Maverick Men in Ballet

Rethinking the "Making It Macho" Strategy

On a new spate of "dance reality TV" shows at the start of the 21st century, the old specter of prejudice against men dancing emerges with absolute clarity from time to time. Based to some degree on talent contests like American Idol, a number of these television series (Dancing with the Stars, So You Think You Can Dance, Step It Up and Dance, to name just a few) police the borders of conventional male and female movement styles in simplistic ways that echo lasting biases men in dance have faced. Female dancers are often allowed to display both softness and strength, but any male contestant whose limbs drift too languidly or curve into a form that might be interpreted as too

Figure 1.1 Juilliard graduate Anthony Bryant ran into trouble when his dancing with a ribbon was judged unmasculine on a popular dance reality television program in 2005. Photograph by Richard Termine. Used with permission.
sof or vulnerable may have his masculinity questioned in no uncertain terms. During the first season of So You Think You Can Dance (Fox TV, 2005), for instance, a young ballet-trained dancer who did an impressive solo holding a flowing ribbon was rejected roundly for lack of “masculinity.”

It’s not coincidental that the dancer in question was well trained in ballet, given the fact that ballet (along with other so-called classical forms elsewhere in the world) is one of the most refined and suspect forms of dance in North America. Because many of the dance reality TV shows feature romantic couple dancing, the judges often reinforce conventional notions of who should be sturdy and who should be pliant. To be sure, these sensationalized television shows are more likely to highlight stereotypes of all sorts in the name of ratings and commercial revenue, but in the concert dance world, the demand for male dancers to fulfill conventional expectations in terms of masculine style has often been as severe.

In this essay, I explore one aspect of the prejudice against male dancers as it relates to the ballet world and is reflected in articles, books, documentaries, and conversations, both in the popular press and in the dance world in general. I focus on stereotypes and responses to them, on coded language and the power of labels. In the West, as well as other contexts where bipolar definitions of masculinity and femininity exist, boys and men who do ballet might reasonably be seen as exceptionally brave or foolhardy, or both, because of the art form’s strong associations with a superfeminized world of women. In all but the most liberal of contexts, men often take abuse for not choosing a more conventional occupation. Tale after tale from anyone in the field reveals that a stigma about men in ballet still exists, long after that sort of thing might have been thought reasonably to have disappeared. In a sociological study reported in 2003, male ballet dancers repeated a number of negative characterizations they had encountered: “feminine, homosexual, wimp, spoiled, gay, dainty, fragile, weak, fluffy, prissy, artsy and sissy.” It’s quite a list. The dance contestant mentioned earlier, who was accused of being too feminine, then worked on strengthening and simplifying his style, trying to better “perform” the role of a manly dancer.

How has the official ballet world—teachers, critics, writers, dancers themselves—responded? How has it dealt with the polarizing cruelty of stereotype and misinformation? In general, the ballet world has answered its detractors with another polarizing tactic, by promoting dance as a macho activity. It has insisted that ballet is as tough as football, a “real” man’s game, that it provides proximity to lots of barely clad women, wink, wink, and is, in short, a lot like the marines, only with briefer uniforms and pointed toes. Has it worked to insist that John Wayne might have felt at home in variations class if only he knew how macho it really was? Have beer-guzzling guys at the pub torn themselves away from watching football on TV to carry on the babe hunt in ballet class? Not noticeably, with the exception of one Argentinean beer commercial in which that very thing happens for comic effect. It might be time to shed some light on the popular “making it macho” strategy and suggest other ways of conceptualizing the plight of boys and men in ballet.

A Short History of the “Making Ballet Macho” Strategy

Characterizing ballet as macho, in the sense of making it seem athletically masculine and relatively heterosexual, has been a common attempt to counter effeminate stereotyping in the ballet world. The strategy might have coalesced most strongly in North America, where masculine types arose from the various pioneer/cowboy/self-made-man mythologies that circulated around nation-building. But the roots of anxiety over male ballet dancing can be seen long before classical dance came to the New World, for instance, in the much-quoted pronouncements of 19th-century Parisian critic Jules Janin, who decided that the Romantic ballet stage should be graced only by women. How could a creature made expressly to bear a rifle, saber and uniform become the sensuous purveyor of passion? How could “men, ugly men” join the ballerinas they clearly worshiped? For Janin, men were clearly destined to make laws and govern, not to embody balletic ideals in a world where seeming ephemeral was clearly a women’s job (quoted in Chapman 1997, 204). By the early 20th century in North America, male dancers clearly struggled with the idea of entering the profession. Could dancing be a manly activity for really manly men who engaged in virile pursuits and did not eat quiche or wear tights? I use the hyperbolic mode ironically here before mention of Ted Shawn and his bravely naïve tactics when facing prejudice in the first half of the 20th century.

Shawn’s attempts to ennoble the masculine aspects of dance are well documented and run along the lines of conjuring up handsome Greek statues, sporting bodies, and rugged outdoor camping adventures. Early in life, he had to think fast when a fraternity brother warned him that “dance was all right for aborigines and Russians... but hardly a suitable career for a red-blooded American male” (Shawn 1979, 11). He entered the field anyway and became a seminal part of American modern dance beginnings with Ruth St. Denis in their glorious Denishawn years. After that, Shawn formed an all-male company, which took on the task of making dance safe for American men. They toured from 1933 to 1940, offering such hardy favorites as The Dance of the Threshing Floor, Mule Team Driver’s Dance, and Labor Symphony. In other words, their titles often conjured up dance as work, not frivolous or feminine fun, and they might have had some luck changing hearts and minds about men in dance along the way. Or not. In Western concert dance, Shawn was at least the first prominent male to proclaim loudly that dance was not for sissies, doing us the favor of admitting that there were choreohobic and homohobic tendencies circulating at a time when so many others avoided any suggestion of what Ramsay Burt has called “the trouble with the male dancer” (Burt 1995, 10).
Shawn's noble male dancers leaped like broad jumpers, ran like sprinters, and stomped in stern poses, but how much they did for the “normalization” of male dancing is unknown. Shawn himself hardly helped the cause of ballet, since he distanced what he did from ballet, calling Nijinsky, for instance, “decadent” and “freakish” and declaring that “America demands masculinity more than art” (Foulkes 2001, 113). But he might as well have cast his lot in with any male dancer, considering that such stereotypes tend to be applied across the board and have proved to be tenacious. Most men in his company really were hardy athletic types, who cleared the land and built much of Jacob's Pillow when they weren't rehearsing. But they were not actually threshers or mule team drivers, nor did they compete for prizes like other male athletes. They were all dressed up (or undressed, likely as not), ready to be looked at, not really accomplishing any manly task other than being admired for their physiques and muscular grace. For insiders, there has always been a certain amount of irony in Shawn striving so hard to be a conventional macho man because he was gay, although, of course, nothing prevents gay men from being macho. In the land of stereotypes, opposites become mutually exclusive only in the minds of those who buy into them.

Because early dance histories never mentioned the homosexual aspect of Shawn's life, he might be seen as a closeted male dancer who was protesting too much during his lifetime. In many of the old films—when Shawn poses like a Greek god on a pedestal, half-naked and buffed white, for instance—he might have looked manly to some, narcissistic and effeminate to others. This is because “different audiences picked up different messages,” as Julia L. Foulkes succinctly puts it in an essay that productively shines new light on Shawn's embodied effects (2001, 130). What Foulkes usefully points out is that, no matter what Shawn intended to do, the dancing bodies in his all-male pieces proclaimed a space for “same-sex object choice for gay men,” as well as “detach [ing] masculinity from heterosexuality” (129–30). In other words, by trying to be so macho and not even a bit feminine, while actually being homosexual, Shawn's dancing body and his choreography stood for more than he might have suspected. Perhaps inadvertently, he pointed the way to a time when gender identity would become more acknowledged as a social construction and a choice.

Yet simplistic polarities that revolve around ballet and machismo continued to circulate in North America. In the dance boom of the late 1960s and 1970s, ballet stars such as Edward Villella and Jacques D'Amboise became poster boys for many men in dance in a different way than Shawn. Their tough personas and working-class backgrounds were promoted seemingly to suggest they could convince streetwise New York kids to choose ballet over juvenile delinquency. Villella even appeared on an episode of television's Odd Couple series in a script that had him successfully competing with football players, presumably to show that ballet men were “regular” athletic guys. In 1958, Gene Kelly had also had a fling at making dancing masculine in a television special called Dancing—a Man's Game, which included guests from the sports world like Mickey Mantle and Sugar Ray Robinson.

Promoting ballet as manly in his own way, Rudolf Nureyev became a glamorous jet-setting hunk after his spectacular defection from cold war Russia in 1961. Photographs and stories of his liaisons with Margot Fonteyn and other women suggested he was a real ladies’ man, despite the fairly common knowledge that he preferred men. Then, in the late 1970s, another Russian sensation, Mikhail Baryshnikov, projected a clearly heterosexual persona in movies like The Turning Point, in which one character speculated that “that horny little Russian will make ballet safe for boys.” Did he make it safe? No surveys exist. And he wasn’t the last ballet man to be trumpeted in this way. In the last few decades, many prominent male dancers from Latin America and elsewhere have inspired lots of newspaper and magazine articles with headlines that advertise “ballet’s sexy new men.” A 1996 article in the Toronto Globe and Mail by its then dance critic was titled “Ballet’s New Men” and subtilted “Straight Talk: the stereotype of the gay dancer is fading as more and more athletic young men take up ballet.” The implication that gay men were not athletic evidently did not alarm any editors of the newspaper. The article read like an unabashed “hooray for hetero” diatribe and stirred up a certain amount of controversy. Letters to the editor tended to include the claim that “sexual preference doesn’t matter,” inadvertently leaning toward a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” doctrine.10 Protesters took the position of saying it was insulting to connect ballet with sexual preference because sexual preference has nothing to do with art or talent—gay or straight, it’s the dancing that counts. The more interesting revelation at the time was that ballet supporters could not find the rhetoric to counter one dance writer's simplistic claims, and that the writer conflated heterosexuality with stereotypes of “manliness,” perhaps to bolster the reputation of ballet men in general.

Few would argue with the fact that negative stereotypes about men in ballet have disappeared in some places today—in the arts community, for instance, or among any number of people who simply don’t subscribe to such prejudices. In some of my interviews and conversations with male ballet dancers, younger men have said they were never teased and never faced negative stereotyping. Anecdotally, I have noticed that these men are sometimes of large stature or menacing demeanor, but not always. Certainly, the standard associations between ballet and “less-than-masculine” men still pop up regularly in movies and television shows where innuendo and essentialized identities are the stuff comedy and anxiety are made of. Examples of how “he’s a ballet dancer” becomes code for “he’s gay,” or simply “he’s weak,” are too numerous to detail.11

In the 1990s, the makers of the movie Billy Elliot had a go at making ballet macho by showing a working-class boy's triumph over stereotype, and within a few years, the Royal Ballet's lower school had so many male applicants that it
admitted more boys than girls for the first time in its history. It was called "the Billy Elliot effect." Various enlightened, optimistic dance commentators are always declaring that times have changed and the old prejudices don't exist anymore. As far back as the 1970s, on an Eye on Dance program (made for New York public television), host Celia Ipiotis declared the prejudice against male dancers at a definitive end. Everything had progressed nicely, she said while interviewing a few male guests, and nowadays, men in dance were accepted by everyone. But in the 1990s, I found that the male students of the National Ballet School in progressive Toronto had to be given permission not to wear their school uniforms on field trips because they were getting threatened too often by local toughs. It was thought that fisticuffs could be avoided if they were not wearing ballet school insignias.

But for all the difficulty boys and men face in terms of stereotype, they also enjoy certain privileges in the ballet world, most certainly because of their endangered status. For instance, boys may not be required to wear standard studio gear or keep hair out of their eyes if it is thought that such restrictions deter them from coming back to ballet class. In private studios as well as conservatories, boys sometimes receive more scholarship money than girls and are often given leeway when it comes to disciplinary infractions. Making ballet macho has been a time-honored strategy when recruiting male ballet dancers. In the 1970s, when Arthur Mitchell wanted to lure boys off the street for his school of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, he compared ballet to sports and promised them they didn't have to wear tights (Backlund 1988, 31-32). In this same vein, any director of a Nutcracker knows that you secure adolescent boys for the party scene by pointing out that they get to be around girls in that scene. To get younger ones for the battle scene, you just mention that weaponry is involved. Once recruited, ballet men face less competition in terms of getting professional jobs and hold many so-called power positions as artistic directors and choreographers. But it's an odd supremacy, in that they pay dearly for any preferred status advantages, facing prejudices that accompany their unusual career choice.

In the new millennium, the "making it macho" strategy made an appearance in a PBS documentary called Born to Be Wild (2002), which took its title from the Bruce Springsteen song and linked it to ballet star Ethan Stiefel's penchant for motorcycles. In an opening segment, Stiefel talks about the ballet world offering him the opportunity to be close to minimally clad, physically fit women all day with a sheeplish grin that suggests a wholesome boy overcome by hormones. Poor Stiefel never suspected that his sexual preference, as natural to him as the color of his hair perhaps, would provide such an effective promotional tool for the "making it macho" ballet strategy, nor that he would look so naively partisan to dance analysts who probe issues of gender. More power to him and all the flirtation that goes on in any ballet class, but one can't help but notice that only the heterosexual men in the documentary have the romance in their lives acknowledged. The omission of what gay men do on a date—or any mention of sexual preference, even in passing—must still be considered part of the protective coloring the ballet world has tended to promote as part of the "making it macho" strategy.

This tendency to try to mark male dancing as not only masculine enough but unquestionably masculine, I suggest, was inherited in deluxe fashion by the young lyrical dancer whose rejection on So You Think You Can Dance began this essay. The Juilliard-trained dancer actually returned a few seasons after his initial audition with an attitude that he clearly hoped would establish his credentials as a manly dancer. Wearing camouflage combat fatigues, he announced (in a voice-over) that he was going to do a "more dynamic, "in-your-face" dance this time, with "acrobatic power," if that's what the judges wanted. But he couldn't win for trying; the judges still found him a "wonderful technician" but felt that, somehow, there was a "spark missing." Despite his clear technical skill and willingness to take direction, they eliminated him at the first stage. In Internet chat rooms, followers of the series were in general not fooled by the judges' statement that a spark was missing. Heterosexuality was the thing that was missing, one blogger indicated, and another said being talented but "too feminine" went against "the basic rules of engagement within dance [that] have been set since the beginning of time." Yet another comment began with, "I have nothing against gays but ...", continuing with objections to any dancer who looked feminine.

In the more conservative mid-1950s, demands for manly style—in both social dance and concert dance—might have been coded, with male dancers criticized at times as "not direct enough" or "not bold enough." But today, a new bluntness has crept into daily discourse, perhaps encouraged by commercial television's dissemination of colloquialisms and put-down speech, so that male dancers can be told to dance "like a man" or even to "butch it up," whether it's on the ubiquitous free-for-all Internet sites or even sometimes on camera. One openly gay contestant on the 2008 edition of a series called Step It Up and Dance (Bravo TV) recently paraphrased the judges' objection to his too-soft, preening style by saying, "Oh, was I too much of a fag?" He took note of the critique and successfully impressed them afterward with his deliberate performance of "manly" dancing.

A Girl's-Eye View

In the world of ballet, as opposed to the world at large, the "unmarked" category is female, and the "marked" category male, to use distinctions Peggy Phelan (1993) has delineated. In Freudian terms, the female dancer is the one whose body is the standard, so that her "lack" (lacking the male genitalia) becomes the "norm." That is, classical dancers are meant to have smooth bodies with no inconvenient bulges; they are bearers of a type of ideal beauty, strength, and
form, and any secondary sexual characteristics are harnessed, shaved, or otherwise minimized. In this aesthetic universe, the male dancer becomes the one with the inconvenient “surplus”—inconvenient because, although classical dancers tend to play roles that are all strictly defined in terms of gender (either girly girls or manly men), they are not supposed to have sexual organs. In ballet, everything must be smoothed over and not get in anyone’s way. In other words, there is no penis envy in ballet.

There is also no question of women not fitting in—women “own” the ballet world, or at least overpopulate it, and increasingly are taking their place as rulers of that world, though they still often face glass ceiling limitations as artistic directors and choreographers. But even in that realm, they are making progress, with the number of “power” positions in the ballet world being held by more women each decade. Women also have the advantage of being able to play ballet’s extreme version of femininity, taking it off at will and remaining relatively unsuspect in terms of their gender identity, in both onstage and offstage life. It’s not so easy for men, who are rarely able to play with conventional markers of masculinity without being suspect.

Except in major urban centers, there is generally a shortage of ballet men, so that their numbers perhaps militate against their becoming more commonplace and known. Perhaps it isn’t unusual, then, that as I grew up learning ballet in the United States, I had absolutely no interest in the fact that men were also involved. Unlike other realms, where it seemed that male privilege obtained, I thought of ballet as a woman’s world, where men were useful mainly for holding up the ballerinas I admired. Who were Anna Pavlova’s partners? Men, whose names I could barely remember. The great Pavlova and Karasavina in the past, or Ulanova and Fonteyn as I grew up, were the main attractions to me. Even when Nureyev and Baryshnikov, the Russian sensations, came to overshadow them in the public imagination, the ballerinas were the figures who captured my attention. There were no boys in my ballet studio, and when male dancers showed up to dance the generic “Cavalier” and “Trepak” in my local ballet company’s Nutcracker, they seemed to me shadowy characters whose lives I couldn’t quite imagine. I did notice their positive attributes—they tended to be considerate, relaxed, and fun; and they knew how to talk to women, which is more than I could say for the boys at my school or the grown men who watched sports or sat stolidly around me at family affairs. Some of them were gay, I vaguely understood, but I had little knowledge about or interest in what that meant.

Later in life, as I did fieldwork in The Nutcracker world, I talked to many other girls and women whose ballet landscapes also seldom included the presence of men, with one exception—the mothers of boys in ballet. More than once, as I was focusing on the enfranchisement of women in the world of Nutcracker and ballet, a mother would say parenthetically, “You should really write about the boys, you know. Now there’s an interesting story that should be told.” Despite many fierce critiques that insisted male privilege and power still prevailed in the gender codes of the pas de deux, many women and men still saw ballet as a place where women ruled and the males took second place, always behind the tutu. For me, Nutcracker season became an interesting place to notice a man’s plight as a creature at the margin of the main event. Except in the largest ballet company productions, ballet boys and men were a seasonal occurrence, arriving only at Nutcracker time. In terms of being suspect sissy boys, as the stereotype would have it, they seemed to get a special dispensation each Christmas—due to the ballet’s popularity and the fact that many of its male roles did not require much dancing.

Still, I could see that Nutcracker communities tended to be worlds of women. The ranks of regional ballets were dominated by women not only as dancers and teachers but as directors, backstage workers, board members, and other volunteers. In the Nutcracker world, women even dominated the ranks of choreographers. Come December, boys and men constituted a subcategory in many ballet communities, appreciated but marginal and often troublesome. The little male participants, for instance, needed more wrangling backstage than the girls; adolescent boys looked gawky next to their more technically schooled female partners; men backstage took orders from the women in charge; and male dancers got only a few moments to strut their virtuosic stuff, while Clara and the Sugar Plum Fairy caught the imaginations of so many in the Nutcracker audiences. For years, I was busy theorizing the ostensibly dichotomous image of the female ballet dancer, finding ways to hold together and accept the fact that she is skilled and strong but must appear conventionally feminine and acquiescent. The ballerina is a woman of steel, I decided, who, in the service of art, must appear as mild—mannered as Clark Kent, unable to show that she is actually as macho as Superman. Who, then, was the male dancer?

With thanks to many men in ballet I have talked to and read about, as well as the work of scholars such as Ramsay Burt and Doug Risner, both represented in this volume, I started to focus on the stereotypes about men in ballet, many of which are nourished by representations in movies and on television. My comic book comparison for ballet men goes something like this, then: men in ballet not only have to appear as mild—mannered as Clark Kent but also—like Superman and the ballerina—have to overcome the dicey image of a man in tights.

The Gay Elephant in the Room

Relatively little has been written about homosexuality and ballet until recent years, with the subject opening up very, very gradually after feminist and gay “liberation” movements accelerated in the wake of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Before that time (and even since), popular biographies of male dancers were full of omissions and innuendo, unless the definitive wife and children could appear. John Gruen’s gossipy 1979 biography of Erik Bruhn, for
instance, avoids personal pronouns almost obsessively—"there are certain people to whom I am drawn physically," Bruhn says, but he doesn't like being overwhelmed by "someone" in a relationship. Gruen makes much of supposed romances with famous ballerinas—Bruhn was gay, and for those in the know, the coded language becomes extreme: Bruhn says he has "loved people on so many different levels" (97), and Maria Tallchief records that Bruhn was "elusive" in their relationship, and that he "comes to the brink of things and then, suddenly, something stops" (101). The answer to this mystery is then addressed when friend Sonia Arova notes the moment when Bruhn "began to relate more fully to Rudolf Nureyev" (115) and when Bruhn himself describes their relationship as "[going] through a great deal together, and on so many different levels" (124). Levels, hmmm. Like sex? It's left to the active reader's imagination. It took a few more decades before a tell-all biography like Diane Solway's Nureyev would leave nothing to the imagination.

Considering the number of homosexuals involved in ballet, dance critic Horst Koegler wrote in 1995, "its 'coming out' has taken an unusually long time" (231), but he accurately predicted a sea change. One of the few North American dance critics who had approached the topic directly long before then was Toronto-based Graham Jackson, who wrote extensively about dance during the 1970s, often for small publications. His collected writings included an essay that is uncharacteristically frank about ballet's limitations—that it has a "straight" aesthetic, for instance; that gentleness is not recognized as a masculine quality in North America, though it sometimes was in England, he says, where danseurs like Anthony Dowell could be "somewhere in between" dainty and macho; that the status quo was preserved by gay choreographers and artistic directors who became conservative so as not to jeopardize their positions. He calls gay men to arms, stating that choreography won't ever reflect more than limited realities until they speak up by supporting, attending, and making more diverse dances for the ballet (Jackson 1978, 38-43).

Ramsay Burt reasonably suggests that the "widespread reluctance to talk about dance and homosexuality" might have been an attempt to protect the institution of ballet inasmuch as it might be threatened by taboos among corporate and individual donors (1995, 29). He points out that Judith Lynn Hanna's 1988 consideration of the topic suffers from a characterization of homosexuality as a "problem" for ballet men, as opposed to a problem existing as a result of the roiling sociopolitics surrounding Western society's homophobia (29). Burt's own book-length study of men and dance is one of the few written in a scholarly vein about popular perceptions of the male ballet dancer; in it, he says that prejudices against the male dancer in Europe did not exist until the 19th century (1995, 10), and he tells us that there was no pronounced association between ballet and homosexuality until the age of Diaghilev. This statement is relatively undocumented, but few would doubt that, as Burt claims, bourgeois men of the 19th century may have felt that "to enjoy the spectacle of men dancing [was] to be interested in men," so that "the pleasures of watching men dancing became, in the mid-nineteenth century, marred by anxieties about masculine identity" (28), because of confusion between just being friends with men and the fear of being thought homosexual (28).

This anxiety can be documented in North American popular culture, especially in movies, where it's often addressed by stereotyping, on one hand, and reassurances of heterosexuality, on the other. In the early part of the 20th century, for instance, when Fred Astaire from playing a famous ballet dancer in his film Shall We Dance? (1938). But it seems he did have to prove he was a skirt-chasing heterosexual within the first few minutes of the film by putting taps on his ballet shoes and ogling a photo of Ginger Rogers. And he never appeared in tights; instead, he wore the rehearsal pants male ballet dancers often wore back then. Perhaps when more revealing costumes became common for male ballet dancers later in the century, the stigma grew. "People think tights are like pantyhose," one ballet dancer told me when discussing the negative stereotypes she encountered with a son in ballet. It's evidently okay for men to wear pantyhose only if they are worn under major-league football uniforms for warmth. I had always assumed the prejudice against men in tights had to do with being too exposed, which somehow conjured up unseemly vanity or vulnerability for men, and perhaps that association exists, too, but this mother's pantyhose association revealed another facet of the perceived "girliness" of ballet.

In virtually any film that features a male ballet dancer, the question of his sexuality comes up. If his character is meant to be heterosexual, this is made clear within a very short amount of time, usually by reference to his hankering for female companionship. I once pointed this out to a male student in one of my university classes, and he confirmed my observation by surveying a number of dance movies from the early days of Hollywood to the present. He recorded the time between the first appearance of a male dancer and a definitive reference to his heterosexuality, finding it ranged from about 30 seconds to 3 minutes, as I recall. In that respect, the ballet movie Center Stage (2000) made progress when it introduced both gay and straight male characters as such, making the identification a matter of useful information. When a group of incoming female dancers are staring at an attractive company member from a distance, for instance, they immediately ask which side he plays for, so they know whether their crushes will be figurative or literal. "Straight," they're told, and they send up a small cheer. No covert codes, no ostensible judgments, just practical facts. Notably, although gay characters are acknowledged in this movie, none of them are shown in relationships or intimate moments; dance movies perhaps have not come that far.

The assumption that all men in ballet are gay—a common stereotype despite research showing that about 50 percent are heterosexual (see Risner, this
The Maverick Strain in Ballet.

Striving to make ballet macho is perhaps an expected strategy that well-meaning people have attempted to make ballet acceptable for men in the Western world. In the history of the United States, for instance, a "he-man" stereotype, nourished by various European tropes of masculinity, progressed from rugged individualist pioneers to cowboys to self-made men, and, eventually, to Rambo, the Terminator, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. That's a lightning-round condensation of an evolution described with more nuance in histories of modern masculinity by George Moss and Michael Kimmel, among others.

![Dancer and choreographer Eugene Loring, possibly the first ballet cowboy, in the title role of his 1938 Billy the Kid. Photographer unknown.](image)

Kimmel uses particularly resonant images from popular movies and television series, most of which assure us that the selfish, sexy Rhett Butler (from Gone With the Wind) will always win out over the more sensitive, genteel Ashley Wilkes as a role model for American men (Kimmel 1996, 219–20); and that the new, sensitive man who started getting a toehold in the film Kramer vs. Kramer (1979) never took off like the Marlboro Man did (290). Put another way, the real identity crisis for contemporary men is choosing between two Star Trek role models—the rational alien Mr. Spock or the aggressive traditional man, Captain Kirk (290).

The fact is, North America does not have a national or folk hero or movie star who does ballet, so the more familiar stereotypes of ballet men as gay, sissy, or questionably sensitive still prevail. Supporters of Ballet Man continue to recommend he "up" his machismo quotient, but this constant pursuit of testosterone-charged images has its end point. Men in ballet do have to wear tights eventually, and they have to act as genteel as Ashley Wilkes and as precise as the nerdy Mr. Spock for much of their careers. Ballet is a refined art form, not a sport where athleticism is fueled by steroids, or ever looks like it is, nor will ballet ever be an athletic activity that results in six-figure salaries and enviable endorsement deals that are offered to the other macho guys.

Men in ballet have to cross a line into what is largely perceived as a feminized world. They have to come to terms with the color pink, because it will shadow their lives, whether they wear it or just come in frequent close contact with it. They will wear tights, play princes, and point their toes in a careful fashion. So "making it macho" is not a strategy that will ever work, simply because ballet isn't conventionally macho and never will be. It's athletic, yes, manly, undoubtedly and of course, but Ballet Man will always be something the Terminator is not—light, precise, and more delicately attentive to the music and the muses than a strictly macho man could hope to be. What is Ballet Man to do? How can we intervene in "the realm of impressions and associations" that constitute a strongly stigmatizing stereotype? "The way to break the code is to examine it," so that a new reality can be constructed where a tired old one used to prevail (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 40). Having investigated the stereotype, we need a new definition of masculinity, scholars of its history tend to agree (Kimmel 1996, 333–35; Mosse 1996, 194; Burt 1995, 9, 30, 196). For Ballet Man, the uphill climb to diverse definitions of masculinity may be a long one, but he might take heart in the potential of making a significant contribution to the cause.

To this end, I propose an image that might replace the making-it-macho strategy with another "m" word, more appropriately applied to men in ballet—"maverick." The association between ballet men and mavericks is a logical one if you consider what all the brave men who can deal with the stigmatized world of ballet have in common. The anecdotal evidence, as
well as that culled from the few studies that have been done, suggests that, not surprisingly, a range of men become involved in ballet, and they all have individual motivations, yet perhaps a few things in common. In the interest of illustrating a few maverick beginnings, I suggest that several points of Ballet Men's common ground revolve around the following identifications:

- the athletic boy who accidentally finds he's good at ballet and likes the unique and secure position this usually gives him
- the boy in a large family who stakes out unusual territory because his brothers and sisters have already claimed many other potential professions
- gay or straight men who don't worry about putting a macho reputation at stake
- gay or straight men who find the arts a welcoming environment for many kinds of people
- secure men who don't worry what people think

No matter what the reason for identification with ballet, what men in ballet all must have in common, it seems to me, is a maverick strain, in the sense that "maverick" is defined as "a person who thinks and acts in an independent fashion, often behaving differently from the expected way" (Cambridge online dictionary) and "an irregular, a rebel, someone who is unconventional and unorthodox" (hyperdictionary.com). The word "maverick" has macho cowboy associations, as well, so the new strategy does not leave behind the old one entirely. A maverick can also mean "an unbranded range animal." And, of course, it became the name of the charming Wild West gambler played by James Garner in a television series and later by Mel Gibson in a movie version of Maverick. Interestingly, the word can also have a more sophisticated association, when used in a sentence the Cambridge dictionary suggests: "He was considered something of a maverick in the publishing world." It's a word with appropriate versatility.

Like the male ballet dancer, the maverick can be refined, but even when "tamed," he still may not follow the herd. Like the ballerina, the male ballet dancer is well advised to take the stereotypes of passivity and too much fairyland, if you will, and reinterpret them. The image of a maverick offers new rhetorical associations and is meant to shift perceptions. I don't think ballet will ever get more macho, for men or for women, although it's an athletic, tough endeavor for both of them and might reasonably be thought of as macho, in the classical sense of the word. I may be replacing one stereotype with another, but "making it maverick" seems to promise so much more scope than the dead-end strategy of "making it macho." For Ballet Man, it could be a brand he can live with.

NOTES

This essay appeared in a slightly different form and under another title in Dance Chronicle 30 (2007): 45–66.

1. "Reality TV" is an umbrella term that, in the first decade of the 21st century, includes a vast number of programs that bear some relationship to documentary film but perhaps could be more reasonably seen as evolving from early television contests, "makeover" shows, and celebrity showcases of the 1950s and 1960s. Those that follow to some degree the formula of the wildly popular pop singing contest American Idol, but focus on dance instead of singing, I am calling "dance reality TV shows." Reference to "reality" in these genres is perhaps understood best by comparing it to "structured improvisation" in the dance world. There is a formula, and the programs are shaped by strategic editing, but there are also nonprofessional participants and some leeway to improvise.

2. This dancer was Anthony Bryant, who was asked to make a cameo appearance at the end of the first So You Think You Can Dance season, as a kind of apology. Without any proof, I assumed at the time that perhaps that viewers had complained about his treatment by Nigel Lithgow, the executive producer and judge, who had said, "You didn't look like a masculine dancer." Bryant's return for the 2008 season audition provided extra drama as a "comeback" story. When he didn't get chosen to be on the show once again (although many less talented dancers did—Lithgow during the first season pointed out that they are "casting a show," not just looking for the best dancers), he provided a different kind of drama by cursing the judges as he stormed out and cameras followed him onto the street. Bryant, who had recently graduated from Juilliard, could be seen on YouTube.com in 2008, as well as on his own Web site, anthonybryant.org. I thank him for helping me find a photograph of his ribbon dance.

3. A few illustrations will sketch territory that contains myriad testimonies to this effect. Former New York City Ballet dancer Edward Villella writes in his autobiography about growing up "a red-blooded American boy from an Italian working-class family in Queens," New York, during the 1940s that "kids who jeered [at him for doing ballet] never got a chance to finish their sentences. I just whipped them and left a string of bloody noses in my wake" (1992, 13). In 2006, a perusal of Internet posts, mostly from ballet mothers, reveals that both teasing and bullying of boys who take ballet still go on in the United States, although there are also some reports of more enlightened experiences. Various recent articles from around the world also echo familiar stereotypes. A Los Angeles Times article about ballet training offered to poor children in a South African township repeats warnings boys received from family and others that "ballet is for girls," and that it "would turn [them] gay" (Robyn Dixon, "On Their Toes for a Way Out," Los Angeles Times, November 15, 2005).

4. This was Amanda Berger's master's thesis in sociology at Boston College, dated April 1, 2003. Her fieldwork concentrated on interviews with 10 male ballet dancers whose experience includes dancing and teaching in the Boston area as well as other locations in the United States and other countries. Her research also included conversations and observation that put her in touch with the topic in other ways, as well as noting the statements of male dancers in documentaries. Although her fieldwork sample was
small, many of her findings are relevant in that they echo those of other researchers and my own, in relatively small fieldwork projects and in interviews I conducted during extensive research on The Nutcracker.

5. This beer commercial made the rounds on the Internet, featuring a young man drinking with friends who suddenly announces he must go off to ballet class. Oddly, he puts two pointe shoes tied together around his neck and leaves. His friends follow him and witness him in intimate poses in which his face is close to various female body parts. A few of these poses are reasonably close to everyday studio procedures; some are outlandishly unlike anything male and female partnering requires.

6. See, for instance, Mosse 1996, who explores the roots of modern masculinity, especially as they underpin stereotypes in Europe and the United States; and Kimmel 1996, in which images of American manhood are traced from the turn of the 19th century to the present, including stereotypes such as the "gentle patriarch" or "self-made man." Kimmel concludes, not surprisingly, that a new definition of masculinity needs to emerge for contemporary men to incorporate the virtues of both strength and compassion (334–35).

7. See historical accounts such as those by Shawn (1979), Sherman and Mumaw (1986), and Terry (1976). For a contemporary consideration of the issues surrounding gender and nationalism in relation to Shawn, see especially the essays of Julia L. Foulkes and Susan Leigh Foster in Desmond 2001.

8. The term "choreophobia" was coined by dance scholar Anthony Stay to describe feelings of negativity or ambivalence in relation to dance. He elaborates on aspects of choreophobia as it occurs in the Iranian cultural sphere in Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Press, 1999) but acknowledges the existence of the phenomenon in many parts of the world, including, of course, the United States.

9. Deirdre Kelly’s article brings up many sensitive topics and perhaps was intended to open the ballet closet to frank dialogue. She claims a trend toward fewer gay men in ballet (she polls Canadian companies and lists statistics lower than the usual 50 percent found in scholarly studies) and also engages in "making it macho" strategies in the way they are outlined earlier in this chapter. Near the end, she states that "gay or straight, [men in ballet] can be as delicate or as strong as the role demands." But on the way to that conclusion, the text tends to conflate macho athleticism with heterosexuality, and heterosexuality with social acceptability—for instance, quoting a conservatory director who says more and more boys are applying to ballet school, so that the absence of gays in ballet and its popularity with boys appear causal. The feature article appeared in the fall of 1996 in Canada’s nationally distributed Globe and Mail newspaper, on the front of the Arts section, with a large photo of "three men who are proud of their profession," all of whom are bare-chested and identified in the article as heterosexual. The "continued" page includes two photos of Nijinsky, who is mentioned only in a sentence that offers famous names as examples of the fact that "for the first half of this century, gays did dominate the profession."

10. A letter to the Globe and Mail on December 21, 1996, calls Kelly’s article an example of "sexual voyeurism and queasiness," while focusing mostly on the author's

“apparent need to still bring up the subject of homosexuality in dance,” two statements that seem off the mark to me, though I appreciated the outraged tone of the letter. Kelly’s prose style often seems breathless and gossipy, as when she enigmatically ties together Nureyev’s machismo, his ability to "sex up" Fonteyn’s dancing, and the fact that he was "promiscuously homosexual" and died of AIDS. But the letter writer’s plea to ignore sexuality in favor of detached "technical and artistic merits" addresses only part of the problem.

11. Some examples of ballet stereotyping that relate to masculinity were detailed in my book Nutcracker Nation (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 159–62. Others appear in the introduction to this volume, in the personal histories, and in the essays by Jordan, Keefe, and Risner.


13. “Out from Behind the Tutu” is the title I once heard Canadian dancer Rex Harrington suggest for his memoirs. Harrington, who retired from the National Ballet of Canada in 2004, was known as a dramatic dancer and a gifted partner, not especially for his virtuosic feats.

14. The relationships of women to ballet constituted my first field of inquiry as a master’s degree student at York University and then emerged further in small research projects during Ph.D. coursework at the University of California, Riverside. The dominating female presence in the Nutcracker realm, though not my original focus, also became a theme in my dissertation (1998) and the book that followed (2003). Culminating thoughts in this direction can be found in my essay “Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Powerhouse Ballerina,” Dance Research Journal 39, no. 1 (2007): 3–24.

15. In this volume, John Jordan examines evidence to the contrary by noting negative associations associated with dance in the 18th century.

16. This history of pink is yet to be written, but here’s a start: George Mosse refers to a “pink file” (1996, 98), in which names of homosexuals were kept at the start of the 20th century in Germany, where laws outlawing homosexuality had been on the books since 1871. Popular associations nowadays range from baby girl identification and fashion colors associated with femininity (though pink has been a somewhat accepted color for men’s shirts since the mid-1960s), to political identifications such as pink ribbons used in breast cancer campaigns, and the pink triangle symbol for gay liberation.

17. My summation of these Ballet Man “types” is only a suggestion based on the following: informal observation and conversations with men in ballet, as well as ballet mothers and teachers during research periods focused on other ballet topics (from 1996 to 1998); one fieldwork study in 2003, which involved interviews and observation of a boys’ ballet class during a Southern California summer intensive; browsing of Internet contributions on sites that revolve around boys and ballet; conversations with Deborah Williams, whose study (2003) of boys who take ballet revealed, among other things, that they often feel socially isolated and have a persistent love of dance (iii); and impressions from ballet autobiographies.
WORKS CITED


AARON COTA

Cota graduated as a dance major from the University of California, Irvine, in the spring of 2007, after taking some time off to serve in the Marine Corps Reserve in the Iraq War. His dance video *Ya, We Were Bored*, which featured off-duty marines at Camp Fallujah, has been screened at the UCI Dance Film Festival. He earned a dance M.F.A. at UCI in the spring of 2009 with a concentration on dance for the camera.

I became a dance major almost by accident, because I filled in my application to be a film major wrong. I went to the audition anyway, and once I was accepted, I thought, why not? I grew up with three brothers in Santa Maria, California, in a pretty artistic family—my mom likes to draw, and my brother was the dancer in the family, since he was six. I was into musical theater when I was younger, then I stopped doing that when I started playing football in high school. But I sort of missed it, and in my senior year, I enrolled in a beginning ballet class. When my brother’s teacher found out I was taking ballet, I was thrown into an intermediate class with all these girls who had been taking ballet for 12 years. I had no idea what I was doing, but I was having a lot of fun. That was really why I started taking ballet—I saw the girls my brother was dancing with. It’s an added bonus relating to girls at that age, because when they get to know you, they come to you with everything. Sometimes I’ve learned far too much information, but that just comes with the territory of being a male dancer. The good thing is that you learn the dos and don’ts as far as boyfriends are concerned—you hear the complaints, and you sometimes wonder why they’re still with this person. Then you just kind of pick that up, and you know what not to do.

I tried out different kinds of dance, and I found I loved ballet more than jazz or modern, but I also found out I’m not the best ballet dancer. I think modern feels a lot better on my body. But for me, ballet seemed far more athletic for guys, that’s why I liked it so much at first. In almost every ballet I’ve seen, it’s so athletic for the guys, they do some insane, crazy jumps and leaps. It makes you wonder how the body moves that way, and how much stamina you must have to do some of that—like Mikhail Baryshnikov, he set the bar so high for male dancers, that