

Feature article

DANCE: MYTHING BOYS

The awful pun that is the title of this article serves a couple of purposes. It suggests that there are myths surrounding boys' participation in dance. These include the perception that dance is for girls and not for boys. This is a myth perpetuated by the majority, including parents, teachers and school system leaders.

The title also suggests that the dance curriculum and dance as an artform is "missing" boys. The works that are being made and performed only represent half the population and therefore expression in the artform is gender-deficient. It also suggests that boys are "missing out" on some essential skills, knowledge and understandings that they need to live full and enriched lives.

In April, a selection of exemplary works presented by candidates in 2 Unit Dance in the 2000 Higher School Certificate was shown at *Callback*. The Saturday night show that I attended was outstanding overall. Twenty-four works in performance and composition were presented. Two of the works were composed by males. Only one male performed.

The reason for the absence of males in *Callback* does not reflect the standard of the work of male candidates in dance in the HSC. It reflects, as we all know, the number of males electing dance as a subject at this level.

Ten years ago I based my master's research on *Targeting boys in dance education*. I conducted a dance program for Year 7 students which included practical learning experiences in performing and composing. I surveyed the perceptions and attitudes of both boys and girls to the practical learning experiences. I also surveyed perceptions and attitudes to dance imagery (photos and video).

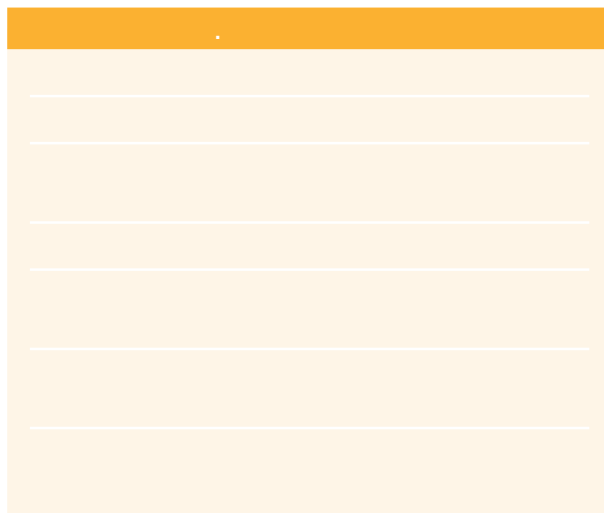
Results of the study in relation to perceptions of dance imagery supported a hypothesis that *dance is viewed as*

a female activity. Boys responded to dance imagery using language that was derogatory and that equated men in dance with effeminacy and homosexuality.

However, boys' attitudes to the experience of a practical dance program did not support this hypothesis. Approximately half the boys in the program responded very positively to performing and composing activities. *This demonstrated a disparity between boys' perceptions about dance as observers and as participants.*

Interestingly, despite evidence that at least half the male cohort of that Year 7 had positive experiences in dance, not one boy elected dance at the beginning of Year 9. However, during Year 9, five boys joined the class from other electives. This was the largest group of boys I had ever taught in one class. Most of those boys left school at Year 10. No boys elected dance in Year 11.

Ten years have passed and there does not appear to be any significant changes in boys' attitudes and



participation rates in dance. Ten years on I wonder about the boys I taught as part of my research. Would **more** boys have responded positively if:

- different content had been taught in the program?
- they had developed skills, knowledge and understandings in dance through primary school?
- they weren't prevented from engaging in dance because they feared it was *feminine* to do so?

I also wonder about the five boys who did study dance in the junior elective (albeit as a second or third choice after other electives failed to engage them). There are many questions I could pose in relation to the whys and wherefores of those boys choosing dance.

A significant problem

I believe it is timely to bring this problem to the fore again. **And it is a problem**—a problem that dance educators, school communities and education systems must face, and solve. I intend to bring the problem to the foreground, on this occasion by looking at current research and opinion about boys and dance and the status of dance in the curriculum in 2001.

A recent submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry by the Australia Council into the education of boys raises some interesting points in relation to boys and learning in the arts.

Firstly, the article reiterates the importance of Gardner's theories about intelligence and learning styles. The author highlights the ways in which individuals (both boys and girls) learn, and discusses the importance of the arts in drawing on specific intelligences due to the nature of their content, knowledge and teaching methodologies. Teachers and students of dance know how the artform engages and develops all of the seven intelligences: verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, auditory-musical, intrapersonal and interpersonal. I suggest that this development simultaneously of all intelligences is rare. There is a special synergy that exists in dance because mind and body are both (always) engaged in the act of performing or composing dance. Given that it is well-documented that many boys prefer to learn kinaesthetically, dance provides a unique opportunity for them to develop the other intelligences through a preferred mode of learning.

The second point of interest in the submission is the survey of Australian research, most particularly the comments made about David Spurgeon's paper delivered at the Dance and Child International (daCi) conference in Finland in 1997. In this paper, Spurgeon discusses a number of reasons why boys don't dance, including problems associated with the dance curriculum and dance pedagogy. Extracts from his paper regarding these issues are printed here with his kind permission.

The dance curriculum

The eight part TV series *Dancing*, an Anglo-American co-production is full of images from around the world of men and women dancing. It would seem that the low participation of males in dance in WASP cultures is peculiar to those cultures. In Rarotonga, one of the Cook Islands in the Pacific Ocean, instruction in dancing is an important part of the school curriculum. Children learn "the proper movements for each gender—women swing their hips but don't flap their knees, men flap their knees but don't swing their hips" (Jonas 1992:111). A father of three daughters and a son explains how important it is for his son to learn the men's dance, not the women's movements, in order that the boy "be seen in the minds of the public as a boy" (Jonas, 1992:112). It would seem that in WASP cultures there is no 'men's dance'. However, a closer examination of my own culture (Sydney, Australia, in the 1990s) revealed several significant instances of men's dances. The successful show *Tap Dogs* originated in Sydney, toured extensively overseas including London and New York, and is now back in Sydney. It features seven very skilful males in ordinary summer clothing, performing intricate tap routines. Occasional visits from African and Latin American companies give Sydney people the chance to participate in Afro-Caribbean dance classes. The attendees are usually mixed gender. I am told by my dance education colleagues in the U.K. that Afro-Caribbean dance styles are the most popular in dance programs in schools. It appeals equally to white and black, male and female. Nightclubs and dance parties are as popular in Sydney as in many other cultures. There are plenty of men dancing in these nightclubs. Students all over Australia who are interested in Theatre and Drama are taking an enthusiastic part in movement styles and improvisation classes—again, the participants are mixed gender. Rock video clips show plenty of images of men dancing.

So, men are dancing but they don't seem to be enrolling in public school dance programs or private studio dance classes. Why? Leigh McSwain presented the results of a survey of attitudes towards dance amongst Sydney high school students at the 1994 daCi Conference. She found that "students of all backgrounds are highly motivated to involve themselves in the popular dance of their own culture" (McSwain, 1994: 257). Amongst her findings were that the most disliked style was "Folk and National". It is not surprising that this was the style most had been exposed to in their primary or elementary schools. McSwain also found that "both ballet and contemporary excerpts, where dance as art is the primary function, were disliked consistently by the whole population" (1994:258). It would seem that we dance educators are not giving the broad population of students the dance experiences that they want and enjoy. We may have forgotten the old adage "start from where the students are". I suspect that too many primary school dance lessons are either Folk and

National dances, or preparing a set dance for a local festival, and that too many high school dance lessons are classical ballet or modern. We seem to have neglected the creative aspect of the curriculum by denying the young student all kinds of improvisation dance activities that enable him or her to make a dance and to use dance to solve a problem. We may also be ignoring the teenagers' interest in rhythm and in a variety of styles by giving them too much ballet and modern too soon.

I am proposing that we are turning boys off dance by what dance experiences we give them. I am not, of course, arguing against the rightful place of ballet and modern in the dance education of the interested, enthusiastic student. I am cautioning against giving the broad majority of students dance experiences that may be largely irrelevant to them. To draw an analogy with our colleagues in music and literature; the composer Mahler may well be an important figure for the student who loves and knows music but to ask the average thirteen-year-old, to sit through a symphony of his, may well be a powerful disincentive to study music. Similarly, the study of Shakespeare can be a joy or a curse depending upon the age and interest of the student.

We have, at our disposal, a wide range of dance activities with which to stimulate most students. There's a men's dance in my culture but, by and large, we ignore it.

Dance pedagogy

On a recent study trip I watched two dance classes for tertiary students who were training to be physical education teachers. Both groups were mixed gender. Both teachers were female. The one class was guided gently and carefully through appropriate warm-ups on to the main topic of the lesson which involved individuals working on composing a specific movement phrase. There was a discernible focus and very little student talk. The other class was introduced to its warm-up with the phrase "Let's do our mad warm-up". The "mad" seemed to refer to a very dated bouncy music track and lots of shaking of the teacher's hands as she led the class. There was little focus and lots of whispered asides. The students looked partly bored and partly embarrassed. In 1988 at the DaCi conference in London I made a plea for teachers to "show a respect for their students' social, emotional and intellectual stage of development particularly with regard to the language used" (Spurgeon, 1988:279). It would seem that students continue to be made to feel uncomfortable in some dance classes by the use of childish, inappropriate language.

Stinson (1994:2) comments on the authoritarian nature of dance classes when she says, "in most dance technique classes, the teacher is the authority and the only recognised source of knowledge." Innes (1988:37) is writing about the teaching of ballet when

she says, "ballet teaches an unquestioning obedience to authority at all times". She goes on to comment "gentility of spirit in many dances is just a euphemism for *timidity* and *diffidence*. Their dance training teaches them an unquestioning attitude to information and those who provide it." (Innes, 1988:42). My current job involves, amongst other classes, teaching movement improvisation to both drama students and dance students. I have experimented on a few occasions, by giving the same improvisation class to both groups, the drama students—both sexes—attacked the work with total focus and a palpable intensity. The dance students—all female—greeted their first few improvisation sessions with hesitancy, caution, apprehensiveness and poor focus. It would seem that all the authoritarian training and externally imposed discipline, all that time spent on working on and refining their instrument, and doing as they are told has rendered many dance students incapable of playing with movement, unwilling to create work and unable to simply have fun with dance.

In the *Dancers' Transition* report commissioned by the Australian Dance Council in 1989 a dancer comments, "Dancers are constantly criticised, losing their self esteem. The notion exists that only dance is worthwhile, not the dancer" (Beall, 1989:29). Innes cites Suzanne Gordon who argues that criticism is so central to ballet that it becomes a compliment, that is, in being criticised one has been corrected but noticed. (Innes, 1988:43). McSwain makes the point that "fear of failure at a physical activity, such as dance is a potent negative motivator for male adolescents" (1994:257).

One of the problems with physical activities such as dance, drama and physical education is that mistakes are public. It needs skilful teaching to provide protection for students and an atmosphere where mistakes are not the source of further problems.

When one considers that in many dance classes students could receive embarrassing instructions, be treated in an authoritarian manner, be criticised, and perhaps have their mistakes on public show, the surprise is not that there are so few men but that so many women put up with it.

We need a radical rethink about how we teach our subject. If the above pedagogical characteristics persist then we may be in danger of teaching to ever decreasing numbers of students.

A third point of interest in the submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the education of boys by the Australia Council is the description of the intertextual nature of dance performance. In this extract the author emphasises the importance for all students to engage with subjects that promote new ways of thinking and new ways of developing creativity for the 21st century.

When you go to see a dance work currently, it is not unusual for it to incorporate text narrative or perhaps deconstructed text, a visual installation, an electronic media component, specifically composed music, and live musical or vocal rendition as part of it. Artists collaborate with other artists all the time, and in so doing, they create new forms of arts practice. They are in the business of synthesising complementary and even seemingly discordant notes to create a new whole. It is one of the reasons they challenge society; they don't readily recognise borders and limitations, they experiment with new tools to make the unthinkable thinkable, they work with technology, science, physics and mathematics to generate their works.

Finally, the submission makes a claim for the significance of the arts as central to the curriculum, both as areas of curriculum content and as teaching methodology. For boys, the case is made for early intervention in learning and the possible provision of single and joint gender spaces of learning. This enables boys to learn in and through dance, in a way that will engage and stimulate them, and allow them to reflect on their arts experiences as males.

The current status of dance in the curriculum

Recent changes in the dance curriculum begin to address the gender imbalance. The new *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus* provides outcomes and content for all students Early Stage 1–Stage 3. This syllabus must be fully implemented in government schools by 2006. This has important implications for teachers of secondary dance:

- primary teachers will need support and professional development to effectively implement the *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus*
- increasingly, boys coming into Year 7 will have dance experiences in performing, composing and appreciating
- through linkages projects, secondary teachers may be able to assist in the dance education of boys in Stage 3.

The *Arts K-6 CD-ROM*, currently under development by the Curriculum Support Directorate, provides support for K-6 teachers implementing this new syllabus. Gender perspectives in relation to dance are dealt with in this resource.

The gender issue

As a teacher of dance there are a number of considerations that need to be addressed to manage the gender issue in the classroom. Establishing a cohesive culture becomes a challenge for both the school and the teacher.

Students bring to the classroom a range of cultural values, attitudes and perceptions concerning what dance

is. Students' backgrounds and previous dance experiences can influence this.

When developing learning experiences, consider making choices based on non-gender specific content or themes.

Consider selecting stimulus material, music style, and activities that reinforce the notion of dance as a whole class activity. Students may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the culture and practice of a "traditional" dance class and therefore will often respond with extroverted behaviour.

It is important to create a classroom culture where learning experiences take students from what they know and feel comfortable doing, to something new. Encourage risk-taking by providing a non-threatening environment. Familiarity with the breadth of dance as a learning area will break down some of the misconceptions and stereotypical behaviour often demonstrated by the male students.

Teachers should provide a range of learning experiences that focus on dance as a whole class activity incorporating single and mixed sex groupings.



Stimulus material should be selected that is non-gender specific, leading to exploration of movement that does not challenge the student's sense of "maleness".



The lesson focus or theme should be generic in nature and non-stereotypical, developing familiarity and comfort in the learning experiences.