

Dance and gender: Is there any change?

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Abstract

The changing notions of gender and power are topics of growing interest in the research of dance education. The question includes, among others, the cultural resistance to dancing boys and the changing practices of dance teaching methods aimed at boys. This study will discuss the experience of a group of dancing boys in Finland with William Pollack's the myth of "real boys," "boy code," and "gender straitjacket" (1998), as well as Doug Risner's views of boys' dancing as an important means for boys to share a more common humanity through movement and expression (2010). The critical questioning of dance teaching methods is also discussed, along with the dissertations of Eeva Anttila (2003) and Kai Lehikoinen (2006) on the subject.

The views and concerns of the group of boys, regarding their dancing, are introduced in this paper presentation. It is also examined how these views and concerns surface through artistic process and dialogue. The importance of being open and sensitive to the narratives and embodied forms of experience is emphasized.

The study is based on long-time pedagogical practice with dancing boys in Finland and the artistic-pedagogical research work at the Performing Arts Research Centre in Theatre Academy Helsinki. This research utilizes methodological pluralism and interdisciplinarity. Therefore, the artistic and teaching processes are crucial to this research. This research, in and through dance, requires tools in this pedagogical and embodied context. The tools to structure this conceptual work come from the fields of phenomenology, systems theory, and ethogenics.

Keywords: dancing boys, resistance, masculinity, gender construction, embodiment

In this paper, I question dance ethos and the cultural resistance. This paper will discuss the experience of a group of dancing boys in Finland with the myth of "real boys," "boy code," and "gender straitjacket" (Pollack, 1999), and the views of boys' dancing as an important means for them to share a more common humanity through movement and expression (Risner, 2009).

This paper is based in my artistic-pedagogic thesis. In my research, I am describing my work as a dance teacher in the 1990s and in the 2000s. During this time, I developed my vision of art education and working style, which is called "raw-board-method" (Turpeinen, 2012). The study opens prospects for dancing boy's and men's experiences. In this paper, I will triangulate "the codes" with "the ethos," as well as with the voices of some dancing boys.

My artistic-pedagogical thesis has three practical and artistic parts. The first artistic part was (*Ms.*) *Julie. Memories: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* in June 2010. In *Ms. Julie*, the exploratory episode is the rehearsal process. The participants in the process were young performing arts professionals. The next project, *Lost Boys*, premiered in autumn 2010. In this

case, the episode is in the frame of growing up in dance school. The participants were young men who had more than 10 years of experience dancing in the dance school. In spring 2011, the final practical part was a series of dance lessons with small boys. Here, the episode was a dance class. The boys were 5-6 years old.

The artistic and practical parts were meeting places (Harré & Secord, 1972; Ylijoki, 1998, 2001) in-and-through the dance, where, in the frames of the episodes, we negotiated the topics arising from the experiences. The stories and the embodied pictures emerged from dynamic interactions that were released in the dance group and also during the artistic productions. In addition, we processed the topics of the dancer's experience using interviews and feedback writings. In this whole process as a researcher, I was involved as a participant, a facilitator, and as an art educator.

In the study, the research episode is a series of events that form an entity in social life, having both a beginning and an end. It is limited locally and temporally. In these processes, we examine the activities during real interaction. The dancers are responsible for their own action and, therefore, can tell about their own lives (Ylijoki, 2001). The dancer's voice and their physical presence are directed towards the world. These narratives are the descriptions of consciousness (Rauhala, 1998, 2005), which are mirrored from the common impulses of our processes.

The study illustrates each dancer as a human being, a woman, a man, or a boy. I have perceived the dancers' speech and the physical activity as having levels, which open the horizon of living. In my study, I will reach for an entire human being. Raw-board-method contributes to processes of dance construction. In addition, it opens a space for dancers to work with emerging experience and to reflect upon it (Turpeinen, 2010, 2012).

For example, a dance lesson is a formal situation with a lot of tacit knowledge; moreover, the ethos or the rules of dance teaching are often either invisible or unconscious (see Löytönen, 2004, pp. 41-47; Lehtikoinen, 2006). This means, for instance, that dancing boys face the boy code in the acts of the dance lessons or in the performances they dance (see Pollack, 1999, pp. 21-28; Burt, 2007; Risner, 2009, p. 49). The institutional teaching practices or curriculums will guide the acts, but in fact, dance teaching involves a lot of educators' tacit knowledge and assumptions (Löytönen, 2010).

Dr. Doug Risner (2009) looks into the lives of dancing boys in the U.S., focusing on such aspects as the stigma they carry and the perseverance needed in their pursuit of dance. Risner states that dance as an art form isn't widely understood, and dancers tend to be seen through stereotypes. While dance in many cultures has been and continues to be viewed as an appropriate male activity, the Western European cultural paradigm situates dance as a primarily female art form, and has done so since the 18th century. Because dance is considered to be a feminine activity, all males engaged in dance are always in danger of being classified as not being "real men."

In my study, I found that Finnish boys who dance also meet with parallel biases from two directions (Turpeinen, 2012). First, there are the self-evident gender roles and models connected to men. Second, there are the quiet, implicit, and seemingly neutral practices within dance education in which the dancing boy's body breaks into or enters a foreign/unconventional area. I have found out, through my own and the dancing boys' experiences, that in a hegemonic system,

the status quo is taken for granted, thus understood as completely natural and inevitable. The young body is expected to be adaptable and socialisable (see also Löytönen, 2004). Dance education contains many self-evident practices that are bound to lead to a collision course with the boys. Deviating from the norm, that is the dominating body and student ideals, the boys are different learners (Varto, 2007). Most practices are based on working with girl groups. The critical moment is when pupils are seen as docile bodies (see also Anttila, 2003).

Homosexuality and femininity tend to be associated with dancing men (Burt, 2007; Risner, 2009). In Finland, one discourse of boys' dance education emphasizes boyishness and masculinity, attempting to show that dance is a manly form of expression. A dancer is compared with an ice hockey player, for example. As an unfortunate consequence, attention is paid to prejudices and fears rather than the possibilities and potential of dance. On the other hand, masculinity is considered a narrow starting-point. In my work as both a teacher and a researcher of dance, I have a political mission: to move the point of power from the teacher to the dance process. That is, to the individual selves and the students' bodies, when these eventually become visible and find expression. At that stage, differences and the varying processes of growth can be seen. In dance performances, each individual is manifested in a personal way. A quote from Hannah Arendt (1998, p. 8) is appropriate: "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."

Why do boys dance? They often answer this question just as a boy would explain his playing football: because their friends, even their best friends, are there. For dancing boys, their group, their common identity, is very important. In dance groups, boys can talk about dancing and share all kinds of things with their peers. Dancing boys appreciate the physical action of dance. It is good physical training, which culminates in the performances. The rehearsal process offers experiences and an opportunity to become acquainted with new people. When growing up, the boys, or young men, emphasize the pleasure of being able to move well and dynamically (Turpeinen, 2012).

The peer group is very important for dancing boys, as it develops into a social setting in which they have nothing to fear. In their dance group, they can freely talk about almost anything and share their problems without being stigmatized. Dancing boys are bound to meet with cultural resistance. What has made most of the boys carry on this activity? In addition to the ones I mentioned earlier, there is one very good reason: dance itself. You feel good in your body. Dance offers you materials for growth. That's why the peculiarity or difficulty you experience doesn't prevent you from dancing. To sum up the boys' comments, they appreciate dance as a way to see the world and themselves in the world. Prejudiced people may sneer at dance as a boys' hobby. Through bodily exercise, a boy who dances opens a door to his self and his identity. Dance provides an opportunity to see and experience masculinity from many angles, and to construct a balanced male selfhood.

With my being a researcher and boys being dance pupils, we will meet implicit cultural resistance as we are operating at the margin of the dance field, while also being part of the hetero masculine and hegemonic culture. There are two questions to answer: how are dancing boys viewed in our society? How is masculinity conceived within our dance education?

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