵ See also, for example, the August image of Lavazza's 2012 calendar, <http://20calendars.lavazza.com>.

²⁶ This is the last “wave” of dance movies that I identified in my analysis (232 movies, period 1949-2012), and including : “Save the last dance” and sequel (2001, 2006), “Center Stage” (2008), “Honey” and sequel (2003, 2011), “Step up” and sequels (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012), and this present wave's parody “Dance Flick” (2009).

visibility and success in dance schools and theatres as well as movies²⁷, TV shows, *etc.* Hip-hop is characterised by jerky and aggressive moving, roomy and sharp clothes – it is regarded as masculine (Faure, 2007). On the one hand, the success of hip-hop concurred with “clear through customs” dance-danced-by-men and male dancers in general ; on the other hand, men's presence is higher in the hip-hop sub-field.

Moreover, presenting the “choice” of a particularly stigmatizing style as externally-driven and/or chance-grounded – *i.e.*, as a non-choice – can constitute another, certainly less powerful, antidote to the stigma. The last quoted interview continues as follows :

Question : Why did you choose classical ?

They recommended this ballet school to me ; actually, I wanted to do modern. I got close to dance knowing nothing of classical ballet (M. 38, Milan, Mar. 2006).

Note also that this case is different from that of the hip-hopper quoted in Section 4 : for the above quoted *ballerino*, it is not only a question of choosing to dance, but also one of dancing a specific style – *i.e.*, classical dance, the most stigmatizing style – that is also presented as chance-grounded and not fully deliberate.

Finally, it is worth considering that the matrix of wearable identities overlies that of kinaesthetic identities, with increasing complexity. However “classical” a pirouette may be, for instance, it will be something “different” if performed wearing jeans instead of white leotards. This in/congruence playing is enacted by both choreographers in creating dance and shaping choreographic style within a (or mix of) dance style(s), and dancers in constructing and creating their – artistic as well as gendered – identity.

At the individual level, in fact, besides style choice, the dancer, engaged as we always are in identity construction and self-presentation, can exploit manifold symbolic and material resources, combining and mixing, accordingly to her/his expressive needs and the context, elements belonging to different systems of signs which are simultaneously related to dance style's social representation and the dancer's corporeality and bodily doings. The woman hip-hopper who wears pink, the *étoile* who devours sweets, the male ballet dancer who wears athletic apparel and avoids delicate or “loud” colours are but some examples of what I observed. It is about “distancing” (Goffman, 1961) oneself from one's role, and mobilising various bodily and embodied signifiers in order to communicate specific identity meanings. From this point of view, styles constitute a resource, since they provide an identified ensemble of signs that one can manipulate and rearrange. Style can be thought of as a classificatory tool :

²⁷ Out of the dance movies released since 2000, about 45% concerns hip-hop (40% ballet, 10% ballroom), vs. the 10% of the preceding decade (40% ballroom, 20% ballet).

it applies to dance, but also – as gender does – to the body, and thus to the Self.

VI. Conclusions

The stigma about male dancers crept in, for the first time in the West, in the XIXth century, and went then through various phases, having its foundations in cultural understandings that were becoming progressively dominant – *i.e.*, common sense. Many male dancers I met or interviewed started dancing relatively late in life, and most of them present their relationships with dance as chance-grounded and/or externally-driven “choices”. This testifies to the persistence of the stigma.

As a symbolic marker of masculinity, artistic-professional excellence, attested to by the position one occupies in the field, constitutes a stigma antidote. Men, therefore, tend to be either at the centre of – thanks to structural elements of gender inequality that systematically favour them – or outside – that is, they choose not to enter or to abandon – the dance field. However, the increasing variety adds to the picture’s complexity. One may choose among styles as among sub-cultures, and this introduces sub-fields, such as hip-hop, that, though not yet central in the field of theatrical dance, is characterised by a large male presence. This means that, in terms of antidotes, what we deem to be a central position in the field – which is composed of more or less central and marginal sectors, or sub-fields – must be weighted, so to speak, with the gendered *continuum* of styles.

Moreover, artistic recognition works differently for men and women, in a way that a) reduces the male dancer’s need to be sexually attractive, and b) increases the relative importance and social visibility of some aspects of dancing, namely, those concerned with artistic creativity and/or athletic prowess, which receive less attention and emphasis, in both professional practice and social discourse, when it comes to ballerinas. Muscularity and prowess, connected with self-control and self-overcoming, have been at the centre of both discursive and representational normalising strategies as well, in a process of sportivisation whose slogan might be : athletic bodies mastered by powerful (and creative) selves. Given the crucial relevance of the context and embodied identity, however, such strategies have not fully succeeded.

The individual strategies relying on dance style, and, more precisely, designed on the basis of a kin/aesth-etic (aesthetic, kinetic and kinaesthetic) matrix, inevitably marked in gendered terms, are indeed variously embodied. The in/congruence playing that relies on the kinaesthetic classification matrix involves forms of identity construction and self-presentation that may be alternative to dominant models, more diversified and nuanced. Further research on such in/congruence playing – especially in other fields than dance (think of women bodybuilders or bodyguards, policewomen, male nurses, *etc.*), the purpose being to find commonalities (and differences) through comparisons – may deepen and refine our understanding of

the embodied, seemingly unaccountable yet ordinarily dealt-with aspects of identity construction and impression management.

Such an endeavour, furthermore, might be helpful in addressing a question that the present work makes more or less implicitly emerge but leaves unanswered. It concerns the change processes that masculinity and, more generally, gender identity are undergoing – processes which seems to happen through the multiplication of masculinities (Connell, 2000) and, therefore, the diversification of the spectrum of accepted-as-normal gender embodied identities (cf. also Abbatecola et al., 2008). However, if gender models are varying, the changes in direction and intensity are unclear. The persistence of the male dancer's stigma, and the fact that most of his antidotes rely on normalising strategies, for instance, seem to point to the endurance, in common sense culture, of a sort of underlying hard core of masculinity, whose transgression still entails social sanctions of some kind.

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Structured summary

“Dance is a queers' stuff!”, a sentence we all heard at least once. The process of practical and symbolic feminization that Western theatrical dance has undergone since the XIX century (Burt, 1995 ; Thomas, 1996) has brought to the so-called “problem of the male dancer” (Adams, 2005). On the one hand, the most of (aspiring) professional dancers are women – in Italy (Bassetti, 2010), France and UK (Rannou, Roharik, 2006), US (Risner, 2008, 2009a, 2009b ; Van Dyke, 1996) and other countries – and the same stands regarding dance audience. However, the number of man dancers has increased in the last decade or so. On the other hand, the male dancer suffers from a strong stigma (Goffman, 1963), which appears indelible, which throws into crisis one of his primary identity (*i.e.*, gendered, and thus sexual, identity), which however, as I shall show, can be downsized, at both collective and individual level, through manifold “antidotes”.

The article is based on the multi-sited ethnography I have been carrying out for 28 months on Western theatrical dance, particularly the Italian field. I conducted field-work and video-based research with two Italian companies and the related schools as well as, though occasionally, more than a dozen international companies and tens of national ones. Moreover, I participated, for the first time in my life, in classes and shows as a complete member, in Italy and abroad. Data also include 23 in-depth interviews with professional practitioners. Finally, I conducted secondary analysis of quantitative data concerning the Italian labour market, and “mapped” the *i*) institutional (companies, academies, schools, associations, foundations, festivals, contests, awards, university programmes), *ii*) commercial (specialised firms, websites, magazines, printed and multimedia editions) and *iii*) imaginary field (literature, visual arts, cinema, television, advertising). Some of the latter, such as blogs, movies, and printed advertisements, constituted the basis for further document analysis.

On such a basis, and after a discussion of the historical genealogy of the stigma, its underling reasons and its effect on men's participation in dance, the article analyses its antidotes – *i.e.*, the social processes which help legitimise men's dancing. What are the normalising strategies for the men-who-dance and the dance-danced-by-men ? What are the symbolic and material resources from which one can draw ? What are the bodily and embodied signifieds and signifiers which one can exploit to express and communicate more or less stereotypical masculinity ? The body, indeed, always presents itself as sexed, equipped with specific physical characteristics, dressed and decorated,

as well as “used” and “moved” in a “certain” manner, sub/object of some body techniques (Mauss, 1936) and not others. Though incarnated in the individual in infinite combinations, the properties tied to corporeality and bodily doings are associated, at the level of social representations, to femininity “or” masculinity. They constitute semiotic resources for (de)constructing and (re)presenting gender.

The article discusses three stigma antidotes. Two of them – artistic-professional excellence, manifest in structural inequalities, professional practice and social discourse ; and athleticism, involving discursive and representational strategies – have been exploited mainly at the collective level and consist of emphasising the masculinising aspects of dancing-as-art/profession, such as virtuosity and creativity, and dancing-as-leisure/body-activity, such as prowess and self-control. Neither of them tries to present as legitimate alternative masculinities. They are “normalising” strategies.

A third antidote, that primarily yet not exclusively works at the individual level, leverages on the choice of the dance style/s, and the use of the markers of embodied identity that styles as bodily, kin(aesth)etic sub-cultures provide. The increasing variety of styles – that represent gender and gender roles in more or less traditional ways, and present differences with respect to body movement and decoration – not only changed the representation of dance in Western societies and, in so doing, affected men's presence in dance (e.g. recent success of hip-hop concurred to increase the latter), but also provides semiotic resources for expressing gender.

As symbolic marker of masculinity, artistic-professional excellence, marked by the position one occupies in the field, constitutes a stigma antidote. Men, therefore, tend to be either at the centre of, or outside the dance field – although styles' increasing variety introduces differences. Moreover, artistic recognition differently works for men and women, in a way that a) reduces men dancers' need for being sexually attractive, and b) increases the relative importance and social visibility of some aspects of dancing, namely, those concerned with artistic creativity and/or athletic prowess, that receive less attention and emphasis, in both professional practice and social discourse, when it comes to ballerinas. Muscularity and prowess are at the centre of a normalising process of sportivisation whose claim might be : athletic bodies mastered by powerful (and creative) selves. There are also individual strategies that rely on styles' differences, inevitably marked in gendered terms. On the one hand, one may choose among styles as among sub-cultures – and this brought to sub-fields characterised by larger men's presence. On the other hand, the in/congruence playing that rests on the kin(aesth)etic matrix provided by stylistic variety involves forms of identity construction and self-presentation that may be alternative to dominant models.