

Augustana College

## Augustana Digital Commons

---

Audre Lorde Writing Prize

Prizewinners

---

Spring 2024

### Exploring the Stereotypes of Gender and Sexuality in Ballet and its Impact on the Dance Community

Ava Jackson

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Jackson, Ava. "Exploring the Stereotypes of Gender and Sexuality in Ballet and its Impact on the Dance Community" (2024). *Audre Lorde Writing Prize*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward/60>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Audre Lorde Writing Prize by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

**Exploring the Stereotypes of Gender and Sexuality in Ballet and its Impact on the Dance**

**Community**

Ava Jackson

WGSS-130-01

Dr. Heacock-Renaud

Spring 2023

Creative Expression

Ballet has been deemed a feminine sport for hundreds of years. The famous words of choreographer George Balanchine, “Ballet is Woman,” remind us of this. While some may see classical ballet as a feminized birthplace of dance for queer men and women, the art form as a whole denies more flexible roles of masculinity. For men, the majority of roles are limited to strong princes, played by cis-gender men who fit the model of hegemonic masculinity. Research shows that gay and bisexual men comprise 50% of the male population who dance in the United States compared to 4-10% in the general population (Risner 2009). Despite this, the dance world denies coverage of homosexual roles. Today, this narrative has been altered for a new sense of equivalence in partnering, whether that be same-sex or opposite-sex. The ballet narrative has stayed the same, men in dance must be athletic and strong. They must allow women to be the main focus, yet men are deemed “too feminine” in society to take on the dancer role. This intersectional issue needs to be addressed, not only for men but for ballet as a whole. Dance is not exempt from oppression with intersectionality between dancers. An intersectional approach is imperative for understanding the exclusion dancers face, by challenging these notions we can unite the community.

Gender roles in dance have started to become more inclusive, but still limit possibilities for dancers not fitting the heteronormative norm. While the eras of ballet are more detailed than this, the idea is clear: the traditions and ideas of dancers have stayed continuous and fixed throughout the years. Male dancers experience sexism and homophobia yet have nowhere to turn. The demasculinization of ballet over the years is damaging to the ballet community. Young boys often have the pressure to quit dance for being too “feminine, homosexual, wimp, spoiled, gay, dainty, fragile, weak, fluffy, woosy, prissy, artsy, and sissy” (Fischer, 2007, p. 45). A

common strategy to counter these remarks is to characterize ballet as macho, athletically masculine, and open to all genders and sexualities. Society continuously declares that dance is not manly enough and epitomizes femininity. Gay men in ballet face discrimination on both their gender and sexuality.

For this project, I chose to reimagine the “Basic Positions of the Body Cecchetti Method” chart that is portrayed in dance classrooms around the world. This chart typically portrays cis-gender women and is limited in diversity and inclusivity. I found images of male dancers who have actively fought the stereotypes of dance. Some are queer, some are not. Some are cis-gender, and some are not. These people portrayed below have impacted the dance world in some way. My collage surrounding the men depicts various stereotypes surrounding men in the dance world, along with stereotypically feminine pictures. The collection of images resists the binary, heteronormative perspective of the chart and of male dancers. Below, I describe the men pictured and what they have had to fight in the dance world.

*Croisé Devant:* The Joffrey Ballet strives for inclusion when they cast a non-binary dancer typically cast in male roles, into a more feminized role. Platée, a role typically for a man in drag, was made into a more feminized role for Fernando Duarte. Instead of a typical drag costume, Duarte wore pointe shoes and a tutu and danced with a man. Despite the backlash, the Joffrey Ballet continued with the role in hopes of promoting a more inclusive dance world (Warnecke, 2022, n.p.).

*À La Quatrième Devant:* The dance boom of the 60s and 70s earned major dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov the title of “Mr. Hetero ballet man” in movies like *The Turning Point* (Fischer, 2007, p. 50). In addition to this, Baryshnikov was a leading choreographer. With this enthusiasm for straight men in ballet came criticism. Fischer cites a 1996 article in *The Toronto Globe and Mail* by Dierdre Kelly, who wrote that the gay men of dance were fading “as more and more athletic young men take up ballet” (51). The idea that gay men could not be athletic stirred up controversy and ignited an argument about whether these stereotypes should be allowed. Fisher goes on to describe how society once viewed ballet as “A woman’s world, where men were mainly useful to hold up the ballerinas [she] imagined” (p. 55). Baryshnikov served as a trendsetter of the 60s, was idealized as a young man in dance, and proved men can be straight and partake in a stereotypically feminized sport. I include Baryshnikov in the collage because of his impact on contemporary dance. Although his roles primarily focused on heterosexual relationships, his choreography was prominent during the time.

*À La Seconde:* This photo was taken by Bon Duke for a *New York Times Style Magazine* article titled, “How a Group of Gay Male Ballet Dancers Is Rethinking Masculinity.” Pictured from the

left is Rhys Kosakowski, formerly of Houston Ballet; Jose Sebastian, in the corps de ballet at the American Ballet Theatre; Taylor Stanley, a principal dancer at New York City Ballet; Tyler Maloney, who is in the corps de ballet at ABT; Patrick Yocum, a principal at Boston Ballet; and Calvin Royal III, a soloist at ABT. (Ebershoff p.1). These dancers are at the forefront of rethinking masculinity in dance. All of them faced bullying as children and work towards challenging ballet norms. I decided to include this photo because it portrays dancers who have stood up for themselves in a homophobic community.

*Épaulé*: Chase Johnsey, a dancer assigned male at birth who identifies as gender-fluid with male pronouns, made history in a production of “Sleeping Beauty” at the English National Ballet. Johnsey was the first dancer assigned male at birth to perform an ensemble role traditionally danced by a cis-woman. Although a feat itself, Johnsey’s role was not revolutionary in appearance. Johnsey did not go on pointe and was concealed by heavy costume and makeup. Despite this, “For the first time in modern ballet history, a [*sic*] dancer [assigned male at birth] is performing as part of the female ensemble at an international ballet company, signaling an important moment in an art form that often celebrates a particular ideal of femininity,” wrote Rosyln Sulcas of *Independent* (How Sleeping Beauty..., 2018, n.p.).

*Écarté*: Taunts of “sissy” and “fairy” followed James Whiteside as a child, who is now a principal dancer at the American Ballet Theater. Whiteside was cast in prince roles but experienced queercoding when he only could express his queerness in evil roles such as the villain Iago in “Othello” due to their sexuality not being expressed in the role. This connection of queerness to evil characters further perpetuates the stereotypes of queer people as predators.

Whiteside has worked on side projects to explore his feminine side, such as wearing tutus and pointe shoes at Paris Fashion Week. NBC wrote, “At Ballet Theater, if he gets to wear pointe shoes, the iconic ballerina shoe, it’s usually meant as a joke” (Scher, 2019, n.p.).

*Effacé*: Rudolf Nureyev, a cis-gender gay man was prominent during Balanchine’s time in the spotlight. Despite being photographed with women in his everyday life, the fairly common knowledge he preferred men was documented. (Fischer 49). Rudolf was described “glamorous jet-setting hunk” who proved that men could be masculine, athletic, outgoing, and still dance (Fisher, 2007, p. 49). Although he lived a short life, Rudolf promoted ballet as manly in his way (p. 49).

*À La Quatrième Derrière*: Pictured here is *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*, also known as “The Trocks,” an all-male drag ballet troupe that portrays male and female roles using humor. The male dancers wear tutus and dance en pointe. This group made strides for inclusivity in the dance world, with their first performance held in 1976. The group still is active today. (Les Ballets, n.d., n.p.).

*Croisé Derrière*: Justin Peck, choreographer, and dancer, actively works to create gender-inclusive roles in the dance world. *The Times Are Racing* pictured here, challenged ballet’s gender norms by pairing Daniel Appelbaum and Taylor Stanley in a pas de deux. As a straight man, Justin Peck could easily follow the strict narrative of heterosexual gender norms in the dance world. Yet instead, Peck has created choreography that features roles purposefully made for any gender (Ebershoff, 2018 n.p.).

## References

- Ebershoff, D. (2018, November 11). How a Group of Gay Male Ballet Dancers Is Rethinking Masculinity. *The New York Times Style Magazine*. Retrieved April 24, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/05/t-magazine/gay-male-ballet-dancers.html>.
- Fisher, J. (2007). Make It Maverick: Rethinking the “Make It Macho” Strategy for Men in Ballet. *Dance Chronicle*, 30(1), 45–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598095>
- Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. (n.d.). *History*. Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. <https://trockadero.org/about-us/history/>
- Risner, D. (2023). Rehearsing Masculinity: Challenging the “Boy Code” in Dance Education. *Dancing Mind, Minding Dance*, 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003343950-20>
- Scher, Avichai. Homophobia, Misogyny Still Problematic in World of Dance, Performers Say. *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 21 Sept. 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/homophobia-misogyny-still-problematic-world-dance-performers-say-n1057186>.
- Sulcas, R. (2018, June 15). *How Sleeping Beauty Got Woke: Meet Ballet's First Male Ballerina*. The Independent. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/chase-johnsey-ballet-male-ballerina-man-dance-english-national-sleeping-beauty-gender-fluid-a8395781.html>



Warnecke, L. (2022, November 8). Mozart, Dancing Frogs and a Message of Inclusion. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved April 23, 2023, from [https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/infinity/article\\_share.aspx?guid=23418b4f-8860-4091-a5a5-89ac0e4e2a7d](https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=23418b4f-8860-4091-a5a5-89ac0e4e2a7d).