

The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities, (Second Edition),
Ramsay Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

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Masculinities revealed through 'dancing bodies' is an important subject which, as Ramsey Burt observes, is framed by but invariably diverges from the dominant white, heterosexual male position which patterns western thought. At ground or rather stage level, Burt aligns the discussion from the ever-changing vantage points of spectators. To his credit, he is also sensitive to the limitations of visual reception in a medium, dance, which arguably operates simultaneously on visceral levels of reception. His premise focuses on the excess of meanings, albeit in limited western parameters, that a human being who dances can provoke. 'Masculinity as a socially constructed identity is not a stable entity, but one made up of conflictual and contradictory aspects' (7). That exemplary aim sometimes misses its potential, which may be more a reflection of the subject's complexity than Burt's contribution to its delineation. The net result of the book's scrutiny of the conceptual underpinnings and central protagonists of masculinity in motion, and a very refreshing one, is that this amorphous dancing identity is just as mysterious as his feminine partners.

Burt's argument begins with the 19th century demise of the male dancer and pivots on societal attention given to 'bourgeois' gentlemanly behaviour, thus pointing to misconceptions too easily derived from our current assumptions that the problem with men and dance is fundamentally bound up in homophobic attitudes. Effeminacy, at that point of time, was perceived by the bourgeoisie as but another attribute of aristocratic degeneracy, integral to political displays of men leading the court spectacles designed to embody the monarch's inviolable might. With the social upheaval wrought by the French Revolutions, the reforming citizenry acquired a distinct distaste for men who danced or manifested any of the refined mannerisms associated with the hated upper classes. The irony of our democratic pioneers initiating such an exclusionary practice is lost in Burt's account, though the insidious currents of resultant ideologies do circulate beneath its scholarly surface. The

bourgeoisie did allow exceptions to their general preference for masculine sobriety by way of accepting the outlandish appearances of Romantic geniuses of poetry, painting and music on the basis of their unique contributions. The ballet, on the other hand, with its unavoidable and ostentatious focus on the body inspired less leeway for tolerance. Additionally, the changing male dress code projected the European man as a sober retiring figure, one, in Burt's view, who tends to evade circumstances, such as stage appearances, where his cultural dominance could be accentuated and thus exposed for all to see.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Lord Baden-Powell's pronouncement that 'God made men to be men' (20), clearly spelt out the Tarzan-like muscularity and virility of tough manhood required to defend Christian nations and their women against the troubling visibility of homosexuality then associated with *over* civilisation. Herein lies the motivation behind Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers' works of stylised manual labour and combat, masking their homosexuality in a dangerous climate of homophobia. Burt draws on the writings of Eve Kosofsky and Leo Bersani to demonstrate the double bind of men's need for collegiate bonding becoming blurred with forbidden homosexual intimacy and, at the same time, social dependence on the markings of homosexuality to define the limits of desirable heterosexual behaviour. This doubled double bind generates anxieties for male spectators of other men dancing which Burt sets out to illustrate and deconstruct through his narrative. His objective is to find ways out of what appears to be an impasse, to suggest strategies both tried and potentially available to future generations through which to change gender prejudices in the art form of dance.

The familiar issue of the 'male gaze' formulated in feminist terms meets formidable contestation in dance once the male dancer's presence is reasserted by Serges Diaghilev's Ballets Russes' entry into Paris in 1909. Burt's preoccupation with theoretical avenues to escape the homo/heterosexual dilemma of the male dancer glosses over the complex cultural factors involved in this revolution in theatre dance by concentrating on

the legend, Nijinsky's (and thankfully his sister Nijinska's) contributions to performance and choreography. His object is to examine the Parisienne reception of the Ballets Russes in terms of Michael Fried's ideas about theatrical and absorptive modes of visual art, the former engaging audiences by way of extroversion, the latter by way of introspection. In Fried's view, masculine performative displays invite identification/adoration which reinforces stereotypical ideas of power, whereas introspective performances open spectatorship choices, enabling the viewer to empathise with the performer's vulnerabilities. To his credit, Burt admits that the kinaesthetic apprehension between performers and for spectators can subvert this generalising theory, citing the women flinching in reaction to the men's impatience while waiting for the sacrificial victim to succumb in Pina Bausch's version of *Sacre du printemps* as one instance among many when a displayed, physical emotion provokes recognition of an unwarranted political trespass.

In his discussion and analysis, Burt quite rightly points out how the choreography, the performing and spectatorship become embroiled in the very issues that circumscribe and disrupt the parameters of masculinity in dance performance. However, the conjunction of these perspectives creates a knot which is devilishly hard to untangle especially in the Ballets Russes' instance where ideas about ethnicity, sexuality and aestheticism clash or combine. While Burt pays attention later in the discussion to the different inflections of white and black bodies who dance in relation to contextual cultural expectations and interplays of heritage, he fails to throw this lens on the complex circumstances of Nijinsky and his fellow cohort of Russian male dancers' presentations to Parisienne audiences. Diaghilev's arrival in Paris was an avant-garde gesture, at least from a Russian perspective; a display of the unique aesthetic achievements of Russian artists, even if French audiences revelled delightedly in the entrance of the barbarians. The specific Russian version of modernism, pioneered in ballet by choreographer, Fokine, and designers, Bakst and Benois, took heed of contemporaneous experimentation within the European art scene and, simultaneously, incorporated unique and often archaic Russian traditions within their art

works. Whether Diaghilev initially appreciated what the impact might be, intrinsic to this avant-garde dance form was the virile, virtuosic and expressive presence of male dancers, typically described by the astonished west as 'pagan.' After the fact at least, Diaghilev, the consummate entrepreneur, was quick to exploit the effect of the male dancer on the French capital, arguably complicating our retrospective analyses by cultivating the performances and choreographic development of his lover, Nijinsky.

Here, Burt picks up the story, offering insights into Nijinsky's work without giving a full account of the contexts from which the feline-like, androgenous character emerged. Instead, Burt concentrates on Nijinsky's genius status and its subsequent conflation with his mental breakdown. He further tests how Edward Said's concept of Orientalism intervenes in the legendary dancer's portrayal and the public's reception of the Golden Slave in Fokine's *Schéhérazade* and the sensational effects of Nijinsky's choreography for *L'après midi d'un faune* and *Le sacre du printemps*. The latter enables Burt to explore one of his central tenets, the openings to alternative formations of masculinity made available through Fried's concept of absorptive performing states. Where Fokine emphasised a realistic approach to dramatic and cultural enactments, Nijinsky emphasised the movement itself as the performance challenge. This concentration on the physical 'rightness' of an action or gesture produced a self-absorption in the dancers which Jacques Rivière has argued deflects attention away from emotional facial signification and on to 'the body that speaks ... [causing] expression to return to the dance' (75). For Burt's purposes, moreover, the modernist tendency of the artist to reflect on his medium oversteps social norms, forcing spectators to reassess their relationship both to Nijinsky's amoral portrayal of the Faune and to the barbaric, near sexless onslaught of the men's group in *Sacre*. The unfamiliarity of the movement vocabulary of these works disconcerted both dancers and audiences, especially in conjunction with Stravinsky's dissonant and thundering *Sacre* score, causing heated debate over artistic propriety which only heightened the company's already considerable reputation for innovation. It is curious that Burt omits mention of *Jeux*, a lesser known yet significant work in terms of gender that Nijinsky completed in between his two

major successes. *Jeux* uses the structure of a tennis match to explore a *ménage à trois* relationship between a woman and two men. Its costuming by Coco Chanel, if not the theme itself, warrants attention in the masculinity discussion since both display radical departures from balletic conventions, as well as situating Nijinsky, if the portrait photographs are anything to go by, squarely in a modern homosexual context, stripped of the masking afforded by historical and/or ethnic settings of his other famed roles.

He continues his examination of the shifting images of masculinity in dance through Nijinska's development of her brother's ideas in *Les Noces* and *Les Biches*. In a work which is choreographically masterful in its manifestation of a physical geometry on Stravinsky's complex and relentless music, *Noces* deals with the same underlying premise of colliding ancient and modern forms as in *Sacre* by transforming the celebratory expectations of a marriage ceremony into what commentator, Boris Asaf'yev, termed a funeral rite. Gone are traces of decorative primitivism and extrovert emotionality in a work which, Burt observes, contrasts men's insolent ease of movement with women's lack of ease about the power men express through their bodies: 'Nijinska's fragmented modernism made the audience aware of the men's physical ease by stressing the women's lack of it' (81). In the lighter socialite setting of *Les Biches*, which incidentally directly extends upon her brother's treatment of sexual manners in *Jeux*, Nijinska pointedly has the women ignore the dazzling macho entrance of the three men. Gender relations, cool and purposefully ambiguous at the core of this work provide him with 'an ideological space that enabled heterosexual female and gay male spectators to negotiate their own "local" readings of male dancing bodies, even when these only superficially conformed hegemonic norms' (84).

Burt's narrative then turns to a British 'writing-back' of modern/postmodern dance normally constrained within a narrow US frame which, from an Australian context where major influences have occurred from both European and US sources, is invaluable. Though he could possibly have delved further into the predominance of US publishing in this area (not unlike the white male dominance so aptly pursued), he does at least acknowledge the blind

assertiveness that has, in my opinion, become a problem in recognizing differences in the substance of dance of the Anglo-world. The formalism or culture of gender indifference that emerges forcefully with the Merce Cunningham and John Cage collaborations in the 1950s is shown as a reaction to and product of right-wing Christian values that shaped the modern dance pioneers, notably Shawn, Martha Graham and Jose Limon. Their generations grappled with the American dream, mixing Puritanism with a right of access to (and destruction of) untamed lands. They were propelled by democratic ideals, by asserting a kind of cultural purity wherein men were constrained within rules of heterosexual power. The contradictions of masculinity, and femininity for that matter, become crystal clear in Burt's overview of Shawn's delineation of masculine movement, Graham's acquiescence to the male performer, Erick Hawkins, and in Limon's evocation of strength from a lapsed Catholic, immigrant perspective. They share a desire, personally, to be accepted in the democratic ideal and, artistically, to engage with formations of American identity which mark them as distinct from the perceived 'decadence' of the old European world.

He carefully positions Cunningham and Cage's treatment of gender, situating their formulation of chance procedures and the anti-hierarchical co-existence of movement and sound against the prohibitive homophobic climate of McCarthyism. Calling on historian, Moira Roth's analysis of the McCarthy witch hunts, Burt suggests that the choice of the two gay men and their associates operated to diffuse accusation of homosexuality and un-American behaviour with a system that simply ignored those sorts of relationships that were, at base, perceived as emotional or sexual. The resultant formalism which continues to pervade the US dance scene is, in Jonathan Katz' view, a strategic way of resisting the hegemonic norm of the times. Susan Foster also suggests that the rational masculinity of Cunningham's work 'distinguishes it from the chaotic excavations of interiority that his female colleagues conducted' (125).

Skin colour within the US scene, offers Burt another avenue for exploring attitudes that proscribe masculinity. Alvin Ailey is an obvious choice of another

artist who veils his sexuality due to racial imperatives as is Elio Pomare, who incidentally deserves greater recognition in Australia for his contributions to the establishment of the oldest surviving modern/contemporary dance company, the Australian Dance Theatre. What options did Ailey and Pomare have of exploring masculine alternatives when racial identity was at stake? That issue looms large in any discussion of gender, which Burt acknowledges but does not pursue in any depth. From a current British, or indeed an Australian perspective, alternative ethnic gender formations may not manifest the same distinctiveness as in the US but the mix of discrimination, movement choices and corporeal identification continue to push and pull at the contours of danced masculinity. Burt's exploration of artists who have latterly challenged the status quo adheres to the canon: the survey of Lloyd Newson's DV8, Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theatre, Trisha Brown, Fergus Early, Michael Clark and others, represents important confrontations of conventional views, enabling sensitive, ostentatious and alternative perspectives on masculinity to arise, to take centre stage or fade into other gendered projections. If the story of the male dancer and his multiplicities are to tread gently but assuredly into the 21st century, then consideration must also be given to the Asian, Arabic and African dynamics that are resonating through the theatre dance scene. Burt, himself, suggests as much, without referring to the increasing plurality of European society, when he acknowledges that there are inevitably marginalised components of identity to emerge into sharp focus which will replace the somewhat over scrutinised politics of gender, 'race' and class. As suggested, I have reservations about the extent to which the ethnic spectrum on gender, bodily presence and movement has been exhausted but, that apart, Burt's delivery of his final and updated chapter, Post Men, is commendable in searching for 'imaginary possibilities for new ways of understanding relations' between people (183).

Unexpected interdisciplinary combinations such as Dylan Thomas' 1946 poem, 'The ballad of the long-legged bait,' and Bill T Jones' liquefied torso isolations place two men, bridging continents, ethnicities, artistic practices and historical periods, in a reverberating constellation which, according to Burt, encourages audiences to consider inter-subjective relations from an

interpretative distance. Another US choreographer, John Jasperse, continues the cool, detached aesthetics of indifference pioneered by Cunningham but explores reconfigurations of performer/audience relationship which Burt finds particularly compelling. *Prone* situates many spectators on mattresses within the performance space, gazing up at mirrors reflecting the action or watching the dancers' motion in peripheral vision, while sensing the closeness of their breathlessness and effort. Burt expresses delight in the uniqueness of his vantage point. Reading about rather than experiencing this positioning reminds me of recent marketing techniques which pander to a growing western expectation of personalisation. In spite of my suspicions, Jasperse is not alone in his belief that spatial intimacy engages senses other than the visual in apprehending dancing bodies and, by extension, their gender.

Bad acting, as is promoted in Lea Anderson's Chomodeleys (female) and Featherstonehaughs (male) companies, highlights two related strategies to disperse stereotypical gender through an 'expansively clumsy or literally pedestrian way of moving' (190) and its reciprocal humour. Not having experienced the work of these UK companies, I am at a disadvantage to comment on their effect but I'm fascinated by the timelessness of humour and its ability to subvert expectations in a range of modalities from the slapstick suggested by Burt's 'bad acting' terminology to the slight and nuanced suggestiveness of Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion's *Sitting Duet*. Here Burt touches on another element of masculinity in dance, which he does not fully explore, the issue of age. What he does appreciate in this extraordinary display of hand dancing between two middle-aged men sitting very ordinarily on chairs is the interdependence and friendship between them. While they sit in white stage light engaged in a conversation of repetition (and minimalist variations) to foreground sameness and difference (the dancer and the actor), they could be two men in a quiet bar relishing life. They do question what performance itself might be but I doubt that the warmth and humour they provoke could be simulated by two young men, bristling with unspent energy. And to add to the contradictions, the hand dancing is virtuosic even when it seems absolutely pedestrian.

His conclusion that masculinity is less of a problem today suggests that, on the one hand, masculinity is acceptable in a number of forms and that this acceptance has opened the pathway for young men to opt for a career in dance. Whether this conclusion has any credence, particularly in Australian terms, remains debatable. No one, it seems, has been able to overturn the democratic---and very European---ideologies of those bourgeois forefathers who thought that dancing was an affront to serious and authoritative masculinity. Mind you, dancing masculinities is a mysterious story that is still to be continued?

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