

**Embodied Gender Identities Through the
Lens of Movement and Dance:
A Phenomenological Study of Ballet Dancers in Action**

by

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B.A Honours Sociology, University Of Victoria (2020)

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We acknowledge and respect the lək'wəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Academic interest in and focus on gender binaries has led to a new expanded understanding of what defines male and female bodies and experiences. What was missing, however, was academic scholarship and research that predominantly focuses on gendered bodies in action as the primary source of knowledge/data collection. Ballet was introduced as a site for the study as it is a gendered art form that contains rich embodied data that has not been well explored or analyzed as a serious subject with regard to how it produces gender norms and how it might challenge them. Inspired by Judith Butlers theory of gender performativity, this research focuses on movement in the moment of creation, centres the body as the primary source of knowledge and the participants as the narrators of this knowledge. This was done by interviewing professional ballet dancers residing in B.C, starting the interview with a two minute improvisation exercise then allowing the dancers to interpret their movements guided by open ended interview questions. The findings found that most participants felt that it was beneficial to dance out their gender and were able to provide more natural and authentic answers than a traditional interview. The participants also were able to vocalize their experiences creating the moves and watching it back which uncovered multiple layered expressions and gendered narratives in their movement that they were unaware of or had not had the platform and/or opportunity to explore. This is an ongoing study with a small sample size, but by allowing the dancers to share their stories in the lens/scope/field then interpret the performance, this research uniquely responds to the promise of phenomenological methodology by examining alternative ways of documenting the nuances and complexities of gender and how they manifest through the embodied dancers experience.

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Dedication

I would like to start off by thanking all my past and present dance instructors, mentors, students, company members, Raino Dance and colleagues that have imbued on my body their stories, lessons, technique and knowledge. A special thanks to one of my home studios Victoria Academy of Ballet whose in-depth ballet knowledge and understandings challenged my previously held beliefs and offered additional knowledge and experiences of inner workings of multiple ballet schools and professional ballet careers. Another big thank you to Ballet B.C who supported my work in my undergrad honours thesis which led me to this research project and also helped with recruitment for this study.

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In gratitude

Forward

I was settling into my seat at a year-end recital and I was excited to see the dances the students had worked on all year. The lights came on and there was a boy, strong, bare-chested, confident smiling from ear to ear. He started strong, with leaps and turns to the music moving faster and taking more space. The music crescendoed and he threw himself in the air turning and landed on one knee. The audience broke out into applause. His arm raised over head in a smooth then sharp flourish. The music calmed, his eye-line looked to the side of the stage with his chest heaving for breath after displaying such a physical act . A girl in a tiara, tutu and pointe shoes gracefully glided onto stage. His eyes never dropped from her as he walked backwards off stage...his arm slowly lowering as he seemed to be offering the space to her. She does not look at him and instead makes her way to centre stage and steps up onto pointe as her feet bourret. She leans slightly forward as her arms float up and down and she starts to circle. She comes off pointe only to step into an arabesque on pointe, then plies out of it maintaining her arabesque. She performs some chugs backward on one leg rising on pointe every third chug. The male dancer re-enters walking with large steps slowly approaching the female dancer. He offers his hand and she takes it maintaining balance on one foot. She is looking toward the audience, he is looking at her. She brings her leg out and around and spins, the male dancer holding her hips lightly as she spins. It gives the impression that he is spinning her. The move ends by slowing her down and suspending the moment. They both bend their legs and she jumps as he lifts her up on his shoulder tucking his head underneath her tutu the audience erupted into applause.

“Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculinity and femininity are produced and naturalized but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized.” (Butler, 2004, p. 42)

Introduction: Dance as a Source of Embodied Knowledge

Over the past decade, academic interest in and focus on gender binaries has led to a new expanded understanding of what defines male and female bodies and experiences. As these binaries dissolve, research and explorations into challenging previously accepted gender norms have been the subject of much debate. What is missing, however, is scholarship that predominantly focuses on gendered bodies in action or, more specifically, research that allows bodies in action to be the primary source of knowledge/data collection.

Capturing the nuances of bodies in action has been a stumbling block in academic study with academics trying to assign symbolic meaning to steps and/or descriptions. However, I argue movement contains within it multiple layers of conscious and subconscious messaging and history. Dancers carry within themselves their personal experiences, societal expectations, the knowledge of their training, the stories of their instructors and the stories of their instructors' instructors, creating a lineage that is not passed on in writing but is embodied.

In this paper I propose dance and the dancing body to be reexamined as key components in furthering knowledge about gender performativity, embodied identities and the coexisting of the mind/body relationship. In previous studies on these topics, the documentation and focus on the

language of the dancer's experiences is another subtle way that disembodiment takes place.

Dancers are asked to vocalize a sensation or essence that can only be fully understood through the movement and in the moment of creation. By collecting information this way, we are ignoring the more in-depth way dancers and indeed most people communicate, which is predominantly through movement.

Professional dancers represent an interesting case in regards to perceived gendered movements and performing traditional gender roles on stage. Dance, specifically ballet, has retained a strong association with white feminized ideations, thereby causing a gender and diversity imbalance in dance schools, which leads to a greater divide in professional companies (Adams, 2005, p. 64).

We also see in dance/ballet and gender research a hyper-focus on masculinity, male dancers, male sexuality and male identity, thereby virtually ignoring questions about female identity, alternative sexual preferences and trans representation. In this work, I give equal weight to women's embodied experience and gender identity with the hope of providing further understanding into women's experiences while acknowledging the lack of trans representation in ballet companies.

I find that limited attention has been focused on the agency of dancers in embodying their own gender expression and their journey through the medium in which they have been trained to express themselves. The dance style of ballet was chosen as it represents a 'prestigious' art form that contains within the artistic training strict gender binaries especially when compared to other dance styles such as jazz, contemporary and tap. Through this feminist, phenomenological study, I will be exploring gender expression and performativity through dance while making the dancer the primary interpreter of their embodied actions.

Historical Context: Ballet

Dance, and more specifically for this study ballet, is seen in western society as a predominantly female activity/art form. If you visit any dance studio, you will find that the highest percentage of the students are female, to the extent that a class might not have any boys in it at all. Though this has been said to be slowly changing with more boys attending ballet classes than in previous years, what is important to note is that the presence of boys/men in a ballet class is a rarity and definitely not the norm (Mennesson, 2009, p. 185, Polasek & Roper, 2011 p. 173). Even if potential limitations are removed to make dance more accessible, such as expense or location, boys will tend to stay away from dance and seek other means of activity (Adams, 2005, p. 67).

The Gendered History of Ballet

This, however, was not always the case. Historically, ballet was a male, aristocratic-dominated activity, (Adams, 2005, p. 72). Throughout the eighteenth century dance steps were not gendered, meaning that female and male ballet dancers performed the same movement phrases and choreography that included beats, turns and jumps (Foster, 1998, p. 12). They did however perform these movements in a stylistically different manner (*quality of movement) with male dancers exhibiting more force and less grace than their female counterparts (Foster, 1998, p. 12).

By the early nineteenth century, ballet steps, training and choreography began to be divided along gendered lines. For women, small complex footwork along with long holds in traditional shapes like arabesque were common, while big jumps and multiple turns become the normal practice for men and part of the gendered ballet dance vocabulary (Foster, 1998, p. 12). Pas de

deux and partnering evolved throughout the eighteenth century, moving from male and female dancers dancing beside each other to the nineteenth century that saw more physical contact, lifts, and supportive holds. The goal of which being “...achievement of pleasing configurations” (Foster, 1998, p. 12). These partnering ‘roles’ for pas de deux were split along gendered lines with the male dancer always guiding, featuring, and lifting the female dancer and the female dancer utilizing the male dancer as support (Foster, 1998, p. 12). However, this gender division within ballet does not explain the overall feminization of ballet we see develop in the early 20th century (Adams, 2005, p. 72).

The Feminization of Ballet

The feminization of ballet brings with it many covert, hidden meanings and gender narratives. One of which focuses on the look of the ‘ideal’ female body. Within this narrative, the female ballet dancing body must be lean, petite, nymph like and youthful. ‘It’ must display characteristics that mimic a supernatural being, such as appearing to float and demonstrate a high level of bodily control and precision. Their bodies also have to display ‘traditional feminine movement qualities’ such as grace, fluidity, passivity, softness, an ease and flexibility. However, it is important to note that lots of these characteristics deemed as ‘natural’ movement qualities are cultivated through years of rigorous training, specified exercises and by constant feedback from instructors (Foster, 1998, p. 13). Feminine movement that has been deemed ‘natural’ has to be rigorously trained into a female body thereby making the ‘naturalistic’ feminine qualities debatable. Young female dancers who do not find these expectations achievable or more realistically do not fit into this narrow idea of ‘femininity’ usually do not move on in dance at a

professional level. Whether it is the body or temperament (*temperament being code for passive ideas of femininity), dancers may find themselves weeded out and not getting the opportunity to pursue ballet at a higher level.

Feminine Movement Unknown

But what makes dancing feminine?

This question is yet to concisely be explained, with many a hypothesis being tied to strict gender binaries or outdated understandings of biological determination. What is yet to be unpacked is how dancing, movement, ‘the body’ is inherently feminine and why is it coded as such. One such hypothesis might have roots in Cartesian Dualism which positions the body and anything to do with the body as ‘naturally feminine’ and the mind as ‘naturally masculine’ (Richardson 2008 p. 210). However, the separation of the mind body relationship does not hold up as ballet is about more than the body and requires mental as well as physical strength and control. Another hypothesis is about how women are meant to be gazed at while men may not physically present or display their body without a purpose. In other words, men should not display their bodies unless they are being used to ‘achieve a physical goal’ (such as during a competition, building something with tools, or carrying something heavy demonstrating his strength), and not be used for simply ‘artistic expression’ (Richardson 2018, p. 210). Male dancers challenge this idea by ‘allowing’ their bodies to be viewed and inviting audiences to gaze at their bodies.

Quality of Movement Defined

The uses of 'Quality of Movement' in this paper comes from a kinaesthetic understanding and background. In other studies and previous academic articles, analysis of the gender divide has focused on moves and training that in ballet are somewhat divided along gendered lines. This is a somewhat simplistic approach as most of the dance steps are kinaesthetically similar but the dancers have to approach them in different ways. This can be seen with female dancers doing similar steps as their male counterparts but on point. Thereby point work is feminine and though some men choose to do point work, it is still uncommon or used as a subversive gendered idea.

The definition of 'Quality of Movement' in this research paper is the 'purposeful imbuing of an emotion or feeling that a dancer adds to a move or sequence of steps'. As an example: raising your hand in the air is an action that everyone can do, but quality of movement is the quality or intention the dancer gives to that move. What is the feeling, motivation, quality of movement they are giving to that action? Advanced dancers can not only memorize choreography while doing complicated steps, they also need to connect a purpose to each action. Foster talks about this sometimes forgotten element when she is discussing dancers learning choreography, "... They may imbue the movement with personal meanings in addition to those described by the choreographer so as to attain a greater fervency... They may elaborate a persona- an integrative conception of the body-subject who would move in the way specified in the choreography and then use this concept to further refine stylistic features of their performance" (Foster, 1998, p. 9).

Extremely Feminized but Patriarchal

It is important to note that even though ballet has been deemed to be extremely feminized, we can also observe that ballet has a strong patriarchal structure, making women's movement, bodies, and career advancement the reflection of what men believe women should aspire to on and off stage (Clegg, Owton, & Allen-Collinson, 2018, p. 133). The gender dynamics between masculine and feminine dancers are also sometimes used as part of the choreographic story lines. These narratives usually follow traditional heteronormative ideas around male and female attraction and paint women as weak, vulnerable and requiring to be saved by a male love interest. As Foster points out, "Part of dance's compelling interest derives from the kinds of links the choreography makes between sex and gender (1998, p. 7)".

Literature Review

Ballet Experience Through the Eyes of Men

Though articles, research and scholarship that pertains to dance are predominately written by women (Foster, 1998, p. 17), we continue to see a focus on men's experiences with limited understanding and nuanced conversation around women's experiences. This could be because women's bodies in this scholarship are situated as a 'natural' expression of feminine ideals/ideas (Foster, 1998, p. 17). Ballet is an extremely feminized art form with 'the body' being at the centre of these feminine ideals/ideas. The ballet body is often referenced/constructed as the definition of feminine qualities, and given a 'natural feminine' aura (Foster, 1998, p. 17). This naturalistic explanation contains within it many gendered biases that are reinforced when we realize that despite the female voices it is actually men who hold most of the leadership and choreography roles in dance companies (Foster, 1998, p. 17). This is not only a continuation of patriarchal structures and ideas mentioned above, but allows the continuation of policing women's bodies by men even when there are limited men in the art form or active in creating academic scholarship. The irony being with boys/men being the outliers or a rarity in dance they still become the focus of many studies and research. Again, the assumption being that ballet is feminine, it makes sense why girls/women would attend, boys/ men need to explain themselves. This is of course ignoring women and trans experiences but also perpetuating ballet dance as inherently feminine and something that male dancers have to confront.

Socialization in Female Dominated Spaces

Mennesson's study, "Being a man in dance: socialization modes and gender identities," focuses on men's gendered experience in dance and/or "physical activities that are deemed feminine" (p. 187). This study examined the "gender –socialisation modes" that allowed boys/men to be introduced to dance and therefore, potentially, to ignite a love of dance that would supersede gendered expectations. This study also hoped to present examples of the socializing effects on the gender identity of boys/men from being physically active over a long period of time in a predominately female-orientated space (dance studios).

The results found that all 14 participants had progressive views around gender roles, homosexuality and gender fluidity (p. 187). This study also recognized how the male dancers displayed higher understanding towards their female counterparts, therefore proposing that boys/men who were 'brought up' in female-dominated spaces allowed these participants more access to socialize with women as peers and instructors (p. 187). It was also noted that the support of women played a key role in their development with 13 out of 14 participants saying their mothers were the main/only active supporters of their dancing and many of the interviews mentioned how the female teachers gave them special treatment because of their status as a male dancer. However, this study also emphasised two contrasting ways that these men described their personal gender identities, which were (inevitably) tied to sexuality. One of these descriptors was categorized as the 'traditional' form of gender identity which was tied to strict gender binaries and was present with some men, emphasizing the connection between dance and sports and emphasizing their masculinity and heterosexuality (Mennesson, 2009, p.188). These participants

insisted on their desire to ‘remain men’ when dancing. Within this statement, we can see the ingrained messaging that these men are receiving daily about the ‘improper’ use of their bodies (Mennesson, 2009, p. 188).

This study also seems to miss opportunities to investigate potential alternative reasons for becoming dancers (in this case, male dancers) and how they chose to communicate. The study highlights how ‘shyness’ was a “...strong characteristic of the male dancer’s childhood identity” (p. 182). When questioned about their childhood experiences the dancers were said to display ‘hesitation’, ‘lowering of voices’, and had ‘difficulty’ expressing themselves (p. 182). This is seen by Mennesson to be potentially tied to the ‘shame’ of identifying with the “sissy stereotype” (p. 182). However, it is through the action of trying to explain why they dance and choose to move in a perceived ‘feminine way’ that the male dancers must either push back and claim that space in a traditionally masculine way or adopt a more recognizable explanation which inevitably feminizes the male dancer. The most telling quote that follows these statements is from one of the male dancers, stating “...dance is a means of expressing myself, making myself heard. It’s a little like a mask I can put on my face, and that way, I can do what I want without fearing the reactions I’d normally fear because I’m not a real boy” (p. 182).

Studies that look at other feminized artistic fields such as men in cheerleading also discovered similar findings. Anderson’s 2005 study “Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity: Competing Masculinity Among Heterosexual Man in a Feminized Terrain” looks at male experience in the predominately female sport of cheerleading. This article displays two contrasting ideas of “normative masculinity.” Anderson breaks them down into another binary described as orthodox

and inclusive masculine performance. The male cheerleaders who display orthodox behavior are said to "... perform masculinity in a manner consistent with previous studies of men in feminized terrain: they attempt to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity, largely by devaluing women and gay men" (Anderson, 2005, p. 338). The second display of masculine performances are categorized as inclusive. These men show a clash with the orthodox group's beliefs and demonstrate a more inclusive approach by embracing the 'feminine' elements of cheerleading and valuing their whole team, regardless of their team's gender or sexual orientation (p. 338).

The precariousness of gendered actions can be found in the ways some of the men involved in cheerleading activities attempt to re-define the activity to try and make it more masculine. They feel the need to explain this transgression with one of the tactics being how this activity does actually fit within the traditional hegemonic, orthodox, traditional ideas of masculinity (p. 339). This can be done by emphasizing the differences between the sexes with men traditionally being lifters and leaving the more sexualized dance elements to the women on the team (p. 339). This trend can also be seen in ballet. However, one could argue that cheerleaders and dancers do more movement, training and stretching together no matter the gender of the participant. Therefore, the elements that are different or gender specific in a feminine-dominated activity tend to be the ones that are focused on and exaggerated when looking for normative masculine behavior.

The potential reason for ballet and cheerleading focusing on gendering-specific actions is it provides boys/men with a societal excuse for this apparent transgression (Anderson, 2005, p. 342). When engaging in physical activity, specifically activity that challenges gender norms,

Judith Butler argues that there is always a degree of ‘slippage’, which takes place when an individual fails to perform an act that completely complies to the set gendered normative ideals. Ballet is a significant site for these actions as each generation of male dancers is challenging normative ideals in new ways. This continual slippage opens up the possibility for challenging all or some of the previous generation’s ideas around gender performativity (Norman & Bryans, 2020, p. 285).

Homophobia and Gay Male Stereotypes

In another article, ‘Negotiating the gay male stereotype in ballet and modern dance’ by Polasek & Roper, they interviewed 12 male dancers about how they navigate the world of ballet/dance with the understanding of the homophobia and negative stereotypes that exist within the dance community for male dancers. In the study all the participants were asked about ‘gay stereotypes’ and how it impacted their involvement in pursuing dance as a career. The male dancers, gay and straight, all recognized the complexities around their internal expression and what they needed to present externally. With four of the participants explicitly stating that they purposely demonstrate hyper-masculine qualities when with a group of strangers (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 184). This study does not elaborate on how these dancers demonstrate hyper-masculine qualities or even what those changes would be, but what is clear is the dancers, gay or straight, feel the need to adjust their bodies expression making it seem like this is something they can put on and in a way is the definition of performing one’s gender.

Several of the participants perceived that the stigma associated with being a male dancer served to limit/control the population of men in dance. More specifically, four of the participants

addressed the peer pressure, teasing, and physical abuse they experienced and/or witnessed as a result of their involvement in dance. As a participant in the study explained: “I actually got beat up a couple of times. I was walking home from a class or from a studio or rehearsal and I don’t know... I would have a dance bag or sweatpants on. Certain kids in school knew that I did it so there was this antagonism” (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 183).

In a specific illuminating quote a participant explains how “...many [dance] companies would purposefully not hire men whom they believed were ‘obviously gay’” (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 185). Further elaborating that some artistic directors wanted only ‘a straight guy image’ affiliated with their company (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 185). Interestingly, this study brings up elements of gendered bodies in motion but stops short of providing a deeper analysis of what this might look like. The closest quote of explanation is provided by one of the participants and then expanded upon by the scholar. “Peter described dancers as ‘being theatrical’ and it was this sort of ‘expressive’ form of movement that was associated with femininity and homosexuality” (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 182).

In this article it is important to note that 'being gay' is not the problem. The problem is ‘acting gay’, which in this study is tied to ‘acting feminine’. Quote: “...the participants also suggested that the ways in which dancers were required to move their bodies was oftentimes perceived as feminine and therefore gay” (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 182). This perceived idea of feminine movement being tied to homosexuality was also shown to impact the hire-ability of male dancers in the industry. With participants naming several dance companies who do not hire men who are ‘obviously gay’, this idea gets more complex when it is explained that is not inherently the fear

of having gay men in the company but the perception of gay men that is wanting to be avoided. This is later described as men who dance in a 'feminine way'. One of the reasons given for this is that the dance companies need to maintain a 'marketability' to mass audiences. This is decoded to mean that the relationships between male and female dancers need to be 'believable' (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 185).

Literature Review Main Takeaways

Both Anderson and Mennesson work primarily focused on men participating in traditionally female activities and mention the struggle that they face and how they are at times required to explain in words the reason for their bodies' transgression. Polasek and Roper dive deeper into ideas and concepts around gender performativity. With the male participants in this study acknowledging changing their bodies actions to appear more masculine and being rewarded for doing so.

In the feminized art forms mentioned such as ballet and cheerleading the requirement for men to uphold and display hyper masculine qualities while simultaneously participating in perceived female activities uncovers missing academic scholarship that speaks to how feminine and masculine movement is defined, explained, performed and constructed.

Though earlier in the scholarship, separation of male and female actions/goals could be seen as a way to try and code movement based on gender, we can observe that this fixed idea of gendered movement can never fully develop. Not only does Butler's observation on the continual slippage that takes place when individuals challenge or do not perform the set gendered normative ideals

demonstrate how fragile gendered movement is but artistic fields, such as dance, inherently deconstruct, questioned, and challenge previous ways of viewing the world at large. This would inherently include ideas around gender and the body as dance and gender continue to be a site and source of historical work, practice and training while simultaneously being a place of contemporary exploration and creative experimentation. This results of which makes dance and the rules around gendered movement ever changing, multilayered and are continually in flux.

Polasek and Roper's research does more to unpack gendered body actions. This is most apparent in the communal understanding around dance companies' predilection to hiring male dancers who may be gay but who do not 'act gay'. The body's action becomes more important than the reality of the individual's sexual orientation. The question becomes what are the actions of acting gay and this is summed up in the article to mean acting feminine, which in turn is never really explained. It would have been interesting to see if a straight man who was coded by society as acting feminine has ever lost a job because of the perception of his body's actions. This would solidify what is the actual predilection of ballet companies or audiences to have preference towards 'masculine' moving men.

Men's Experience as a Focus

Although these studies bring to light many interesting elements, they also predominantly focused on men's experiences, while women are only mentioned in passing and only used as a foil to the men's experiences. In one case, women soccer players and the potential for lesbianism is brought up as a counter to men in ballet being associated with homosexuality. Soccer in this study is coded as a 'male' dominated space, thereby equating these activities as similar in the way they

both challenge traditional gendered spaces (p. 188). However, one could make the argument that in soccer the teams and even leagues are divided along gendered lines. This division makes female soccer spaces remain categorized as masculine even if no men are present.

We also see a lack of research and scholarship that speaks to women's experience in dance and gender identity. This could be because women who participate in ballet are not seen as challenging the gender norms that have been assigned to them. However, expanding on Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, I would argue that women as well as men are under the same pressure to conform to gendered expectation. This could also account for the limited research on trans and non-binary ballet dancers.

In the end, none of these articles gets to the root of the issue. Dance, even ballet, I would argue, is not an inherently 'feminine activity'. Men in these interviews feel the need to either embrace their gender neutrality or enforce previously held normative/traditional beliefs about gender. I am once again brought back to the quote in the Mennesson study by a male participant: "Dance is a means of expressing myself, making myself heard..." (2009, p. 182). Whether masculine, feminine or gender fluid, dance is a means of communication and self expression that can be further unpacked to provide insight into embodied actions and experiences. This is the call-to-action researchers should be responding to.

This data can only be discovered through movement and does not exist solely through language. This project responds to the missing literature and research around embodied practices of gender performativity and women's experience in dance by placing the body central in the knowledge collection, including women in the interview process and allowing the participants to be the

primary voices in the data collection and analysis.

Theoretical Foundation

Exploring Gender Expression and Performativity Through Dance

Gender is not exactly what one “is” nor is it precisely what one “has.” (Butler, 2004, p. 42)

For this research project, I am inspired by Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler (2004) articulates how the mechanism of gender brings forth the qualities predominantly associated with masculinity and femininity at a particular historical moment. In doing so, Butler demonstrates how these gender qualities are fluid and that it is through bodily practices (such as dance) that these gender norms can not only be produced but can also be challenged and altered (p. 52). Butler also further elaborates that these qualities do not exist separately but rather in relation to each other. In other words, the action before and the action following a movement, as well as how many times that movement is repeated, reinforced and developed can impact the interpretation (Foster, 1998, p. 5). The body moving through space can be seen as being in a constant state of gender performance (Butler, 2010). We see symbolic manifestation of this through popularized terms such as ‘manspreading’ and ‘running/throwing like a girl’. We also see it represented in the literature review ... “Peter described dancers as ‘being theatrical’ and it was this sort of ‘expressive’ form of movement that was associated with femininity and homosexuality” (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 182).

In ballet, the biological sex plays an important role in how dancers will be trained, future careers and the expectations of their bodies (Henderson, 2019, p. 1). Dancers are still heavily marked by their biological sex, and ballet specifically has strict standards of physical appearance that

dancers are expected to strive to meet and maintain; this is especially true for women (Henderson, 2019, p. 4). It is not uncommon for men and women in dance to be trained separately with the focus on muscle development and specific movements to be divided along gendered lines.

Women are said to ‘naturally’ embody qualities that female ballet dancers are expected to display, such as grace, flexibility and a softness to their movements. Butler (2004) writes, “The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself” (p. 10). In western societies’ traditional dance class settings, the students are expected to judiciously mimic the instructor’s movements and immediately display changes in their body if the instructor vocalizes the need for modification. These actions promote a type of “silent conformity” in which dance students conform their bodies and regulate expectations without critical contemplation or analysis (Henderson, 2019, p. 5). This can also be reflected in social norms and gender outside of the studio.

The ideas of what men’s and women’s bodies should look and act like are strictly enforced in Western society. Men should act/dance like men and women should act/dance like women is a common statement that takes place in and out of the dance studios where many performers train and work (Henderson, 2019, p. 1). This assumption of specific body movement having a gender contains within it symbolic gendered and social messaging, which covertly conveys gendered information (Polhemus, 1993, p. 7). However, the fact that specific movement can be seen as gendered and more specifically as gender identifying highlights a disconnect between the body

in motion (in this case, a dancer) and the internal narrative or ‘knowing’ of one’s own gender identity. A dancer can dance more masculine or feminine as defined by social norms around them; they can also choose to challenge these expectations by moving in contrast to expected gender norms. This not only brings up questions of male/female embodied gendered identity but also provides a glimpse into the fluidity of gender performativity (Polhemus, 1993, p.12). We can see ironically how dance/ballet is in fact more rigid in its gendered expectations than many sports, which are commonly compared to dance. The push for ‘normative’ narratives to make dance more masculine begs the question: why is a man displaying ‘feminine’ behavior shameful and why does it need to be fixed to help ballet attract more male dancers.

The relationship between dance performance and gender performativity shares many similarities. Both are learned, produced, repeated and involve dissemination of thought and action through social and cultural contexts (Henderson, 2019, p. 5). It is due to this relationship that dance artists should be made aware of their bodies’ vulnerable/influential position as creator and reproducer of gender performance. The dancing body is also one that is culturally marked by the society it is in (Henderson, 2019, p. 4). This allows the body to be a place of conflicting discourse predominantly decided by viewers, reviewers or audience members rather than the individual performing the movements. To disentangle the material body from cultural markings such as gender, race, size, unique physical attributes, etc. is impossible (Henderson, 2019, p. 4). However, by allowing the performer/dancer to have agency in the interpretation of ones own movement a deeper understanding and complexity of gender performativity might emerge and provide additional knowledge and analysis. Dance is a unique artistic art form, one that not only

centres the body as the producer of movement and meaning, but also establishes an intrinsically profound understanding of one's movement potential (Henderson, 2019, p. 2).

Decoding Gender Performance: Anatomical Body Versus Natural Body

The irony of pointing to anatomy while explaining the differences between male dancers and female dancers is this argument starts from a place of thinking that the dancer's body is a 'natural body'. Most ballet dancers start training their bodies from a young age and ballet notoriously has strict/ridged expectations of what a dancer's body needed to look like. Women are required to be thin, have high arches, long necks, petite build, turn out and 'pleasant facial features'. Men, though more lax, are expected to be muscular, slender and 'handsome' but not feminine.

The body's gender expression/presentation exists on a continuum that at times attributes male and female qualities to different parts of a body (Foster, 1998, p. 7). Broad shoulders have been deemed more masculine and we see that a flexible body is more feminine (Foster, 1998, p. 7). However, by dissecting the body into parts and assigning attributes that define masculine and feminine, these pieces do not necessarily equate to a masculine or feminine body and it is only in the whole and in motion can these elements begin to be understood. As we know, physical features can change and be developed. Women gymnasts tend to have large developed shoulders, which is a male attribute. Yet, they also need to be extremely flexible which is seen as a feminine attribute. So in this we can also understand that not only are gendered attributes fluid depending on the activity or task but also how a dancer's anatomy is 'not destiny'. A dancer will cultivate specific (ideals) for the body through rigorous training (Foster, 1998, p. 7). As mentioned earlier,

by saying female ballet dancers have to display ‘natural traditional feminine movement qualities’ without acknowledging the years of rigorous training it takes to accomplish naturalistic feminine qualities makes the word ‘natural’ debatable.

Ballet as a Site for Study

To fully explore this concept, I argue that dancers, due to their exceptional body awareness, are uniquely positioned to provide insight into embodied forms of gender performativity in a way that may enrich Butler’s theory of performativity in relation to the embodiment of gender roles, movement qualities and bodily expectations.

I was also inspired by Susan Leigh Foster’s work that further ties/elaborates/unpacks dance as a location for gender analysis. Quote “Dance illumines the issues at stake in an analysis of gender as performance not only because dance, like gender, consists largely of bodily actions rather than effects of speech, but also because it delineates a clear function for the performer.”

I also want to acknowledge that my inspiration draws heavily from my experience growing up in dance studios and working for the past fifteen years as a professional dancer, instructor and choreographer. I have had and continue to have many conversations about dance-related subjects, gender imbalance, inclusivity and empowering young artists. Being part of this community while I write this work has allowed me to stay closely connected to dance and embody my work on a deeper level. As Foster states, "The rich production of experience occurring daily in the dance studio provided a crucial resource for understanding not only the poststructuralist claims

concerning the instability of the text and the cultural contractedness of the body but also the structuring of knowledge that dichotomies such as verbal and nonverbal produce (Foster, 1998, p. 19).

Research Questions that were used to Guide the Study

- 1) How do dancers embody and express their gender?
- 2) How can dancers challenge embodied ways of knowing through movement and dance?
- 3) What are the implications of strict gender binaries in ballet, and is that changing?

Methodology

Neither body *nor existence* can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 148)

This study contains three different elements for knowledge collection. The first is a short-answer component that asks basic information such as the age of the participant, the age they started dancing, their preferred gender pronouns, the style(s) of dance they have trained in, their professional title(s) and their racial identity/background. The second element for knowledge collection is a dance-based improvisational exercise (2 minutes) guided around the dancer's personal experiences, feelings and expression of gender (this section was recorded for re-examination and made available for the dancer to watch). The last part of the knowledge collection process is open-ended interviews with the dancers, who were asked to dissect/discuss the improvisation they created, thereby allowing another opportunity for the dancer to be the primary interpreter of their movements.

The three different elements for knowledge collection took place in multiple dance studios in B.C and lasted between 55-65 minutes with each participant receiving a recruitment poster that had the topics of the study and mentioned the improvising element. After the recorded improvisation that had the question prompt, "would you (using your body) improvise for me a short work (approx. two minute) that encapsulates your definition, experience, or relationship to your gender?" The dancers who created the movements were able to react and respond to what they experienced. This was implemented by the first interview question: When you were improvising just now, could you tell me about anything that came up for you?

After that question the dancers were able to respond in anyway they felt was authentic. This included describing how they felt, complex imagery and at times more movement and dancing. Afterwards the dancers watched their improvised solos and were asked if anything else came up as they were viewing their work followed by a few more open-ended questions.

The purpose of asking for the dancers to improvise a short dance to encapsulate their lived experience regarding gender as the first question was to allow these potential ingrained habits to emerge through the movements they created. As dance is very much a physical expression, I also wanted to challenge ways of collecting this information. Requesting an improvised performance on gender from professional dancers, followed by a sit-down interview afterwards in which they were asked what they felt about it was intended to ensure that the dancers were the narrators of their bodies' expression.

In this research project, I utilized an embodied and non-dualist perspective in examining the gendered self (Purser, 2018, p. 319). My methodology included a unique method of collecting data utilizing movement as the primary source of knowledge. This research is designed to bring embodied knowledge to the surface where it can be recognized, acknowledged, discussed, and examined. Due to the nature of embodied knowledge and interpretation, elements may have been lost in translation or were unable to make the leap from body to the more traditional data analysis. However, it is through this collection method that we can begin to explore these elements and unpack potential embodied knowledge that has previously been ignored.

By allowing the dancer to share their story in the lens/scope/field where they are most comfortable (through dance), and then allowing them to share their interpretation of the

performance, I sought to create an environment/space that was open to their lived experiences and their interpretation. I hoped to explore how theoretical concepts such as gender play out in practice. In doing so, I seek to further contribute to a contemporary/philosophical/ innovative understanding of the embodiment of gender through the empirical exploration of dancers' lived gendered experiences/journeys/understandings. This research uniquely responds to the promise of phenomenological methodology by examining alternative ways of documenting the nuances and complexities of the lived embodied dancer experience.

Dance was chosen because of the recognition that it is “both embodied and creative, both athletic and expressive, meaning that a consideration of dance involves a questioning of the boundaries between what we might think of as the physical and the mental dimensions of human existence” (Purser, 2018, p. 320). This description lends well to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ‘embodied subjectivity’ and non-dualistic concepts/ideas/understandings (Purser, 2018, p. 320).

Improvisational Movement Sequence

Dancers who train and perform at a high level have a more sophisticated and therefore complex understanding of their own body's expression. This information becomes so habituated and internalized that it can take place on a subconscious level (Purser, 2018, p. 319). This leads me to introduce a key element of this research that focuses on the dancers providing an improvisational movement sequence to encapsulate their lived embodied experience regarding gender. The reasoning for this element is twofold: First, it allows the dancers' bodies to be the primary source for gendered knowledge acquisition. Secondly, this unique method of knowledge accumulation

allows potential ingrained habits to emerge through the movements that would have been otherwise undetected and therefore unmentioned in traditional interviews ¹.

In order to access the embodied dimension of gender performativity I based my knowledge accumulation around 'the body' in motion and allowed the dancers' bodies to be the primary method of discovery/communication. This allowed the dancers to explain their gendered experience through a short-improvised dance. It is through this awareness and knowledge that the body can be understood as a place of potential action. The location/space/performance venue, bodies, style of dance, gender, race, etc. all contain meaning before a dancer has committed to an action. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that dancers only behave in the culturally accepted/normalized ways. Dancers have the unique ability to be aware of the multiple bodily potentials and challenges and to oppose habitual gendered practices (Ravn, 2017, p. 60).

As mentioned, ballet as a dance discipline entails a strict separation of movement quality, muscle development, and body suitability between male and female dancers. This uniquely makes ballet a perfect location to propose a phenomenological study to understand the embodied gender essence (knowledge) through the perspective of dance artists. My research allows the bodies that create the movement to react and respond to what they enact, create and embody, thereby allowing the narrative to be interpreted by the interviewees (dancers).

¹ It is important to mention that dancers have been trained to display deep thoughts, feelings and emotions with their bodies. Requesting an improvised performance on gender from professional dancers followed by a sit-down interview afterwards and asking what they felt about it helps ensure that the dancers will be the narrators of their bodies' expression.

In order to engage with this phenomenon in depth, this study was guided by a qualitative phenomenological methodology derived from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the traditional Cartesian differentiation of the body and mind work is integral when examining/studying movement and gender. Phenomenology can be seen more as a philosophical practice than an empirical discipline (Purser, 2018, p. 321). Importantly, dance blurs the lines between the physical and mental dualism that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy challenges. The body is traditionally questioned as being either a subject or object; however, as Merleau-Ponty argues, it is within this interaction and layering that the embodied subject is acting on and acted upon (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 137). Merleau-Ponty gives attention to the body as an active participant of personal and social history, experiences, power and expression (p. 162). He acknowledges that the powers that the body provides are nuanced because of their complexity; however, he acknowledges the presence of these thoughts and complexities as being "well known in the arts" (p. 164). Professional dancers through their training have a deeper capacity for understanding their embodied experiences than the average person has (Purser, 2018, p. 321). This makes them perfect subjects to develop this new way of accumulating data.

Rejection of Dance as a System of Simplistic Signs and Symbols

Dance scholarship has theorized that movements can be contextualized as to contain within dance steps certain universal meanings. Thereby turning dance into a type of crude language that one tries to de-code and understand (Foster, 1998, p. 19). These strategies carry with them implicit bias against dance by prioritizing verbal, descriptive, and written means of communication over a deeper layered form of embodied understanding. At times dance is described in simplistic manners such as when a short paragraph description of a traditional ballet

is used to demonstrate male and female traditional gender roles. This again, (similar to the gender binary), tries to cast the mind and body as inherently separate with the mind being placed above the body creating a hierarchical binary. It tries to separate the dancer from the dance or the dancers from the mind (Foster, 1998, p. 19).

In this study it is important to note that though it will be using language, audience narration, description of movements and discussion, the full understanding is best understood and explored by viewing dance or by challenging yourself to do your own improvisation movement sequence with the same prompt at home. This thesis is actively calling for the readers to dance and experience their bodies moving to help understand the project's full meaning.

Data Analysis

The data analysis focused on ideas, themes and the movement quality that developed from interviews that included a short answer section, a two minute-dance improvisation and open-ended questions. The data from the improvised section and video as well as the interviews were used concurrently to understand the context of the whole experience.

Because of the unique way this project collected data, I used hands-on analysis rather than computer analysis to help capture the multiple layered meanings. For example, a participant moved, rubbed, then punched his shoulders. The act of punching from an audience perspective seems like an act of strength and can be interpreted as a ‘masculine’ movement. However, when the participant watched back the improvisation he explains how his shoulders were a site of his body not meeting societal gender expectations...“My upper body did not get big as easily as the other guys”. This in-depth way of accumulating data also helps catch non-vocal cues. The participants frequently stood up to demonstrate a dance move and accented answers with a movement or a sound ... “when I did ... dee de dee” the dancer using their hand to demonstrate a ballotté.

My approach involves focusing on the many interacting elements from embodied expression, knowledge, interpretation and the language discourse the dancers use to express themselves. By including Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I bring practical and complex philosophical ideas together without prioritizing one over the other. In doing this, I hope to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of embodied gender expression and reflections.

Participants

The participants consisted of nine ballet dancers (five female four male) who are working or have worked previously with local, national and internationally recognized ballet companies. All participants reside in B.C Canada though some worked in companies outside of B.C.

The interviews started with a few short answer questions including their age, the age they started dancing, their involvement in ballet/ dance today, the styles of dance they have trained in, and how they identified. The participants ranged in age from 22-63. Three were in their first few years of working as professional dancers and one considered themselves 'retired' and two more participant considered themselves semi-retired though they still sometimes worked with ballet companies or taught dance in the community. The other three participants considered themselves 'mid-career'. All participants were asked to describe how they identify. Of the nine participants five identified as female and four as male. Seven identified as 'white' or caucasian one as 'mixed asian descent' and one as a 'hispanic immigrant'. All identified as cis gender and most divulged their sexual orientation. Of the nine participants, five identified as 'straight', one identified as gay, and two identified as bi, with one participant not using her sexual orientation as part of her identity descriptor.

Recruitment

Five of the dancers were recruited through contact with B.C Ballet companies who forwarded the information onto their company of dancers, apprentices and advanced students. Four other participants responded to a call out on online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

I personally reached out with recruitment posters to help spread the word to dance studios in Victoria and Vancouver. To obtain access to dancers from B.C dance companies, an email was

send out and the dance companies passed on the information to their registry of dancers. For those dancers who were interested, they had to make contact by email and then a date was set to meet in a location/dance studio of their choosing. The dancers contacted me separately by email then were forwarded the recruitment poster. The dancers/participants were all told ahead of time the purpose of the research as well as the performing/improvisational element of the study.

Though they did not receive the follow up questions ahead of time.

It is important to acknowledge the small sample size of 9 participants. All interviews required in-depth interviews, a large studio space and flexibility in the schedule. Some of the dancers were on tour and were interested in participating but had to wait until they returned back home. Some scheduled interviews had to be canceled due to scheduling conflicts or inability to book a studio at a time that worked for the participants. All nine interviews were conducted in the span of four months in dance studios in Victoria, Kelowna, Nanaimo and Vancouver.

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Sophia	27	Caucasian	F	Straight
Rachel	63	Caucasian	F	Straight
Erin	N/A	Caucasian	F	Straight
Shawn	37	Caucasian	M	Gay
Fred	24	Hispanic	M	Bi
Meredith	37	Asian	F	UN
Philip	23	Caucasian	M	Straight
Eric	25	Caucasian	M/	Straight
Bethany	21	Caucasian	F	Bi

Objective

The purpose of this research was to provide a space for the body to be the primary source of embodied knowledge. When we are asked to explain our feelings or thoughts we can communicate in a multitude of ways. Unlike the other studies mentioned in the literature review, this research allowed the dancers to answer questions about their beliefs and experiences regarding their journey of gender expression through movement as the primary source of embodied knowledge. In this new approach, I place the body as central in knowledge creation and expression, as well as teased out the differences between the body as performing gender roles and embodied feelings, reactions, and discovery of internal gendered expectations. Dancers contain rich embodied data that has not been well explored or analyzed as a serious subject with regard to how it produces gender norms and how it might challenge them.

Exploring gender through movement is a starting point and a way for dancers who are used to communicating with their body and have a deeper understanding/control of their body to be the source of beginning to understand this connection between movement and gender.

Positionality

I am a professional dancer, choreographer and instructor working in B.C. Though my professional background is more in contemporary and jazz dance, I have been taking ballet since the age of four and I am involved in many companies and schools who primarily work in the classical ballet style of dance. This background provided me insight and knowledge in body subjectivity and internalized gender embodiment. As a researcher, I was interested in elevating the body as a source of knowledge and finding out how classically trained ballet dancers

interpret and embody ideas of gender when they are allowed to explore this idea through their own movements, with the focus being on the dancers' interpretation of their own movements.

With the addition of asking for the dancers to do an improvised dance as part of the interview I want to acknowledge that my presence in the room added additional stress to the participants as any performance with an audience would do. Surprisingly, the feedback from the participants was the traditional interview felt more unnatural as they did not want to say anything wrong, and dance is a place that is comfortable to them.

*This research received ethical approval by UVIC and followed UVic human research ethics guidelines.

Start of the Interview

Greeting the Participant

The dancers were greeted, thanked for coming, shown the studio, and given a description of the structure of the hour-long interview. They had all received a description of the activities in an email and if any of the participants had questions they were answered before anything was recorded or the official interview began. They then were asked the short answer questions, asked if they needed any time before the improvisation, and offered a music option to have on while they improvised.

*Music selection: To help with the improvisation the dancers could choose to do the improvisation movement in silence, soundscape or minimal piano (saman by Ólafur Arnalds). Most participants chose to have some sound/music playing and to prevent any gendered bias inspiration from the music they only where able to select silence, soundscape or “light piano” and did not hear the music before they started dancing.

Before the Improvisation Began (Gender Difference Between the Participants)

Interestingly another difference between the male and female participants was the attitudes in which they approached the improvisation. When asked if they were ready to improvise the women were overall more hesitant, required longer time to prepare, asked lots of follow up questions and at times pre warned that their improvisation ‘might not be very good’. The male participants had little to no questions or hesitation. They communicated that it “felt good to move” and they commented that they “liked their results” of the improvisation.

Analysis Structure

The analysis structure for the movement improvisation was broken down into three main sections:

- 1) The kinaesthetic observation (What is physically happening. The moves the dancers are doing)
- 2) Audience narrative (What is the researcher seeing from the improvisation)
- 3) Dancer narration (How does the dancer choose to communicate their message after the improvisation.)

The first two sections are organized around explaining kinaesthetic observations from an audience perspective and a type of audience interpretation. These external interpretations are only meant as a guide to help the reader visualize the movement and provide some interpretive context.

Improvised Work (Kinaesthetic Observations, Audience Narrative and Dancer Narratives)

*It is important to note that the kinaesthetic observations and audience narration help provide more context to the later and more significant 'Dancer narration'. The Kinaesthetic observations are to help the reader visualize the movement, whereas the audience narration helps acknowledge the potential audience biases or the congruency of the dancer's body messaging to an audience.

Even though the conversations and questions pertaining to what the dancers felt/saw in their work will be the main focus of analysis.

Improvisation Prompt Question

“Would you (using your body) improvise for me a short work (approx. two minute) that encapsulates your definition, experience, or relationship to your gender?”

Improvisation Observations

Kinaesthetic- All dancers walked to a central part of the studio (shifting slightly, or shaking out their hands/shoulders) and then found stillness. The movement started slow, the heads were down or eyes were off to the side or closed not looking in the mirror or at anything else in the room.

Audience Narrative- At the beginning of the improvisation the dancers seemed to be demonstrating internal questioning and exploration. The gaze of the dancers was not ‘to the front’ or ‘to an audience’.

Cluster Of Movements

Kinaesthetic- Each dancer demonstrated similar flow in how the movement developed in their improvisation. Slow hesitant movement, followed by a faster sequence of movement then back to slow.

Audience Narrative- It looked like the dancer ‘hit on’ an idea that created a rush of inspiration causing a sequence of movement to come out of the body.

Kinaesthetic- After the faster sequence of movement ended, the movement would slow back down which would then be followed by another burst of movement until the dancer slowed

completely to stillness or walked away from the centre of the room thereby finishing their improvisation.

Audience Narrative -When the dancers slowed they seemed to be in a state of reflection or waiting for the next burst of inspiration.

This pattern could be seen for every improvisation but the spaces/time in-between the cluster of movement varied for each dancer.

Quality of Movement

Kinaesthetic- The overall control and intention of each dancer demonstrated many levels to their performance/improvisation. All dancers demonstrated 'strong' hits, flow, quick footwork, turns, suspension, release and complicated isolations. It can be noted observationally that the female participants demonstrated smoother transitions thereby making their movement seem less chaotic and have a more consistent flow. The male dancers demonstrated more hits and less flow.

Repetition of Themes

Kinaesthetic- Each dancer in their improvisation demonstrated repetition of selected steps or an evolution of specific steps/movements. *This can also be explained as common body movement patterns. Example Dancer (Sophia) demonstrated seven 'Arabesques' during the 2 minutes improvisation. These were sometimes close together and fast or at the end of a 'burst of movement' and slow. Near the completion of the improvisation the arabesque evolved into a penché then into a forward roll.

Arabesque: Body position in which a dancer stands on one leg (supporting leg) with the other extend behind (working leg).

*Penché: Similar to Arabesque but the torso leans towards the floor as the working leg raises higher.

Example Dancer (Shawn) went into a deep lunge and then slowly pulled in his back leg ending in a low squat ball position. He repeated that action twice more during his two minutes improvisation with the final repetition ending the sequence by shaking his head as if saying ‘no’ and then collapsing to the floor.

Dancer Narrative- When asked after about the repetition later in the interview. Dancer (Sophia), who had repeated the Arabesques said she was reflecting on the expectations that were put on her as a female ballet dancer: “You had to be perfect and somedays you were just tired”... or when explaining about the evolution of the Arabesque to the Penché into the forward roll: “ That was the fall...the accepting I can’t be perfect all the time”. Dancer (Shawn), who did the multiple lunges, responds after seeing that pattern, “I was feeling small, feeling alone, thinking about retreating...I was the only boy in the class...I tried not to be so weird”

Traditional and ‘Non-Traditional’ Ballet Movement

Kinaesthetic -The women participants overwhelmingly stayed in the more ‘traditional Ballet vocabulary’ (Pirouettes, Bourre, Arabesque). Though at times they would do a ballet step that traditionally is done more by male ballet dancers such as a ‘tour on lair’ and ‘Grand jete’.

Dancer Narrative- During the later part of the interview this was explained to have been done purposely as an exploration into traditional male ballet movements.

Kinaesthetic - The women participants when compared to the male participants had more turns, graceful (flowing) arms, quick foot work and jumps. The connections between steps seemed more structured as if they were doing a cross floor exercise or a set exercise from a ballet class or performance. Overwhelmingly the female movement was smooth, had flow and seemed to be consistent. Not too many highs and lows but a gentle ripple.

Audience Narrative -When watching one of the female participants, water imagery kept coming up, which was later expanded upon by the dancer.

Dancer Narrative: (Bethany), "I always felt fluid like I would go with the flow...like I had to adapt to those around me".

Kinaesthetic / Audience Narrative -It was also hard to ignore when watching the movement back just how quiet the women were when they were dancing even when demonstrating larger jumps. They were up on Demi point more often and when waiting for 'perhaps' the next movement inspiration more of the female dancers swayed gently from side to side.

Kinaesthetic / Audience Narrative -When the women participants touched their bodies, they did so in a gentle manner by stroking their legs and torso and caressing their face.

The male participants differed greatly in what they presented. Though traditional ballet steps were present, the male participants overwhelmingly did not stay within the confines of 'traditional ballet step repertoire'.

Kinaesthetic -Men moved faster with accents of strong hits and would then sustain a movement. They demonstrated more acts of physical strength (push ups, squats,) they had smaller jagged and intricate movements (specifically in the upper body, arms, shoulders and chest).

Audience Narrative-The small quick movements followed by slow sustained movements gave the impression of the movement bursting out of them and then trying to contain it until it burst out again. The physical strength movements were sometimes accompanied by grunts or a physical shake making the viewer aware of the physical work it was taking to accomplish the step.

Kinaesthetic - At one point a male dancer mimes partner work by grabbing the hips of an imaginary dancer then raising his hands above his head and spinning the imaginary body as he rolled his eyes.

Dancer Narrative-(Philip), When watching that section back the dancer commented " ...The hours of partner work, it can get exhausting."

Kinaesthetic / Audience Narrative -Unlike their female counterparts, who seemed to caress their bodies with care, men punched, kicked and tore at their bodies. At times beating their chest with their fists and another swinging their leg around, seemingly kicking out their supportive leg and then fell to the ground.

Dancer Narrative -The supportive leg kick out prompted the participant Eric to remark “That looked cool” when watching it back.

Audience Narrative- The women participants overall seemed more internal in their movement, and somewhat timid. They seemed to display slow exploration and processing of the question without acknowledging their external space/audience.

Audience Narrative- Male participants seemed to do more movements that acknowledged their bodies on display than their female counterparts. Though still very internal, at times they would do a move and look to the corner or the side of the room as if they had been caught. Their movements seemed to be play acting as if people were watching them, and then they needed to stop those movements and hide what they were doing. Men also seemed to have a point in the improvisation where they gave into the movement and moved with no shame, very large and proudly.

Kinaesthetic - The movements for the male participants also seemed more abstract from traditional ballet moves that one might see in a class exercises or syllabuses. This was in direct opposition to their female counterparts.

Interview After Improvisation

How dancers interpret their own body movements and feelings after the improvisation is/was an important part of this research. With the goal of letting the dancers be the main voice in the interpretation and individual experience. This was done in two ways. The first being after the improvisation the first prompt question was asked, Q) When you were improvising just now,

could you tell me about anything that came up for you? This question was posed after the dancer had finished the improvisation and they had settled by drinking some water, putting on a layer and sitting on the studio floor.

The two other follow up questions were:

Q) Did anything surprise you, or is there a moment in which you felt conflicted, satisfied, or at peace?

Q) How do you feel you explored gender in your improvised work?

However, sometimes the dancers had already answered these two in the first question, so the questions were adapted to ask if they wanted to expand on their answer.

As with the open-ended nature of the questions, the dancers answered in multiple ways. Some dancers used abstract feelings of embodiment ...“I felt a certain airiness”. Others used the duality of male and female expectations and energies, thereby embodying multiple gender roles and expectations in their improvisation: “...We each have a duality and I think we have learned that certain parts ...are more appropriate for certain situations”.

Others straddled these ideas and predominately explored the multiple (and expansive) roles that their gender entails. Dancer (Rachel): “I oscillated between feeling small and private and then being very open and expansive”. Others focused on the potential expectations of society on men and women. One female participant explained this as trying to be “soft, fluid, a little bit subservient, pretty.” One male participant noted: “...I’ve always felt like a boy...the whole stereotypes that went with most boys went for me as well ...except for the whole sport thing, but instead of that I had dance.” The male participant that had mimed the partner work also

communicated that:“ ...Men are not expected to dance (as much) in certain ways, and basically be a prop for the women to show her skills... and that is great and all but I have some [skills] too”.

Improvisational Black Out

An unexpected and unplanned result happened regarding the improvisational element. Lots of the dancers did not remember much about what they did or even what they were thinking about when they were improvising. When given the first question as a prompt “How do you feel you explored gender in your improvisation?” Four of the nine participants admitted they did not really remember what had happened or what they had been thinking about. They also had trouble vocalizing what they had done. This ‘improvisational black out’ was explained by one of the participants in this way: “...when you get into improvising there is always a zen moment... you go into a zen space its very meditative but like a dream sometimes you can’t remember it when you are awake...”

This also led to a discussion about gender as a whole and how the performance of gender in class, onstage, in the improvisation and during everyday interactions can also play into our understanding of gender as a whole even if we are somewhat unaware it is happening.

Two Emerging Themes

Despite these difficulties with recall, many dancers were able to provide abstract and overall themes they might have been contemplating. This led to two main themes emerging:

Theme one: What felt natural - (their natural way of being and expression)

Theme two: What was expected of them socially- (the way they think or needed to move, express and act)

These themes were not separate and at times the dancers seemingly contradicted themselves in what came first. This led many of the participants to question what was responsible for the way they moved their body during the improvisation? Was it the training they had received or their own 'natural' movement ability. Ballet is a gendered art form and these professionals in this field are going to have a natural ability to demonstrate traditional gendered movement. For women, they would have been rewarded for flow and gracefulness and the men for strength and agility. These ideas were vocalized by one of the participants: "...I had that thought [about] how much of it (the improvised movement) is because I am a dancer ...how much is because of my gender identity." Another participant "...how much though, is because I have been dancing my whole life and how much [is] because I am female or female presenting ... how much of it has been shaped by umm... expectation of me from a young age"

Natural Movements

Many of the participants described some of the movements less as a purposeful gendered expression and more of what came naturally to them. Sophia reflected: "I think I naturally have a tendency to just kind of ...I'm hyper and I flutter about and I feel that is reflective in my movement quality". Bethany: "I'm naturally very fluid, gentle and calm and caring... so I try to demonstrate care and purpose with my body and movement". Eric: "I'm naturally just... energetic"..

Learnt Behaviour

Both male and female dancers expressed and understood the gendered expectations in ballet and how they saw themselves fitting into these ideas. One Female participant remarked “I think that when I dance it is extremely feminine”. Overwhelmingly the participants both engaged and understood the norms in ballet around gender and though at times believed they fit into many of the gendered ideas around movement, they were also quick to point out how they did not: “... some gendered things [in dance] are really stupid”...“I am pretty obviously cis gender and I fit those stereotypes in a lot of ways but I also don’t.” One participant remarked after being asked the first follow up question -When you were improvising just now, could you tell me about anything that came up for you? Shawn answered simply: “I was thinking about being a dude ..hahaha what does that even mean?”

The participants in this section were also quick to point to the gender differences in classical ballet movement vocabulary. “...Men are required to partner, do more jumps and turn [and do] tricks women are required to do point work, it is that simple.” They also brought up how some movement was designated male (or female) because the assumption was that the other gender would be unable to accomplish the step. Eric commented, “I know plenty of women who can do double tours ...double ‘ensemble’ which is not required of a women in professional dance. I have never...very rarely ever seen it in choreography on a women on stage but I know plenty of women that can do these things and I’m like...why not ? It is a fun trick. You know...they are flying and spinning its fun...why is this only a thing a men can do?”

Fred pointed to how the choreography in ballet is created intentionally to show the difference in the genders , “...the way it’s presented is a strong guy and a very almost frail female”.

In congruence to the kinaesthetic and audience narration the women participants did experience mixed feelings about expression and ballet dancing. Erin commented, “...classical ballet specifically is predictable...their are x number of ballets and they go like this...”. This was interpreted as the women participants feeling like they did not have as much freedom in bodily expression as their male counterparts. However, the male participants also pointed to their lack of freedom with regards to attention. Quote from Eric, “The girl is the focus for sure... sometimes you are just standing there looking at her...”

Language Usage and Gendered Language

In this section of the interview, (and throughout the rest of these interviews), the language that the participants used to describe their movements was implicitly gendered. With women using words such as: light, up, lifted, floaty, glittery, fluttery, fairylike, melty, dainty, fluid, submissive. Men used words such as: strong, assertive, powerful, and big.

We also see some of the same words being used by male and female participants but being expressed in the body in different ways. The description ‘quick’ and ‘hyper’ came up in multiple interviews, one emphasizing the feminine “quick foot work”, which is a traditional female quality and then was used to describe the masculine “quick arms”. ‘Hyper’ was used to describe the ‘lift’ of a female dancer. “I’m always up, hyper and buzzing around”, and hyper was again

used by a male participant to explain why he was put into dance, “[Like most boys my age] I was hyper and energetic and my parents found dance helped focus me”.

Video Analysis

The next step in the interview process was for the dancer to watch their movements back. This was done by the dancers viewing their recorded improvisational work on a computer screen in the studio and making any comments. Some dancers choose to speak throughout the viewing, and some remained quiet until it had finished. The goal of this video analysis viewing was to allow the dancers to be active participants in how they viewed their bodies in motion and allow the primary narration to come from them.

The three follow up questions after watching the improvisation were:

Q) Did anything come up as you watch yourself dancing? Or is there any part specifically you would like to discuss/ focus on?

Q) Do you feel ballet has impacted your body’s ability for expression?

Q) Is there anything else you would like me to know about the short work you improvised?

(Or anything else you would like to add before we finish up)

Results Video Interpretation

This section of the interview provided overwhelmingly the largest portion of vocal discussion and insight. As with most open-ended questions in interviews the topics and experiences were

varied with the discussion moving from the improvisational movement to overall experiences in the ballet world. A small movement from the dancer's improvisation might trigger a story or feeling and this could lead to multiple experiences that tied back to an element of their identity. An example of this is how many participants had moments during their improvisation that related to feelings of being watched, judged and looked at. However, this could lead to a heart-warming story about their parents watching them on stage and/or an anxious story about the overwhelming feeling of needing to be perfect. The final question, Is there anything else you would like me to know about the short work you improvised, (Or anything else you would like to add before we finish up?) provided lots of additional information but did not necessarily tie back to the improvisation or embodying of gender. However, it did bring up themes that could be used for further research and also provided space for the participants to express frustrations, gratitude, speak of individual experiences and talk about how they view or viewed the ballet world and where they predicted it is going.

Themes from Video Interpretation

After the participants viewed their improvisation three different themes emerged.

Theme one -Differences in what they thought they were doing/presenting and what they saw on the video.

Theme two- Participants ability to decode and unpack specific movements and moments.

Theme three - The improvised movement uncovering or expanding on a deeper personal truth or trauma.

Difference Between How it Felt and What They Saw

Interestingly, most dancers had a very different feeling/narration after watching back their improvised work. Sophia, who had said her fast paces and ‘jittery’ movement was key to her expression of femininity directly after she had completed her improvisation changed her mind and was surprised on the pace and the intention she saw in the recording: “Watching it back it almost seems slower than it felt.”

Some dancers who communicated in the first question (before seeing the recording), that they felt like they did not really express much in the improvisation, and who seemed not to remember what they had done or thought about while they were moving, also felt differently after seeing the recording. Shawn expressed it in this way: “...I mean seeing the movement, I realize there is a lot more going on in my head, than what I realized in the moment, there were more layers ..and I could narrate [it all] to you..but I did not realize I could narrate it to you because I didn’t realize what I did”.

The surprise in what they saw versus what they think they did was a continuous theme with comments ranging from, “Woah I had a lot to say” too “I don’t remember doing that”. Fred, who did not speak during the video remarked afterwards: “...watching it back I think there was more nuance in the movement than I initially expected.”

Deep Narration and Deconstruction

Though not all the dancers talked throughout the video, most were able to provide a complete narration that went with every step, gesture and sway holding a meaning. Some dancers literally

got off the floor and demonstrated the moves again or did the arms while seated. Meredith commenting on a specific part that visually symbolized how she felt when she was younger “ I was, you know... (dancer gets up and moves arm up and down in a fluid motion) like that... ”

An interesting element of this style of interview was how the watching of the movement allowed the dancers to revisit what inspired the choice for a movement or a specific sequence of movements. An example was Sophia, who repeated the Arabesques that was mentioned earlier. Right after the the improvisation when asked the first question she gave an answer filled with feminine descriptive words “I felt up, lighted, flighty, soft” yet seemed to have difficulty articulating how she had embodied her feminine identity in the improvisation. However after viewing the improvisation, Sophia was able to reflect on the expectations that were put on her as a female ballet dancer. When watching herself do the multiple arabesques she said, “You had to be perfect and somedays you were just tired” when explaining about the evolution of the Arabesque to the Penché into the forward roll that ended the sequence, “ That was the fall...the accepting I can’t be perfect all the time”. Meredith, who had remembered some of the improvised steps she had done, communicated how during specific movements she was trying to embody feminine and masculine attributes and ideas at the same time. “ ...this is me thinking about how can I do male movements but with more fluid [feminine] arms...” When Philip watched back the improvisation he had a section that had him looking to the corner of the room then running backwards until he stepped into a long held sideways movement with his arm slowly reaching up. Then rushed back to the corner dancing frenetically whipping his arms back and jumping from one leg to the other. He explained that he experienced bulling because he was a male dancer and it was “so bad” that he quit dance for two years. However, he could not stay

away and when he went back it was excited to be, “..exactly who he was” and that he “could not hide it”.

Improvised Movement Uncovering or Expanding on a Deeper Personal Truth

Another interesting element was how the dancers reflected their movements back on themselves and discovered (or at least were able to articulate) a ‘truth’ about themselves. Rachel responded, after seeing herself dance her improvisation, “Well [there is] not a lot of energetic movement. But umm, on the other hand...I feel like I’m a really steady person, like no big emotional change. I feel like there is a lot of melty qualities, which once again probably is that thing that I was saying ... about [how I] easily adapt, change, which is a weakness and a strength, right? Like..it is fluid, when we talk about fluidity... fluid takes the shape of the container that they are in. Yes, I notice that about myself.”

Below is a quote taken from Erin who was narrating in real time as she watched herself in the recording: “...So here I’m trying to figure it out... So here I am thinking about all the things we were supposed to be as girls, light and fluid, and sort of expressive this way and soft...and I think at some point here, I think I started to go into what I thought was expected ..ballet movements for men [is the way] I prefer to move...more powerful and less passive, and more kinetic”. She is stating that she understands the feminine qualities of movement that are expected of her and can produce them however, she feels more comfortable/natural moving in a more traditional masculine way.

Unpacking The Gendered Body

Unpacking some of the recorded movements brought in elements of trauma, or the expression from the participants that their body did not meet the expectation of the gendered ideology set in ballet. This was specifically a focus for the female participants. Erin : "...and I think at some point, I was thinking how to move again... again an expression of daintiness ...umm and maybe this is a personal thing too because I was always expected to be dainty as a female dancer...and I never was. I was never that dancer. It was hard for me in the ballet world". This was echoed by Bethany and Meredith "My body was not made for ballet... I knew I would never be a prima" and "They don't accept dancers who are strong they accept dancers who look the right way..."

Though not mentioned as often, the male participants also commented on the gendered bodies expectation. After watching his work Fred brought up a section of the improvisation in which he was punching his shoulders: "I had to work really hard on my upper body"... "My upper body did not get big as easily as the other guys and I feel like that held me back"... "I really hated that".

Shawn shared his additional stress and care for his pas de deux partners "...Partnering was always a bit of a trauma. Cause you felt so guilty for any small mistake because it is so precarious for the women and then there is the whole self-conscious thing. You don't want to make her feel heavy or fat because nine times out of ten in ballet class or professional ballet class she is definitely not by anyone else's standards. And you know because...shared ballet

trauma...she probably thinks she is the fattest thing in the world. And you know you want to be sensitive to that”.

There was also subtle acknowledgment from some participants about how they actively change their bodies’ movement qualities depending on what they want to accomplish. Bethany talks about morphing her body to play different roles: “It is more morphing into what you are playing with at a certain time (pause) right? We all do that.” Erin quote, “...to a certain degree, we all play certain parts, perhaps when I am walking down the street late at night I am walking with long strides and heavy foot...and if I am wanting to feel dainty I wear high heels and going out I am going to be more feminine, we have a ying and yang. Shawn, “...everyone oohs and aahs, there is that about classical ballet and it is fun to be that person for a moment but it definitely is not real, but that is what we love about classical ballet, is a bit the fantasy.”

The Final Question

Is there anything else you would like me to know about the short work you improvised? (Before we finish). This section overwhelmingly brought up further discussion about ballet, dance and gendered expectation more than directly reflect back on the improvisation. However, these topics were usually prompted by something in the improvisation that stood out to them.

Agism in Ballet

For two participants, one who is now considered retired and one participant who is not, used this section to talk about agism in ballet. This will be expanded on in the discussion section but it should be noted most of the dancers expressed an idea or concept of their body ‘running out of time’. One of the youngest participants (*21) also communicated during her interview that she

was worried that her career might be over soon due to body limitations, injuries and her age. The idea of youth being one of the descriptors in ballets 'ideal' female body, plays a role in how the dancer might place value on their youth and worry about the future and getting older.

Patriarchal Practices, Changes and the Future for Ballet

Though trans representation was never brought up, some participants did express that they were unsure how classical ballet could adapt to the changing ideas around gender. "Unfortunately with ballet there is so much history with it that it is difficult to do it. Unless you create something new." ... "[Ballet] has a long rich history, either good or bad it has a long history. In a way you can't expect older things to conform to the new standards we have set." "...I know so many ballet schools and companies encouraging their men to do point work. But point work was originally meant to make the women look more feminine and more light. Of course, it has changed in what we use it for today, in regards to technique has changed. But the origins of point work was to make the dancer look like a fairy. That's not really happening anymore...". Another quote: "...When it comes to gender...taking more of the gender out of it..is going to make it more universal and less stigmatized". Most participants during the interview pointed to how things in ballet regarding patriarchal practices were changing rapidly, and that the rules regarding gender were also changing. Quote from Philipe, "...I know so many ballet schools and companies encouraging their men to do point work".

However, visual changes do not necessarily mean systemic change. Some of the participants pointed to how more ballet companies today had female artistic directors. This was seen as a positive change, as it represents a shift in the male dominated leadership seen previously in ballet

companies. However, two of the participants brought up how this did not equate to a more women-friendly workplace. "... Female directors of companies I have found, (long pause) I have experienced them to be almost more toxic than the men. Because they grew up in a certain way and that is how they experienced the world in [terms of how] they experienced it as a female dancer. With the expectations that were placed on them, that when they end up in a position of power it almost is exemplified (amplified) because it is almost like they went through that so they need to put others through it. Because that is what they went through. So there is almost like a continued pushing forward of past experiences...it is almost like inter-generational trauma that flows through, because they went through it, so it is only fair that you go through it. Some of my female leaders were the ones that pushed us to have fully unhealthy eating habits and the way we look at ourselves in the mirror."

Discussion

“The dancing body is aligned with and central among a whole host of entities similarly defined as feminine: it is most often construed as natural, authentic, spontaneous, fervent, chaotic, and evanescent.p.17... (Foster, 1998,)

As noted above, the research questions used to guide the study were:

- 1) How do dancers embody and express their gender?
- 2) How can dancers challenge embodied ways of knowing through movement and dance?
- 3) What are the implications of strict gender binaries in ballet, and is that changing?

The purpose of this research was to provide a space for the body to be the primary source of embodied knowledge. This was done by starting the interview with a two-minute improvisation exercise that had the prompt, “Would you (using your body) improvise for me a short work (approx. two minute) that encapsulates your definition, experience, or relationship to your gender?” This was followed up by an interview with the following questions, then a watching of the video. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order, (at times they had answered the question already but then they would be asked if they would like to expand on anything). Ballet in the interview was intentionally not framed as inherently feminine and the male participants were not asked to explain why they were participating in a feminine art form.

Improvisation Element Impact

With the unique inclusion of using improvisation in this research as a way to further unpack/ understand embodied knowledge around gender, the feedback from the participants is key in how

they feel it affected their responses. It is important to note that the dancers did respond differently to this new way of collecting data.

As mentioned earlier, the women participants showed more hesitance, asked more questions and took longer to prepare when first asked to improvise a short work that encapsulated their definition, experience, or relationship to their gender. This can somewhat be explained by ballet being extremely controlled, codified and at times restricted in nature. This holds true especially for classically female trained ballet dancers who might feel more pressure to achieve perfection in their movements and in their body form/shape. This leaves little time and agency for female dancers to explore, create, and make mistakes thereby potentially limiting their relationship with internal/embodied dialogue and identity.

This contradiction between professional dancers knowing their bodies and being limited by this knowledge was best encapsulated by Rachel's reflection on this theme, "...it is enjoyable, [and it is a] interesting thing to do and it's funny, as people that spend so much of their lives dancing, a lot of dancers don't get that much time carved out ...in their lives for actually just expressing themselves in that way ... it is really gratifying to do"

Overall, all but one dancer felt that the improvisation element helped them further explore the questions that were asked to them. However, it should be noted that the one dancer's hesitation developed more from the complexities for ballet dancers to actively participate comfortably in

the act of improvising than the idea of improvisational movement being used as a method for collecting data.

Quote from Erin: “Umm so, an interesting perspective of this is asking ballet dancers to express a complex thought process with movement is not something we are trained to do... I have even done some contemporary dance and for me I move kinetically and I do not necessarily express my philosophy through movement”

With the improvisational element being part of the recruitment requirements this could have been a reason that some dancers chose not to participate and potentially attracted dancers who were more comfortable with improvisation. An interesting element to these hesitation, quotes and conversation is that they were all made by the women participants. Even when taking into account that all dancers had training in different styles of dance, the men did not seem to have any hesitation or questions regarding improvising.

Overwhelmingly, most participants felt that it was beneficial to dance out their gender and were able to provided more natural and authentic answers than a traditional interview : “I feel it was weirdly easier answering your question by ‘dancing it out’ ... “I did not need to say anything because it is sometimes easier just to do..” “...I honestly don’t think I would have really had much to say if I had not first explored it in my body...” “...you immediately got the partner eye-role you immediately understood what I was doing...”

Choreography Versus Improvisation

With the interviews beginning with a short, improvised dance work the question might arise why improvisation was needed versus decoding a pre-recorded dance work that already existed. This addition of improvisation is a significant departure from previous studies that look at the body in motion. Previous understandings or deconstruction of dance, gender and performativity have come from either interviews in which the dancer simply answers questions or deconstructing dancers performing choreography. Choreography is usually a series of pre-determined and highly rehearsed steps, if one is unpacking gender from a choreographed work, you run into the problem of confirmation bias. The men are doing larger/bigger jumps (they must be better at it)... the women are much more fluid... (this must be a natural state that all women dancer possess).

However, choreographed steps, actions, and expressions are usually decided on or adapted by one individual (the choreographer) and set on the dancers. This role has historically been dominated by men, (though it has been changing rapidly in the past 10 years). In the case of classical ballets, ideas around gender can be seen as stuck in time. They are repeating stories and dances from long ago that have (what we would call now) an old-fashioned and outdated quality.

This however, does not mean that the dancer is not also imbuing their lived experiences into the movements or that they are robotically reproducing the movement exactly as given. Even in a strictly choreographed classical ballet, the dancers are actively participating in each moment and making the movement their own. Dancers are required to communicate/embody emotions, stories, feelings in the choreography that can lead to a more gendered performance. These

performances, however, are fantasy, and though fun do not get to the root of the dancers' embodied experiences. As Shawn stated earlier, "... It is fun to be that person for a moment, but it definitely is not real, but that is what we love about classical ballet is a bit the fantasy". By having the dancers improvising, this allows the dancer to explore movement that they feel expresses something about gender without the confines of 'doing someone else's choreography'.

Importance of Recording and Improvisational Black Out

The additional step of recording the improvisation also added to the depth of the interview and potentially allowed the participants to tap into their subconscious. A type of improvisational black out was prevalent with all participants and if it had not been recorded and the dancers were not given the opportunity to observe their improvisation back and make comments the research would not have provided the opportunity for the dancers to be active participants in their movement interpretations. After doing the improvisation but before watching the video, the dancers were not able to remember much and answered the interview questions in a very general way, focusing on an overall feeling or theme, and one that solidified a somewhat basic examination of their definition, experience, or relationship to gender. "I felt a certain airiness" "I think that when I dance it is extremely feminine", "I was thinking about being a dude ..". One participant was able to articulate the improvisation black out by comparing it to a dream or meditative state. This can also be further examined in how gender performance can be performed in a subconscious and automatic way and makes embodying a question with movement even more effective as a sight for knowledge collection.

All the dancers felt that watching themselves back on video helped provide them with a deeper understanding of the choices/narration they were feeling, communicating and exploring at the time of the movement creation. It provided more depth, gave the participants time to reflect and acknowledged the knowledge that these artists contain within their bodies. Some participants were able to deconstruct each gesture to such an extent that a one second move, such as flipping the palm of ones hand from the floor to the ceiling, and could provide thirty seconds of dialogue. Bethany's narration on the hand flip: "This was me seeing myself, almost like I was looking at a mirror... you are always in front of a mirror and are taught to be critical...you are taught to only see the problems ..and in a way it is not bad ...you get really good at being able to take criticism but you also learn to hid certain parts of yourself...".

Those deconstructions of the movement provided space for the participants to explore, dialogue and unpack embodies awareness that would not have been achieved in a more traditional interview. The dancers also seemed to use the movement to help reflect on something about themselves such as a deep truth that they uncovered through the improvised movement.

This brings to mind Rachel comments after watching her improvisation, "Well [there is] not a lot of energetic movement. But umm, on the other hand...I feel like I'm a really steady person, like no big emotional change. I feel like there is a lot of melty qualities, which once again probably is that thing that I was saying to you about [how I] easily adapt, change, which is a weakness and a strength, right? Like..it is fluid, when we talk about fluidity... fluid takes the shape of the container that they are in. Yes, I notice that about myself."

Framing Ballet as a Universal Art Form and the Impact

Unlike previous studies, the questions and research in this project was not focused on why men participate in a feminine art form. Though dance and ballet can be seen as inherently feminine in western society, the goal was to allow all the participants to explore, embody and express their gender through movement. By not framing it as inherently feminine and then looking for the male dancers to explain why they were choosing to participate in this art form, this allowed the male participants to engage fully in their personal, independent, internal discovery and motivations around dance.

Unlike the shy reaction Mennesson was said to receive when the men talked about their childhood experiences or explain why they got into dance, the men in this study were happy to report that they enjoyed dance from a very young age. Stated from a participant, when explaining why they liked it, “I was good at it”. The men in this study also demonstrated extreme confidence around their choice to dance and do ballet.

However, similarly to Mennesson’s results, the male participants who referenced their childhood in their improvisation did mention after watching the recorded video of their improvised dancing similar ideas around being hesitant to let people know about them taking ballet classes: “Like as a kid in my first dance classes I was the only boy...being pulled in all opposite directions because I liked it...I was a bit shy about telling people”. However, these experiences seem to be less about internal shame, as Mennesson speculated, and more about how others might perceive the participants’ interest in ballet.

Even though ballet in this study was actively not coded as feminine, this does not mean ballet as a feminine art form was not brought up by the participants. It might have been expected for the male participants to acknowledge this but the surprise came with the female participants who explained how ballet provided a safe space for them to explore their feminine side. One participant communicated a natural way of being in the world, and that she was always “flighty”, “up and light”, and thus ballet was a place in which her ‘natural’ femininity could be explored. Another participant commented that her sister was a ‘tom boy’ and traditional feminine attributes were discouraged at home. She found ballet as a place in which she could explore this side of herself. This was an important reminder that ballet for many of the participants ‘felt right’ and provided space for personal and self-expression despite the somewhat rigid structure.

Women Can Act Like Men but Men Cannot Act Like Women

Mentioned earlier in the literature review, sports are widely considered to be a more masculine activity, especially when compared to arts-related activities. Though women participate in sports, they do not receive the same pushback, violence and uneasiness towards their gender expression as male ballet dancers are reported to receive. The ease for women to take on more masculine actions and movements can be seen repeated in this study. Though the women participants stayed predominately within the traditional ballet framework of steps, they were able to move more easily between feminine and masculine steps and traditional gendered qualities of movement than their male counterparts, (who never expressly did any traditional feminine ballet dance steps and never communicated that they were experimenting with feminine movement when

interviewed). This again hints at the hierarchy that exists between male and female movement and actions in ballet and more broadly in western society.

The ease in which women can oscillate between masculine and feminine movements can also be seen reproduced on a larger scale in western society in the clothing that people wear and the acceptance for women and girls to display more masculine tendencies without receiving too much negative feedback. Women can dress more masculine and not receive much attention but a man who is seen to be dressing more feminine can be seen as not recognizing his superior status in the gender hierarchy and therefore can create outrage and be putting himself in danger. All the male participants recalled situations of bullying, acts of physical violence and random name calling that had happened to them during their dance training and into their careers.

This does pose the question, why do male dancers make some people so angry? As stated earlier in this paper, an effeminate man (even arguably more than a gay man) is not only challenging 'biological' and 'socially understood norms' around the binary system of gender, he is renouncing his 'male privilege' by 'acting feminine'. A male ballet dancer performing 'feminine movement' is seen as 'insulting' to the male body because it is challenging the gendered hierarchy that puts men above women (Richardson, 2018, p. 209). With only one of the participants identifying as gay it should be noted that all the male participants experienced being called gay slurs. These experiences were expressed by the male dancers very causally as if this was just part of the job. With one participant shrugging after talking about some of his experiences "... Ya, but it is to be expected".

Men Must Hold Firm to Their Masculinity

This casualness regarding the male participants negative experiences should not be viewed as them not caring or not being impacted by these actions. Instead, this points to the overall reality of the male dancers lived experience. It can be observed that the men in this study had a much more solidified understanding of their gender identity and my overall impression as an interviewer were the male participants seemed to have a reactive response when 'gender identity' was brought up. Responses to the follow up question; did anything surprise you, or is there a moment in which you felt conflicted, satisfied, or at peace? Had the male participants responding with statements such as, "nope, no conflict" "I've always felt like a boy" "I was normal" can be seen in contrast with the women participants more inquisitive nature, "Never really thought about it" "not sure" "I don't know... I'll have to think about it more". This could be because, unlike their female counterparts, the male participants from very early on in their ballet training felt that their masculinity was constantly questioned. This constant questioning could have potentially created a more firm/fixed idea of their own gender identity or due to the fact their chosen art and activity is coded as feminine they felt the need to solidify and defend themselves when asked about their own personal gender identity. Quote, "I've always felt like a boy...the whole stereotypes that went with most boys went for me as well, except for the whole sport thing but instead of that I had dance."

Comparing ballet to sports as a way to masculinize it can be seen in the early development of ballet in western society. Rather than celebrate and acknowledge the potential power and beauty of the feminine we still find examples of sports comparison such as seen in the Mennesson's

study, in which the men involved in cheerleading activities attempt to re-define the activity to try and make it more traditional masculine. This comparing of ballet to sports to make dance more masculine can be seen echoed in this study with the participants using analogies of sports, working out, weight training for lifts and tied these elements back to their male identity. This duality in men acknowledging and understanding that they are participating in a feminine art form while simultaneously comparing it to sports which is a safer more masculine expression not only shows how feminine activity needs to be redefined before men can take part in it, but it ignores the feminine gendered attributes that ballet contains within its history that should be celebrated and embraced.

Language as a Starting Point

Language still plays a key role in understanding how gender movement and action are talked about and understood. The women participants described themselves and their movements using traditional feminine gendered language such as; light, up, lifted, floaty, glittery, fluttery, fairylike, melty, dainty, fluid, and submissive. While Men used words such as, strong, assertive, powerful, and big.

However, descriptive gendered language only captures a narrow slice of the potential conflictive narratives that might be going on in the dancers' movement. After watching the recording of the improvisation, more conflict came up regarding the gendered language used and the seemingly 'natural' ways of moving and movement descriptors. The dancers also seemed unable to unpack if the natural movement qualities they were discussing were innate or if it was because of the years of vigorous training they received. We especially saw a duality in the women expressing

how the movement they did felt natural but also the limitations they felt in their bodies due to the very strict structure of ballet.

With the improvisation and the chance for the participants to vocalize their experience creating the moves and watching it back we can observe many conflicting ideas around natural and societal expectations. This led to the two themes emerging mentioned earlier:

Theme one: What felt natural - (their natural way of being and expression)

Theme two: What was expected of them socially-(the way they think or needed to move, express and act)

The dancers vocalized that during their improvisation they performed movement that came ‘naturally’ to them. The word ‘natural’ is one that kept emerging in the academic literature, news articles, in studio conversation and throughout this research process. All participants in the study used the word ‘natural’ many times to describe their quality of movement, the steps in their improvised movement and when discussing their bodies and overall dispositions.

‘Natural’ Unpacked

Both male and female participants mentioned having a ‘natural’ ability for ballet early on in their training. A fundamental fact about ballet as a discipline is it involves learning a series of strictly codified movements that tells the dancer ‘how to move’ in accordance to the ‘ballet aesthetic’. (Hopper, Weidemann, Karin p.229, 2018). As mentioned earlier, some of these movements under the ballet aesthetic are split along gendered lines and the term natural ability can be interpreted very differently depending on how the ballet world defines masculine and feminine.

All the participants expressed this understanding and saw it as common knowledge. "...Men are required to partner, do more jumps and turn [and do] tricks, women are required to do point work, it is that simple." In ballet, women are rewarded for flow and gracefulness and the men for strength and agility. It is not about how natural these qualities are as much as how well individuals fit into these prescribed gender binaries.

Ballet is a gendered art form and professionals in this field are going to have a natural ability to demonstrate traditional gendered movement. At times the participants seemed to contradict themselves when questioned about how and why they moved a certain way. Was it the training they had received or their own 'natural' movement ability? These ideas were vocalized by one of the participants: "...I had that thought [about] how much of it (the improvised movement) is because I am a dancer ...how much is because of my gender identity." Another participant "... how much though, is because I have been dancing my whole life and how much [is] because I am female or female presenting ... how much of it has been shaped by umm... expectation of me from a young age".

Ballet is a great example of how the term 'natural' is used, but with the understanding that this 'natural' way of moving takes multiple years of training and a very limited amount of students are able to make the jump from amateur to professional. This is specifically true for female bodies and female movement. Butler (2004) writes, "The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender

itself' (p. 10). Feminine movement to the extent that it is trained into female dancers can be seen as losing the 'natural' description as these movement and bodies can be argued to be not natural. This presumption of using ballet to symbolize what a good feminine body should be or able to do, creates a hierarchy of valued feminine bodies in society. Dancing on point is anything but natural, as is most of the ballet dancer's work. Grace, fluidity and presenting a calm exterior is extremely challenging. The female dancer (similar to the expectation on women in western society) is to do the work; it is not hard, it should be natural. The message to female ballet dancers is they should be able to accomplish these artistic and athletic feats with grace and passivity. However, once their bodies do not meet the standard of beauty assigned in ballet whether that be too old, heavy or damaged, they need to leave the art form and retire.

Natural Women

The use of words like natural when talking about a female dominated art form in a particular society can also be seen reflected in lots of women's unpaid labour such as child raising, cooking and caring for a family. Terms like 'natural women' have been growing in public discourse as a way to define women who conform to social expectations, not only by the acts they do, but the biological sex they are assigned at birth. In a way, ascribing a title such as a 'naturally talented dancer' is a complement, but when we are putting ideas of grace, flowy and dainty as natural feminine characteristics on ballet, we are de-valuing the work that goes into accomplishing these feats of strength and perseverance while also simultaneously not allowing other forms of femininity to be acknowledged. Using the term natural to something that is not natural or in some cases unnatural can be potentially very harmful. It alienates bodies who do not fit into

ballet's very narrow ideas of femininity (white, thin, small) and devalues the work of the dancers who have done years of training.

This 'natural' verbiage is also a common trope when trying to disregard certain types of work or has been used specifically to focus on specific types of women. Potentially, one who fits within heteronormative and patriarchal structures will be given the title of a 'natural' women and those who don't could face being othered and disregarded. This rise of 'natural' can also be seen echoed in anti-trans rhetoric and legislation while simultaneously pushing a very narrow and superficial ideas about femininity and womanhood.

The irony of course is ballet is not natural and the fantasy of femininity that is seen on stage is not the reality that the dancer is experiencing. An example of this is the creation of the supernatural lightness with point shoes that is symbolic of women in ballet. The female ballet dancer is somewhat hobbled when in point shoes and she will now require a man to help her balance while simultaneously preventing her from demonstrating and participating in some of the more 'masculine' moves mentioned earlier. This is further complicated to include these movement qualities even when not wearing point shoes. As stated by a participant, "I know plenty of women who can do double tours ...double 'ensemble' which is not required of women in professional dance. I have never...very rarely ever seen it in choreography [for] a women on stage but I know plenty of women that can do these things and I'm like...why not...?"

This is not to forget or minimize the pressures that men also face. Though men in dance have gained more authenticity and acceptance it is unfortunately because of the rejection of femininity, not the celebration and acceptance of it. The takeaway for men today is yes, you can

dance, but make sure you are not dancing effeminately. The heteronormative expectations and stigma/assumptions of sexuality can cause many male dancers to quit or never start in the first place. It also inherently devalues femininity, places homosexuality as a negative and adds inherently sexual undertones that one could argue are only in place because of the patriarchal structure that views the value of women's bodies as purely aesthetic.

Body as Deviant

Relating to the potential problems that terms like 'natural' can have on the dancing bodies during the interviews, some participants mentioned how 'their' bodies/expressions did not perfectly 'fit in' to the narrow ideas of 'femininity' or 'masculinity' in ballet as they understood them to be. With one participant exclaiming "...female ballet dancers are dainty ...and I was never dainty". One of the female participants described binding her chest when she younger as she stated she developed "way early", and thought this would impact her chances of being accepted into a specific prestigious ballet school which she wanted to attend. A male participant expressed how his shoulders did not "develop" as fast as the other boys his age and how he needed to constantly "work on it". This element is important as it recognizes that even professionals who, one could argue, fit within the narrow definition of gendered body expectations set by ballet still see themselves as not fitting into it naturally. They all discussed different ways that they modified their bodies, with some expressing pride in the work they had done to achieve a goal and others a type of sadness in the extreme actions they felt they needed to take. This was more apparent for the female dancers who felt additional pressures and competition. When referencing the pressure

to achieve the expected ballet dancer's body one participant put it simply, "...there are only so many spots..."

Who has to identify?

As mentioned earlier, most of the male participants were very clear about their 'correct' gender identity and mentioned it a few times during the interviews while the women participants seemed to have a more inquisitive view regarding gender identity. Though it can be seen as a good thing that women have apparently not been bullied, questioned or lost jobs because of an assumption about personal identity and experiences, we also have to acknowledge the difference between accepting and ignoring/ erasure of lesbians and trans gender dancers.

Mentioned in the introduction of this paper one of the aims of this research was, "to give equal weight to women's embodied experience and gender identity with the hope of providing further understanding into women's experiences". I want to further unpack these statements by the women participants rather than have them as a foil to the men's experience. Because women have not been the focus of many of these studies there are little to no academic articles about gay/lesbian/gender-fluid people in ballet. This is surprising when we look at how much research, discussion and documentation of gay men existing in dance and theatrical spaces.

In a New York Times article 'Lesbians in Ballet: 'Has Anyone Like Me Ever Walked These Halls?' by Siobhan Burke, Katy Pyle, the participant who is the main focus of the article, is quoted as saying ..."I truly was a stranger to myself until I got out of ballet...I did not ever know

a lesbian in ballet in my training, and it was hard to even find lesbians in the culture at large.

There was a real lack of representation, which kept me closeted and confused.” (Burke, 2021)

Even with today’s more liberal lens and ballet companies now being viewed as spaces that celebrate queer culture, we see women who identify as lesbian being left out. In a similar way to the men in ‘Negotiating the gay male stereotype in ballet and modern dance’ by Polasek & Roper, who interviewed 12 male dancers about how they navigate the world of ballet/dance with the understanding of the homophobia and negative stereotypes that exist within the dance community for male dancers. Women as well feel they needed to hide who they are because of the stigma that surrounds queer women.

The stigma around lesbians being more masculine and female ballet dancers required to be ultra feminine is quoted as a reason to why lesbian women will stay closeted. From Point Magazine, *For Queer Women in Ballet, There's a Profound Gap in Representation. These Dancers Hope to Change That*, by Lauren Warnecke, “Because of the hierarchy in a lot of ballet companies, there’s a lot of fear—especially when so many artistic directors are men—that queer women might be looked at differently. It’s just the honest truth; it’s something I’ve heard from women I know who are still closeted. We need to feel like we can thrive and live authentically.”

(Warnecke, 2020, para 8)

This eraser can be seen happening in subtle and not so subtle ways. In one example from the above-mentioned article, a ballet company was sharing posts about pride month on the companies official instagram and they were only featuring and approaching the company’s male

dancers who identified as gay. One of the two openly gay women company members had to approach the PR team and ask why they were not being included (Warnecke, 2020, para 4).

A potential reason for this erasure and fear is the subliminal male gaze that ballet still ascribes itself too. If one is creating a woman in a patriarchal male's fantasy, then she cannot be queer in anyway. She cannot demonstrate strength, dependency or agency as she needs a man to literally lean, carry her and move her around the stage. The male participant can be queer, (as that means they will not pose a sexual threat to the male viewers watching the female dancers), but they cannot act feminine as that challenges the gender binary and evolutionary determinism that places men above women in western society.

Men have it easier -In a very Feminine Activity how is it still so Patriarchal ?

Regarding women in ballet quote from participant Erin

“There are more of us but we matter less”

As with many studies, and the studies mentioned in the literature review, there is an interesting dynamic at play with an art form that is dominated by women, an art form that celebrates femininity and one in which a female dancer is the prominent star of many classical ballet works, is contradictorily extremely patriarchal, controlling, and views women as disposable.

It is important to note that men/boys are not critiqued as much as women/girls are and this is especially true in ballet. This can be seen as a somewhat speculative statement, but was mentioned throughout the interviews by both the male and female participants. The male

participants recognized their privilege and stated how much they were encouraged and supported in their ballet journey. The women participants seemed to understand and accept that ballet will always favour the men in the room. Meredith summed up her overall experience with this dynamic, “It is harder to get recognition as a female dancer because there are so many of you and that increases the competition...but if you show a flicker of potential as a guy you have it made...” she was quick to add “...not that there are not some incredible male dancers.”

Another important part of the gender ballet discussion is the preferential treatment and opportunities boys/men receive compared to their female counterparts. All the participants discussed and agreed that in the dance studio boys/men have an easier time. Bethany commented, “When a boy did come in we all had to get along with him...there was no other option” This also supports other studies in which participants mention that due to the low numbers of male participants in dance, men/boys in these spaces had an advantage and received preferential treatment: “...they did not have to pay for their lessons and many discussed the abundance of scholarships available to men interested in dance” (K.M. Polasek and E.A. Roper p.181.) Meredith: “I’ve seen very talented female dancers not really get a lot of opportunities just because by age 12..they were told their bodies 100% were not going to be right ... where I think guys are given more leeway.” And “...there are absolutely some incredible male dancers but I also just think that they’re inherently given more attention in their development than a lot of female dancers”.

This was echoed by two of the male participants Eric and Shawn in similar ways: “I have so much privilege being a male ballet dancer” and “...It is still hard but not nearly as hard as it is

for girls”. Though both male and female participants state that the most skilled dancers are elite athletes and the job is very hard, men have more opportunities, more chances, can dance longer and lots of the barriers are removed for them to succeed. The male participants recognized this privilege while the women participants acknowledged that though men have some of the barriers removed it is still a hard job and these comments do not take away from the work they do or did to get to the position that they are in.

Male Movement Freedom

In the improvisation, It was mentioned that the male dancers did not stay in the strict codified ‘traditional’ ballet steps sequences, they had no follow up questions and stated that they enjoyed the exercise and were happy with the results. This could be because male dancers who find themselves in ballet could already be interpreted as ‘rule breakers’. They have had to demonstrate confidence in themselves and are aware of the stigma against them. It can be argued that a boy who starts dancing is probably one who has had to ‘seek’ it out as they are less likely than their female counterparts to start from a young age (which was also found in this study). This ‘freedom’ to move, play, make mistakes and express is somewhat reserved for male ballet dancers (though not all the time). They are under more pressure “to be athletes not aesthetes”, therefore the perfect lines and calm demeanour is not expected of male dancers in the same way it is for female dancers (Polasek & Roper 2011 p. 174). This can even be seen in the subtle ways men can portray breath, sweat and hard work on stage while women have to be perfect, calm and collected.

There is also an element of risk that a male dancer can have in their training, in class, and on stage that is not allotted to women. Not only do women dancers feel the pressure to accomplish every move perfectly, but they understand how replaceable they are especially when compared to their male colleagues. The addition of point work can also create an environment in which the female dancer might find the risks not worth the reward as one small rock off balance or wrong landing can cause an injury. Failure is an important step on the road to success and men have the opportunity to fail in dance where women do not allotted the same opportunity.

Mutual Respect

This mutual respect between male and female dancers in this research shows similarity to Mennesson's study. The men who were interviewed in the Mennesson study showed a great understanding/empathy in regards to their female counterparts. This can be seen duplicated in this study when Philip discussed his experience with partner work in pre professional and professional companies, "...I know it was easier for me because I was a man". ...They also commented on knowing men who did treat women or their female partners badly: "but I don't think those guys end up being very successful".

Though all the participants mentioned that men overall had an easier time in the ballet world. It was also mentioned, predominately by the female participants, that outside of the studio it is actually harder for men. A female participant had a brother who danced at the same studio as her: "He got all the special rolls and free classes but then I saw how much he got bullied especially in the beginning, that I understood it was harder for him". This is supported by previous academic studies which also point to the bullying and teasing that male dancers have to endure. In Polasek

and Roper's research four of the 12 male participants mentioned experiencing harassment and physical abuse because of their involvement with dance (2011 p. 183).

This point was further elaborated on in regard to men's limited prospects outside of dance company or near the end of a male ballet dancer's career. Unlike their athletic male counterparts that they continuously get compared too, male ballet dancers have limited prospects once their dance careers come to an end. Even the most successful male dancer will probably not achieve as much financial success as a mediocre football player. Though male dancers are very skilled, (some could argue more skilled than sports athletes), they are not going to receive large branding deals or become CEO of a company. This adds to our societies' expectation that men have to 'financially provide' for their families and being a ballet dancer does not always accommodate this expectation. This inability to provide can also be seen as adding more internal conflict in regards to male ballet dancers feeling 'less like men'.

Physical Adjustment to the Body

In, 'Negotiating the gay male stereotype in ballet and modern dance' (Polasek & Roper, 2011), men expressed being able to transition their bodies into a more masculine presentation if people they did not know were around. This transition or adjusting of one's identity could be seen replicated by some of the participants in this study when they were in a space with people they did not know. One dancer commented that he rarely used ballet dancer as an introduction to what he did, preferring artist and choreographer. Eric quote, "I don't think I have ever introduced myself as a ballet dancer..."

However, this adjusting was not only done by the male participants. An interesting answer from one participant to the question: “do you think ballet has changed how you present?” Brought up how dance has given her more awareness and in a way choice about what and how she wanted to present. She talked of walking home alone late at night and would purposely walk with a ‘heavier foot’ and ‘longer stride’, thereby demonstrating dancers’ ability to change body patterns or actively to be able to adapt to their surroundings.

Playing different roles on stage and acknowledging the fantasy of ballet is also an important part of understanding how each dance can change or in some cases challenge the ideas around gendered movements. Bethany talked about morphing her body to play different roles. She talked about an earlier experience before her professional career in which she played a male child in the nutcracker “party” scene due to the lack of boys at her dance school. She commented how much fun it was to “run around” and “be bad” and “got to do cartwheels”. Shawn speaks to an experience of playing a straight male prince that was meant to be the embodiment of the female fantasy. Shawn’s quote, “...everyone oohs and aah - there is that about classical ballet and it is fun to be that person for a moment but it definitely is not real. That is what we love about classical ballet: a bit of the fantasy”.

Quality of Movement Revisited

As mentioned earlier, the definition of ‘Quality of Movement’ in this research paper is the “... purposeful imbuing of an emotion or feeling that a dancer adds to a move or sequence of steps”. In the kinaesthetic observation the female participants demonstrated smoother transitions thereby making their movement seem less chaotic and have a more consistent flow while the male

participants demonstrated more hits and less flow. This does not mean kinaesthetically that both groups did not demonstrate similar qualities of movement. As stated earlier, "... The overall control and intention of each dancer demonstrated many levels to their performance/improvisation. All dancers demonstrated 'strong' hits, flow, quick footwork, turns, suspension, release and complicated isolations." It should also be noted that even one simple movement cannot be adequately described as sharp/hard (masculine) and another is soft/floaty (feminine) as a full body movement can be doing multiple qualities/expressions simultaneously and are greatly impacted by what came before and what follows. As supported by Foster, "the action before and the action following a movement, as well as how many times that moment is repeated, reinforced, and developed can impact the interpretation" (1998, p. 5). It therefore can be argued that feminine and masculine movement are not exclusively diametric and do not exist in a binary. It is at times the hard and the soft movements working together that creates the competing clashing dynamics that produces intriguing choreography.

Dance as a Visual Art Form and the Sexual Gaze

Building on the idea of clashing elements, the idea of gender politics, sexuality and attractiveness came up at multiple times during the interview. Rachel: "As much as we don't want to acknowledge it...there is a sexual element. It is about who do you want to see on stage."

Shawn is quoted as saying: "the roles we are expected to perform are very gender normative, which is very ironic to me because there are a lot of queer people in my line of work...umm... and they are expected to play these very very straight princes who are supposed to be your fantasy dream person."

Fred: “Because you have to be able to have decent interactions with your partner...because that is one of the things ...right ...good chemistry.”

Overwhelmingly the participants understood the gendered illusion that ballet movements were trying to create and this related back to ballets overall gendered expectations and experiences. It is also important not to confuse gender identity with sexual preferences. There seems to be an expectation that men in ballet needed to maintain their masculinity at all costs and at least ‘embody’ ‘straightness’. This is not only for safety, to combat stereotypes and to get hired, but also to be viewed as ‘desirable’ by the audience.

However, confusion arose at times when the participants commented on how other people at times responded to their movements. Rachel told of an experience of teaching a ballet class in which a male dancer did not like her class as it was “too feminine”, and that this was not a one-off event. Rachel had set choreography on a different male dancer and they said they did not want to do the movement because it looked extremely feminine to them. Rachel expressed confusion about how the male dancer could not understand that if they did the movement it would be masculine as they would do it differently, and they were manly: “I admit...I did kind of switched my teaching a little after that”.

Agism Revisited

Originally not a topic of the study, and possibly because one of the participants considered themselves retired and the another participant said they were close to retirement the topic of agism came up in multiple interviews. In some ways it was subtle, such as the younger women

expressing feeling pressure to succeed quickly before they were too old. A male dancer age (37) expressed experiencing agism in an audition, “I remember doing an audition [and] I was at the older end of the audition pool for [...] They would not even look at me”. It is important to look at the intersection of age and gender specifically in a feminized art form and one that has a focus on youth tied to beauty and grace.

Additional Reflection

This is an ongoing study with a small sample size, but by allowing the dancers to share their story in the lens/scope/field where they are most comfortable (through dance), and then allowing them to share their interpretation of the performance, this study was successful in creating an environment that was open to the lived and embodied experience of each individual participant.

Movement is complex and the control that ballet requires is not only explored through stable and repeatable movements by the dancer, but the ability of a dancer to adapt and achieve these movements in multiple settings (Hopper, Weidemann, Karin p.231, 2018). It also should be noted that the body is ever-changing. Each day it is getting older at times getting stronger, the sleep you had or the workout the day before can impact how the body will be able to perform and respond. Some of the mechanical complexity is best illustrated by the following quote, “Human movement is a complex self-organizing dynamical system that is produced through the coordination of myriad neural, muscular and skeletal degrees of freedom. Control of movement requires endless translation and interpretation of mechanical stimuli into transduced neural coding that is translated back into mechanical muscle forces which produce movement” (Hopper, Weidemann, Karin p.231, 2018)”

This research uniquely responds to the promise of phenomenological methodology by examining alternative ways of documenting the nuances and complexities of the lived embodied dancer experience and therefore brings attention to the body as a site for study and a source of embodied knowledge.

Additional Research

As stated earlier, a large portion of the scholarship focuses on why boys don't dance versus why do girls dance. This has led to a narrative of men requiring to explain why they would choose to do something so feminine rather than ask why ballet been coded as feminine in western society. Further research into how/why western society interprets ballet as feminine might bring to light further understandings of femininity and uncover new understanding of how the body embodies gender.

Missing in this study as well as others is trans representation. Though there has been more trans and non-binary dancers in the news and in companies, these stories are few and far between. It can be argued with ballet strict gender binaries traditional ballet schools and companies are still somewhat unwelcoming places to those who do not fall into these ridged gender binaries.

The intersection of gender, race, age and backgrounds mentioned earlier in this paper requires further examination. One of the critiques of ballet is it has a history of narrowly defining femininity and having a hyper fixation on thin, young and white female bodies. Thereby eliminating the possibility for other bodies to be accepted and seen on stage. This has led to limited opportunities for dancers who do not fit into this definition to get hired leading to them being unable to participate in studies such as this one with the recruitment processes only including 'professional' ballet dancer living in B.C.

Another potential limitation in the diversity of applicants could be because the research emails and poster mentioned the improvisation element and follow up emails were sent to make sure each dancer felt comfortable improvising before they entered the studio for the study. This could have potentially cut off a large portion of the professional ballet population from participating in this study. Not only because of location (only B.C), but because they would be required to improvise, which is something that some ballet dancers are not as comfortable doing.

It would be interesting to do similar research with multiple dance styles such as jazz or tap and potentially to see people who have no formal dance training dance their gender. Contemporary dance would be an interesting style to apply this research methodology to as it is known to work with improvisation and imagery as part of the training as well as come from a more feminist and female point of view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this research was to provide a space for the body to be the primary source of embodied knowledge. Through the use of improvisation, open-ended questions and allowing the dancers to be the primary interpreters of their movement, this research methodology looked to the body as a source of embodied knowledge.

How Do Dancers Embody and Express Their Gender?

Overwhelmingly most participants felt that it was beneficial to dance out their gender and that they were able to provide more natural and authentic answers than a traditional interview. Due to the improvisational black out, all the dancers felt that watching themselves back on video was key in providing them with a deeper understanding of the choices/narration they were feeling at the time of the movement creation. It provided more depth, more struggles, more questions and acknowledged the knowledge that these artists contain within their bodies. All the participants mentioned how their bodies in motion provided more depth and even furthered their understanding of their own personal relationship to their gender.

How Can Dancers Challenge Embodied Ways of Knowing Through Movement and Dance

There were similarities to other studies such as Mennesson's with results from the male participants who referenced their childhood in their improvisation mentioning similar ideas around being hesitant to let people know about them taking ballet classes. However, by not framing the question to the male participant as 'Why are you participating in a female art form', allowed the male participants to dance from a place of exploration rather than potentially

defence. Overall, each participant had an understanding of gendered expectations even if they did not think that they are necessarily true or valid. There was a mix of dancers fully embodying traditional gender expectations and a complete rejection of this way of expressing/thinking. At times this tradition and rejection could exist at the same time in one participant. Parts of the body that were seen to not conform to ballet ideas of gendered expectation were regarded on the whole by the dancer as problematic. Something that required work to overcome or 'hide'.

Overall, these participants due to their profession, extensive training and embodied knowledge are a rich site for challenging ideas around gender performativity.

What are the Implications of Strict Gender Binaries in Ballet, and is That Changing?

An overarching theme of this study was how for the women participants, ballet does not really challenge norms around the preconceived ideas about femininity and their individual gender expression. This also led to the discussion to how the women participant utilizing more traditional ballet steps in their improvisation though they played with masculine and feminine movements simultaneously and purposely. This was in direct opposition to their male counterparts who did not stay within the traditional ballet vocabulary and at no time mentioned that they were trying to emulate feminine movement.

The women seemed more flexible with labels and more fluid about their identity overall. This connection of ballet to the feminine might be causing men and/or boys to equate anything feminine with a loss of themselves or not being man enough in the eyes of western society. Some of Shaw's influence regarding men in dance and the connection to male ballet dancer as athletes

can still be seen today and in this study. Men seem to have to hold on tightly to their masculinity when participating in traditionally feminine activities. The male participants instance that they always knew that they were boys/men and used stereotypical male activity such as "I played sports.." To communicate how they were not feminine or girly. However, they were also quick to point out that lots of the gendered ideas, expectations and qualities did not make sense to them and actively brought up experiences of pushing back against strict gender binaries. Whether this was one participant exclaiming his favorite colour was pink, "...and who cares", another male participant had trained and performed on point and yet another saying he actively helps out and teaches his women colleagues how to do some of the traditional male ballet dance steps. Stating that "... they are fun, why shouldn't the girls try it".

Language still plays a key role in understanding how gender movement and action are talked about and understood. The women participants described themselves and their movements as light, up, lifted, floaty, glittery, fluttery, fairylike, melty, dainty, fluid, and submissive. While Men used words such as, strong, assertive, powerful and big. A special focus was given to the word 'natural' due to the amount of times it was used in academic literature, news article and by the participants in this study. Natural was used to describe the movements they did in the improvisation and was also tied to the participant's personality. In one case, a participant described her movement as naturally fluid she then connected this to her personality as she always goes with the flow then to her gender identity as she said she had never really thought about it but like liquid she takes on the shape of the container she was given.

Because of the natural feminine label ballet has been given, ballet can be seen to have unfortunately ignored the existence of lesbian, trans ballet dancers and any other feminine representation and definition that does not fit within its narrow traditional ballet narrative. With the results of this action potentially creating unsafe and harmful experiences. One of the examples discussed was how lesbianism, because of its ties to masculine actions and sports, creates an environment in which women are worried that their sexual orientation will impact how artistic directors of ballet companies (males specifically in the article), will view them. This also supports the understanding of ballet, despite its feminine status, as also a patriarchal art form. Ballet in most cases upholds the patriarchal structures that it makes it difficult for women to explore and express diverse facets of femininity.

However, each participant in this study demonstrated, danced and vocalized their own encapsulation and definition that related to their own embodied relationship to their gender. Each dancer was unique, thoughtful and were not hesitant to challenged assumptions if they felt that it was integral in their personal narrative.

In summary, exploring gender through movement is a starting point and a way for dancers who are used to communicating with their body and have a deeper understanding/control of their body to be the source of beginning to understand this connection between movement and gender.

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