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Review

Exploring the complexities of black male identities in South African theatre dance

Maxwell Xolani Rani

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The perception of professional black male dancers in black communities in South Africa is that of a homosexual man. However, little if any systematic research has investigated the validity of this stereotype, much less the reasons why male sexual orientation would be associated with interest in dance. Many male dance figures pursuing dance as a career in Cape Town, South Africa have often been faced with difficult questions and stigmas. In many dance societies in Cape Town, male dancers are classified as homosexual - black males who decide to pursue a dance career are not only often questioned about their sexual preference, but also carry the negative baggage and stereotypes that have been historically predetermined for them given their "black physique". In this paper the author analyzed the concept of masculinity in terms of Western ideologies embedded in this definition and draw attention to the limited applicability of such a definition to black South African dancers in Cape Town. The paper interrogates the historical stereotypes that have been deeply entrenched on the black male dancer's physique and the manner in which these stereotypes continue to be prevalent. It then investigates the attitudes to black male dancers in different regions that share similar contexts. Towards the end, article looks at overall similarities that male dancers face irrespective of racial factors. In this paper it is argued that the same Eurocentric standards in relation to homosexuality held for white dancers should not be held for black South African male dancers, as racial differences vastly impact the understanding and perception of these two different racial groups.

Key words: Masculinity, dance, homosexuality, stereotype and black male physique.

INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by the many activities and debates that have taken place around my experiences on my dance journey. The author writes this paper based on personal events that exhaust him just to think about. When he studied his Masters dissertation, he came

across both stereotypical and homophobic behaviour in Nyanga Township where he lived. He was born in Nyanga. Since the late 1980s he have witnessed the fusion of various ethnic backgrounds Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Venda, Tswana and Coloured.

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He has experienced firsthand the effects of assimilation into the modern urban society, and seen just how the forms of dances have gradually changed and been perceived. He grew up in Nyanga Township at the “Old Location” where my career as a dancer began. As a teenager he began to learn traditional dances. He started in Gugulethu Township learning the *Zingili* dance style, a typical Zulu style. His dance teacher Mr Douglas was originally from KwaZulu Natal in Durban. It was then that his love for dance was instilled and passion drove him to love it even more. They rehearsed from Monday to Thursday and performed on the weekends, rehearsals were held in community halls and School halls at times. Performances varied from corporate to social events and sometimes political events as well. Nyanga was the place he danced in for a large part of his childhood and until he became an adult he was involved in sharing performance space with other community dance groups from Nyanga such as *Siyakhala*, *Mabutho*, *Izilo Zakwantu* and *Siyakha*. He was and is still involved with many dance groups in Nyanga.

An interesting change occurred when Professor David Poole (then Director of the CAPAB Ballet Company and UCT Ballet School), and Val Steyn (then Director of Pace Dance Company) took an interest in teaching us. Mr Poole with whom he had a personal relationship (his mother worked in his house), introduced a dance training programme. We began to learn ballet and contemporary dance every Tuesdays and Thursdays. Coming from a traditional dance background to the European styles made us curious in many respects. It was comical at first because they laughed at the “feminine” quality presented by Mr Poole when he demonstrated his movements but they began to be fond of it because their bodies changed. The problem that they had was the jockstrap and tights that were revealing their private parts. That did not sit well with most of them and that took major negotiations. It was uncomfortable to wear them and they ended up settling for sport tight shorts.

They became physically flexible and added a different strength to our muscle tonality from that which we gained in African traditional dancing. They were introduced to different dance fraternities and rubbed shoulders with different races in Cape Town. The interesting observation came when we began to showcase our work choreographed by Ms Steyn and Mr Poole. The shows took place in Zolani Community Centre with an invited audience of close friend, family members, community and extended traditional dance fraternities. When They performed traditional dances everybody would be clapping and shouting with joy and eyes would glitter from excitement due to familiarity, but when the contemporary choreography began, the atmosphere changed. The audience became confused, questioning and curious about the costume, quality of dancing and why we looked like “women” when we dance. To some

extent other audience members would giggle and laugh out loud but we did not care because we loved what we were doing. That we loved what we were doing gave an interesting slant to people of the community. Most people had problems with the interdisciplinary in dance that we were involved with due to the fact that it looked out of place. In a way it was not pleasant to experience because they questioned our manhood and this was followed by “labels. We were called “*Amatalasi*” meaning man who sleeps with other man (Intensely derogative word). That was a huge shock as they knew there is no such thing and family members were not making it easy at all. The worse part for them is when some family members discovered that Mr Poole was a *talasi* (homosexual) that undermined our dance group. *Talasi* is a derogative word that is rude and undermining of human rights. Most of us did not care as we were dancing our hearts out, enjoying the moment and the oportunities that were presented to us. By the mid 1990s they grew in the dance industry and turned semi-professional. That was because of the training and the stories we were creating mixing dance disciplines (Contemporary, Ballet and African) and using our bodies as tools to explore and create new meaning to dance in the Townships. That still came with a price of being labelled, stereotyped and belittled. The ten of us male dancers were close friends and our families were part of what we did. They are now mature artists and not “*talasi*” or homosexuals, but it disturbs the author when he is labelled with such passion and anger. Travelling around the world (Americas, England, France, Canada and Jamaica), and becoming a global citizen, to discover such similar stereotypes encouraged him to write this article and attempt to find both commonalities and differences in order to create a debate amongst artists, extended dance fraternities and scholars. The idea is to share this scholarly information in order to combat such stereotypes and understand what transpires in Cape Town in most black townships.

A dance friend, who preferred not to be named, says that:

If you say I am going to dance, I am a dancer; people will begin to laugh at you because they do not know what you are informed of concerning dance. Dancers these days are compared with moffies/ sissies (derogative term for homosexuals) (Rani, 2013: p134).

The homosexual stereotype that continues to pursue many male dancers in South Africa is prevalent throughout the world. Despite considerable research into this area (Bailey and Oberschneider, 1997; Fourie, 2011; Hanna, 1987; Jackson, 2011; Risner, 2011), to name just a few, there has been very little investigation into the specific case of Black male dancers in South Africa. This stereotype poses a problem in that it acts as a deterrent for many black males who may be interested in dance,

but do not want to be associated with the typecast. In March 2009; a national rugby coach of Amabokoboko (SA National team) Mr Peter De Villiers, criticised the team's poor performance by saying that "So, guys who cannot take it, make your decision. Why don't we go to the nearest ballet shop, get some tutus, get a great dancing show going, not tackling...and all enjoy it" (Serrao, 2009: p1 in Fourie, 2011: p17). Male dancers are often presumed homosexual until "proven innocent". The perpetuation of this stereotype is aided, inadvertently, by certain gender breaking productions, for example those written by South African choreographers Gregory Maqoma¹ (*Thandi*, 2002)², and Alfred Hinkel³ for Jazzart Theatre (*Bolero*, 1990)⁴. Both choreographers are striving to make a difference by trying to fight prejudice and stereotypes in South Africa. Putting men in women's dance roles and costumes however, often results in the audience perceiving the men as overly emotional in comparison to straight men, disinterested in sports and therefore homosexual. This stereotype poses problems for black men interested in dance in Cape Town; who do not want to be assumed as homosexual. It is important to mention that there is no scholarly discourse on this subject within a South African context in the black townships. I have therefore drawn on my experiences as dance teacher, choreographer and dance scholar as well as observations whilst travelling. Men and women differ when it comes to the pathways of their dance careers in Cape Town; women usually begin dancing at a young age, and are goal oriented immediately, while men usually begin dance in their mid to late teens, and often pursue other performance avenues not specific to only dance.

¹. An internationally renowned dancer, choreographer, director and scriptwriter. He started his dance training in 1990 at Moving into Dance in Johannesburg While studying under the direction of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker at

². Miss Thandi made its debut at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 1998 in an acclaimed cross-culture drag show. At the opening night of the Afro vibes Festival, Maqoma's Vuyani Dance Theatre project did Rhythm Blues at the Holland Dance Festival in The Hague and the work was dedicated to Matinyane (Miss Thandi). (www.matinyanafund.org.za/review34.htm)

³. Mr Hinkel is an influential artist in South Africa; he has trained; choreographed and directed lots of national and international works. He is one of the pioneers in African contemporary works in Cape Town; South Africa. He has been the artistic director for Jazzart for more than 15 years till returning back home in Nababeep, which is a place outside of Springbok. (tevamoves.weebly.com/.../Alfred-Hinkel-a-leading-visionary-in-sa-dance.htm...)

⁴. A work that has fairly traced a political path, *Bolero* has continually transformed through the process of being reworked on each of the several occasions that it has been staged. The original version was about, "overcoming prejudice", and focused specifically on the Immortality Act-arguably the most controversial of the legislative acts of the South African Apartheid government which attempted to forbid intermixing of couples of different races. (www.iol.co.za/capetimes/sensuous-new-twist-for-bolero-1.1605995)

What is masculinity?

Before further progress it is extremely important to engage with definitions of what is considered masculine. According to Bailey and Oberschneider (1997) "The professional male dancer is homosexual, however little if any systematic research has investigated the validity of this stereotype". In researching the dance world, I find that male dancers face unique challenges, and must battle different stereotypes associated with their career field. Risner (2002) comments in *Rehearsing Masculinity*, that 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. This under-researched stereotype poses a problem for potential black male dancers, and detracts from the human focus of dance placing the focus solely upon gender. Judith (Jack) Halberstam, a professor of English and Director of the Center for Feminist Research at University of Southern California, focuses her writing on tomboys, female masculinity and queer and gender theories. She explains that:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into a family; masculinity represents the power inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege. But, obviously, many other lines of identification traverse the terrain of masculinity, dividing its power into complicated differentials of class, race, sexuality and gender (1994, p3).

It is imperative to note how "masculinity is a collective gender identity and not a natural attribute, it is socially constructed and fluid" (Morrell, 1998, p. 607). Unquestionably, masculinity is a socially constructed concept that is not stagnant, "there is no single universal masculinity but many masculinities. There are not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships" (Morrell, p. 607). This concept of masculinity is applicable when discussing the way in which black male dancers are perceived in Cape Town. A male dancer's identity is constantly evolving regardless as to how he defines his sexual orientation. Each individual male dancer has to come to terms with what masculinity means. Most importantly in the context of this paper, "class and race factors are constitutive of the form that masculinity takes. This means that in any society there are many masculinities, each with a characteristic shape and set of features" and those "contours of these masculinities change over time, being affected by

changes elsewhere in society” (Morrell, p. 607). Morrell coins the term “hegemonic masculinity” which he describes as the dominant form of masculinity in society (Morrell, p. 608). He further explains that this dominant and widely accepted notion:

[...] presents its own version of masculinity, of how men should behave and how putative ‘real men’ do behave, as the cultural ideal. The concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a way of explaining that though a number of masculinities coexist, a particular version of masculinity holds sway, bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own (608).

Evidently, there is a sort of unwritten code of how men are expected to behave and act in specific spaces. Black male dance figures or professionals that pursue dance in Cape Town, at some point in their dance career irrespective of their sexual orientation, have to combat the dominant and accepted notion of hegemonic masculinity. Not surprisingly, this concept is largely “overwhelmingly the masculinity of white, ruling class men” (Morrell, 1998, p. 608). In Cape Town; in Nyanga⁵ township⁶ African dance is popular and taught in the community halls as an extramural activity meaning additional to your job or organizational usual work. There are several African dance groups that practice at their own designated venues based on their choices and desires. The African dance I refer to is social traditional dance⁷ and the popular teachings that are based on warrior dance forms are seen as a rite of passage to adulthood because they taught boys the “qualities of manhood”, which include self-mastery, sexual virility and military courage. Like warfare, “war dance was considered to be a powerful form of bodily motion that involves mental endurance, muscular strength, and a keen manipulation of gravity and momentum” (Hanna, 1976, p. 111). African dance in Nyanga was and mostly still is approached in a more heterosexual manner due to the perceived power of a male warrior. The war dance I refer to is Zulu warrior war dance style which is popular amongst black South African townships. These war dances are based on mock combat, usually in reference to tribal warrior societies were such dances were

performed as a ritual connected with endemic warfare. There is an evoking ferocity in preparation for battle or showing off skill in a more stylized manner.

Male homosexuality within dance: a western perspective

The question explored by Hanna in her analysis of homosexuality within dance is predicated on Western ideals and perceptions. She begins her essay by asking: “why do women and gay men outnumber other groups in Western theatre (‘high culture’) dance?” (Hanna, 1987, p. 1). It is imperative to mention the fact that Hanna’s essay is relevant to the current times and context of this paper despite the fact that it was written in 1987.

Hanna comments that most Western theatre typically attracts and caters to white people, and white males dancers make up a large percentage of the professional dancers. She further indicates that dance “interweaves the ramifications of dancers, choreographers, and producers...in a context of the cultural history of women’s and gays’ liberation movements and reactions to them” (Hanna, 1987, p. 1). This is because people of colour have typically not been included in these movements and have held different ideologies regarding gay liberation movements in a sense that their black voice mostly echoes in white suburbs but not in the black populated townships. In the case of Africa, most countries have not dealt with the same gay liberation movements fully; therefore it becomes altogether more difficult to make such cross-cutting generalisations on the international level. According to 76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal, in Algeria, Botswana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, homosexuality is not accepted. As a result of these limitations, when interrogating homosexuality within black male dancers one has to be cautious in applying the same research used for white males in to men of colour particularly in Cape Town.

Hanna then provides historical background on the role that male figures have played in dance. The historical background dates from Louis XIV and his royal council till the development of his professional theatrical genre (Hanna, 1987). Therefore, once again, when thinking about homosexuality and the male figure in an historical context, one must bear in mind the racial dynamics. Nonetheless, her analysis does shed light on the historical power that men held within dance theatre. This was the case because “well-bred women did not appear on the public stage, men danced women’s roles, often in travesty” and “men’s dress was not so physically confining; they could be more virtuosic and thus gain respect for their individual dancing” (Hanna, 1987. p. 24);

⁵. “The name Nyanga originated from the Xhosa word *Nyanga*, which means the ‘moon’. It is the second largest township, or black urbanised area, in the Western Cape province of South Africa. It was established in 1960” (Rani, 2011: 52).

⁶. “Township is the allure of a better lifestyle often romanticized, as living conditions are very poor: frequently consists of structures improvised from old pieces of iron, sacking, wooden poles, mud and anything else that comes to hand” (Louw, 2004, p. 110).

⁷. “Social traditional dance generally explicitly imply a consistency that has its own boundaries and parameters. Implied in the definition of social tradition are the requisite confines of the rules and norms of the society that the art form manifests” (Welsh-Asante 1996: 178).

virtuosic in regard to skill in a field of dance technique and appreciation for its art. It is interesting to consider the fact that given women's restrictions in public spaces, any gender ambivalent attire that the male chose to wear was accepted. However, the demise of male supremacy within dance occurred in Europe in the 1830s when Marie Taglioni established significant elements for ballet (Hanna, 1987, p. 26). Male figures would no longer go without being judged for dressing in clothing attire considered feminine.

BLACK MALE DANCER PHYSIQUE: AN OBJECT OF WHITE DESIRABILITY?

There have been other persistent misconceptions around the notion of black masculinity. According to Jackson, it is evident that pervasive ideologies in the Western World have been perpetuated which promote the notion that black men are inherently violent, savage, oversexed immoral beings... the black male's physique streamed into Western consciousness as a desirable, yet dangerous exotic being [and Inevitably, such] construct [s] of black male bestiality and primitivism fostered stereotypes regarding black male sexual prowess (Jackson, 2011, p. 75).

Similarly, the perception of the black South African male body in Cape Town in relation to the question of homosexuality in dance has been preloaded with pre-existing stereotypes that establish misconceptions of the black male dancer. The portrayal of black bodies as "animalistic" is unquestionably extremely problematic and appears to indicate the white person's unjustifiable choice to contain and control other bodies. This then leads to a superior/inferior dynamic that persists. The white gaze continues to control the black male bodies every time black male bodies are classified as exotic particularly in the touristic entertainment sectors. Sharon Friedman⁸ explains that "the tourist entertainment sector is well funded in South Africa based on the popular "window to Africa" which encourages the traditional or indigenous dances that are based on the likes of Umoja and African Footprint to be the face of Africa particular South African spectacle in concert theatre (Friedman, 2010, p. 7). The pervasive effects of these stereotypes are evident in performances today. For instance,

[...] representations of black men in concert dance, and the media in general, has been instilled negatively with a series of racist mythical ideologies. Built upon flamboyant

exaggeration, minstrel stereotypes added a theatrical distance between white audiences and black male performers (Jackson, 2011, p. 77).

Consequently such perceptions eventually contribute to the objectification and exploitation of most black male dancers in Cape Town. As Paris⁹ concludes, the audience must remember that the manner in which they understand the black male body in a performance has been conditioned by years of social and cultural conditioning that trace back to slavery and have continued to this present day (Paris, 2011, p. 20).

Perceptions of homosexuality and dance are dependent on regional context

Any discussion of homosexuality within dance in Cape Town needs to make a distinction between the type of dance being discussed as well as the region in which the dance is taking place. As has been noted above, the perception of masculinity in dance varies when discussing non-Western dance and different, non-white racial groups. Consider one significant difference between different types of dance, and in this particular case within South Africa: In Cape Town, most black men participate freely in South African dance cultures without being ostracized by society. It is a fact reflective of the sociocultural context within which dance is situated; However, within the townships, how and why one is dancing has to be carefully monitored. The manner in which township dwellers perceive one of their own performing is often informed by strict notions of how men behave. Unquestionably, the sociocultural context of the dance is important and can determine how society responds to the male dancer. Moreover, the fact that male figures are "ostracized" or in other words, can be categorised as homosexual for pursuing dance, is indicative of how such categorisations have the potential to further complicate societal understanding of dance. There are social traditional black dancers that are also professionals in their own right. There are South African contemporary black dancers and black ballet professional dancers and in these areas, there is a perception held by the social traditional dancers that there are a large number of homosexuals. It is this attitude that I experienced when pursuing my studies in the field in Nyanga Township.(2013). There are still traces of homophobia in Cape Town especially in the townships. It is worse if you are believed to be involved with a dance style that requires tights as a dancing dress code. Neo

⁸. Sharon Friedman is a freelance dance editor and writer and a mentor to most scholars and dance practitioners in South Africa. She is editor and a co-author of Post-Apartheid Dance many bodies many voices many stories (2012) as well as of many dance articles and conference papers.

⁹. Carl Paris holds a Ph.D in Dance Theory and Cultural studies (Temple University) and a Master's Degree in Dance Education (NYU). He has published several articles in leading dance and theatre journals and presented papers at ADG, CORD and NDEO conferences.

Maditla and Nontando Mposo 'Like walking in a war zone' IOL News explains that:

[...] Lesbians in townships around Cape Town say they fear for their lives following a spate of violent attacks. In Khayelitsha township they think that we want to take their clothes and girlfriends. There are endless and countless killings in black Cape Town townships concerning homosexuals and lesbians in Nyanga and Guguletu townships as well. (www.iol.co.za/news/-crimes-courts/like-walking-in-a-war-zone-1.1332282).

BLACK HOMOSEXUALITY, MASCULINITY, AND DANCE IN JAMAICA AND UNITED STATES

Examples from other contexts are of interest because this will verify that we are not alone with such problems. According to Pinnock,¹⁰ in Jamaica "popular culture is famous for its vitriolic anti-homosexuality. Its rigidly patriarchal traditions do not allow for easy room within which to navigate readings of hetero-normative masculine sexual identity as being complicitous with homosexuality" (Pinnock, 2007, p. 61). Pinnock then explains how this leads to the manner in which "the homosexual male... alien identity is thus constructed in a space where the homosexual 'being' is almost, by necessity, a product quite apart from his sexuality" (Pinnock, 2007, p. 61). Evidently, societal norms in Jamaica, a predominantly black country, deem it unacceptable for the black male to be homosexual. In addition, that means most of the people do not tolerate homosexuality and are homophobic in Kingston- Jamaica.

In the case of the United States, most black male dancers endured similar stigmas to those faced by black dancers internationally. Black modern dance companies that emerged in the 1960s (Alvin Ailey and others) empowered the black male through the broader exposure of 'African American culture' and, thus, privileged greater possibilities to articulate and witness black masculinity within the context of the theatre and the dance realms (Paris, 2010). A black dancer in the modern dance realm admits that, as a black man on stage, being watched primarily by white spectators made him feel like "a special black...like a commodity, uniquely obliged to impose masculine control" (Paris, 2011, p. 25). Reacting to internal conflicts about his identity and sexuality, the dancer's response to his decision to pursue a confrontational style was that he chose to "participate in his own fetishisation in order to then subvert and transcend it" (Paris, 2011, p. 25). Moreover he declares

that "being described as a 'black artist' seemed an attempt to diminish my individuality and reduce the possibilities of what I was trying to express" (Paris, 2011, p. 22). It becomes clear that even within Western theatre, a black male that identifies as homosexual can be presented on stage in a versatile manner. He can either be perceived as a homosexual or the strong brute male figure discussed earlier. For instance, this same male dancer can be "identified as a gay black male" or can "wear a voluminous white tutu and intertwines hyper-masculine hip-hop moves with modern- dance and exaggerated ballet moves" (Paris, 2011, p. 21). In his performances "one moment, he is hyper-gay, and in the text, he is hyper-thug" (Paris, 2011, p. 22). One might argue or question the fact that who says that there are no gay thugs either? This interplay of choosing between identities is extremely problematic. The black male figure seems to have to choose which identity he chooses to embody, and cannot merely choose to be a dancer. The black male figure's decision is weighed down by stereotypes and historical perceptions of what society has established

Despite racial differences, similarities experienced amongst male dancers

Although there are vast differences that exist between the ways in which black and white male dancers identify , there are similarities regarding the major challenges that males who identify as homosexual experience within dance.

[...]in spite of efforts to establish the respectability of a male dance career, problems remain. Ballet student, teacher and anthropologist O'Connor (1982) observed that in New York City, dance capital of the world, male dancers still feel threatened to find their occupation choice considered deviant in mainstream America. Interestingly enough O'Connor's observation is still relevant presently in modern times of South Africa. Moreover, he found the male sphere of ballet to be as homophobic as other career domains. Thus, there are several approaches to the problem in addition to the Jaques d' Amboise's strategy to upgrade the status of male dancers and destigmatize the profession. Strategy such as to bring the dance to children, including young boys, and to a wider audience in general, continue to be admirable, these efforts and their rhetoric have often obfuscated larger social issues but destigmatization and respectability when read closely, meant minimizing the homosexual population and its profound contribution to dance. Hanna expands by saying that "A male dancer (straight and gay alike- homosexual) might handle the issue with non dancers by first acknowledging the stereotypical image and the establishing of himself as an exception" (Hanna, 1987, p. 41).

¹⁰. Augustinho MN Pinnock is a Journalist, Broadcaster and a Public Relations practitioner. He is a media and Communications teacher, as well as a published author on culture and identity issues in Jamaica.

This is of significance because it exemplifies that male dancer, both homosexual and straight, experience difficulties when dealing with questions of homosexuality in the dance world. This particular excerpt is of major significance in that a straight or homosexual dancer would classify himself as the exception to constructed and perceived notions of male dancers. Such a decision indicates that too often male dancers are greatly confined to specific categorizations, such as a homosexual. However, their decision indicates that they do not want to be confined rather they want to be viewed as dancers irrespective of their gender and sexual preference.

When discussing male homosexuality Hanna explains that one of the reasons that homosexuality is prevalent with regard to the art is that “the art world offers them an opportunity to express an aesthetic sensibility that is emotional and erotic, an insulation from a rejecting society, an avenue of courtship, and an arena in which to deal with homosexual concerns” (Hanna, 1987, p.33). In addition, “because the dance profession offers a more physically and psychically integrated presence than the typical nine-to-five world of work, dance provides opportunities to explore the range of unconventional options without the consequences of real-life sanctions” (Hanna, 1987, p. 34). Her statements are accurate and have the potential to transcend racial boundaries, in that any form of artistic expression provides an escape from all sorts of societal oppressive ways.

For instance, consider how in an African Dance course the female instructor indicates that in her class the “male students are more comfortable because the drummers are male; the drummers’ presence in the studio seems to lessen their feelings of minority status in the studio” (Kerr-Berry, 1994, p. 45). Interestingly enough the author has had the same personal experience; as an African Dance teacher I find the male students talking and physically looking comfortable while conversing with the drummers. The years 2012 and 2013 saw an amazing transformation in the University Of Cape Town School Of Dance. An influx of male dancers brought an interesting perspective to a department in which the students are predominantly female. This perspective was encouraged by our dance productions which seem to balance gender roles in dance and demonstrate a greater capability as well as increased expectations from male dancers.

This can be intimidating and increase pressure on male students. On the other hand, it is important to highlight how “dancers and critics are proud of the ever-increasing number of men in dance because their presence has legitimatised it. No art is recognised as an art until men do it, from cooking to medicine to dance. And then it becomes dignified, arduous, skilled” (Kerr-Berry, 1994, p. 42). This idea can be applicable to the way male figures are perceived when they decide to pursue dance. However, the statement does not take into account whether or not a male figure’s homosexuality makes the

art of dancing ‘arduous’ and ‘skilled’.

The societal expectations and norms will always attempt to define and judge the male dancer, irrespective of their racial or sexual identification. For instance, people “might feel distaste at macho displays of male energy on the dance stage-asking –“what are they trying to prove? OR one might feel that the male dancers are generally a disappointment- they do not just look masculine” (Morrell, 1998). Therefore the question does not solely lie in the manner in which the male dancer identifies but more on the accepted norms and values that the audience transfers on to the male dancers throughout a performance. As mentioned earlier, it is important to re-emphasize that these values are highly fluid and dependent on the context. One individual will feel that the ways in which they observe masculinity represented in dance is not relevant or similar to the manner in which the person next to them interprets the same dance.

Conclusion

Overall, it remains clear that the intersectionality between race, homosexuality and male figures in dance remains highly complex in South Africa. This analysis attempted to grasp a better understanding of these difficult issues by looking at the western standards, the historical legacies, and specific case studies as to how the standards remain different for black and white males who choose to either identify or not identify as homosexual. Dancers, irrespective of their race and sexual preference await a time in which they can approach their work as men who are merely dancing whether or not they are homosexual or straight. Each individual body represents vastly different identities through their dancing. However, in the context of the black male dancer, the racial aspect should not be ignored in that it vastly influences the manner in which *he* is perceived and the way in which *he* perceives himself. In traditional African societies however, dance was integrally associated in societal customs with a virile and legitimate manhood. Colonisation and Globalisation initially appeared to flip this binary as African dance became detached from its previous masculine connotations. Efforts to associate dance purely with a homosexual or heterosexual masculinity have unfortunately resulted in reinforcing social stereotypes governing gender, which instead need to be reconstructed.

Dance has always served as a form of socio-political commentary, and thus will ultimately be essential to resolving the “issue” of homosexuality in both Western and African dance forms. It is not reasonable to try to define dance as manly and heterosexual in order to encourage participation without having to reject “socially acceptable” masculine identities. The issue of homosexuality in dance therefore boils down to the prevailing

stigma and discrimination that still plague much of popular opinion. We need to address the restrictive stereotypical associations between homosexuality and dance because otherwise we just perpetuate the emotional and verbal abuse of unconventional sexualities. It is proposed that labelling dance in the West or Africa as either homosexual or straight only perpetuates unhelpful binaries. Instead we must acknowledge the complexities behind dance and masculinity and make the dance world a safe space for both homosexuals and straight dancers without feeling the need to exclude one or the other. We need to redefine manhood in dance as encompassing a diversity of sexualities, because claiming dance as either homosexual or heterosexual ultimately just hurts all male dancers involved.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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