Dance Is for American Men:
Ted Shawn and the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in the 1930s

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In 1926 Ted Shawn, the male half of the dance pair and institution known as Denishawn, published The American Ballet. In the foreword, Shawn conceded that he had chosen the title “as an admission of defeat.” The word ballet was too tied to European forms of dance and Shawn predicted that “the birth of the dance in America will make new forms...seemingly formless” and big like Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass.¹ In eschewing ballet, heralding Whitman, and naming national dance traits, Shawn allied himself with Isadora Duncan and the emerging generation of modern dancers of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and others. Shawn described himself as “merely a wave carried on this tide,” but his mission also differed from that of other modern dancers.² His dictum: “Dancing is for men, American men.”³ Shawn had promoted dancing for men at least since 1916 in an article entitled “A Defence [sic] of the Male Dancer” in the New York Dramatic Mirror. There, Shawn declared that “the decadent, the freakish, the feverish” Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, who appealed to Parisians, would not find such an enamored audience in the United States: “America demands masculinity more than art.”⁴

Like female modern dancers, male modern dancers faced assumptions about masculine and feminine characteristics both on stage and off. While Graham and Humphrey accumulated descriptions of their dancing as masculine and ugly, accusations of effeminacy and suspicion of homosexuality dogged male dancers.⁵ At this time the delineation between queer and straight signified
an inversion of gender roles more than particular sexual acts or
partners. Queers were men who exhibited perceived female traits
and behaviors such as a high-pitched voice, a languid swivel-
hipped walk—and an interest in the arts, especially dance.6 The
lack of financial security in a dance career was also more problem-
atic for men because of their traditional roles as breadwinners.
Financial instability and the gentility associated with the arts only
further strengthened the conventional union of dance and femi-
ninity. Shawn challenged these notions by meshing virility with
Americanism, a winning combination in the tumultuous times of
the Great Depression.

The 1930s was a time of gender troubles because economic
times hard undermined the traditional role of the man as the
breadwinner of the family. Although this had more often been an
ideal than a reality for most Americans, the conditions of the
1930s challenged both the reality and the ideal. Women asserted
new strength in holding the family together, played a larger role
in the workforce and politics, and assumed this would continue—
all epitomized in the towering tenacity of Eleanor Roosevelt. The
gender troubles sparked new fears of gender inversion and
homosexuality. More severe crackdowns began on gay bars, drag
balls, and theatrical pancy acts in New York City, and legislation
prohibiting the representation of homosexuality increased.7 Ob-
vious displays of gender reversal symbolically threatened the re-
ival and rebirth of the nation itself. Nationalism—Shawn’s
strong patriotism and Americans’ deep need to believe in the
endurance and uniqueness of their nation during the depression—
provided the foundation for Shawn’s success. And, while Shawn’s
homosexuality molded his dances, it remained an undercurrent;
an allusion most often picked up on only by other gay men.
Shawn transformed his offstage homosexual inclinations to an
onstage American virility, shaping the American male dancer into
a near-nude Greek ideal of an athlete-artist: a heroic image that
Americans heartily embraced.8

SHAWN’S STORY

Edwin Meyers Shawn was born in Kansas City, Missouri, on
October 21, 1891, the second son of Elmer Ellsworth Shawn, a
journalist for the Kansas City Star, and Mary Lee Booth Shawn.
Shawn’s mother traced her lineage back to “a nobleman serving
under William the Conqueror when he invaded and conquered
England”; his father came from less aristocratic German folk who
had emigrated to the United States in the 1840s.9 The Shaws
moved to Denver in Ted’s early childhood and there Ted decided
to become a Methodist minister, attracted to the high moral
ideals of a religious life. During his third year as a pretheology stu-
dent at the University of Denver, Shawn contracted diphtheria, a
bacterial infection that caused difficulty in breathing, high fever,
weakness, and, in Shawn’s case, temporary paralysis of his legs. To
rebuild his stamina and physical dexterity, he sought out dance
lessons.

Shawn had displayed an interest in theater before his bout with
diphtheria. In 1911 for his fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon, he wrote
a two-act play entitled The Female of the Species, a satirical look at
women’s suffrage. The play depicted a post-suffrage future (in
1933) where men dressed in “ruffled trousers, laced waists, ear-
rings” and women wore “men’s full dress coats and shirts”; wom-
en ran the government as commissioners of the “Bargain
Counters” and “Manicurists and Beauty Parlors,” and the only
men ran the tiny department of “Municipal Affairs.” “Horrified
and shocked beyond expression” at this futuristic scene, the rabid
feminist character swore “to renounce suffrage.”10 In reinforcing
traditional roles for men and women, the play foreshadowed
Shawn’s own path through the dance world.

Shawn’s theater experience and ballet and ballroom lessons led
to his leaving the University of Denver, his forgoing a ministerial
career, and his launching a lifelong career in dance.11 Although he
gave up his ideas of being a minister, Shawn, like Isadora Duncan
and Ruth St. Denis at the same time, believed that dance joined
mind and body in a spiritual union. Shawn found affirmation in
The Making of Personality by the poet Bliss Carman, who
described dance as “that perfect fusion of sense and spirit, without
which no art is possible and no life is fortunate,” a view that
prompted Shawn to write him for advice about making a career
in dance.12 Carman’s reply captured one of the difficulties Shawn
faced, noting that the male dancers “who have made it in Amer-
ica have been foreigners, with all the prestige of Europe.”13 Shawn sought Carman out at the Triunian School of Personal Harmonizing in New Haven, Connecticut, in early 1914. That meeting eventually led Shawn to Ruth St. Denis, whom Carman believed best embodied the union of “sense and spirit.” After a first meeting between St. Denis and Shawn in New York, their mutual admiration for each other soared as they exalted shared idols such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mary Baker Eddy, and François Delsarte. St. Denis asked Shawn to accompany her on an upcoming tour; he quickly accepted. Their passionate conversation continued and, after much beseeching, Shawn convinced St. Denis to marry him later that same year, in August 1914.14 St. Denis gained a dance partner and entrepreneurial acumen; Shawn benefited from St. Denis’s prominence and her devotion to and success in creating a new form of dance.

Their alliance initially prospered, with Denishawn schools sprouting nationwide and worldwide tours in the 1920s. But their personal relationship was continually fractious. Professional envy (most often, Shawn’s jealousy of St. Denis) and extramarital love affairs by both riled them. By the late 1920s they were spending more and more time apart, eventually splitting personally and professionally. The Denishawn school and company ended in 1931 and, although they did not divorce, Shawn and St. Denis never lived together after 1930.

BEAUTY AND BROTHERHOOD

While St. Denis dallied with men during her marriage to Shawn, most of them younger than she, Shawn also pursued the affection and love of men. Their mutual affection for one man contributed to their permanent separation. Shawn and St. Denis met Fred Beckman in 1927 in Corpus Christi, Texas, while on tour. In early 1928 Shawn invited Beckman to become his personal representative. Beckman fulfilled that role and became Shawn’s lover. Although the dissolution of St. Denis and Shawn’s company and marriage was imminent, a secret liaison between St. Denis and Beckman doomed the partnership when Shawn found a romantic letter from St. Denis to Beckman.15

Shawn fled to solo tours in Europe. German newspapers praised his American “freshness, youth, even boyishness,” which contrasted sharply with the Russian male dancers who toured in Germany and who were “sluggish, degenerate . . . [and showed the] weariness of civilization.”16 The generous flattery helped soothe Shawn’s ego, bruised by the betrayal of St. Denis. Denishawn had crippling debts when it folded; because Shawn needed money, he toured the United States with a small company as “Shawn and His Dancers” from 1931 to 1932. He soon headed resolutely to the wooded retreat he had bought in 1930 near Lee, Massachusetts, named Jacob’s Pillow. Jacob’s Ladder was the highest mountain in the Berkshires; a large sloping rock on Shawn’s property thereby became Jacob’s pillow. At the restful farmhouse in the woods Shawn turned his full attention to his earlier mission: men must dance.

On his 1931–1932 tour Shawn had devised lecture-demonstrations for university and college audiences advocating dance for men. During the winter of 1932–1933, he found a way to apply his ideas. Nearby Springfield College (then named the International Young Men’s Christian Association College) had a strong physical education program for men and, with the enthusiasm of the college president, Shawn offered a class in dance. Shawn was determined to overcome the charge that male dancers were sissies, so he stipulated that the class be mandatory for all, thus ensuring that all suffered the stereotype and that peer pressure would not arouse further divisions among the male students. Shawn gave them strenuous exercises the first day, pushing them to recognize the physical stamina dance required. He learned that simple descriptive active verbs—leap, turn—translated better for his class than the French ballet terms such as ballon and pirouette. By the end of the term he “had his disciples.”17 More important, he had fellow performers. In quick response to an offer to perform in Boston, Shawn pulled together men from his Springfield College classes and performers (including women) from his touring company. On March 21, 1933, at the Repertory Theatre, Shawn and his dancers debuted to rave reviews, with the all-male pieces receiving the most praise.
The success of the Boston performance inspired Shawn to arrange a formal company, called Shawn and His Men Dancers, and he immediately set about training, choreographing, and touring. From 1933 to 1940 the company of either eight or nine men (including Shawn) held 1,250 performances in more than 750 cities in the United States, Canada, and England. Throughout the seven years of touring, Jacob's Pillow was home and sustenance. There each summer the troupe built cabins, a studio, and eventually a theater; took daily dance classes; refurbished older works and created new ones; and each noon hour sunbathed nude as Shawn read from Havelock Ellis, Ouspensky (a disciple of the theosophist Gurdjieff), and the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. (A 1936 catalogue for the "Shawn School of Dance for Men" described this last daily ritual as a "required course in the principles of applied anatomy, body mechanics, corrective exercises and massage... held, as a rule, during the noon-hour sunbathing period." At the suggestion of F. Cowles Strickland, a friend of Shawn's and director of the Berkshire Playhouse in nearby Stockbridge, the troupe began "teas" to make a little money. Shawn invited the dowagers of western Massachusetts to the Pillow in the late afternoon. The "boys" would serve tea, then retreat to the woods and emerge, stripped to the trunks, and perform. These teas blossomed into the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival that continues today.

Shawn's commitment to promoting men in dance, and especially the ideal of an all-male company, encompassed his idealization of homosexual love between men. Shawn looked to the musings of Walt Whitman, and the British writers Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, the standard reading list among gay men of the era, to fortify his belief in the higher ideal of love between men. Shawn sought out Carpenter and Ellis during a 1924 tour to London, and Walter Terry, Shawn's friend and biographer, suggested that the meeting eased Shawn's mind about his own homosexual inclinations. In his book Love's Coming of Age, Carpenter wrote of the "intermediate sex," which combined a balance of masculine and feminine characteristics in one person and included a same-sex love object. Love between men or between women was not a "result of disease and degeneration" in Carpenter's view; in fact, "it is possible that in this class of men we have the love sentiment in one of its most perfect forms." Among men the "intermediate sex" man who unified masculine and feminine traits exhibited superior artistic talent, and Carpenter named as examples Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Marlowe. This was a vision of homosexuality that Shawn could heartily embrace. Shawn yearned for legitimation of his artistic talent. The idea of the "intermediate sex" also incorporated his sexual relations with both men and women. Terry argued that Shawn clung to the Greek ideal of a husband with a wife and a male lover.

It was Plato who best captured Shawn's feelings. To Barton Mumaw, Shawn's lover from 1931 to 1948 and the principal dancer in his company, Shawn recited this passage from Plato's Symposium:

The whole soul, stung in every part, rages with pain; and then again remembering the beautiful one, it rejoices... It is perplexed...
and maddened, and in its madness it cannot sleep at night or stay in any one place by day, but is filled with longing and hastens wherever it hopes to see the beautiful one. And when it sees him and is bathed with the waters of yearning, the passages that were sealed are opened, the soul has respite from the stings and is eased of its pain, and this pleasure which it enjoys is the sweetest of pleasures at the time.

Therefore the soul will not if it can help it, be left alone by the beautiful one, but esteems him above all others, forgets for him mother and brothers and all friends, neglects property and cares not for its loss, and despising all the customs and proprieties in which it formerly took pride, it is ready to be a slave and to sleep wherever it is allowed, as near as possible to the beloved; for it not only reveres him who possesses beauty, but finds in him the only healer of its greatest woes. Now this condition, fair boy, about which I am speaking is called Love by men.24

This kind of heroic physical love guided Shawn’s relations with Mumaw and his next long relationship, with John Christian, which lasted from 1949 until Shawn’s death in 1972. This embrace of homosexual love did not include the “fey actions” (presumably effeminate or campy gestures), as Mumaw puts it, of other homosexual men. Shawn wrote to Mumaw: “[It] makes me sick. It’s all wrong. That’s the kind of thing that brings discredit on what is essentially a noble thing. Our kind of love . . . must be lived on a higher plane than the other or it sinks to a lower level.”25 Shawn’s vision of a higher kind of love borrowed heavily from Edward Carpenter and, especially, Havelock Ellis’s Studies in the Psychology of Sex. In six volumes, published from 1897 to 1910, the British sexologist defended sexual passion, including homosexuality, and attributed spiritual qualities to sex. For Shawn, dance emerged from this spiritual and idealistic view of sex and love; Ellis’s Dance of Life was “the dancers’ bible” and Shawn rarely missed an occasion to extol it.26 His group of men dancers, then, was more than a sales campaign for dancing as a career for men. It was also a philosophical ideal—which included homosexuality—in action.

This purpose was clear to other gay men. Lucien Price, the gay male music critic for the Boston Globe and a novelist, first saw Shawn dance his Thunderbird in 1931 and “was in an agony of desire to see it right over again.”27 Price also attended the 1933 Boston performance that included all-male dances and became an indefatigable champion of the troupe and a constant correspondent with Shawn throughout the 1930s. Price recognized that they “serve[d] the same dieties [sic]—beauty and brotherhood.”28 Price commended and emboldened Shawn’s effort to recreate a Greek ideal in his group of men dancers, combining athletic grace, philosophical import, and the quest for “Beauty” in the male body: “I think the combination of high intellectual content and genuine spiritual feeling in the dances, together with almost complete nakedness of the male body, are letting people feel, if not see, for the first time that there need be no conflict between flesh and spirit, and that an ennobled sexual attraction can be a vehicle for religious feeling.”29 Price praised the combination of intellectual stimulation and physical prowess possible among men, but he also exalted the closeted nature of homosexuality: “Uncomfortable as one’s position may often be, it has the comfort of not being exposed to this mass-exploitation by theater, movie, literature, and every crude device down to the roadside advertising signs.”30 For Price, gay male sexuality, unlike heterosexuality, remained free of corruption by mass culture and, in this way, also contributed to the idea that a higher love existed between men.31

The example of Shawn and His Men Dancers inspired Price to write The Sacred Legion, his series of four novels that chronicled love between men, some of whom were dancers, and that he chose to publish privately to escape censorship problems.32 Price recalled, “In you and the boys I had watched [the ideal] being lived.”33 Other gay men were inspired to be a part of the dance world. Walter Terry took dance classes with one of Shawn’s former students at the University of North Carolina and roomed with Foster Fitz-Simmons, who was to become a member of Shawn and His Men Dancers. Terry had decided on the career of a dance critic rather than dancer, and Shawn encouraged him, helping Terry gain his first post at the Boston Herald in 1936 (he moved to the
New York Herald Tribune in 1939). Similarly, Arthur Todd approached Shawn about writing his biography, a duty that Shawn had already promised to Terry. Todd ended up working primarily in the fashion world but photographed Shawn and wrote about dance in Dance Observer and the Dancing Times. John Lindquist, a cashier at Filene’s department store in Boston, stopped by the Pillow one summer afternoon in 1938 out of curiosity. An amateur photographer, Lindquist became entranced by capturing dancers on film, especially naked male dancers. Lindquist came back to the Pillow every summer from then on, becoming the official photographer of the Pillow and the unofficial photographer of male dancers posing nude in the woods outside the studio and theater areas. For some gay men, Shawn and His Men Dancers was a triumphant model of a loving brotherhood that inspired involvement in the dance world.

MASCUlINE MOVEMENT

Shawn’s vision of brotherhood relied on an emboldened masculinity. In his attempt to dispel the popular link of dancing and effeminacy and to counter the dominance of women in the American concert dance field, he embraced distinctive, essential differences between men and women and heralded “masculine” traits.

From his earliest publicized thoughts on the subject, beginning in 1916, Shawn divided movement into masculine and feminine types. Dance had “one fixed limitation that must be faced: the human body is the instrument and medium of the dancer, and human dances are either male or female.” Male and female bodies engendered different postures. Men’s posture was “widespread, feet and legs apart, pelvis forward, chest forward, a broad stance”; women’s was “the concave receptivity.” He pronounced that men and women had always held different roles in society that would naturally lead to different kinds of movement.

Modern people inherit movement impulses from thousands of generations of ancestors who did all the labor of the world with hand implements. Thus the women’s movements are conditioned by cooking, sewing, tending babies, sweeping, etc., small scale movements which use comparatively little stress through the trunk of the body and a greater use of the small arm movements, with resultant greater flexibility of wrist and elbow. The executive man of today, in his office, still inherits movement impulses from forefathers who wielded scythe, axe, plough, oars, etc., and the masculine movement uses stress from the ground up through the entire body, culminating in big arm movements from the shoulder out, and with much less flexibility of elbow and wrist joints.
Starting from this different base of movement, then, men’s dancing was made up of broad sweeping gestures that mimicked their outdoor, adventurous, and often dangerous lives. According to Shaw, “The movement of men should project itself beyond the body of the dancer and create in the mind of the audience a sense of spaciousness, great distances and invincible strength.”

The emphasis on the flexibility of the wrists in this description (and the lack of it in “masculine movement”) seems to be another attempt to disassociate male dancers from this sign of effeminate homosexuality. George Chauncey charts the development of coded signs that were linked to popular notions of homosexuality but that also constituted a system of divulgence and communication among gay men. Limp wrists, flamboyant dress and colors (especially a red tie), and an exaggerated walk bespoke effeminacy and perhaps homosexuality. Shawn condemned men who danced “with pinked toes and wisps of white chiffon [who] writhed and skipped to our mingled amusement and disgust.” Similarly, “to most normal people masculine movement in a woman dancer is just as repulsive as feminine movement in a man dancer.” The goal was to achieve the unity between men and women dancing in their respective “anatomically, functionally, emotionally, and . . . inherited movement impulses . . . eternally different—opposed and yet complementary.”

Shawn also retraced the history of dance, proclaiming it an occupation originally “limited to men alone.” Citing both the societies of Western civilization such as Greece and Rome and what he called the primitive societies of Native Americans and Latin America, Shaw claimed that only men had performed in theatrical works and rituals. It was the European courts that turned dance into a feminine art and removed it from its ceremonial importance. To return to its proper status at the apex of the arts, dance needed men. No art form could succeed if “dominated by one sex” and, more important, “the dance in its fullness . . . demands strength, endurance, precision, perfect coordination of mind, body and emotion, clarity of thinking, all distinctly masculine qualities.” Men needed to study dance with men because through women teachers “unconsciously there crept into his gesture a feminine quality.” In fact, the best course was to isolate men thoroughly: “I wanted to get them away from all feminine influence—away from any chance to mimic feminine gestures.”

Shawn even let go his female accompanist in favor of a male accompanist and composer, Jess Meeker. Thus the male idyll at Jacob’s Pillow was born.

Dances emerged from masculine living at the Pillow. Labor Symphony (1934) offered four portrayals of men’s work: in the fields, the forests, on the sea, and in a factory. Movement mimics actual work motions. In “Labor of the Fields,” a dancer lumbers forward, chest toward the ground, as if pushing a plow through the fields. Planting seeds follows with long swinging arm gestures, and the section ends in a harvest, with full knee bends and scooping motions. The next sections match this pantomimic approach: two men saw a tree with broad back-and-forth torso movements; a crew rows as one man guides a rudder and another throws out a net and hauls it in; and, circular alternating arm motions of the group in a rhythmic pattern create a human gear shift in the final section.

Through Shawn’s impressive publicity drive and his dances, reviewers almost always commented on the manliness of the performance; as one critic noted, “The female dancer decidedly was not imitated nor missed.” Another waxed profusely: “Vigor limned by restraint; furious motion controlled and balanced and suggestive of mighty harmonies; muscular orderliness and pointed grace; a hale and rugged lyricism whose line is gentle, but never effeminate or Hogarthian; energy; humility and bravura, suavity and simplicity; power; beauty. Which of these qualities apparent in Shawn’s work can be called effeminate?” Reviewers responded more covertly to the suggestion of homosexuality and praised Shawn’s success in freeing the dance “from the purple tints which usually hover around male dancing” and commented on Shawn’s “expressive hands and muscular wrists.”

Shawn promoted the athleticism of the men, and he preferred that his dancers have athletic training and no dance background. He believed that athletics prepared men better for “masculine movement.” The 1936 application for the Jacob’s Pillow summer
school included these questions: "At what athletic games are you proficient?" and "List athletics for which you have received awards." Wilbur McCormack was a "former track man, wrestler and gymnast" from Springfield College; Frank Overlee was a swimmer and all-around athlete; Dennis Landers held the record for pole vaulting for northeastern Oklahoma. Athletics suffused Shawn’s choreographic ideas too and culminated in Olympiad, for which individual members of the company choreographed their own solo or group dances. Wilbur McCormack choreographed a "Boxing Dance"; Fred Hearn did "Fencing"; Foster Fitz-Simmons danced the "Decathlon." Olympiad ended with a basketball "dance." The offstage apparel of the troupe also gave the impression of an athletic team: terry cloth bathrobes worn immediately before and after performances, like boxers, and knit sweaters that sported a large S, like members of a college tennis team. Most reviews of the troupe mentioned the athletic backgrounds of the troupe members, often comparing the performance of the male dancers with that of athletes. A sportswriter for a Springfield, Massachusetts, paper compared Shawn to a wrestler and concluded that Shawn was "far more the master of a far more flexible craft [who] makes the liveliest wrestler seem like a petrified tree stump."

For Shawn, athletics prepared men for masculine movement, but dancing nude best communicated such movement. While female modern dancers covered their body in long tubular dresses, in effect downplaying their curvier physical attributes with little display of the legs, Shawn and His Men Dancers most often performed as close to nude as permissible. Shawn credited Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis with bringing the "almost nude body" to the stage. Both women wore flowing tunics that hinted at nudity rather than revealed it (St. Denis did bare her midriff often, however, in her oriental dances). Quoting Whitman and Ellis, and noting the example of Greek civilization about the divinity of the body, Shawn protested that clothes always restricted the dancer and, more, limited what a dancer could communicate: "There is no way of representing invisible form, the idea of Man, except by the nude human body. We cannot associate the cosmic Man with clothes, because clothing suggests classification—clothes would place him as to race, nationality, period of history, social or financial status—and Man would become man." His 1923 Death of Adonis again drew on Greek ideals in a portrayal of a Phoenician god as the epitome of human physical beauty. Shawn performed the piece in a powdered wig, powdered his body white, and wore only a fig leaf G-string. The work consisted mostly of poses, flowing from one into another, and his idea was to convey a fluid sculpture.

But it was the beauty of the male body that particularly interested Shawn. In describing the moderation and good health that would come about if all had to walk around naked, Shawn picked an image of a woman as the example of excess: "To look at a nude woman whose breasts are flabby and discolored, whose body is gross and fat, produces only nausea and disgust." Photographs of nude male dancers taken at the Pillow by John Lindquist, the noontime nude sunbathing hours, and Shawn’s later hobby of carving wood sculptures of male nudes demonstrated his continued fascination with the male body. Shawn’s 1935 solo Movement Naif, inspired by a Whitman poem, personalized this fascination. The piece was a discovery of the motions of one’s own body through isolated moves of shoulders, torso, ankles, arms.

Shawn’s reverence for the nude male body was part of a "rediscovery of the human body" common in early twentieth-century America and Europe. George Mosse argues that the search for an enduring image of strength arose to counter the artificiality of modernism and then was easily folded into nationalist and fascist movements based on eugenic ideas in Germany and Italy. Nature, however, always required tuning. In Shawn’s case the practicalities of performing nearly nude required a weekly all-over shave in an attempt to achieve a "sexless impersonality." Homosexual desire, though, was probably always present in this Greek model of male nudity, which was resurrected by a German art historian with homosexual inclinations in the late eighteenth century and revived again in the twentieth century. Lucien Price claimed that dance, in particular, allowed for a greater suggestion of homoeroticism than literature: "Its idea can be communicated
to others to just that extent to which they are qualified to receive it.” A hairless reified “natural” body escaped censorship when dancing in the name of manliness and virtue.

While Price and other gay men picked up on a homosexual allure, women in the audience also appreciated the sexual masculinity Shawn and His Men Dancers displayed. As the wife of a friend of Lucien Price’s remarked (in Price’s recounting): “The show was wonderful. I tell you it was simply wonderful. Why, the young men had next to nothing on. Next to nothing on. You might say they were naked.” Barton Mumaw claims that often the curtain would raise to gasps and then stunned silence, the men’s sexualized bodies arousing the audience into watching them. Katherine Drier, in her book on Ted Shawn, may have had sexual imagery in mind when she wrote that Shawn “stands for a power of rhythm which refills one with fresh vitality.” After a 1940 slide show at a women’s luncheon, a publicist for Jacob’s Pillow commented to John Lindquist that his pictures were a “KNOCKOUT. Every time I showed a single of Barton they applauded and insisted on the film being held in the projector.” For these women and the dowagers who supported Jacob’s Pillow, Shawn and His Men Dancers offered a rare spectacle of male sexual exhibition.

The ironies of social attitudes about male and female bodily display on stage emerge in looking at reactions to Shawn and His Men Dancers. Although the company danced close to nude, the dancers rarely received admonitions for their performances, even in Boston, where Katherine Dunham was censured in 1941 and 1944. (A friend of Dunham’s suggested that Boston was “more like a Clothing Convention than an Art Center.”) Price attributed Shawn’s success there to the fact that Shaw did not accompany his performances with “frank discussions” (presumably about sex or the divinity of the body), although no other modern dancers did either. Nudity was partially censored in the art projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—officials allowed the use of nudity in paintings and sculptures in allegorical settings but excised it from artistic portrayals of contemporary life. Barbara Melosh suggests that this policy more pointedly targeted female nudity, ostensibly because it was more sexualized and represented a greater “affront to public decency,” an idea that apparently applied to the dance world as well.

Newsreels and Farm Security Administration photographs of saddened, resigned men in battered shacks and long unemployment lines were perhaps the most prominent images of men during the decade. Artistic images countered this documentation, with partial nudity of dynamic men as part of the strategy to inspire national strength. Many popular WPA murals and paintings featured the bare muscular torsos of laboring men. This celebration of manly strength in portrayals of manual laborers was reminiscent of National Socialist art in Nazi Germany and Soviet realist art of the 1930s. Bernard Macfadden, the entrepreneur behind the magazine Physical Culture, picked up on this trend of the 1930s and advocated the combination of virile bodybuilding and active citizenry. Physical Culture featured pictures of Shawn and occasional articles by Benito Mussolini, who extolled healthy “aggressive” bodies as the basis for his fascist citizen army. Unlike partially nude women, partially nude men in magazines, paintings, and dancing on stage projected an inflated masculinity and strength that was accepted and even promoted if used in the cause of workers or nationhood. Bare bulging muscle men flattened images of emaciated, shrunken specters.

Although homosexuality inspired Shawn’s plying of nudity in the cause of nationalism, the almost hypermasculinity of his troupe diminished the homosexual implications of the bare bodies because it did not fit into the societal framework of homosexuality as fey effeminate inversion. Ramsay Burt argues that the pressure to conform to heterosexual images of men prompted Shawn’s heroic masculinity and that, in so doing, he did not challenge the “dominant heterosexual male norms.” Although this may be true, Shawn’s visions were also about an idealized male homosexuality, which some audience members picked up. These manly men dancers may have conformed to heterosexual norms, but they were challenging common homosexual images of sissies. And, in this way, Shawn helped change the definition of homosexuality from gender inversion to same-sex object choice, through visual
DANCING AMERICAN MEN: O, LIBERTAD!

By the mid-1930s Shawn's promotion of male dancers and masculine movement resonated throughout the dance world. In May 1935 New Theatre magazine and the New Dance League sponsored a dance recital of men only. Shawn and His Men Dancers did not appear, but most men active in the dance field in New York City did, including Charles Weidman, the ballet dancer William Dollar, and the African American dancer Add Bates. The second (and final) "Men in the Dance" program the following year in March featured a greater variety of dance, including African dancers (led by Momodu Johnson, who would choreograph Bassa Moona for the WPA Federal Theatre Project's Negro Project in December 1936), the white jazz dancer Roger Pryor Dodge, the Russian ballet dancer Vladimir Valentino, and a final section by modern dancers, headed by Charles Weidman and José Limón. The variety of dance styles illustrated the necessity of grouping all men dancers together for the unified cause of promoting dance as a career for men. Female dancers could afford to maintain a righteous distinction between ballet and modern dance (and even between the different groups within modern dance); male dancers recognized the bigger social barriers and, on these two occasions at least, overlooked aesthetic battles.

John Martin, the New York Times dance critic, deemed that the thrilling opening of the 1936 performance by the African dancers "made what followed seem a bit pale and lifeless in spots." Martin's comment reinforced the trend among male dancers and critics to plunder ethnic and racial cultures and stereotypes for models of masculine movement and imagery in dance. The imagery of these cultures played on preconceptions about these societies' closeness to nature and sex and reinforced the association of heterosexuality with masculine movement. Shawn portrayed Native American warriors and Spanish conquistadors, although not African tribesmen, which betrayed his prejudice against African Americans and what he considered their degenerate contributions of jazz and tap to American culture. Shawn's persistent racist attitudes, more overt than those of other modern dancers,
demonstrated the enduring nativist elements especially apparent in the 1920s that lingered in the 1930s.

Shawn turned against Europe and Africa in his quest to promote dancing for men and re-created a mythic American manhood with his own all-male troupe. Combining athleticism, pioneering labor and courage, outdoor living, and entrepreneurial spirit, these men, according to Shawn, were the "ideal type of young representative American manhood." Life at Jacob’s Pillow was based on the hard physical labor and pioneer adventurousness of American men dancers. Price wrote in 1933, "Is it entirely an accident that in this homestead of an 18th century New England pioneer now dwells a cultural pioneer of the early 20th century?" In addition to pioneering fortitude, Shawn and His Men Dancers had business acumen. They incorporated the group itself and shared ownership of two cars, the costumes, and sets and split profits from the tours. On tour they drove trucks, set up the stage for the day’s performance, and then danced. These young American men were self-sufficient (including financially), responsible, and active. Their robust dynamism was a rebuttal to depression-era resignation.

Shawn also cultivated a populist basis for his American manliness by publicizing his midwestern roots. An apparent draft of a press release declared that from his Kansas City birth and Denver upbringing "no beginning could have been purer U.S.A.—just as his consequent career and entire personality is of the flavor of the hardy and staunchly patriotic early American pioneer." Shawn did not rest on paens to midwestern roots, however. He claimed that he brought the new American dance to the "hinterland of the States" where intense prejudice still existed against male dancers and against dance as an art form. In a 1934 interview with the Cornell Daily Sun he chastised New York artists for their elitist attitude: "New York is not as American as even other big cities." Shawn and His Men Dancers intended to appeal to "real" Americans outside New York City. The dances created from the back-breaking outdoor labor at Jacob’s Pillow "have a quality of verity about them," Shawn argued, "that convinces audiences out in Texas and Montana and Wyoming." Reviewers around the country picked up on this populist appeal and praised Shawn for it. A writer in the Dallas Times Herald in 1937 commended Shawn for shunning "the glib way of the high-pressure press agent," organizing his own tours, and demonstrating tenacity in his annual long winter tours throughout the States. "His business has been to dance, and to dance, he has not been ashamed to appear in obscure halls, school auditoriums and many strange and humble places." The writer cautioned that audiences should not take him "for granted" and celebrate the "latest sensation" from Europe. Walter Terry, Shawn’s champion, named the populist appeal of Shawn’s dance as his greatest feat: "He brings the most understandable art to the greatest number of people. The mere appearance of Shawn and His Men Dancers in small towns throughout the South, Midwest, and West, to audiences that most likely had never seen much dance, gives credence to Terry’s statement.

The Americana folk flavor of Shawn’s works also bolstered his
success. He created *Four Dances Based on American Folk Music* in 1931, a solo piece that included an American country dance, choreography to a Negro spiritual, and a dance to a Methodist revival hymn, and culminated in a patriotic finale to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." *O, Libertad! An American Saga in Three Acts* (1937), an evening-long work, was his fullest vision of America and incorporated earlier solo and group dances. *O, Libertad!* depicted the past, present, and future in three acts. Shawne's "past" mainly consisted of dances based on those of Native Americans, "Noche Triste de Moctezuma" and "Los Hermanos Penti-entes" narrated the influence of Europeans and then European Americans on Native Americans. The West of Mexico and California was the setting for the final three dances of the act, which ended with the "49ers," a rowdy square dance mimicking the celebration of the newly rich miners of 1849. Act II, "The Present (1914 to 1937)" started off on a college campus and rambled through war and the jazz decade. Its high point was "Depres- sion," a piece composed of two parts, "Modernism" and "Recovery—Credo." A critic for the *Dancing Times* described Shawne in "Modernism" as "a bag in robes, ringlets and a frightening mask. It was comic and startling, for it proved a pitiful burlesque of the Martha Graham manner, a courageous step that made her followers gasp and sent more rational observers of the dance into hilarity." Shawne's response to "Modernism" was "Recovery—Credo," his own autobiography in dance form. "Credo's" deep lunge, extended arm movements, and leaps swallowed the bent over, grave, and insistent stamping of "Modernism." "The Pres- ent" ended with the suite of dances earlier performed independently as *Olympiad*, which emphasized America's endurance and strength through the keen athleticism of its men.

The performance peaked in Act III, "The Future." Titled *Kinetic Molpae*, and originally choreographed in 1935 (and captured on film that survives from the mid-1930s), this work fused many of Shawne's ideals and hopes. Shawne drew on the work of Gilbert Murray, author of *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, for the title and idea of the piece. According to Murray, the Molpe (the singular form of Molpae) was an ancient Greek art form that included poetry, singing, drama, and rhythmic movement, but "in its essence it was only the yearning of the whole dumb body to express that emotion for which words and harps and singing were not enough." Shawne's *Kinetic Molpae* begins with his entrance and circling the stage with pounding steps. Stopping center stage, he moves his torso from side to side, as if finding new possibilities of movement within his body for the first time. This leader then beckons to the four corners of the stage with a strong upswing of an arm; men enter in response. Different groupings of men move in and out of geometric patterns of circles and squares and often trade movements in a kind of bodily counterpoint. Later in the piece the leader falls to the ground, "dying." The men mourn the loss with small stoic steps and balled fists hitting their thighs. They circle aimlessly around the stage, ending in a lump of flesh, falling over one another. The piece then climbs to a crescendo with men whirling in "Surge." They create a wavy figure with four alternating lines, falling to the floor and rising, and then repeating the pattern in side motions in three lines. In a dramatic depletion of the frenzy, the dancers dive to the floor and form a circle, each head to another's feet, as bodily links in a circular chain. Into this calm the leader comes forth from offstage, in a kind of resurrection. Holding onto one man's arm, he runs around the circle, successively pulling up all the men and creating a simple but dramatic explosion of energy. The finale, "Apothe- osis," moves to a waltz and features big balletic steps of tourjéts, arabesques, and even a set of fouetté turns for Shawne. *Kinetic Molpae* finishes with a fierce run forward to the audience in a straight line spanning the stage, a drop to the knees, and broad side arms that spotlight center stage. Shawne stands there, regal, arms stretched upward and then sideways, as if in an embrace of the kneeling men.

*Kinetic Molpae* melded masculine movement and Greek hero-ism to form a triumphant vision of "the Athletic Art of the Dance as a field of creative endeavors for the American man," as it was described in the program notes. Shawne used dance and men to express this hopeful idealized vision of American civilization. In 1936 he wrote, "'Another Athens shall arise' prophesied Shelly.
Where better than in America, with the athlete, the artist, the philosopher combined in one man—the dancer.390 And he envisioned himself as that dancer. Shawn’s idealistic, even egotistic, vision sold in small towns across America where the economic hard times of the depression had corroded hope. In a crisis of American manhood, where men lost jobs more often than women, suffered from not being the breadwinner for the family, and witnessed women successfully scrunching up jobs, the heroic masculinity Shawn and His Men Dancers portrayed and embodied soothed them. Even if the present was a time of struggle, the hope for the future of America dwelled in its kinetic heroic men.

DANCING IN THE ARMY

When the specter of a world war became a reality in the early 1940s, nationalist fervor changed from a broad movement that included interrogation of America’s past and present policies to a more devout unquestioning patriotism. Although this celebratory embrace of the United States affected other modern dancers whose nationalist beliefs had been more critical than hagiographical, Shawn’s brand of nationalism moved easily from theater buildings to theaters of war. Shawn’s increasing age, the exhaustion of constant touring, dancers’ desires to go on to something else, and the impending possibility of war all contributed to the group’s demise in 1940 after seven years of performing. By 1942 many male modern dancers were serving in the armed forces, including almost all the dancers from Shawn and His Men Dancers, the accompanist and composer Jess Meeker, and the dance critic Walter Terry. Shawn, then fifty-one, escaped service because of his age. If a dearth of men had always been a problem in the dance profession, the war only heightened the shortage.

The number of modern dance performances diminished in New York City, and companies took no major tours around the country during World War II. But in the armed services some of these men found ways to dance. Mumaw was assigned to the Technical School of the Air Corps at Kessler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1942. Daniel Nagrin eventually served there and Paul Magnell, author of books and articles on dance, was the librarian at the base. Shawn lived at the Hotel Biloxi to be near Mumaw. Within a few months Shawn and Mumaw were performing at Kessler Field and in nearby Gulfport. Performances and lecture-demonstrations at the base were benefits to raise money for a “Reception Cottage,” which Shawn described as “a charming home-like place dedicated to the purpose of providing privacy for boys to say goodbye to their womenfolk when they are shipped away.”391 Shawn and Mumaw both received commendations from Col. Robert E. M. Goolrick, the commanding officer, for their efforts to raise money for the cottage.

Shawn did not comment on the irony of two gay lovers raising money for a building devoted to privacy with womenfolk, nor does Shawn’s close relationship with Mumaw seem to have caused consternation for the military officers at a time when homosexuality was deemed a mental illness by the U.S. military and ground for a dishonorable discharge. In fact, the 1943 Cornell Selectee Index created by a group of doctors to simplify the initial psychiatric exams of inductees included a category of occupational choice: interior decorators, window dressers, and dancers were suspected of homosexual inclinations.392 Allan Berube argues that gay men and women not only populated the wartime military but even developed a stronger sense of individual and group identity through the forced same-sex living circumstances and the military’s attempts to define homosexual characteristics and behavior. While definitions tightened and prohibited some men from being admitted to the armed services, once there regulation of sexual behavior and rigid gender roles loosened. Within this intense and unusual situation female impersonators (many of them mimicking ballerinas) flourished as entertainment on bases in the well-known shows such as Irving Berlin’s This Is the Army. Military and popular press reviews downplayed the association of female impersonation with homosexuality, which was more common to writings both before and after the war. In the exigencies of war the threat of homosexuality somewhat diminished.393

In this atmosphere Shawn and Mumaw’s relationship and their performances of “interpretive dancing” roused only cheers.
Shawn noted that twenty-three hundred men at Kessler Field had bought tickets to see their performance; “they behaved like a dance fan audience at Carnegie Hall, even to bravos.” Mumaw performed solos when he was transferred to a base in England, to continued acclaim. And male members from the Littlefield Ballet, Ballet Theatre, Ballet Caravan, and Shaw and His Men Dancers performed in a rendition of This Is the Army in 1944 at an unspecified base. The reviewer noted that “Ted Shawn would probably have apoplexy if he could see one of his former dancers, trained in the uncompromising virility of the Shawn technique, swish his skirts as Betty Grable; yet on second glance he would undoubtedly take pride in the dancing of Charles Tate, for Pfc. Tate is excellent as Betty Grable and, in matters of dancing, infinitely more accomplished.”

The enthusiastic reaction to dance—even modern dance—in the armed forces probably had more to do with the boredom and stress of military life than with a new passion for dance. But some men may have also been interested in dance because of a sexual attraction to men, either because of the absence of women on the bases or not. Walter Terry, stationed in Egypt, wrote to Shawn that Shaw and His Men Dancers were well known among “the boys” there. The soldiers were reading Terry’s recently published book, Invitation to Dance, which heralded Shawn’s O, Libertad! as “the story of America with its cruelties, its greatness, its success and its failures told in terms of dance, told through the bodies of American men.” And a picture Shaw sent of himself “has wound up over my bed (if you don’t mind being a pin-up boy!).”

When Terry himself performed a Native American dance in the manner of Shawn at the Royal Opera House in Cairo, he claimed that the picture in Stars and Stripes was “gracing the walls of several of my buddies: one, Bill Joyce, an ex-Boston-cop has my photo sharing honors with his fiancée, and in another barracks I am flanked by Betty Grable and Ann Corio.”

The positive reaction to modern dance and female impersonation in the macho-minded military demonstrated the fluidity of sexual identity and behavior during wartime service. Certainly, homosexual contact flourished, from the tight sleeping quarters to the “Find-Your-Buddy-Week” that encouraged close friendships among men. For gay male dancers, the war provided a way to prove their patriotism and their virility. But at least Terry recognized that Shawn had epitomized that ideal long before the war. In a letter to Mumaw in 1944 Terry upheld the vision of Shawn as reason enough to fight the war: “The dance contribution [of Shawn] has stood for the very best in America, has revealed our physical prowess, our spiritual heritage, our vision and something that I can describe only as the clean freshness of the New World. Such dances being as they are distillations of America, are worth living and fighting for.”

Ted Shawn expressed both his patriotism and his attraction to men through his company of, and choreography for, dancing American men. In Shawn’s dancing portraits of America “masculine movement” operated in a variety of ways: as an example of America’s potency, as a sign of essential differences between men and women, and as an ideal of homosexual love between men. His choreographic proclivities for near-nude male bodies nourished the need for symbols of natural vigor during the Great Depression and World War II. In fact, the attention to bodies may have attracted gay men to dance over other genres of art. With their bodies as sites of spectacle and spectatorship, gay male dancers could both flaunt and entice homosexual male desire. And Shaw’s strategy of heightened virility on stage subtly changed the message, from signs of gender inversion to a hearty flaunting of male bodily display. Nationalism enabled this vision, masking homosexual urges and desires in a cloak of American masculine triumph that consoled men and women as they faced economic hardship and military battle.

NOTES

My thanks to Kathy Peiss for insights that continue to reverberate and to Jane Desmond for pushing me to think through key issues. I am also indebted to Mary Edsall for telling me about the treasure trove of materials on Ted Shawn and Jacob’s Pillow at the Harvard Theatre Collection; the Houghton Library of Harvard University for its financial support; the staff of the Harvard Theatre Collection for helping me wade through the materials; and Norman Owen for access to, and insights about, the archival material at Jacob’s Pillow.
2. Ibid.
7. Chauncey, Gay New York, chap. 11.
11. A publicity photo of Shawn with his dance teacher, Hazel Wallack, almost led to Shawn’s dismissal from college. The university chancellor denounced Shawn and Wallack for their sensuous activity, evidenced in the photograph by the slip in Wallack’s gown that exposed her leg almost to her hip. The chancellor would have expelled Shawn if he had not already quit school (Terry, Ted Shawn, 15).  

16. The translation of the review in Berner Tagblatt, May 4, 1931, may be found in the Ted Shawn Scrapbook, Dance Collection.
17. Pindarwester, “Ted Shawn: His Personal Life,” 238–41; the quote is from Shawn’s Art Form for Athletes, unidentified, undated clipping (mid-1930s?), Folder 628, Ted Shawn Collection (hereafter Shawn Collection), Dance Collection.
18. Pindarwester, “Ted Shawn: His Personal Life,” 284; the scope of the tour is confirmed by the meticulous route lists Shawn kept, which have been preserved in the Shawn Collection.
23. Terry, Ted Shawn, 14. Shawn’s eradication of feminine influence in dance may have come from a growing bitterness toward women: his hurt over the early death of his mother and the philandering of St. Denis, which he believed prompted him to turn to men for love and affection. Although Shawn acknowledged to Terry that he “guessed” his homosexuality was always there
‘deep down,’ he never stopped believing that if St. Denis had been faithful to him, he would have been satisfied in marriage with her (130).


25. Ibid., 124.


32. Price to Shawn, September 28, 1960, Page 9, Marks Collection.

33. Price to Shawn, August 13, 1960, Folder 380, Shawn Collection. In fact, Price had been attracted to one member of Shawn’s troupe, John Schubert, an interest that was apparently mutual (John Schubert to Lucien Price, October 22, 1938, Page 9, Marks Collection). Schubert died in World War II, however, and his death, along with that of another lover during World War I, contributed to Price’s romanticized vision of homosexual love.

34. The Harvard Theatre Collection houses the John Lindquist Collection, which includes some correspondence and a massive amount of photographic material. For a general overview of the collection and biography of Lindquist, see Amy Lucker, “The John Lindquist Collection at the Harvard Theatre Collection,” Performing Arts Resources 20 (1996): 57-74.

35. For gay men at this time it was quite useful to have a photographer as friend. Lindquist personally developed film that was considered criminal. He apparently distributed these photographs fairly widely, to a circle of gay men that included Shawn and other male dancers (see letter to Lindquist from unidentified man [Jon?], February 11, 1961, Correspondence Box 1, Folder 5, Lindquist Collection). Shawn and Lindquist had an understanding that Shawn would not send pictures taken by Lindquist before anyone else saw them. While Shawn was worried about particular pictures “falling into the wrong hands,” he also built a picture collection for his own use and enjoyment (Shawn to Lindquist, July 17, 1965, Correspondence Box 3, Folder 3, Lindquist Collection).

36. Neither John Martin, dance critic of the New York Times, nor Lincoln Kirstein, writer on dance and supporter of George Balanchine, consistently praised Shawn. Although both engaged in homosexual affairs, both were married and perhaps less inclined to glorify Shawn’s fraternal ideal. They also held high artistic standards, which they may have believed Shawn did not reach.


38. Shawn, Dance We Must, 119.


46. Shawn is quoted in “Found Dancing Wasn’t for Sissies,” undated, clipping (Springfield Republican or Berkshire Eagle? 1934?), Shawn Clipping File, Dance Collection.


49. My analysis is based on a film of the piece, dated 1934-1940, Dance Collection.


52. Dancing Times, October 1934, p. 12; Des Moines Register, April 2, 1934.


57. Ibid., 81.

58. “He-Man Dances,” Now and Then, January 1938, p. 6. Offstage, his own body preoccupied him too, and his weight bounced dramatically in response to intense periods of dieting and training followed by laxity. Shawn continued to send pictures of himself to a select audience throughout his life (and found in the John Lindquist Collection). Shawn included one in a letter to Barton Mumaw that was taken when Shawn was nearing his seventy-fourth birthday. Shawn kidded about his “Narcissus complex” (Sherman and Mumaw, Barton Mumaw, Dancer, 223).
   For an analysis of the natural body in dance during this period, see Ann Daly, *Dance into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).


62. Price to Shawn, September 11, 1936, Paige Box 9, Marks Collection.

63. Price is quoted in Sherman and Mumaw, *Barton Mumaw, Dancer*, 129.

64. Ibid., 124–29.


66. Harry Gribble to John Lindquist, January 18, 1940, Correspondence Box 1, Folder 1, Lindquist Collection, emphasis in original.

67. One reviewer did comment that "in the opening group of dances the particular thing reminding me of the fan dance was the absence of a fan" (Chicago Daily News, April 9, 1934).


72. Mussolini Writes a Signed Article Expressly for Our Readers," *Physical Culture* 65, no. 6 (June 1931): 18–20, 80–81; Benito Mussolini, "Building a Nation's Health," *Physical Culture* 68, no. 1 (July 1932): 14–15, 64, 68. Shawn appeared on the cover of the July 1917 issue of *Physical Culture* and was featured in the November 1924 issue. Shawn and Macfadden had a personal friendship as well; Shawn and his company stayed at Macfadden's Florida home and spa in 1936 (see Shawn Newsletter, January 1937, Barton Mumaw Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection). Macfadden's interest in dance was inspired by his first wife, Mary, who had studied "nature dancing" (Robert Ernst, *Weakness Is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991], 83). See also Ann Fabian, "Making a Commodity of Truth: Spec-
Matthew Bourne's sensationnally popular “gay male” Swan Lake premiered in London’s West End in September 1995, eventually breaking box office records for longest-running production set by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Using the original Tchekovsky score and a modern dance vocabulary that only occasionally invokes ballet, Bourne has re-envisioned the famous romance between the Prince and the Swan Queen as the coming-out story of a gay prince, dominated by his mother, who finds no satisfaction in the royal regimens or underground getaways that comprise his life. On the verge of suicide he instead dreams himself into a world inhabited by magical creatures, male swans whose sensuous strength and sinuous vulnerability promise sexual and emotional satisfaction. Swan, part of this all-male corps de ballet, reciprocates his affections in a series of duets, tender, passionate, and erotic, yet their attachment is finally severed by the two separate societies to which they belong. The Prince’s court cannot accept his homosexuality and condemns him first to the asylum and then to the sickbed; Swan’s cohorts cannot forgive his dalliance with a mere mortal. In the final scene Swan, hounded by his fellow swans, scoops the dying prince into his arms and ascends heavenward, presumably toward a world where they might live happily ever after.

Exhilarating, epic, entertaining, the production elicits enormous sympathy for the gay male couple. The Prince’s severely constrained life and inarticulable feelings resonate strongly with the closetedness of homosexuality in dance and in society. Swan’s bravery and vulnerability evoke the kind of admiration reserved