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Rehearsing Heterosexuality: Unspoken Truths in Dance Education

Doug Risner

Introduction

While recent research in the United States indicates that gay and bisexual men comprise half the male population in dance,¹ a very limited amount of scholarship focuses on the experiences of gay men and boys in dance education (Hamilton 1999). Cultural heterosexism and homophobia certainly contribute to this conspicuous absence of scholarship and discourse, as does institutionalized heterosexism in concert dance and Western social dance forms (Adair 1992; Burt 1995; Hanna 1988). Given the rich and compelling dance research in gender (Albright 1997, 1998; Bond 1994; Case et al. 1995; Crawford 1994; Daly 1998; Stinson et al. 1990; Stinson 1998; Thomas 1993) and feminist theory (Albright 1990; Banes 1998; Daly 1991, 2000; Foster 1996; Shapiro 1998; Stinson 1993), one questions the absence of scholarly analysis surrounding gay issues in dance education. Unfortunately, dance and dance education may unwittingly reproduce asymmetrical power relationships, social inequities, and sexist patriarchy by reaffirming the status quo operating in contemporary American culture. In doing so, the profession ignores vast educative opportunities for diminishing homophobia and antigay bias. In view of the relatively large numbers of gay men and young adults in the field, the lack of serious discourse and study of these critical issues is disheartening. I am reminded that Susan Stinson importantly asked the dance community these ethical questions nearly two decades ago. Regrettably, her cogent questions remain largely unanswered:

When it appears so obvious that dance can either enhance or diminish our humanness, [why] do we seem to use it so frequently for the latter, and so infrequently for the former? Why do we not choose what and how we teach based upon what will make us more fully human? Why are the most popular approaches to dance education those which do not attempt to disturb the status quo, those in which we are either obediently adapting to or else escaping from a very problematic world, instead of trying to make it better? (Stinson 1984, 18)

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Having myself been a closeted gay male dancer until the age of thirty-five, my concerns are rooted in the larger social issues of dance education and the contemporaneous pedagogical implications this research presents. Therefore, this article is primarily concerned with a social analysis exploring homophobic myths, *unspoken* truths, and the enduring silence that surrounds these issues in dance education. Although a social critique of professional dance performance/choreography—its emphatically heterosexual thematic and value system—is necessary and valuable, I am unable to discuss this here with breadth or clarity.² Instead, I offer an initial project in the hope of enlivened discourse and further research.

To do so, I want to address in as forthright a manner as possible what Linda Hamilton sought to accomplish (or at least initiate) in her *Dance Magazine* article when she wrote:

We realize some readers may be uncomfortable with the topic of homosexuality. However, we believe that *Dance Magazine* has a responsibility to provide useful information for those dancers who may be dealing with this issue. Although dance, like other art forms, is often more accepting of different lifestyles than is the mainstream society, the process of “coming out” can be difficult for dancers as well as their families. (Hamilton 1999, 72)

While I affirm Hamilton’s first two points—the difficulty of candidly addressing gay issues in our culture and the responsibility the profession bears for such important conversation—I believe her third point—acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle by the profession—is a troubling source of the profession’s muted discourse. It is my contention that this “acceptance,” which I wholeheartedly believe exists, both trivializes and obfuscates the larger issues at hand. More simply put, we know and accept that many of our male students and colleagues in dance are gay, but we rarely discuss it in popular or scholarly discourse.

Let me preface this effort with a few preliminary questions: How have our students, their parents, and our gay and lesbian colleagues heard our silence? What societal suspicions have we unwittingly produced? Does dance education have a role to play in addressing homophobia and the prejudice that male students and colleagues (gay or straight) face as dancers? How do heterosexist assumptions and actions in the studio/classroom unnecessarily and unintentionally create an environment of shame, humiliation, or embarrassment for gay dancers? How do we as dance educators unknowingly reaffirm narrow gender stereotypes? As teachers and mentors, how might we use our authority and power to support students who are questioning their sexual orientation?

Gay Males in Dance

It is worthwhile to ground these initial questions in a brief, limited overview of existing dance scholarship regarding gay men and youth in dance education. Because gay and lesbian³ issues in dance education receive little serious attention, I will briefly highlight perspectives from two larger works that discuss gay males in dance and the ways in which research historically frames homosexuality for the gay male dancer in dance theater.

Stigma and Stereotypes

Judith Lynne Hanna (1988) situates the study of male homosexuality and dance in a therapeutic psychopathological setting, in which gay male dancers can ameliorate or elude their “problematic” homosexuality in a comfortable and insular milieu. Without regard for domi-

nant sexual codes of heterosexuality or prevailing homophobic attitudes, externalized or internalized,⁴ Hanna's work focuses on the anomalous numbers of gay men attracted to dance (ballet), and develops a subsequently lengthy rationale for this. Rather than exploring the social complexities of gay and bisexual male experiences in dance, she repeatedly frames homosexuality as a problem for gays, and in doing so, reinforces narrow homosexual stereotypes:

Gay men identify with the effeminate yearnings, feelings, and romantic idealizations of the ballet...ballet presents an illusion experienced by some gay men as parallel to their relationships with women and the difficulties some gays have in establishing long-term relationships with each other...dancing (for gay men) may be an audition for lovers...ballet has had the attraction of colorful costume, glamour, and makeup. (Hanna 1988, 136–138)

In order to destigmatize dancing for men and to “establish the respectability of a male dance career,” Hanna champions projects like Jacques d’Amboise’s National Dance Institute. While the effort to bring dance to children—and to a wider audience generally, including young boys—is certainly admirable, these efforts and their rhetoric often obfuscate larger social issues such as the significant gay male presence in dance and internalized homophobia in the dance community. Destigmatization and respectability, when read more closely, actually mean: (1) minimizing the gay male population and its profound contribution to dance; (2) cultivating more “respectable” heterosexuals, “upgrading the status of male dancers”; and (3) silencing discussion of patriarchal and sexist practices in the profession. This approach clearly illustrates the deleterious effects of heterosexual respectability, homosexual negation, and further homophobic attitudes in dance:

There are several approaches to the problem in addition to the d’Amboise strategy. ... A male dancer (straight or gay) might handle the issue with non-dancers by first acknowledging the stereotypical image and then establishing himself as an exception. He does this by revealing that he has a girlfriend, that he finds gays disgusting, or that his love of ballet makes him “put up” with gay men [attributed to O’Connor]... A number of dancers said that there are very few gays in ballet today. (Hanna 1988, 146)

The notion that male dancers are perceived to be effeminate deserves cultural critique, rather than psychological hypothesizing about gay men’s attraction to ballet. Reframed and, I might add, more thoughtfully put, critical questions might focus instead on the reasons that straight men represent only fifty percent of the male dance population. As John Crawford asserts,

Men have traditionally fulfilled roles as choreographers and managers, whereas women have been the prevalent performers and workers. Yet male dominance in dance has not led to an increase in male dancers, possibly because it conforms to, rather than challenges, the very structures that brought about the scarcity in the first place. (Crawford 1994, 40)

In addition, researchers might interrogate the heterocentric⁵ underpinnings of such concerns at the outset. Or put more simply we might ask: Why are we concerned about equitable numbers of gay and straight males in dance? Why do we need more heterosexual males in dance? If we decide we do, how many heterosexual males do we want? What ratio would be commensurate with our strategy and intention? From this homophobic perspective, one would certainly conclude that we need more straight male dancers than we currently have in the profession and, espousing this perspective, we certainly would want to minimize its current gay male presence.

While I acknowledge the significance and appeal of cultivating a larger straight male population (and audience for that matter) in dance (Meglin 1994), one that more closely resembles our communities, schools, and cultures, I find it highly problematic to do so by denying the presence of gay male dancers. Within our current political, economic, and social systems, attracting more males to the profession could conceivably bolster credibility and generate greater financial support for dance. However, to do so by ignoring important cultural issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, homophobic attitudes, and sexual harassment is not only pragmatic and shortsighted, but also forfeits vast and profound opportunities for educating a highly confused culture to its sexuality and discrimination.

Even with the best intentions, the profession's attempts to encourage young boys and men to pursue dance frequently reproduce narrow, derogatory stereotypes of gay dancers (Crawford 1994; Bond 1994), which demeans rather than celebrates the gay male dance population and its contribution. It is one thing to promote dance, for example, as being an activity of self-expression and physical challenge for all children, both girls and boys. It is quite another to encourage involvement for boys by denigrating others, thereby continually recasting the underlying assumptions and implicit sexism of the "sissy myth": dance is for girls. If we commit ourselves to cultivating larger male participation,⁶ on the whole enriching the art form and its audience, then it would seem at least sensible to question the ways in which patriarchal Western society discourages young boys and men from participation. It would also be prudent for dance scholarship to widen its conception of the gay male dancer well beyond the realm of research in professional ballet (Hanna's research), and at the same time to bring into question larger issues concerning dance pedagogy and sexual orientation for adolescents and young adults in the field.

Masculinity and Homophobia

In *The Male Dancer*, Ramsay Burt (1995) gives a highly insightful and rigorously critical explication of the cultural, social, political, and economic history of masculine representation in dance, notably the twentieth-century construction of prejudice toward male dancers and the homophobia that surrounds gay and, for that matter, straight men in dance. Borrowing from the writings of Eve Sedgwick (1985) and Joseph Bristow (1988), Burt charts the development of homophobia as a means for males to rationalize their close attraction to one another. For example, although men might certainly enjoy watching other men dance, in order to do so, they must profess an absolute repulsion toward homosexual desire or attraction. Burt believes that straddling this important boundary for men—acceptable homosocial bonding and repressed homosexual attraction—is the crux for the heterosexual male spectator watching men dance. When extrapolated societally, I believe this notion is a key element in men's culturally prescribed anxiety toward gay men. It is instructive for dance educators to realize that similarly uncomfortable boundary crossings might reasonably apply for many fathers, sib-

lings, and friends attempting to watch our male students dance. Without facing these foundational aspects of culturally defined masculinity, as narrow and destructive as they may be, there is little hope for any real progress.

Recent research in men's studies finds much the same conclusion as Burt; homophobia is a defining element in contemporary, postmodern masculinity (Kimmel and Messner 2001). By illuminating the social and political contexts in which masculinity is constructed, we see more clearly the double-bind situation encountered not only by gay men in dance, but also by all males who pursue dance in any way. Clearly, the insightful and significant contribution Burt makes to reenvisioning the male dancer in dance history is profoundly important. While I want to acknowledge and affirm this contribution to the field, Burt's primary concerns remain centered on the professional dance sphere: international choreographers, their choreographies, and celebrated male dancers. The challenge for dance educators is to translate this important research into pedagogical issues and concerns in the "trenches" of the dance classroom, technique class, rehearsal studio, and school/university stage. More to the point, we might ask, knowing what we know now about the cultural construction of masculinity, the underpinnings of sexism, and our culture's dominant bias against gay people, what can we individually do in our daily dance practices—teaching, writing, choreographing—to ensure a clear affirmation of gay presence, contribution, and equality in the dance profession?

Speaking the *Unspoken*

In order to breathe life into these concerns, I speak from my lifetime of experience in the studio, primarily as a student and young performer. I tell my own particular story in order to generate a more thorough understanding of the larger stories our culture tells and the hushed silences those stories often produce. Speaking the *unspoken* means not only revealing our own personal narratives (as painful as they may be), but also reading them in conversation with the dominant stories, or metanarratives our culture tells us. These accounts are told inside these larger social narratives, not to persuade readers that mine is the story of all gay males in dance. Rather, I tell and re-read portions of my own experience as only one of many in a collective pursuing deeper understanding of what is necessary to affirm a diverse humanity and, more specifically, to initiate discussion about the ways in which dance education might importantly play a vital role in eradicating societal stigmatization and antigay bias.

From an analysis of four extensive autobiographical reflections compiled over a three-year period, several themes emerge as important evidence of internalized homophobia and heterocentric bias in dance education.⁷ Most prominent in these themes are notions of escape and isolation, secrecy and denial, and silence and abuse in dance training.

Escape and Isolation through Dance

As a child, I found the dance studio a seemingly safe place for my retreat—a magical, transformative locale for me and my teacher, Miss Janice. Saturday dance classes held at the old junior high school allowed me to evade the bullying that I endured daily in school and at home. In my jazz and tap classes I did not worry about being cornered in the boy's room, beaten on the playground, or harassed by my older brothers. Bigger than life, Miss Janice provided a weekly escape for me, a retreat from a beleaguered family environment, a brief interruption from the chiding and teasing at school, a respite where my confused sexual identity did not seem important. Because girls had always been my primary playmates, the dance studio environment was a very comfortable one.

Although I clearly enjoyed dance lessons, what figures most prominently throughout the narratives recalling my early dance study are notions of escape and avoidance. Unfortunately, the safe space made available for fleeing one's deepest fears and emotional pain may also create a space for deception and shame. Stinson importantly reminds us that although dance, like all of the arts, has the potential for human liberation and prophetic, visionary change, it "may instead serve as a drug to anesthetize us from feeling pain and ugliness. It may help us adjust to things we ought to change, ignore those things we ought to see. It may diminish our capacity to choose, limiting our options in our thinking as well as our movement. It may simply support the status quo" (1984, 17). Years later, I discovered that for Miss Janice teaching dance was likely a space for her own escape and avoidance, a fantasy world without an abusive alcoholic husband, far away from the dilapidated and crumbling studio, removed from a small, backward town in the Midwest.

For young gay males, the protection offered by the dance studio often carries the high cost of extreme isolation, for a number of reasons. First, young girls significantly outnumber their male counterparts in dance. Second, boys (gay and straight) suffering from the negative stigma associated with males in dance often go to great lengths to display traditional heterosexual markers, but social support networks and role models for gay youth in dance are rare. And last, leaving the studio means returning to the embarrassment, humiliation, and contempt of being labeled the pansy, fag, or queer.

Young boys' avoidance of their homosexual orientation is facilitated by countless devices perpetrated by a pervasively heterocentric culture, especially when one considers the overwhelmingly ridiculed status of sissy boys in American society. Eric Rofes (1995) notes that the widely accepted sissy/jock paradigm operates as a key element in male youth culture, whereby traditional masculinity is narrowly described in highly misogynistic ways. Boys in dance, unlike their male peers in athletics and team sports, are participating in an activity that already sheds social suspicion on their masculinity and heterosexuality. Alternatively, dance for young girls affirms their femininity and buttresses the image of heterosexual orientation. For gay male youth in dance, coping with this double-bind situation is an arduous dilemma.

While there is vast individual variation, young gay males tend to begin homosexual activity during early or middle adolescence; similar activity for lesbian females begins around age twenty (Anderson 1995, 18). Because adolescents are only beginning to possess the capacity for abstract thought or formal reasoning skills that will cognitively integrate their sexual experiences, dance educators must realize that young gay males in dance are extremely vulnerable to gendered criticism, homophobic attitudes, antigay slurs, and the absence of positive gay male role models. Young gay males may also develop internalized homophobia throughout childhood, in which self-hate, low self-esteem, destructive behavior, and further confusion characterize their underlying attitudes and conduct. Moreover, gay adolescents and teens often have far fewer resources available to them for understanding homosexuality and same-sex sexual harassment/abuse in a balanced and unbiased manner. Many gays, incapable of resisting persistent heterocentrism and homophobic prejudice, internalize negative attitudes about homosexuality and themselves. By constructing elaborate secrecy webs, employing heterosexual alibis, and fabricating heterosexual evidence, patterns of deception and self-destructive behavior emerge with social acceptance as the goal. Although dance as an institution may be more accepting of homosexual lifestyles, deeply internalized heterosexual bias nurtures public closetedness, not only for gay students and teachers, but also for their schools.

Secrecy and Denial in Gay Students' Lives

In high school I stopped taking dance lessons, not because I did not enjoy dancing, but because I could no longer bear the ridicule and contempt I experienced at school. In order to continue to dance, I joined the show choir and performed in musical theater productions. For males, singing was seen as a much more serious and legitimate endeavor than dance. Straight guys with popular girlfriends sang with big booming voices and won blue ribbons at statewide competitions. This would be my way to continue to dance without the harassment, chiding, and mockery I experienced as the "dance faggot."

I was always cast in the big dance roles in our yearly musical. Although I was excited to be dancing, being pegged as a male dancer (when you already think that you might be gay) means constantly reasserting a straight image with heterosexual evidence. Playing romantic leads opposite pretty young ingénues, I was featured in dance solos and heartthrob ballads for our touring group performances. However, the attraction to my male counterparts did not subside. Crooning a love song like "On the Street Where You Live" to fair lady Eliza Doolittle when in actuality I had an intense crush on the quarterback playing Henry Higgins only intensified my homosexual denial. My desire to study dance grew; however, the secrecy and shame I harbored also increased. My girlfriend served as my pivotal alibi as I continued the deception of rehearsing heterosexuality.

Male teens in dance are participating in an activity that immediately casts doubt on their masculinity and heterosexuality. Instead of dispelling suspicion, their dance talents invite speculation about their sexual orientation. In contrast, a female dancer is assumed to be heterosexual unless events repeatedly occur to create suspicion among her fellow dancers. Closeted gay male teens in dance (as well as their heterosexual counterparts) often feel the need for protective camouflage, as evidenced by a girlfriend, expressly masculine dress, and participation in other traditionally masculine activities. Unlike his female counterpart in dance, a male dancer is often perceived to be "guilty" (of being gay) until proven "innocent" (heterosexual). He is called upon to prove his heterosexuality actively over and over again. For gay male youth, mustering the courage to study dance is rarely accompanied by the bravery needed to openly identify as gay.

This kind of environment is stressful and often threatening for gay male students, particularly since they are vulnerable young people who are struggling to claim and affirm their sexual orientation in an often hostile atmosphere of homosexual denigration. Dance most likely, but unwittingly, recapitulates this heterocentric perspective as long as its significant gay male presence is publicly minimized, its heterosexual themes are repeatedly emphasized, and its educative potential for reducing homophobia is ignored.

Moreover, it is also necessary to acknowledge the overwhelming need to maintain secrecy about a significant issue like sexual orientation. To constantly conceal parts of one's being (or one's profession) so utterly basic to human existence, such as intimate feelings, personal relationships, and physical attractions, requires tremendous energy. The weight of this burden over a long period of time causes many other psychological and emotional hardships, although at the time recognition of these dilemmas goes unacknowledged (Besner and Spungin 1995, 95). Deceiving others ultimately leads to deceiving one's self, a deception that goes well beyond sexual orientation. What happens in this denial-entrenched environment infiltrates nearly all other segments of one's life, an existence predicated on hiding, and characterized by worry and torment.

Professional Silence and Abuse in Dance Training

At nineteen, I was accepted at a prestigious dance conservatory in the East. Strict technical training was emphasized with dress codes, weigh-ins, assigned places at the barre, and required faculty juries. My attention was immediately drawn to the beautiful men who danced with such effortless skill. Classes and rehearsals were filled with gay men who “cruised” all the males in the conservatory. I was highly intrigued by these men and their subculture, but at the same time I found this world very confusing. They were strong, accomplished dancers, performing repertory pieces with masculine bravura, partnering women with intensely male charisma, but offstage they were very effeminate, blatantly campy. They appeared to be playing the ultimate travesty. In almost reverse drag, these cavalier men onstage seemed much more natural as flaming, finger-snapping drag queens.

Training at the school was intensive: daily classes in ballet, modern, and jazz dance, supplemented with rehearsals and tutorials. As freshmen, we were the largest class of males ever accepted into the conservatory, and therefore we were scrutinized heavily not only by the faculty, but also by the older students. At first, I remember feeling that these men were just very friendly. Naively, I was flattered and thought they were actually interested in me. Over the next few months their secret sex game, which I had unknowingly played, was revealed. Halfway through my first semester, I discovered that the gay upperclassmen had a master grid for monitoring the progress of the underground game. All the first-year male’s names were written down on one side of a sheet of paper, while the juniors’ and seniors’ names were written across the top. Unbeknown to us, week by week the upperclassmen made their sexual way down the grid; if in any given week an upperclassman did not “make” his freshman, he was out of the game. The humiliation and shame I experienced in this secretive world of abuse greatly influenced what I perceived as the dance story for gay men, a not-so-funny double-life game of pretense, secrecy, contradiction, and manipulation. I deeply internalized this deceptive charade for many years thereafter.

Similarly exploitative relationships between faculty and students were also prevalent. Both male instructors with whom I studied rarely gave verbal corrections in class. Movement was rarely broken down into components. The rest of us learned, and I use the term loosely, by watching the most advanced dancers in the class. Physical corrections, usually directed at male dancers, were opportunities for both instructors to “feel up” their young male students. Getting a correction meant being felt, prodded, sized up by these gay male teachers in power. Tightly pressed behind me, pulling my pelvis back toward him, the disguised correction was given. He might ask, “Did you feel that?” or “Isn’t that better?” In front of the entire studio, terribly uncomfortable and embarrassed, I would give a slight nod, soft smile, and “Thank you.”

I learned quickly from my male peers that getting the attention of these men was crucial for success at the conservatory. Because I desperately wanted to dance, I knowingly played this game with the male faculty, unlike the “make your freshman” game, at least this time knowing the shallow and meaningless nature of the intimacy and sexual encounters that would follow.

Although it seemed that everyone in the school “knew,” no one ever questioned the exploitation and abuse happening in these young men’s lives. My own attempts to call attention to these matters fell on deaf ears. When I appealed to the associate director of the conservatory for guidance, he suggested I drop the matter and focus more on my technique and flexibility, reminding me of upcoming juries I would need to pass. Regrettably, I retreated back to the closet in silent shame. I later discovered that he, too, was one part of the faculty

using his authority and power to initiate and maintain sexual relationships with male students. Frustrated, confused and ashamed, I rationalized that if this is what being gay meant, I was not gay after all. Once again, I returned to rehearsing my heterosexual persona, the technique and exercises I knew all too well.

My experience is not an isolated case. In 1995, claims of flagrant sexual abuse and misconduct surfaced at the North Carolina School of the Arts (Hamilton 1998, 88). In a lawsuit filed by a former male student, two male faculty members from the school's dance conservatory were accused with sexual abuse of a minor, and that such misconduct was common knowledge to school officials. Although graduates of the school as well as current students and some teachers knew of this abuse over nearly a ten-year period, it went unacknowledged. It would be presumptuous to attempt to explain the alleged improprieties of these otherwise revered teachers; however, I do believe that the dance profession's silence surrounding sexual abuse is not only deeply troubling, but also speaks to the unwritten pact the profession maintains for the *unspoken*. Although the profession rightfully shook its collective head about the abusive environment at NCSA, it just as quickly turned its head away, as it has done for many years.

Dwelling on this particular incident only energizes a misguided mythology that sexual abuse is an isolated, one-time event.⁸ Instead, we should rigorously question the motivation and perpetuation of the secrecy that allows this kind of abuse to be perpetrated upon youth in dance education. For dance educators, three grave dangers emerge: (1) male students rarely, if ever, come forward about sexual harassment and abuse; (2) sexual abuse by male dance faculty is often trivialized or ignored; and (3) within the profession's muted discourse, sexual abuse and homosexual orientation are wrongheadedly equated with one another.

Because the field often suppresses candid and forthright discussion of gay issues in dance education, it avoids addressing the sexual harassment and abuse that sometimes occurs (and I believe is unintentionally nurtured) within this environment. Hamilton (1998, 92) reports that while there are far fewer males in dance overall, it is male students who are three times as likely to experience sexual harassment in dance, and that perpetrators of sexual harassment are more than seven times as likely to be male. In addition, male dancers in their teens are propositioned for sex by their dance teachers, directors, choreographers, and fellow dance students at a rate of three to one, when compared to female dancers, with the gender of the solicitor being male nearly seventy percent of the time (Hamilton 1998, 92).

Given very little recognition, these important findings seem to have had minimal pedagogical impact on dance education. These kinds of disconcerting, if not incriminating, statistics certainly exacerbate the continued absence of serious discussion. When faced honestly, gay issues should compel dance educators to speak more openly and candidly about the "truth" of the matter in its entirety. Gay men have been and continue to be an important part of the dance landscape. As a profession, we can counter society's negative message about gays only by answering it directly, not by avoiding it. Taking a critical stance about sexual harassment and abuse in the field should not require that we deny the important presence and significant contribution of gay men to dance education. However, all too frequently this has been the case. What I find even more troubling is the way in which the profession's silence and lack of response wrongly serves to equate homosexual orientation with sexual harassment and abuse, thereby reproducing negative attitudes and stereotypes about gays. Concealing gay male presence and participation in the field only results in further societal speculation and suspicion, all the while breeding further homophobic attitudes and prejudice.

Youth and Dehumanizing Pedagogies

From a larger perspective, the lack of serious discourse about homosexuality is equally illustrative of the ways in which the dance profession has historically discounted its sometimes rigid and insensitive training, inhumane treatment of dancers, idealization and mandate of particular body types, the rampant eating disorders that develop from such body idealizations, excessive drug use by dancers, and sexual harassment and abuse suffered by dancers from those in positions of authority (Buckroyd 2000; Hamilton 1998). Whether the particulars specifically concern verbal harassment, sexual abuse, eating disorders, or inhumane teaching approaches, the larger concerns—without diminishing any of these palpable dilemmas—focus on the manner in which these issues profoundly compromise the human dignity of dancers. I believe the overarching problem centers on the dehumanizing effects of some traditional dance pedagogies and the ways in which ignoring these issues cultivates further dehumanization in dance education.

Let me also suggest that the legacy the field reproduces pedagogically, intentional or not, fuels the continuation of this precarious cycle. Unless we diligently critique the ways in which we were taught, trained, and treated, we frequently manufacture exact pedagogical replicas. Moreover, from a very early age, students are the unwitting beneficiaries of this process. The abusive exploitation of the students' "make your freshmen" game is certainly a shining example of harmful pedagogical transmission and replication. The dangerous nature of this cycle makes education for children, youth, and young adults essential.

Seldom receiving the kind of attention that adequately prepares dance educators to confront these critical issues, the profession frequently waits until a crisis develops in our programs or schools, and then we stumble, struggle, and fumble through territory we often know little about, for which we have no preparation and, worse, lack the technical skills to be responsive. It is also important to realize that children, teens, and young adults comprise the vast majority of the population engaged in dance study. To complicate matters, we are afraid to tackle the subject of children forcefully because we are so afraid of the associations and assumptions our culture makes regarding homosexuality. At the same time, the fear of drawing this charge deters teachers, administrators, and parents for that matter from speaking candidly about these deeply profound issues. Unfortunately, these fears separate us from the often confused and fragile young people who most need our mentoring and support. To discuss gay and lesbian issues openly requires that all people, not only gays, critically probe their own attitudes and assumptions about homo/heterosexuality, clearly a difficult and agonizing task for many. However, without such forthright discussion as well as the resolve to do it, we unwittingly foster further misunderstanding and discrimination, not only in our schools and programs, but also in the highly problematic world in which we find ourselves.

Speaking openly about sexual orientation, especially with children and adolescents, is virtually proscribed in the heterocentric culture in which we find ourselves, although research shows that children and adolescents have far less difficulty accepting sexual difference than might be supposed (Chasnoff and Cohen 1996). Many parents, teachers, and administrators are frequently uncomfortable even in the limited discussions our culture currently presents. However, as Burt reminds us, "Not talking about something doesn't make it go away, and may insidiously make it take on greater significance than it really deserves" (1995, 29). If wary, we might also gain inspiration from contemplating our ethical obligations to our gay and lesbian dancers as well as our fellow gay and lesbian choreographers and faculty colleagues. Other

disciplines in the social sciences, such as education,⁹ serve as fine examples of including gay and lesbian issues in teaching, as do those in the humanities, and more recently even physical education and sports.¹⁰

Possibilities in Dance Education

As I have noted, this project does not attempt to speak for all gay males in dance, but rather I offer these reflections as heuristic guideposts in the hope of initiating an imaginative, critical, and meaningful discourse for exhuming the *unspoken*. Let me also make clear that this work emerges from an intimate conduit, a connection to these concerns that is as much a personal journey (search) as it is a professional contribution (research). Although each dance educator's professional environment is unique, with its own set of opportunities and constraints, there are some initial suggestions that I offer in this arduous yet compelling task. It is particularly important to understand the necessity of age-appropriate approaches to sexual orientation and alternative lifestyles.¹¹ I briefly conclude by presenting them here for further contemplation and informed action in our own locales and individual contexts. Some of these suggestions are adapted from the work of Pat Griffin (1995), which addresses homophobia in athletics and the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes.

Possibilities in the Studio and Classroom

Dance educators can inventory their own heterosexist beliefs, gender assumptions, and taken-for-granted actions that unintentionally create an environment of shame, humiliation, or embarrassment for gay and lesbian dancers in the studio and classroom. I encourage teachers to understand more fully their authority and power as positive role models for dancers, and the respect teachers inherently garner from their students. It is important to contemplate seriously the fact that what we do not say is just as important as what we do. For gay, lesbian, and bisexual dance educators, try to be as open and candid as you safely can about who you are. All youth need to know gay adults who are leading satisfying, productive, and meaningful lives. Heterosexual dance educators can give unwavering support to their gay and lesbian dance colleagues by speaking out against antigay attitudes, actions, and policies. Dance educators can also:

- Identify teaching methods that reinforce narrow definitions of femininity and masculinity. Understand that young gay and lesbian students are particularly vulnerable to gendered criticism.
- Refrain from assuming that all dancers are heterosexual. Some probably are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Others may be questioning their sexual identity.
- Explore and identify simple yet inclusive ways to incorporate gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues in the classroom/studio in a balanced and unbiased manner. For example, invite a guest artist, former dancer, or current faculty member who is gay or lesbian to teach a master class, and to speak about gay and lesbian issues for the students.
- Be available and prepared to talk with dancers who are questioning their sexual orientation or expressing homophobic beliefs. Many closeted gays use

homophobic slurs and antigay epithets to buttress an outwardly heterosexual persona.

- Identify and readily make available pertinent resources for students who need them, such as the Gay Straight Alliances (GSA), an extension of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, www.glsen.org). Display in a place of visual prominence the Pink Triangle, universally associated with safe zones for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

Possibilities Beyond the Studio

Dance educators can encourage administrators to (1) establish nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies that include sexual orientation, and (2) ensure that all teachers, parents, and dancers understand what actions are unacceptable, and what procedures are to be followed when the policies are violated. Dance administrators can provide dance teachers and staff with sexual harassment/abuse education focusing on asymmetrical power relationships between faculty and students. School directors and department heads can openly support gay and lesbian faculty/staff by nurturing an environment that is sensitive, supportive, and respectful of sexual orientation, alternative lifestyles, and family structures.

While it may appear difficult to include parents in these kinds of strategies, addressing their concerns and supporting their participation are equally important. At the outset, dance educators can encourage parents to: (1) know their child's private dance school, public school dance program, or university department—its teachers and administrators, and (2) to discuss with their children, in an age-appropriate fashion, what constitutes sexual harassment and abuse. Dance educators can also facilitate and nurture openly candid dialogue between parents and children about dance teachers, classmates, dance classes, and the child's progress in dance. Dance teachers can also help parents to:

- Challenge their own prejudices and biases about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and evaluate how they condone or reaffirm antigay prejudice in their children. Understand that a dance teacher's sexual orientation does not determine his or her ability to be an effective and respected professional.
- Understand that for males, there is a great deal of social stigmatization for those who study dance. Explore the ways in which they support or discourage their child's dance training.
- Consider the very real possibility (given statistics in dance) that their son might be gay or bisexual, and if not, that their son most likely will experience the same discrimination and prejudice regardless of his sexual orientation.
- Contemplate the arduous struggle their child suffers and endures as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person. Show sensitivity and support, regardless of their personal belief system, if their son or daughter comes out to them as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Remember that sexual orientation is a leading and contributing factor to teen depression and suicide.

- Contact a local chapter of Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG www.pflag.org) if necessary for information and support.

While these issues are certainly not limited to the realm of dance education, but are much larger in scope, they should compel us to question the pedagogical choices we make, the [in]actions we take or avoid in our departments, schools, and research, and the world we create for our students and ourselves.

Notes

1. Hamilton (1998) first reported her survey findings regarding dance and homosexual males in *Advice for Dancers: Emotional Counsel and Practical Strategies* (85–86). This research informed her courageous article, “Coming Out in Dance: Paths to Understanding,” published in *Dance Magazine*, November 1999.
2. See Desmond’s (2001) edited volume for interdisciplinary crossings in writing about dance history, shifting sexualities, and the dancing body.
3. In this paper I focus on gay men and male youth in dance. For a selection of writings on lesbianism and dance, see Adair (1992); Bramley (1994); Briginshaw (1998, 1999); Leask (1998); and Manning (1998).
4. Unfortunately, many gay people, unable to escape the pervasive nature of heterocentrism and homophobic prejudice, internalize negative feelings about homosexuality and themselves (Lehne, 1976; Margolies, Becker, and Jackson-Brewer, 1987). Because homophobia and anti-gay prejudice emerge from a complex heterosexist pattern of social, political, religious, familial, economic, and interpersonal value systems, gay men and lesbians, by virtue of this acculturation, may unwittingly contribute to ongoing homophobia, heterocentric bias, and their various and diverse reproductions.
5. At the center of heterosexist prejudice is the organizing belief that heterosexuality is the *normative* form of human sexual relations. Thus, the standard measurement used to evaluate and judge all other sexual orientations is defined as heterocentrism.
6. I am not suggesting that the dance profession has set as its task the goal of encouraging larger involvement by young boys and men. Nor do I predict that increased male involvement would generate a significant rise in participation by heterosexual men. I use this debate to reveal the countless ways in which gay male presence is denied, and gay contribution overlooked. See Crawford (1994).
7. The methodological approach to autobiographical narrative I employ is rooted in traditions of interpretive inquiry, feminist theory, and reflective practice. For further discussion, see Risner (2002).
8. When dissected more thoroughly, we know that many issues likely contribute to the complexity and continuation of sexual harassment and abuse in educational realms and in dance education specifically: asymmetrical power relationships between teachers and students; feelings of guilt and shame that develop for abused persons; the unquestioned potency and example set by those in authority; and the insidious cycle of abused turned abuser. However, we rarely discuss these complicated issues candidly in dance education or, for that matter, in a pedagogically sincere manner.

9. There is a vast literature in education, a few important titles of which includes: *Understanding Homosexuality, Changing Schools* by Arthur Lipkin (1999); *Queer Theory in Education* by William Pinar (1998); *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies that Work* by Sears and Williams (1997), and *Thinking Queer* by Talburt and Steinberg (2000).
10. Readers might be particularly interested in the following from the discipline of physical education: "Living in Two Worlds: Lesbian Physical Educators" by Harbeck and Woods in *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet* by Karen Harbeck (1992); *One Teacher in 10: Gay & Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories* by Kevin Jennings (1994); "Homophobia in Sport" by Griffin in *The Gay Teen* by Gerald Unks (1995). For additional popular titles of interest, see *Jocks: True Stories of America's Gay Male Athletes*, edited by Dan Woog and Kevin Jennings (1998); *Lesbians and Gays and Sports*, edited by Perry Young and Martin Duberman (1994); *Sportsdykes: Stories From On and Off the Field* by Susan Fox Rogers (1995).
11. See, for example, the short documentary film (available in video format), *It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in Schools* (Chasnoff and Cohen, 1996), for guidance on age-appropriate approaches for gay and lesbian issues in education.

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