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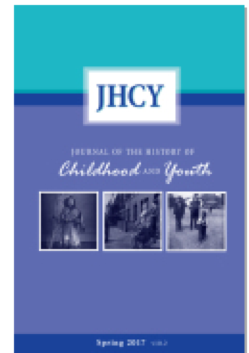

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"YOU SHOULDN'T TELL BOYS THEY CAN'T DANCE": BOYS AND BALLET IN AMERICA

> I like sports, parties, and things other children like, but I'd give them all up for dancing. . . . Each step in ballet gives me a different feeling entirely. Dancing makes me forget other things like homework and trouble with the other boys in school. It means to me good health by developing a strong body and an alert mind.
>
> —Ronnie Schwinn, Age 9, Winner of *Dance Magazine*'s 1950 Young Dancer Contest[1]

The word "ballet" conjures up specific images for most twenty-first century Americans. Swans. Sugarplum fairies. Tutus. Pointe shoes. Perhaps a generalized haze of pink and sparkle, with a dash of Degas thrown in among the cognoscenti for good measure. All these images, it hardly needs pointing out, are highly gendered. Anyone who has seen *The Nutcracker*, as hundreds of thousands of Americans do each year, knows that ballet includes men as well as women, yet the feminized view of ballet predominates to such an extent that the male presence in ballet has been obscured and, worse yet, stigmatized.[2] From the perspective of the history of childhood, this invisibility is problematic. Ballet class has been a significant part of a certain kind of American childhood from the early 1900s forward. While no one could reasonably claim that as many boys as girls have ever taken ballet class, boys have made up a steady—and continuously increasing—number of American ballet students. Changes in the growing presence of boys in ballet have not been met with concomitant changes in the challenges these boys have had to face, however. Stereotypes about effeminacy and homosexuality have persisted even as more American boys have made their way into ballet classes over the course of the twentieth century. Their experiences reveal a great deal about the gendered nature of childhood and the ways

in which larger social norms and cultural associations affect the opportunities, expectations, and experiences of real children.

Scholars in a number of fields have studied gender and theatrical dance from multiple perspectives. Ramsay Burt, Michael Gard, and Doug Risner have explored many aspects of men and masculinity in dance, and Jennifer Fisher has explicitly written about ballet. Feminist scholars like Ann Daly and Susan Leigh Foster have also commented, often critically, on ballet and gender.[3] However, considering how popular ballet has been as an extracurricular activity for much of the last century, historians of childhood have scarcely paid any attention to it at all, let alone to the boys who took ballet class. This essay takes a social history approach to an unexplored corner of the history of American childhood, focusing on so-called ordinary boys who took ballet class. Adult professional male ballet dancers were once children, too; their youthful experiences reflected the same challenges other boys faced and are also an important part of the story. The world of professional ballet necessarily affected all boys' encounters with ballet class, whether or not they had aspirations for dance careers. The essay will briefly survey the gendered history of ballet, trace the steady growth of the number of boys in ballet class, explore the challenges they faced, and examine the strategies used to defend and encourage them. The many American boys who took ballet deserve a spotlight on their activities, rendering them invisible no more, and they also serve as exemplars of the ways that ideas about masculinity, femininity, and gender shape every childhood.

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF GENDER AND BALLET

Associations of ballet with girls, women, and femininity have a long but ironic history. In its origins in Italian and French court dance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ballet reflected political and national interests and thus reinforced male royalty and assertions of power. The noble amateurs who performed as the first ballet dancers did include women among their number, but the ornamental costumes all the dancers wore restricted women's movements even more than those of men, who were regarded as the virtuosos. When in 1661 Louis XIV of France, himself quite an accomplished dancer, founded the first ballet school, the Académie Royal de Danse, men served as the directors, choreographers, teachers, and theoreticians of ballet, a gendered professional empowerment that continues to exert lingering effects today. Men remained the star figures of ballet until the early nineteenth century, when the influences of a larger cultural Romanticism led to more ethereal choreographic themes and the presentation of female dancers as elemental figures from nature or supernatural figures such as fairies and sylphs. Daring experiments in shortening the skirts

of ballet costumes and developing the rudiments of pointe shoes focused new attention on women in ballet, and the Victorian period ushered in an era of female dancers' technical showmanship.[4]

As feminist critiques of ballet have pointed out, even when changes in costume and the growing fascination with pointe technique made female dancers more central to ballet during the early nineteenth century, male dancers still presented, manipulated, and framed women's bodies through choreographic conventions. Even now, men and women often execute different steps in ballet and emphasize disparate aspects of technique and performance. Nonetheless, by the late nineteenth century in the French, Italian, Russian, and Danish schools of ballet that dominated training and performance, the ballerina had become the iconic figure. Male dancers had largely been reduced to so-called porteurs, whose main role it was to support the women in partnered dancing. Some bravura male dancing persisted, and the state-sponsored European ballet schools continued to provide career opportunities for professionally trained male dancers.[5] Still, the apparent—though misleading, given the great strength ballet requires—delicacy and airy quality of ballerinas' dancing further underlined the association between ballet and femininity.

The United States, which lacked the centuries-old traditions of ballet and other forms of concert dance popular in Europe, proved especially susceptible to strong associations of dance with women. Physical education pioneers, who in western Europe often incorporated dance into their programs, in the United States asserted that "individual group achievement through aggressive competition" was the overriding goal for boys and young men. At the 1905 meeting of the American Physical Education Association, the main theme was the place of dance—generally aesthetic, gymnastic, or folk dance—in physical education. All present agreed on dance's importance, but attendees debated the relative emphasis for boys and girls and questioned its necessity for older boys. By 1914, New York State mandated dance for girls' physical education but eliminated it for boys. This change neatly warded off both perceived threats to masculinity and the dangers of interracial partnered dancing. Language itself seemed to skew female when related to dancing; no one referred to men who stood around not dancing at parties as "wallflowers."[6]

Early twentieth-century developments in ballet could have changed such attitudes. The rise of Enrico Cecchetti, a respected dancer and an internationally renowned ballet teacher of enormous influence, helped recuperate male dancing throughout Europe. The acclaimed artistic and technical prowess of Vaslav Nijinsky, who toured the United States in 1912 and 1916, provided an example of what male ballet dancers could be. Michel Fokine, a star dancer and then reformer

from the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, produced influential choreography focused on men. Fokine moved to the United States in 1919 and taught in New York for decades, while Cecchetti's methods were adopted by ballet teachers worldwide, including an influential cohort in the United States. Starting in the 1930s, modern dancer Ted Shawn also celebrated male dancing and toured the United States with an all-male troupe that challenged the widely accepted links between women and concert dance. However, though ballet grew in popularity in the United States, largely due to the national tours of Anna Pavlova and European companies like the Ballets Russes, the perceived femininity and grace of the art form tended to reinforce traditional gender roles. George Balanchine, the hugely influential choreographer who founded the School of American Ballet in 1934, was wont to say, "Ballet is woman." By the postwar era the stigma for boys and men had, if anything, increased, in spite of more widespread American exposure to ballet. This increased stigma reflected a larger Cold War consensus that underlined the importance of traditional gender roles in family life and general culture, a consensus that affected everything from childhood to the arts.[7] As a result, most Americans who considered ballet as an optional, if status-bearing, recreational activity for their children assumed ballet class was for girls.

THE GROWING NUMBER OF AMERICAN BOYS IN BALLET CLASS

As ballet became an increasingly common extracurricular activity after World War II, assumptions about the feminization of ballet appeared in multiple contexts. A 1950 humor piece in the *New York Herald Tribune* took for granted that the male author's audience would sympathize and chuckle along with him when he lamented, "Last week my wife and daughter, with the aid of a pair of wild horses, dragged me to a [ballet] recital. I was relieved to see other fathers and husbands sitting around the auditorium in attitudes of dejection." Rejecting ballet was the appropriate, manly attitude. In 1973 Marjorie Madford, whose son took ballet classes, wrote to *Dance Magazine* complaining about the dearth of dance books and materials for boys. Not a single library book in the local school's large collection included biographies of notable male dancers, and the costume catalogs only showed pictures of girls. Ten years later a popular ballet book for children bore out Madford's complaint, explaining in the introduction that "The reader will notice that the personal pronoun 'she' rather than 'he' has been used throughout the book. This has been done simply because the majority of people in dance are female."[8]

The stereotypical image of a ballet class full of girls is not entirely historically inaccurate. When future ballerina Maria Tallchief studied with the

two best ballet teachers in Los Angeles during the 1930s, she never learned to partner because there were no boys or men in her classes with whom she could practice. Before Jacques D'Amboise switched to the School of American Ballet in 1942, he was the only boy in Madame Seda's Dance Academy in New York. In the 1950s, ballet student Cynthia Novack found no boys in her class either, and for a long time she was not much interested in male dancers as a result. During the 1966–1967 school year, only five of the forty students at the National Academy of Ballet were boys.[9] It was certainly possible for ballet studios to survive, even thrive, with mostly female students. When necessary, professional companies in the United States imported male dancers from Europe, where state-sponsored ballet schools with rigorous admission policies made ballet a desirable art form and profession for both boys and girls.

The overall gender balance improved over time, however. By the 1940s George Balanchine's School of American Ballet in New York, a national trend-setter, had already begun to enroll more boys and to provide them with a special curriculum emphasizing strength, leaps, and turns. As teenagers these boys learned how to partner and also became role models for other male students in the school and elsewhere. The Ford Foundation began granting scholarships to talented ballet students during the mid-1960s, which helped raise the number of boys going to ballet schools across the country. Brothers Dale, Paul, and Terry Loeser all benefitted from Ford Foundation scholarships in 1965, and their whole family moved to San Francisco so they could attend the Academy of Ballet there. The School of American Ballet reported to the Ford Foundation in 1966 that the number of boys in ballet classes was steadily climbing, noting, "There seems to be a definite change in parents' attitudes toward ballet training for boys." One author describing the proliferation of ballet schools in cities during the late 1960s—seventy in Manhattan and sixty in Washington, DC, by her count—noted that the ratio of girls to boys used to be 50 to 1 but was now 15 to 1. The children's division of the American Ballet Center School reported a 3-to-1 girl-to-boy ratio in 1978. From 1971 on, the Cecchetti Council of America, a certifying body for ballet teachers, required knowledge of the syllabus for male dancers in every grade, reflecting the growing numbers of boys in ballet. By the time the School of American Ballet started a special boys program in 1990, there was intense competition to claim one of the fifty spots available yearly. Smaller and less prestigious ballet studios saw less of a change but still attracted more boys.[10]

The number of boys grew in part because of the more general increase in the popularity of ballet class as an extracurricular activity. As more girls

took ballet class, their brothers sometimes ended up there too by default. No one could have predicted that Edward Villella, Peter Boal, and Ethan Stiefel, representatives of several different generations, would end up as principal dancers for the most prestigious American ballet companies when as young children they joined their sisters in ballet class. Their parents had goals other than professional dance careers for their sons, primarily practical concerns. Villella's, Boal's, and Stiefel's mothers would not leave their young sons at home while they took their sisters to ballet class and more or less forced the boys to take class rather than sitting around the studio lobbies making trouble and wasting time.[11]

Mary Daly's experience as director of the Washington Ballet underscored this point. For eighteen years she had a hard time filling the boys' roles in the company's annual production of *The Nutcracker*, but by 1977 there were enough boys in local ballet classes (including her own boys-only class) that she could double cast the roles. The families of the two twelve-year-old boys dancing Fritz, the main boy role, sacrificed as much as they would for any of their daughters in similar roles. Each family had to commute an hour each way for rehearsals and performances. One of the boys playing Fritz, Edward Smith, initially started ballet class to make himself a better football player and to keep his sister company, but now his sister had given up ballet for cheerleading and Edward was more interested in ballet than football. The other Fritz, Steven Tobin, did not publicize his ballet classes at school but was indignant at the idea that anyone would tell him to stop dancing. "It's the same thing as women's lib, really," said the seventh grader, coopting the language of second wave feminism. "You shouldn't tell women what they should or should not be, and you shouldn't tell boys they can't dance." Both Edward and Steven thought it would be a very good idea for more boys to take ballet class.[12]

Developments in popular culture also brought in more boys. Ballet teachers across the country remarked on the "*Billy Elliot* effect"; within two years of the release of the 2000 British film about a coal miner's son who pursued ballet despite familial and community opposition, the number of boys in ballet classes burgeoned. In England, the Royal Ballet School had so many male applicants that for the first time the elite training academy admitted more boys than girls. The numbers were less dramatic in the United States, but in 2013, 107 of 416 students in the School of American Ballet's children's division were boys. Reality television shows like *Dancing with the Stars* and especially *So You Think You Can Dance*, which often highlighted ballet, also had an effect. Many of the students who expanded the Oregon Ballet Academy's boys' roster in the early years of

the twenty-first century cited the dancing they had seen on those shows as their motivation for studying ballet.[13]

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY BOYS IN BALLET

The steady increase in the numbers brought to the forefront the accusations of effeminacy that consistently dogged male dancers in the modern era and cast doubt onto the motives of boys who took ballet class. During the early 1920s Luigi Albertieri, a disciple of Cecchetti who served as ballet master of the operas in Chicago and then New York, policed gender difference in the ballet classes he taught. He initially did not allow his female students to jump in grand allegro combinations, worried that the large movements would compromise their prescribed prettiness and appearance of delicacy. He believed girls and women who danced should be "at once voluptious [*sic*] and modest." But Albertieri's biggest concern was that his male students avoid "affectation and . . . effeminacy, which is especially repugnant and repulsive." If this expression of distaste for purported effeminacy could come from within the world of ballet, it is hardly surprising that attitudes would be even more judgmental from the outside. Franklin Stevens, an aspiring dancer as a teenager in the early 1950s, was deeply hurt when a girl in his high school class who discovered his love of ballet told him, "I can't see what any *real* boy would like about that."[14]

In renowned choreographer Agnes de Mille's 1960 advice guide for dancers, she condemned a situation where "it is taken for granted here that boys who dance are sissies." De Mille thought this prejudice was uniquely American. While that was not the case, it was true that there were relatively few male ballet teachers to serve as role models except at the highest professional level. There was also no centuries-old tradition of male ballet dancers in the United States to bolster the aspirations of boys interested in ballet. Leon Danielan, a successful dancer and then teacher in the middle of the twentieth century, credited his Armenian heritage with protecting him from the opprobrium directed at many of his contemporaries. In Armenian culture, men traditionally expressed emotion and danced. Native-born American boys had no such legacy upon which to draw. As a writer for *Dance Magazine* regretfully put it in 1953, "Many boys would love to study ballet. But for most, it is a secret dream which they dare not confess." Twenty-five years later, longtime ballet teacher Richard Glasstone opened his book *Male Dancing as a Career* with the hope of demonstrating that "dancing can be a viable and socially acceptable career for men. . . . There is nothing effeminate about good male dancing."[15] The similarity in language and tone illustrated the slow pace of changes in attitude toward boys and ballet.

Persistent questions about the masculinity of boys who danced shaded all too easily into equally pernicious accusations of homosexuality. When future New York City Ballet star Jacques D'Amboise's classmates found out that he took ballet class every day after school, they asked him, "What the hell is all this stuff about ballet. . . . You a sissy? A queer?" The association of ballet with homosexuality rested on numerous false assumptions, including the notions that gay men were necessarily feminine or feminine men were necessarily gay, as well as straitjacketed limitations on acceptable forms of masculine embodiment and performance. Sports, gendered male, provided a suitable arena for drawing the male gaze to the male body, but dance, gendered female, did not. Joffrey Ballet cofounder Gerald Arpino pointed out how illogical this was, commenting, "We can have sports where two men are locked on the football field. It is not considered homosexual or effeminate. . . . Why not in dance?" Arpino blamed the American father who "will <u>not</u> take his son in his arms" for creating suspicion whenever two men came into contact in any context other than competitive sports.[16]

While this theory could not in itself provide an explanation for the gay-baiting around ballet, it did highlight the important role fathers played in monitoring their sons' interests. In 1969 when Arthur Mitchell started the all-black ballet school that became the Dance Theatre of Harlem, he met with especial hostility "from fathers who feared their boys would turn effeminate." A 2009 study asked boys to complete the following sentence: "I think more boys/males would study dance if. . . ." Seventy-two percent believed more parental support would make all the difference. As recently as 2006, twenty-three out of thirty-one fathers of preschool children interviewed for a child development study expressed negative reactions to the idea of their sons engaging in gender non-conforming activities like ballet. One father said that if his son "really wanted to dance, I'd let him . . . but at the same time I'd be doing other things to compensate." A limited amount of gender non-conformity in boys might be acceptable, but fathers would find other ways to strengthen their ideas of masculinity. Another father said, "I wouldn't encourage him to take ballet or something like that, 'cause I guess in my own mind that's for a girl."[17] The very design of this study, which assigned "girl activity" status to ballet in the first place, demonstrates how persistent the feminization of ballet remains, with all its consequences for girls and boys.

Even the most successful male ballet dancers had to deal with questions about their masculinity and sexuality. A 1979 letter to *Dance Magazine* criticized classical ballet costumes as contributing to the problem, noting "how klutzy or effeminate they look in their tights and in most of the ballet costumes."

This letter provoked several sharp responses, including one that defended the "dizzying" virility of Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, the male ballet stars beloved by female audiences who "sit there breathless and trembling slightly, and giddy with the sensations—which only *increase* when they begin to dance!" Not even the gradual shifting of attitudes toward sexual orientation at the end of the twentieth century changed popular associations of ballet and homosexuality. In a 2003 article entitled "Tough Guys Do Dance," American Ballet Theatre principal dancer Marcelo Gomes stated, "I'm gay, but not because I dance. . . . Ballet doesn't make you gay." Gomes acknowledged that acceptance of a variety of sexual orientations had improved greatly, but he still felt it necessary to explain that there was no causal connection between ballet and homosexuality.[18]

For generations of boys taking ballet class miles below the stratospheric heights of megastars like Baryshnikov or Gomes, all the "gender trouble" associated with ballet led them to face real problems, including fear of or actual harassment, paucity of male peers, assumptions of homosexuality, and lack of family support. Future dancer Hinton Battle's Washington, DC, neighbors called him "Twinkle Toes" and mocked his tights. Another future professional dancer, Conrad Ludlow, at age fifteen wrote plaintively to *Dance Magazine* in 1950 that he had "to fight all the boys in my grade before they stopped making fun of me for taking ballet," though he added that "now they all accept the idea and at my scout group they sometimes said that I could do certain things better than the other scouts because I had taken ballet." Ten-year-old Andrew experienced a less positive outcome. He showed the potential to become an extraordinary ballet dancer, but in 1957 his public school classmates threw his tights into a tree, where they remained when he promptly stopped taking classes. After seeing a Royal Ballet performance in St. Louis in 1969, nine-year-old David Allen had to pester his disapproving mother and stepfather for six months before they reluctantly allowed him to start ballet classes. Scott Wheeler's parents never did support his passion for ballet, and by the time he was in high school he had left home to train with the Tucson Regional Ballet, supporting himself with fast food jobs and scholarships.[19]

Arthur Quinn, a fifth grader participating in the National Dance Institute in 1979, had his own way of dealing with these issues. He told a reporter, "Anyone says dancin' is for sissies, I tell 'em that's their problem. They say it again, and I punch 'em. Pow!"[20] This response was hardly one teachers or family members could recommend, but it was also not surprising that Arthur, like Conrad before him, found it useful to reply to teasing with violence, a response that affirmed their masculinity when it was called into question. It is telling that in both cases,

their ability to fight their peers successfully did in fact shield them from further teasing and harassment.

The challenges confronted by boys in ballet class occurred not only in real life but also in ballet books for children and adolescents. Starting in the 1970s, children's literature took a turn toward the more realistic, incorporating real-life problems into the narrative. While most ballet books continued to center on female protagonists as they had during earlier periods, it became more common for the male characters in ballet novels to confront stigma and prejudice. As one example, in Amy Hest's 1982 book *Maybe Next Year . . .* , friends and aspiring dancers Kate and Peter both prepare for auditions for the summer course at the National Ballet School. But fourteen-year-old Peter faces resistance at home, where his father "sat him down in his leather-bound study and announced that no son of his is going to be a dancer," mirroring the opposition many actual boys faced from their fathers. Another echo of reality appears in Karen Strickler Dean's *Maggie Adams, Dancer* series, written during the early 1980s, in which the character Paul struggles with his sexuality and eventually comes out as gay, only to find that even his male dancer friends are not all supportive. They fear that Paul's openness will cast doubt on their own sexual orientation.[21]

Popular ballet book author Jean Ure addressed the concerns of boys who dance in several novels. In the 1982 book *A Proper Little Nooryeff*, British high school student Jamie is forced into dancing by his younger sister's ballet teacher, who needs partners for her more advanced students. He turns out to be quite talented but is horribly embarrassed by the idea of wearing tights or performing and keeps his dancing a secret. When he chooses a ballet recital over a cricket match, he enjoys the performance but endures awful catcalling and taunting from his school buddies. Ure's 1995 novel *Fandango!*, set in a ballet school, early on includes a lunchtime conversation in which a group of the top girls complains about the small numbers of boys in their school and further lament that "half of them aren't into girls anyway."[22] That a book aimed at an audience already interested in ballet could so casually reference this stereotype, even when it is presented in a nonjudgmental way, speaks volumes about its relative power.

DEFENDING BOYS IN BALLET

Real families with boys in ballet class dealt with stereotyping in their own way. In San Francisco brothers Dale, Paul, and Terry Loeser's home, their mother explained, "The word 'sissy' or any word equivalent to it is taboo," and the boys convinced their grandmother to abandon her prejudices about male dancers.

The importance of addressing such prejudices was graphically illustrated when Roger Stevens, first head of the National Endowment of the Arts, discovered how widespread suspicion of men in dance was. One member of Congress asked Stevens in 1965 whether it was true that most of the male dancers in the companies the National Endowment for the Arts hoped to fund were gay. Stevens replied, "It may be true in a few instances . . . but I guarantee you this, Mr. Congressman. If any male dancer happened by right now, he'd be strong enough to pick you up by the waist and put you over his head and throw you straight out of that window."[23]

Stevens's defense was much appreciated, but it was also important to develop significant strategies from within the ballet world to effect change in both the number of boys in ballet and the public perception of them. Scholarships and free tuition were one common tactic. Teenager Franklin Stevens, dazzled by a production of *Sleeping Beauty* in the early 1950s, turned overnight into a ballet fanatic and enrolled in a class at a dance studio picked after seeing an attractive advertisement in *Dance Magazine*. Although at sixteen he was quite old to start ballet, the studio was so delighted to add another boy to its roster that it promptly offered him a scholarship. Girls who attended the National Academy of Ballet during the mid-1960s paid $1200 a year, but boys' tuition was free. In 1964 the Newark Ballet Academy began an initiative to increase the numbers of boys, recruiting the younger brothers of the girls already enrolled at the school and offering them free classes. After an exchange in the Dayton, Ohio, newspapers about the low numbers of boys in ballet classes, the Dayton Civic Ballet started a special boys class. Sixteen boys began the program in the fall, paying tuition, but they were promised scholarships for the spring term if they stayed on, which all but one of them did.[24] At the college level, too, scholarships helped attract and retain more male talent. A 1971 advertisement for the Corbett Foundation Performing Program for Advanced Male Ballet Dancers, housed at the University of Cincinnati, announced auditions for seventeen- to twenty-year-old young men. Ten spots were available to American and European high school graduates with ballet training who met the university's admission requirements. The successful applicants would receive scholarships covering tuition, room and board, transportation, and a living stipend. No equivalent program was offered to women.[25]

The practice of offering boys free ballet classes has continued to be commonplace. In 2001 boys at the School of American Ballet did not pay tuition until or unless they reached the intermediate level. At the Metropolitan Ballet Academy in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, nearly 250 boys ages seven to eighteen participated in the Boys' Scholarship Program between 1999 and 2014.[26]

The Metropolitan Ballet Academy's Boys' Scholarship Program advertised itself as "designed to enhance athletic skills, flexibility, and strength," along with providing extensive dance training and performance opportunities. This emphasis on athleticism has consistently been another tactic aimed at persuading boys to take ballet class. If there were questions about masculinity, then focusing on ballet as enhancing, rather than compromising, boys' traditional gender roles was an important response. A focus on male dancers as athletes has deep roots in America. Catherine Littlefield, a pioneering ballet teacher and choreographer in Philadelphia during the 1920s and 1930s, haunted local boxing gyms and the docks in search of young men with strong bodies that might take well to ballet. She explicitly referred to her male students and dancers as "athletes" and assigned them choreography that illustrated what she considered manliness. Explain to boys that ballet provides an opportunity "to learn good timing, good coordination, and to build a strong healthy body to prepare their future for any kind of sport and profession," urged a 1959 ballet primer for children. In talking about ballet's benefits for boys, New York City Ballet star Edward Villella cited a Montclair, New Jersey, football team whose members all took ballet class together. Though initially reluctant, they could not deny their winning season or the noticeably lower rate of injury for their better-conditioned bodies. During the mid-1960s the Tulsa School of Ballet offered a special boys-only class that, as teacher Roman Jasinski claimed, "helped us change the image of Boys in Ballet to a respected and normal activity. . . . Many of the boys who took this class improved greatly in their athletic abilities." Similarly, Bryn Bass made a name for herself locally during the early 1980s by advertising a ballet class especially for male athletes. She found that as long as the coaches supported their players, the boys improved quickly because they were naturally competitive. The presence of older boys at her dance studio encouraged younger boys to take ballet as well.[27]

Not everyone found the linkage of ballet and athletic prowess convincing, however. When a private dance studio tried changing the name of the boys ballet class to "Sports Movement for Boys" in an effort to increase enrollment, one boy already at the studio sneered, "Who are they trying to fool? Kids are smarter than that!" He did not like the whole idea of having to justify boys' desire to dance.[28]

Increasing athletic prowess was not the only justification on offer. One high school student defended his years of ballet by citing heterosexual privilege. He told his skeptical schoolmates that he touched far more women than they did and spent most of his time with beautiful, thin girls. Tres McMichael, an African American ballet student in Baltimore, also pointed out that "the girls

in high school think guy dancers are very cool." Some private boys' schools offered ballet as a means of instilling discipline. The Culver Military Academy in Indiana provided ballet class as part of its required arts curriculum, an innovation noted in a 1962 *Time Magazine* article entitled "Molding Men." In 1970 St. Paul's became the first boys' prep school in the United States to offer a dance class. Interest in the school had grown after alumnus Alexander Ewing, general director of the Joffrey Ballet, arranged a lecture-demonstration there. Thirty boys signed up for the first class, which went so well that St. Paul's began to mandate dance for the lower school's physical education program. Even the non-dancers learned to respect the discipline required by ballet, and mockery was rare. Positioning ballet class as a part of a well-rounded education that included the arts also served as a justification for boys. One father of a ten-year-old son acknowledged in 1967, "Loving the beautiful, wherever he finds it, does not lessen a man's virility; it rather enhances his nobility."[29] As ideas about gender shifted toward the end of the twentieth century, there was more acceptance of boys engaging with the arts as part of their journey toward self-expression.

With all the difficulties recruiting boys into ballet, retaining them, especially after the age of seven or eight when ballet class requires more discipline, patience, and commitment, proved even more challenging. Sixth grader Joseph Irizarry starred in a 1953 New York public school performance of the ballet *Billy the Kid* to great critical acclaim and was offered a scholarship to the prestigious American Ballet Theatre School, but he just was not interested. He wanted to be a mechanic when he grew up and saw little value in continuing to dance. Ballet teacher Betty Smith, active during the 1960s, consciously varied her classroom practice for boys and girls in order to keep boys interested and improve retention. She used different imagery for the students, telling girls to bend and lift like flowers, for instance, and boys to spring like cats. Her goal was for ballet to bring the boys in her class "the same all-around pleasurable development that is now so much valued for average girls." Marva Spelman reduced the drop-out rate from her ballet class for boys by encouraging the students to think of themselves as a team wearing a uniform of black tights and white T-shirts. She focused on coordination, elevation, and timing, but especially on teamwork so that the boys would support each other by staying in class together.[30]

There were other things ballet teachers could do to improve the retention of boys, many of them aimed at reinforcing ideas about masculinity. Allowing beginning students to wear whatever they wanted rather than traditional dance attire of white T-shirts, black tights, and dance belts could be helpful. Some of the most successful male American ballet dancers, including New York City Ballet star Peter Boal, recalled their childhood selves refusing to wear tights to

their earliest lessons. One small-town ballet teacher suggested to her colleagues in 1969 that they take care to choose recital costumes from catalogs that their students could see themselves reflected in, noting the particular importance of this caution for boys, since "effeminate looking male models don't do anything to boost [their] spirits." Similarly, some teachers were careful to provide performance roles for boys that appealed to their sense of adventure and did not require glittery costumes. Many boy ballet students first danced as toy soldiers and mice in *The Nutcracker*, roles that included battle scenes and did not require revealing tights. Further strategies for increasing boys' retention included showing male versions of all movements and introducing boys to male dance celebrities as role models. Setting up peer mentoring programs also had a positive effect, as did conducting boys-only classes. Indeed, a 2009 study found that adolescent boys in dance classes reported getting most of their support from the friends they made at their dance studios who shared their experiences.[31]

For boys taking ballet class who seemed to be talented, there was another motivation for sticking with it. Among the many ironies surrounding the issue of boys in ballet is that even though dance was so often coded as women's space or as feminine, the world of dance actually offered more professional opportunities to men. Ballet teachers who brought in and attempted to retain male students could offer them many more assurances about their chances of success as professional ballet dancers than they could ever offer to equally talented and hard-working girls, for whom the competition in starkly numerical terms was much more intense. This logic continues to hold true. As Pennsylvania Ballet artistic director Angel Corella explained in 2016, taking ballet classes and attending ballets helps boys "see that it is okay to be a male ballet dancer, that it's a profession, that it's a serious job, that you get paid . . . and that it's a very beautiful, but at the same time a very masculine profession."[32]

Rhetoric like this that promotes masculinity within ballet has a history as long as justifying ballet class as an activity for boys. Professional American companies continually highlighted tough, virile dancers whom they believed would combat the stigma attached to men in ballet. During the 1950s and 1960s, the New York City Ballet frequently sent dancers to appear on hugely popular television broadcasts like *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The company directors repeatedly dispatched Jacques D'Amboise and Edward Villella, two working-class, ethnic New Yorkers who projected strength and conventional masculinity. In 1958 Hollywood star Gene Kelly, whom no one saw as effeminate, wrote and codirected *Dancing: A Man's Game*, which aired on NBC at Christmastime. He compared the power and stamina of dancers favorably to those of athletes—by tap dancing with boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, for example—and pointed out

dance-like moves in many sports. Guests on the show included Villella and two-time Olympic figure skater Dick Button, both of whom worked to combat ignorance and stereotypes in their own fields.

These role models had a real effect on people who saw them perform. As a child and teenager in Washington, DC, during the 1950s, George Faison eagerly looked for dancing each week on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and began taking ballet class in the hopes of dancing like the men he saw on television. A recording of Villella dancing inspired Jock Soto, growing up on a Navajo reservation during the 1970s, to begin ballet class. As he recalled, "I remember how masculine Eddie was and how he looked like such a guy and . . . I couldn't believe somebody like that [was] dancing."[33] The conventional masculinity of these adult exemplars helped legitimize young George's and Jock's desire to take ballet class, demonstrating the impact that the world of professional ballet could have on boys who wanted to dance.

Prestigious ballet companies continued to use media to demonstrate, aggressively, the masculinity of its dancers. The 2002 film *Born to Be Wild: The Leading Men of American Ballet Theatre* highlights four of the company's principal male dancers. Ethan Stiefel comes roaring onto the screen on a motorcycle, engines gunning, and emphasizes the benefits of "workin' hands on, with women all day, and they're pretty fit." *Teen Vogue*'s 2014 web series *Strictly Ballet* took a similar approach in the episode focusing on male ballet students at the School of American Ballet, which was, unsurprisingly, entitled "Dance is for Athletes."[34] Athleticism, heterosexual privilege, and professional opportunity thus served as defenses against effeminacy for boys in ballet class and professional dancers alike.

CONCLUSION

Although as a strategy to change negative attitudes toward boys and ballet such defenses proved to be somewhat effective over time, there were also costs. Comparing dancers to athletes and idealizing noteworthy straight male dancers ran the risk of propping up heteronormativity, making homophobic stereotyping of boys in ballet even worse. When even within the dance world a sort of internalized homophobia cropped up, as seen in language about making dance macho or helping boys learn to "dance like a man," a campaign of aggressive heterosexuality for public consumption was problematic. Such a strategy also limited much-needed conversations about historic and contemporary sexism within a ballet world where more dancers were women and more choreographers and artistic directors were men.[35]

In an odd way, boys have had both fewer and greater opportunities in ballet. Social pressures, family expectations, and gender norms have historically limited the number of boys taking ballet classes. However, boys who did take ballet then had a better chance of becoming career dancers, if they chose that path, because of the ongoing, though now decreasing, gender imbalance in professional ballet. Whether boys taking ballet class aspired to become professional dancers, hoped to improve their coordination in other sports activities, found beauty in the art form, or just kept their sisters company and themselves busy, their experiences were shaped by a combination of external forces and internal motivations. Yet no matter what their motivations were, boys have been largely omitted from the historical record of ballet in America. In part, that is because cultural misconceptions about boys in ballet have masked their steadily expanding participation. In part, that is because of a larger erotic confusion about ballet, in which dancers are viewed as both sexless and sexualized. In part, that is because historians have not written much about children and the performing arts. In part, that is because much more attention has been paid to professional (or aspiring professional) ballet dancers than the millions of American children—girls and boys—who took ballet class at some point over the twentieth century. The growth of ballet class as an extracurricular activity deserves its own history. But the obscured history of boys in ballet also points to the influence ideas about gender norms can exert not only on "ordinary" children's experiences but also on historians' choice of subjects and subjectivities to explore.

NOTES

1. "Winners in this Month's Young Dancer Contest," *Dance Magazine* 24 (May 1950): 45. Special thanks to Kirsten Fermaglich and Leslie Ginsparg Klein, as well as the anonymous *JHCY* reviewers, for reading earlier versions of this article and offering helpful comments.
2. See Jennifer Fisher, *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
3. These prolific authors' major works include Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007); Michael Gard, *Men Who Dance: Aesthetics, Athletics, and the Art of Masculinity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Doug Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance: An Empirical Study of Male Identities in Western Theatrical Dance Training* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2009); Jennifer Fisher, "Make it Maverick: Rethinking the 'Make it Macho' Strategy for Men in Ballet," *Dance Chronicle* 30 (2007): 45–66. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay, eds., *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ann Daly, "Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 3 (1987/1988): 57–66; and Susan Leigh Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," in *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture, and Power*, ed. Susan Leigh

Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 1–24. Other works by these authors are referred to as relevant in the notes below.

4. A complete history of the art form is beyond the scope of this article. For a comprehensive cultural history of ballet, see Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010). For standard works on nineteenth-century changes in the role of women in ballet, see Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in England: Its Development, Fulfilment, and Decline*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972) and Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*, rev. ed. (London: Dance Books Ltd., 2008).

5. As an example of the feminist critique current during the 1980s and 1990s, see Daly, "Classical Ballet." For an accessible discussion of changes in ballet over time, see Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, and Lynn Garafola, "Ballet: Reinvention and Continuity Over Five Centuries," in *The Living Dance: An Anthology of Essays on Movement and Culture*, 2nd ed., ed. Judith Chazin-Bennahum (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2007), 118–52.

6. Myron Howard Nadel, "A Failed Marriage: Dance and Physical Education," in *The Dance Experience: Insights into History, Culture, and Creativity*, 2nd ed., eds. Myron Howard Nadel and Marc Raymond Strauss (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 2003), 173–83; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4, 24–25.

7. For a classic text on men in ballet, see Richard Philp and Mary Whitney, *Danseur: The Male in Ballet* (New York: Routledge, 1977). More recent theoretically informed scholarship includes Fisher and Shay, eds., *When Men Dance* and Deborah Jowitt, "Dancing Masculinity: Defining the Male Image Onstage in Twentieth-Century America and Beyond," *Southwest Review* 95 (2010): 228–42. It should be noted that Maurice Bejart, an influential mid- to late twentieth-century French choreographer, countered Balanchine by proclaiming, "Ballet is man," a statement highly unlikely to be made in the United States. See Robert Gresovic, *Ballet 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving the Ballet* (New York: Limelight, 2005), 146. Sarah E. Fried-Gintis discusses gender norms in the context of other postwar changes in attitudes toward ballet in "Elevated: Ballet and Culture in the United States, World War II to the National Endowment for the Arts" (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 2010), 185ff. For more on the Cold War, gender, family life, and childhood, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008) and Paula Fass and Michael Grossberg, eds., *Reinventing Childhood After World War II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

8. Dick Ashbaugh, "Afternoon of a Father," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 12, 1950; Marjorie Madford, "Letter to the Editor," *Dance Magazine* 47 (July 1973): 98; Wendy Neale, *On Your Toes: Beginning Ballet* (New York: Crown, 1980), unpaginated preface.

9. Transcript of interview of Maria Tallchief by John Gruen, May 21, 1985, MGZMT 3–893, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPLPA hereafter); Jacques D'Amboise, *I Was a Dancer: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 2011); Cynthia J. Novack, "Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power," in *Dance, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Helen Thomas (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 36; National Academy of Ballet Papers, MGZ (National Academy of Ballet [New York, NY]), NYPLPA.

10. Jennifer Dunning, *"But First a School": The First Fifty Years of the School of American Ballet* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 99; Monica Moseley, "Three California Brothers," *Dance Magazine* 40 (March 1966): 32–33; 1966 School of American Ballet Report to Ford

Foundation, MGZ 93–8712, NYPLPA; "The Great Leap Forward," *Time*, March 15, 1968, 54–61; Jennifer Dunning, "Step One: The American Ballet Center School," *Dance Magazine* 52 (June 1978): 64; Kathleen Papovich Tidwell, "The Cecchetti Council of America: A Focus on the Historical and Administrative Development of a Dance Organization" (PhD dissertation, Texas Woman's University, 1994), 286; Transcript of interview of Peter Boal by Barbara Newman, April 4, 2005, 105, MGZMT 5–1601, NYPLPA.

11. D'Amboise, *I Was a Dancer*, 34–37; Boal, interview, 2; Transcript of interview of Edward Villella by John Gruen, January 2, 1973, 1–2, MGZMT 3–201, NYPLPA; Transcript of interview of Ethan Stiefel by Rose Ann Thom, July 9, 2012, 2–3, MGZMT 3–7510, NYPLPA.

12. Nan Randall, "Interest in Ballet Class Increases Among Boys," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1977.

13. Trenton M. Hamilton and Meredith G. F. Worthen, "Male Ballet Dancers and Their Performances of Heteromasculinity," *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (November 2014): 761; Laura Jacobs, "Balanchine's Christmas Miracle," *Vanity Fair*, January 2015, 98; Harriet Barovick, "Barre None: Far from Broadway, Boys-Only Ballet Classes Are on the Rise," *Time*, June 25, 2012.

14. Albertieri quoted in Jessica Rachel Zeller, "Shapes of American Ballet: Classical Traditions, Teacher, and Training in New York City, 1909–1934" (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2012), 183–84; Franklin Stevens, *Dance as Life: A Season with American Ballet Theatre* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 16 (emphasis in original).

15. Agnes de Mille, *To a Young Dancer: A Handbook for Dance Students, Parents, and Teachers* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 4–5; Transcript of interview of Leon Danielian by Jacklyn Armstrong, April-May 1976, MGZMT 5–388, NYPLPA; Carolyn Parks, "Sex: Male. Profession: Dancer?" *Dance Magazine* 27 (April 1953): 43; Richard Glasstone, *Male Dancing as a Career* (London: Kaye & Ward, 1980), 1.

16. For a thoughtful approach to the subject of homosexuality in ballet, see Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (London: Routledge, 2007). D'Amboise, *I Was a Dancer*, 55; Craig, *Sorry I Don't Dance*, 8; transcript of interview of Gerald Arpino by John Gruen, September 13, 1975, 3–4, MGZMT 3–647, NYPLPA (emphasis in original).

17. Henry Weil, "Dance Theatre of Harlem: Inspiring the Deprived," *Change* 8 (November 1976): 15; Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance*, 108–9; Emily W. Kane, "'No Way My Boys Are Going to Be Like That!' Parents' Responses to Children's Gender Nonconformity," *Gender & Society* 20 (April 2006): 161, 166.

18. Beatrice M. Mason, "Letter to the Editor," *Dance Magazine* 53 (May 1979): 26; Ann Salomon, "Letter to the Editor," *Dance Magazine* 53 (July 1979): 19; Joseph Carman, "Tough Guys Do Dance," *The Advocate* 882 (February 4, 2003), 40.

19. The phrase is borrowed from Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Claude Reed, Jr., "Hinton Battle: A Reluctant Star," *Chicago Metro News*, December, 12, 1981; "Winners in this Month's Young Dancer Contest," *Dance Magazine* 24 (June 1950): 43; Mem Fox, "Men Who Weep, Boys Who Dance: The Gender Agenda Between the Lines in Children's Literature," *Language Arts* 70 (February 1993): 85; "David Allan and Michel Gervais," in *When Men Dance*, eds. Fisher and Shay, 81; Barbara Crockett, "Regional Dance America: Born to Dance," *Dance Teacher Now* 18 (January 1996): 28–30.

20. Suzanne Charlé, "A Nation of Dancers," unidentified article, May 6, 1979, Clippings File, MGZR (Children–Ballet Instruction), NYPLPA.

21. For an overview of such trends in children's literature, see Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Kimberley Reynolds, *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Amy Hest, *Maybe Next Year . . .* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 70; Karen Strickler Dean, *Between Dances: Maggie Adams' Eighteenth Summer* (New York: Avon, 1982).

22. Jean Ure, *A Proper Little Nooryeff* (London: Bodley Head Children's Books, 1982); Jean Ure, *Fandango!* (London: Random House Children's Books, 1995), 15. These books were widely read in the United States as well.

23. Mosely, "Three California Brothers," 32; Alex C. Ewing, *Brava! Lucia Chase and the American Ballet Theatre* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 22.

24. Stevens, *Dance as Life*, 5–7; Eugene Palatsky, "Thalia Mara and the National Academy of Ballet," *Dance Magazine* 38 (February 1964): 62; Doris Hering, "A Special Kind of Clatter," *Dance Magazine* 38 (January 1964): 58–60.

25. Advertisement for Corbett Foundation Performing Program for Advanced Male Ballet Dancers, *Dance Magazine* 45 (May 1971): 9.

26. Barbara Newman, *Grace Under Pressure: Passing Dance through Time* (New York: Limelight, 2003), 42; Lisa Collins Vidnovic interview by Melissa R. Klapper, January 30, 2015.

27. http://metropolitanballetacademy.com/boys-program/; Nancy Brooks Schmitz, "A Profile of Catherine Littlefield: A Pioneer of American Ballet" (EdD dissertation, Temple University, 1986), 75–77; Martha Geeslin, *Ballet Time: A Ballet Primer for Children* (Dance Publications Company, 1959), 4; Thelma White, "A Master Class with Edward Villella," *Dance Teacher Now* 3 (January/February 1981): 12; Roman Jasinski, Tulsa School of Ballet Response to School of American Ballet Questionnaire, 1973, MGZ 93–8713, NYPLPA; Thelma White, "A Ballet Class for Athletes Only," *Dance Teacher Now* 3 (May/June 1981): 13–17.

28. Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance*, 53.

29. Hamilton and Worthen, "Male Ballet Dancers," 767; Barovick, "Barre None," 64; "Molding Men," *Time*, January 5, 1966, 43; Katharine S. Cunningham, "The Dance at St. Paul's School," *Dance Magazine* 44 (June 1970): 24–25; Youry and Elizabeth Yourlo, "Question and Answer," *Dance Magazine* 41 (April 1967): 30.

30. "Joseph Doesn't Want to Dance," *Dance Magazine* 27 (January 1953): 34–36; Betty Smith, "Boys at Work," *Dance Magazine* 36 (March 1962): 51; Marva Spelman, "Boys Will Still Be Boys," *Dance Magazine* 31 (August 1957): 74–77.

31. Boal interview, 2; Dorothy Rainer Sellars, "Performance: Studio to Stage," *Dance Magazine* 43 (August 1969): 72; Fisher, *Nutcracker Nation*, 160–62; Zihao Li, "Adolescent Males in Dance: A Close Look at Their Journey," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 82 (September 2011): 19ff.; Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance*, 112.

32. For more on this point see Doug Risner, "What We Know About Boys Who Dance: The Limitations of Contemporary Masculinity and Dance Education," in *When Men Dance*, eds. Fisher and Shay, 59ff.; Corella quoted in Kat Richter, "Strength and Longing: Bringing the

World to Philadelphia," in *Strength & Longing*, Pennsylvania Ballet Program, February 4–7, 2016, in possession of author.

33. Fisher, "Make it Maverick," 49; Brian G. Rose, *Television and the Performing Arts: A Handbook and Reference Guide to American Cultural Programming* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 31–32; and Jowitt, "Dancing Masculinity," 232–34. Transcript of interview of George Faison by Robert Greskovic, April 7, 2009, 3–5, MGZMT 3–3958, NYPLPA; Transcript of interview of Jock Soto by Jennifer Dunning, April 12, 2006, 5, MGZMT 4–2464, NYPLPA.

34. *Born to Be Wild: The Leading Men of American Ballet Theatre*, directed by Judy Kinberg (New York: Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2002), DVD; *Teen Vogue*, *Strictly Ballet*, episode 3, "Dance is for Athletes," published May 29, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCKk-na2axo&list=PLXQ-B69QR-506j4XdlVMmMbFtZvwZJP5H&index=3.

35. Scholars who have discussed these issues include Hamilton and Worthen, "Male Ballet Dancers"; Doug Risner, "Rehearsing Heterosexuality: 'Unspoken Truths' in Dance Education," *Dance Research Journal* 34 (Winter 2002): 63–68; and Risner, *Stigma and Perseverance*.