Dances of innocence and experience: Consumerism, the middle class, and impositions upon the body of the child performer

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Abstract

What does it mean when adult movements are imposed upon children? How does the child performer's body accommodate itself within the ever-growing consumer culture that demands over-night stars, rather than dancing bodies carefully nurtured over the years? What is the vocabulary for this new generation of performers, whose "agile" bodies and ability to move freely are all that stands between them and the fragility of elimination, as well as the frustration of aspiring and overtly expectant parents? This paper, within the conference theme of "Dance and Social Justice" (*Youth and Popular Dance Culture*), aims to look at the role that the child performer plays in the reality dance show. The choreography includes multiple dance genres, thus providing the child performer with a "curriculum" that demands them to fit in. The specific case study that this paper is concerned with is the dance reality show that gained immediate popularity with the middle class in West Bengal, *Dance Bangla Dance* (Junior). Frivolities and an imposed sense of mirth in the course of the reality show contrasts with the nail-biting tension that the performers and their parents endure in apprehension of elimination. The only way to survive in this scenario, it seems, is not through the frivolity of spontaneous movement, but through rehearsed "adult" movements. It is here that the child performer's body is upheld as exemplary of a "perfect" body; it is held against the "normal" body, that of the differently-abled for whom dance can be a form of expression. This paper compares and contrasts the dance reality TV show genre with the institutional training methods vis-à-vis the child performer, where the modes of investigation rest on the issues of body, gender, and society.

Keywords: reality TV, consumerism, institutional training, child dancer

Introduction

In June 2012, national news in India, as well as local news in West Bengal, questioned identity: how can you tell whether someone is a "man" or a "woman"? Runner Pinki Pramanik, an Asian gold medalist, was accused of being a male and subjected to multiple gender tests with male policemen groping her breasts in public and treating her as a circus freak as she was taken from private nursing homes to legal courts and finally put behind bars. As the nation reacted, videos of her being forced towards nudity during the gender test went viral, with her fundamental rights to privacy and dignity violated.[1]

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[1] See "Gender Controversy: Run, Pinki Pramanik run." Retrieved July 16, 2011, from http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-20/off-the-field/32334540_1_santhi-soundarajan-gender-afi; Play like a Girl, Woman!" Retrieved July 16, 2011, from http://feministsindia.com/play-like-a-girl-woman/

Whether Pinki is a "man" or a "woman" is still to be determined, and is not the focus of this paper. What one aims to look at with this information is the category of the "body" that is simultaneously physical, cultural, and social. These three labels, not to be read in isolation of each other, bring us to broader questions of gender, its notion, and violation. Dance, on the other hand, allows one to speculate on these three categorizations of the body – physical, cultural, and social – as a form of behavior that is also communicative.[2]

Within the purview of this paper, the meta-point of entry into the dancing body is through that of the body of the child performer. I choose here to look at a singular case study of a dancing child, Dipannita Kundu[3], from a popular dance reality show in West Bengal, India, entitled *Dance Bangla Dance (Junior)*. This show aired on Zee Bangla and received high TRP ratings and an excellent following among the Bengali middle class. The middle class, apart from every other type of audience, is also comprised of aspiring parents longing to create overnight stars out of their children through the medium of the dance reality show.

In "Reality, Fiction and Television," Thomas (1978) challenges the idea that television, in terms of social learning and adjustment, is a uni-dimensional event. She suggests that individuals may identify with and learn differently from media presentations whose event images are structured as either real or fictional. Furthermore, independent of the inherent real or notional structure of the given events, the television format is fictional in and of itself:

> In order to produce fiction, time and space must be controlled. Therefore, if an observer interprets an event as fictional, he or she must also assume the "presence" of a controlling agent behind the event; hence, inferences must be made in interpreting the event. In other words, since one knows or believes that the event is purposely manipulated and controlled (rather than random and spontaneous) the event must have some implied communicational significance from which inferences may be drawn … (Thomas, 1978, p. 2)

On the other hand, "authorized interpretation" is not possible in a "real" event, given the absence of the author and the pre-dominance of the physical event.

As Benjamin (1936) said, "The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception."[4] This takes us into the subject of enquiry: the reality dance show. Crafted on the unclear boundaries of "fictional" and

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[2] In "The Body and the Woman Dancer: What She is, or What She is Expected to Be," Urmimala Sarkar demonstrates dance as a discourse that incorporates physical, cultural, social, and communicative behavioural practices.

[3] See 'Dance Bangla Dance Junior Promo 2'. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from:
http://www.zeebangla.com/shows/dance-bangla-dance-junior/dance-bangla-dance-junior-promo-2.html

[4] See, Benjamin W. (1936), The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

"real" (especially the contest meant for the child performers), and born out of a certain "scriptedness," *Dance Bangla Dance* proposes to be a platform for young dancers as well as for children. But who are the participants in the show? As one can see from this list,[5] they belong to a lower rung of the middle class, and "dream" of becoming dancing stars. The "dream," which is the mainstay of drawing both the participant and the audience, is coupled with the emotional/sensationalizing factor marked by descriptions of the participants' background, such as these:

- She participates in *Dance Bangla Dance* with the hope that she gets back her lost brother who lives away from them.
- His father is a hawker in a train, and his parents have lived separately since he was only 13 years old … he dreams of becoming a big star.
- His grandparents are against his dancing, as they feel only women dance and not men. He hopes his grandparents will bless him and will acknowledge his talent eventually.

Running for six seasons, the last season of the show, entitled *Dance Bangla Dance Junior*, was particularly popular among the Bengali middle class. It proposed to create a "magic world" in which to celebrate childhood, a "world" tinged with special audition episodes that captured candid moments, the essence of entertainment. The magic world, colour-washed and marked by the occasional presence of a ghost, established the benevolent presence of "Maha Guru" (or the colossal figure), Mithun Chakrabarty,[6] as well as three Bengali judges from the commercial film industry, who had no dance background. Deemed as one of the biggest dancing stars Bollywood has ever produced, "Maha Guru" is known as the "disco dancer" as well as the "designed patron," and rewards the child performers with points based on his level of satisfaction.

Benjamin (1936) has shown us how "aura" as the essence of "authenticity" in art is lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, which brings us face-to-face with the dancing child and the socialized bodies that are created in the process of making a television show. I have chosen to focus this paper on the performance of Dipannita Kundu,[7] one of the participants in the show and possibly its greatest crowd-puller, though not the overall winner. By focusing on her and setting her performance against that of the winner's, Shalini Moitra,[8] I chose to look at some of the key areas that dominate the visual vocabulary of contemporary dance reality shows and are overlooked in terms of in-depth research.

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[5] See, Dance Bangla Dance: About Show. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from http://www.zeebangla.com/shows/dance-bangla-dance.html

[6] See, Mithun Chakrabarty. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from http://www.zeebangla.com/shows/dance-bangla-dance-junior/cast/mithun-chakraborty5252.html?ptype=photos

[7] Dipannita is a three-year-old child from a middle class Bengali family hailing from the provincial town of Berhampore in West Bengal.

[8] See, Shalini Moitra. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from http://www.zeebangla.com/search.html?searchfor=Shalini+Moitra+Dance+Bangla+Dance

In visual cultural forms, the idea of the Bengali female body has centered around the social perception of a woman's body being rotund. This rotundity, exhibiting a roundness of the face and limbs, emphasized by a heavy back and bust, captured the imagination of colonials and has shaped the view of contemporary society. This physicality of the "traditional" female body is socially viewed in its cultural production and marketed through its own claim of ethnicity. When closely viewed, Dipannita, even as a child performer, has shown the potential signs of fitting into this set role of the "traditional" Bengali female, which is also a middle class ideal of the Bengali woman (i.e. the traditional sari, the vermillion forehead mark, and cascading hair). Against this socio-cultural construct of the ethnic female body is that of the "perfect" dancer's body, which is exhibited in the agile performance of Shalini.

With the presence of the ethnic body and that of the "perfect" body, dance vocabularies are carefully selected for performers who fall into either category. For the former, it is the emphasis on the exaggeration of expression, as opposed to the juggling of movements in the latter. In an essay entitled 'The Influence of TV Viewing on Consumers' Body Images and Related Consumption Behavior," Eisend and Moller (2007) discuss media effects, body images, and beauty-related consumption within the purview of cultivation theory.[9] They write:

> Cultivation theory asserts that enduring exposure to television has subtle and cumulative effects on shaping views of social reality. Heavy television users rely on what they see on television as representations of reality. Since television reality is exaggerated and fictitious, they come to have a distorted "social perception" of the world: Television "cultivates" reality. (p. 116)

In the case of Dipannita and Shalini, the idea is not to highlight one body over another, but to employ movements and gestures that help fix the viewer's gaze and nurture the aspiration of "dreams coming true." In reality, this is a middle class dream nurtured by parents, audience members who exhibit their joy, anger, and frustration as their child performs and the camera captures candid moments. In keeping with this aspiration quotient, the child performers have to continually prove themselves via the exhibition of new movements and choreography, new glitter, and new glamour as the episodes air and as audience demand and TRP ratings rise (or fall).

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[9] Eisend and Moller (2007) further say that: "Cultivation effects relate also to body images. Body images are based on a cultural ideology that underlies body satisfaction, senses of ideal and desirable bodies, and activities motivated by these perceptions and feelings…those socialized bodies are largely manifested by mass media. Their physical appearance and bodies deviate from the population average…Hence, heavy viewers of programs upholding this construct of the 'ideal body' may have a biased perception of what an average appearance and body looks like in today's society and what efforts are undertaken in order to achieve such bodies…particularly female viewers of those programs are more likely to perceive unrealistic thin female bodies as a standard." (p. 103)

Effects of cultivation that lead to biased social perceptions may also lead to an increased gap between real and ideal self-concepts. Dipannita's status as a dancer is halfway between the actual and the ideal self (given her middle class female body image and the frivolities of expression), whereas for Shalini, her status fits well into the framework set for the "ideal," which also aids her in winning the contest. For Dipannita, the onus lies in showing exaggerated adult expressions, and she drifts between acting out a distinct Bollywood coquettishness and a Bollywood loudness. On the other hand, Shalini's curriculum extends to accumulating bits and pieces from numerous dance genres and presenting them in choreographed "perfection" for the reality show. It is a question of the survival of the fittest, with the ability to survive not involving playful, spontaneous movements, but rehearsed, compromised, "adult" actions. In a way, it becomes a "dance of experience," a string of episodes constructed in a "magic" world of "innocence."

This brings us to perhaps the most important and complex question pertaining to the child performer: the issues within dance pedagogy. Training in classical Indian dance genres involve rigorous processes that demand strong, persistent engagements, as well as physical and psychological endurance. The history of classical dance training traditions in post-independence India (I am using the term "classical" here in a socio-cultural and political context) reveals a disciple's submission to the "guru," or the teacher, and a long process of training that culminates with the disciple being fit for public performance, as long as they are given the consent and satisfaction of the teacher. Such a long drawn out and rigorous method of training demands more than anything else the investment of time and money, which in many cases is not readily available. Neither is there a promise of the child becoming famous. Within such restrictions of time and continuous investment, dance reality tv proposes and promises to solve the dilemma that numerous anxious parents share across the nation, and in this case, across the state of West Bengal. The promise of instant success and the potential to create a middle class celebrity continuously ushers in aspiring children and their parents.

The creation of a dancer's body through the institutionalized classical Indian training methods is an area of investigation and research that has been frequently discussed, and which I will not refer to here. For now, let us consider the binaries between the two variations of the idealized body: that of the classical Indian dancer purged out of sensualities in movement and expression on the proscenium stage for the audience-patron, and that of the body of the reality TV performer with the essential ingredients of agility and sensuousness catering to viewers. Held in this binary of "imagined ideal" bodies, the child performer goes between learning, unlearning, and re-learning. For a dancing child like Dipannita, who does not belong to either of these binaries, her survival in the contest is validated by the presence of her partner dancer (who is not a contestant), a plump boy constantly mocked by "Maha Guru" for his inability to agilely move and his absence of frivolous expression. While Dipannita's adult-like expressions shift the audience's gaze away from her partner and more towards her "not-so-ideal" body, the image of the "not ideal" is drummed into the perceptions of the audience, which is largely made up of parents who are aware of the fact that one of the key factors in creating stardom overnight is to negate the "not ideal" body and transform it into the "ideal." After Dipannita's performance, only one set of the judge's comments exists. They say, "Dipannita, you are looking gorgeous

today!" or, "Both of you look cute together!" validating their presence in the show, yet bringing out their "difference" and "ideal" partners and performers.

Where does one place the body of the differently abled within this binary of the "ideal" and "not ideal"? Do we still hold them as a third category in difference with and in separation from the world of the "normal"? While we negate any possibility of inclusion of the differently abled within this given curriculum of dance showcased by the virtual media, do we, in the process, find ourselves less-equipped with performance pedagogies for them, given their exhibited "inadequacies"? As Leigh Foster (1998) says in her article, "Choreographies as Gender," choreography as a bodily practice that focuses on movement relations with "social and political" structuring of power is capable of challenging the binary system of textuality and physicality. While we agree on the exaggeration of the television media, which helps shape the audience's consciousness, and while it can be construed as a medium that can usher in alternative perspectives towards "bodies in motion," the absence of any such endeavor in the reality dance show forces us to shift our speculation towards the consumer behavior that television nurtures. For most of the participants on the reality show who come from lower middle class backgrounds, alternate pedagogical platforms seem twice removed from reality: from the scope of reality TV as well as the reality of the aspiring parent and child.

The role and influence of Bollywood in this body-manufacturing procedure is one that cannot be left unexamined. While Bollywood remains a greater dream for many aspiring dancers who are particularly aware of the discriminatory and eliminating practices taking place therein, the reality TV show nonetheless offers them a microcosm of that dream. For each episode featuring the "survival" of the "fit" performers and the elimination of the "unfit" ones, the microcosm inflates each time by a greater percentage, while the dream of the victim is transformed into a non-victimized dialogue (through a post-judgment series of smiles/tear-shedding by participants, judges, and parents; promises of further break-throughs by patrons; consolations; and happy endings).

One last anecdote includes yet another piece of news in circulation just after *Dance Bangla Dance Junior* completed its sixth season. The news claimed that Dipannita Kundu, the "Eighth Wonder of the World" as she was known, had died in a car accident. Enquiries on the authenticity of the news, ready condolences, and more news pieces followed, adding to the viewers' awe at the suddenness of the event. The news event of the presumed death remained in circulation for a while until Dipannita was resurrected and produced before the audience (very much alive) in yet another reality show for aspiring stand-up comedians. I do not question here the moral obligations that should or should not be involved in circulating such sensationalized news but what seems as a greater metaphor in this sensationalism of death is the greater death of the performer – the eliminated participant as well as the elected winner of the reality show.

The news of the death of the child performer (who is thankfully alive!) mirrors a voluminous post-reality show identity "death" of the performers themselves. Some of them may be seen performing on road-side theatre-like stages; these are moments of resurrection for them. As on-lookers gaze face-to-face with former reality stars, the fictive skin of the reality performer is shed as several Shalini's and multiple Dipannita's pass into oblivion. One among them might be

fortunate enough to be kept in the loop and prove their talent further up on the national platforms, like Dance India Dance, for the show must go on!

And as the event surrounding "the wonder kid" or the overnight star fades from public memory, which is the final level of extinction for the performer, I end with Leigh Foster's words from *Choreographing History*: "We used to pretend the body was uninvolved, that it remained mute and still while the mind thought … Now we know that the body cannot be taken for granted, cannot be taken seriously, cannot be taken" (p. 3).

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