

Letters/Comments

Who Speaks for Gays in Dance?

Doug Risner's article, "Rehearsing Heterosexuality: Unspoken Truths in Dance Education," *Dance Research Journal* 34/2: 63–78, 2003, raises some poignant questions and offers some useful suggestions for diminishing homophobia and antigay bias in dance and dance education.

Risner's autobiographical narrative represents a one-man perspective. He admits his project "does not attempt to speak for all gay males in dance." Yet he takes me to task for what he alleges I wrote on gays in *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire* (University of Chicago Press, 1988). The chapter on homosexuality appeared first as "Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance," *The Drama Review* 113, 31(1): 24–47, 1987, reprinted in Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, eds. *Homosexuality and Homosexuals in the Arts*. Vol. 4 of 13-volume *Studies in Homosexuality*, Garland, pp. 198–223, 1992.

In his article, Risner claims that *Dance, Sex and Gender* "situate[s] the study of male homosexuality and dance in a therapeutic psychopathological setting," which it does not. He also asserts that the book disregards "dominant sexual codes of heterosexuality," patriarchal and sexist practices, and "prevailing homophobic attitude," even though the book addresses all these issues, both in the U.S. and cross-culturally.

The beginning of the chapter on homosexuality in *Dance, Sex and Gender* clearly states the chapter's purpose, which is to sketch the reasons for various attitudes toward dance as a career in the United States (p. 122). To do so, I interviewed gay male colleagues, including the late Barry Laine, dancer, writer and editor, and Daniel O'Connor, a dancer who wrote an ethnographic master's thesis on American Ballet Theatre. I also interviewed Tensia Fonseca, mother of an ABT gay dancer, herself a former dancer and founder of the Maryland Youth Ballet school. In addition, I drew upon the extensive literature on the arts by gay writers in the fields of English, psychology, and history.

Given these sources, I reported a number of cases of a tolerant and accepting art world as a refuge for creative expression (pp. 136–138). It is perplexing that Risner interprets the chapter as repeatedly framing homosexuality as a problem for gays: "rather than exploring the social complexities of gay and bisexual male experiences in dance, she repeatedly frames homosexuality as a problem for gays, and in doing so, reinforces homosexual stereotypes." Perhaps interviews with young gays today, 18 years later, would reveal other perspectives. If so, it would be informative were Risner to provide them.

Dance, Sex and Gender is scholarship not advocacy. So when Risner alleges that the book "champions" projects like Jacques

d'Amboise's National Dance Institute (as a way "to destigmatize dancing for men and to establish the respectability of male dance careers"), his apparent bias toward advocacy prevents him from recognizing that the book simply reports what has been widely publicized about d'Amboise and his project. I wrote:

Jacques d'Amboise, hailed by *Life Magazine* in June 1963 as America's first great male ballet dancer, also challenged the dance domain as belonging to women and male homosexuals. A former principal with the New York City Ballet, d'Amboise and his son, who also joined the company, defied the traditional image of who's who in dance and let boys know that dancing is as physical, exciting, manly, demanding, and dangerous as any sports activity.

I then went on to describe d'Amboise's work in public, private, and parochial schools, K-12.

Dance, Sex and Gender acknowledges accomplishments of dancers, choreographers, and presenters, some of whom also happen to be gay. Perhaps this inclusive approach—which scholarship requires when looking at a range of aspects about dance, sex, and gender—is what accounts for Risner interpreting the book as minimizing the gay male population and its profound contribution to dance. He levels the criticism:

Destigmatization and respectability, when read more closely, actually mean: (1) minimizing the gay male population and its profound contribution to dance; (2) cultivating more "respectable" heterosexuals, "upgrading the status of male dancer"; and (3) silencing discussion of patriarchal and sexist practices in the profession. This

approach clearly illustrates the deleterious effects of heterosexual respectability, homosexual negation, and further homophobic attitudes in dance.

Perhaps these comments reveal what may be Risner's self- and gay-centered attitude toward scholarship about dance and gender. If so, it has made him turn a blind eye to the book's clear implications that male status in the dance world should be improved and sexism abolished.

Similarly, when Risner asks, "Why do we need more heterosexual males in dance?" he misses the point that sexual orientation—whether heterosexual or homosexual—does not necessarily shape dance as an art form, nor does it determine excellence in dance. On the contrary, broadening the recruitment pool for dance can only be good for the art. The Arts Partnership (the National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. Department of Education, arts alliances and organizations, school systems and other groups) advocate dance education for all children K-12. See my book, *Partnering Dance and Education: Intelligent Moves for Changing Times* (Human Kinetics, 1999).

Apart from his criticism of *Dance, Sex and Gender*, Risner raises some additional problems related to misuse of terms, lack of perspective on difficulties faced by various groups, and suggestions for dance educators.

He refers to "homophobia" as a means for males to rationalize their watching men dance. Evidence? Males watch men's bodies in sports. Risner equates "sissy" with gay, a term used by kids ignorant about sexual orientation to refer to the weak or disliked. He implies that all gay men in dance are effeminate, "finger-snapping drag queens offstage"—certainly contrary to many gay men's views.

Risner speaks of the gay secretive world

of abuse, deception, pretense, contradiction, manipulation, “deceiving one’s self, a deception that goes well beyond sexual orientation,” and exploitative relationships between faculty and students—certainly awful. But these behaviors are also found in the priesthood, military, corporations, and government and among women, minorities, and immigrants.

Risner says, “We know and accept that many of our male students and colleagues in dance are gay, but we rarely discuss it in popular or scholarly discourse.” How important is sexual orientation when dance is self-expression and also role-playing? The issue is homophobia in society writ large and the responsibility for all teachers to promote tolerance of diversity.

Some of Risner’s suggestions for dance educators are more likely to cause problems than solve them. “Be available and prepared to talk with dancers who are questioning their sexual orientation or expressing homophobic beliefs” and “Identify and readily make available pertinent resources for students who need them” would be considered appropriate. But not incorporating gay issues in the classroom, unless a student brought up the issue. The Institute for Education has called for sex education classes in schools to teach about homosexuality.

Risner’s reflection on his personal journey as a gay dancer led him to raise important ameliorative issues for consideration. However, his misreading and maligning of scholars whose purpose is other than focusing on one group’s problems undermines his credibility.

Judith Lynne Hanna

Interview with May O’Donnell

The interview with May O’Donnell in the Summer 2002 *DRJ* issue by Patricia Beamon contains several errors.

Because O’Donnell was in her mid-nineties when she was interviewed, Ms. Beamon was probably documenting what she was told without having access to O’Donnell’s archive for documentation. Forgivable.

The errors are few: Paragraph 1, O’Donnell was fourteen, not seventeen when she began classes with Leila Maple; she performed in the Graham company from 1932 to 1938 (began her own choreography in 1937 in California) and returned to the Graham company in 1944 to 1953, not ending in 1950.

In paragraph 3, The O’Donnell-Green Foundation for Music and Dance was founded in 1982, not 2001.

Marian Horosko
O’Donnell’s biographer