

Gender Performance, Gender Norms and Dance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines dance as a cultural medium for constructing and challenging gender norms through embodied performance. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Richard Schechner's performance studies framework, it analyzes how repetitive choreographic practices and bodily stylization reinforce or subvert patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies across cultures.

Classical ballet and Chinese classical dance exemplify institutionalized gender systems. In ballet, male-dominated partnering lifts, female-coded pointe technique, and heteronormative pas de deux structures (e.g., Swan Lake's passive female protagonist) perpetuate hierarchical gender roles. Similarly, Chinese classical dance uses gendered hand gestures—such as the "orchid palm" (feminine) and "sword finger" (masculine)—to encode cultural stereotypes of "feminine grace" and "masculine strength," reproducing these norms through generational transmission.

Japanese theater traditions reveal contradictions in gender representation. Kabuki's onnagata (male actors portraying femininity) and Takarazuka Revue's otokoyaku (female performers enacting masculinity) deploy stylized gestures to construct idealized archetypes. However, these performances ultimately uphold patriarchal logic: male choreographers dictate feminine submission, while female-rendered masculinity caters to heteronormative spectatorship. Despite surface-level gender-bending, they reinforce compulsory heterosexuality. Contemporary experimental dance offers transformative potential. Contact improvisation and queer choreographies (e.g., Steve Paxton's works) destabilize gender binaries through egalitarian partnering and non-normative embodiment. LGBTQ+ artists further challenge essentialist gender notions by incorporating transgressive corporeality into performance. These innovations echo Butler's claim that "gender is an enacted cultural fiction," positioning the dancing body as a site of political resistance.

This research highlights dance's dual role as both a transmitter of oppressive norms and a laboratory for cultural reinvention. From classical codification to avant-garde subversion, it documents evolving societal attitudes toward gender. Future studies should explore intersectional dimensions in global dance practices, particularly in the digital age. By emphasizing dance's capacity for both normalization and subversion, this study enriches critical discourses on embodiment, identity, and social justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As Richard Schechner suggests in Performance Studies, gender is essentially a performance. In daily life, gender is a performance based on one's life experience and gender roles assigned by accepted social norms. The concept of gender first makes sense when being performed. Similarly, performance on stage, including dances, is a demonstration of gender and sexuality. As Judith Butler suggests in Gender Trouble, 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame' (p.33). Furthermore, the stylization of gender performance in dance also reflects the consistency or transformation in people's perspective on gender norms. This essay will analyze the gender representations in different dances with specific examples of choreographers or choreographies. Some of them are conforming while some are subversive to the prevailing gender norms characteristic of patriarchy and heterosexuality, but all of them speak about the stylization of body and repeated acts in dance that give birth to gender performativity and conceptualize 'gender'.

II. GENDER PERFORMANCE IN DANCE THAT CONFORMS TO CONVENTIONAL GENDER NORMS

According to Butler, 'the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as [Simone de Beauvoir] has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation.' Among all the possibilities that the body demonstrates a historical situation, the dance performance, such as classical ballet, where gender representations strictly obey the prevailing gender norms is absolutely the mainstream. Ever since the advent of classical ballet in the 15th century in Italy, the society that we live in has always been based on heterosexual marriage and patriarchy, which constantly signify the gender binary between men

and women, and by extension, the domineering role of men. Elegant and formal, classical ballet never fails to keep consistent with, and even epitomize such gender norms. For instance, although both female and male dancers are required to be physically strong to perform classical ballet, a male dancer always has to be even taller and stronger than his female partner so as to demonstrate his supporting role by picking up or holding his partner. We can see stereotypical aesthetics with gender bias that tends to define male as strong and female as weak in classical ballet. Furthermore, the dance does not only exemplify the superiority of male dancers in terms of physical strength, but also serve as the site where the male dancers exert absolute control over female dancers and thus objectify them, as Susan Leigh Foster comments on the ballet *pas de deux*, 'He and she do not participate equally in the their choreographic coming together. She and he do not carry equal valence ...he embodies the forces that pursue, glide and manipulate it...[so that her role] traffics women to sustain various forms of male hegemony (pp.1-3).'

When many contemporary dance genres have started to challenge the conventional gender norms nowadays, classical ballet remains the opposite. Now let's get down to more details and discuss normative gender representations in today's classical ballet from multiple aspects, including the plot design, choreography and choreographers. To start with, the plot of today's 'Swan Lake' puts great emphasis on the sentimental and miserable feature of the swan-queen Odette who gives her heart to Prince Siegfried even though 'he promptly proves himself Prince Wrong by plighting his troth to her wicked lookalike Odile' (Macaulay, 2010). Furthermore, rather than explaining more on whether the heroine takes the agency to love and returns the prince's love, the story is more focused on her hesitation and complicated feelings about 'committing herself to accepting his support' (Macaulay, 2010). The story ignores the female agency to choose and love someone, making their relationship look like a pseudo-romance contract

where the female role only needs the male role's love to release her from the swan form.

Secondly, in terms of choreography, classical ballet is among the dances which insist on biased gender performances, even making the distinctions between female and male dance more conspicuous than before. For example, the practice of point work in classical ballet today is more representative of femininity than in the 19th century, whereas male dancers only use it for an 'eccentric or animal effect' (Macaulay, 2010). The point work of women also tends to be associated with the dichotomy of gender, in that it represents a 'tragic dimension', which thoroughly differentiates the female from the male and make the female the tragic Other. Furthermore, the man has to support the woman in pirouettes, but not vice versa; neither is the partnership in pirouettes allowed between same-sex dancers. While the term *pas de deux* originally means 'steps for two', dancers are more inclined to use it to refer to the men's task of supporting women, due to the remarkable increase of situations where men lift women in the ballet today.

Thirdly, the fact that choreographers behind classical ballet are mainly comprised of men is also problematic, making the gender binary and patriarchal system even more evident in this dance. The art of ballet largely relies on the performance of the ballerina, whose techniques and theories are mainly passed down by female choreographers. However, a ballerina's career only lasts for no more than twenty years makes women, and to make things even worse, the authorities in the industry have been deliberately excluding female choreographers. It is a sad fact that when the major bodies performing on the stage are female, the minds that direct their movements are mostly male. Though performance and individual dancers do not live forever, the knowledge and sparks in choreography can survive the time. Excluding female choreographers from classical ballet, in other words, is discriminating and neglecting the potential contribution that the female can make to the collective knowledge of ballet. It is particularly ironic that, female professionals still have to strive for an equal position as their male counterparts in a dance that is mainly expressed through female bodies, which in another sense, reinforces the impression of classical ballet as extremely patriarchal and exemplary of gender norms.

Similar to classical ballet, classical Chinese dance also demonstrates the gender norms that define femininity as soft and graceful, while masculinity as strong and powerful. Hand gestures in classical Chinese dance would be a great example of such, where orchid palms are only practiced by female dancers, while male dancers conduct sword fingers. Orchid palm, as suggested by its name, is a hand gesture that resembles the form of an orchid, where the middle finger and thumb are pressed close toward each other, while 'the other fingers edge in toward the middle finger laterally and on different planes to bring out different layers of the orchid's petals' (Wang, 2016). Since orchids, characteristic of beautiful blossoms and pleasant aroma, have long been considered as a symbol of elegance and feminine grace, the imitation of the flower using hand gesture represents the ultimate femininity of the dancer based on conventional gender norms. On the other hand, however, Sword finger, which is more often than not associated with martial arts and Kung Fu, is mainly practiced by male dancers. Sword fingers is a hand gesture where the index and middle fingers are pointed out together, while at the same time, the thumb is pressed towards ring finger and pinky, thus to imitate the form of a sword in Chinese martial arts (Wang, 2016). It is natural to relate sword fingers more with masculinity than femininity simply because of the fact that martial arts is more engaged by men rather than women according to Chinese gender culture. Of course, in addition to hand gestures, classical Chinese dance resembles classical ballet in emphasizing the dominant or supportive power of men and the tragic position of women in both storyline and choreography. Since China has a long history of strict patriarchy and conventional gender norms, classical Chinese dance is as equally convincing as classical ballet being a stylization of biased gender roles between men and women.

III. DISRUPTION OF GENDER NORMS? GENDERING BENDING IN JAPANESE DANCE

As a country renowned for its strict gender hierarchy, it might be surprising that Japan has engendered some of the most impressive gender bending performances in the history of dance, among which stand the *onnagata* performance in Kabuki theater, and *otokoyaku* performance in Takarazuka Revue. Since Kabuki is an all-male theater while Takarazuka Revue is all-female, both

theaters, inevitably, have to assign a 'secondary gender' to some of the performers during the performance, which is opposite to their biological gender. For example, kabuki is famous for its onnagata, which refers to female-role specialists (who are male), while Takarazuka Revue has attracted hundreds of thousands of female fans with their handsome and charming otokoyaku (male roles) portrayed by women. Both dances feature high stylized dance to create the ideal women and men portrayed by actors of the opposite biological gender, which exemplifies the fact that gender performance does not necessarily need to align with the biological sex of the performer, as long as the 'set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame' are carried out.

Kabuki was the first theater in Japan that defined 'the formal concept of androgyny (or gender bending)' (Robertson, 1992, p.423). with vivid demonstrations of its beauty during performances, in particular, onnagata dance. Besides the cross-dressing and exquisite make-up of onnagata actors, onnagata performance features the choreography where a dancer adopts and stylizes feminine movements and gestures, standing with the knees and back slightly bent to look smaller. The onnagata dancers speak in falsetto; their fingers kept together and they only walk with tiny steps in elegant and controlled manners. Furthermore, they keep their knees and toes pointed inward in order to create a perfect image of the ideal woman in the Japanese aesthetic. Therefore, onnagata is aimed to transcend real women and stylize the ideal women. Yoshizawa Ayame I, a top onnagata star of his time in early Edo and considered the founder of onnagata's art, first borrowed the Buddhist concept of *henshin* as his core theory for performing onnagata. *Henshin* stands for bodily transformation or metamorphosis in the most complete and comprehensive sense, including all levels of physical, mental, social, historical, and spiritual entity. Therefore, Ayame's theory of onnagata encourages male actors to transform into a woman instead of impersonating a given woman. For all the contributions that Ayame and his onnagata peers made to the performing arts marked by androgyny, their major objective of doing so, after all, was to please the entrenched patriarchy of the Edo society. An ideal onnagata in Kabuki, according to Ayame, 'was not an androgyne but an embodiment of patriarchally inscribed, state-regulated female gender' (ibid., p.424), and

would set an ideal archetype for women offstage to emulate.

Similarly, otokoyaku dance performed by female dancers in Takarazuka highly stylizes the movement and gestures of men in order to set a model of ideal men. According to Jennifer Robertson, most of the training of otokoyaku dance focuses on 'learning kata, which refers collectively to technologies of gender, including form, posture, sign, code, gesture, and choreography' (Robertson, 2008, p.12). An otokoyaku dancer must walk across the stage forthrightly, with 'her arms held stiffly away from her body, her fingers curled around her thumbs to form a fist'. She adopts a set of bold and expansive hand gestures to show her masculinity. Also, she must keep her legs apart when standing when she stands still (ibid.) In fact, the otokoyaku dancers are highly encouraged to imitate the behavior and movement of male celebrities with large female fanbase, in order to approach the ideal image of a perfect man. The femininity demonstrated by female roles, on the other hand, is used as a foil for the masculinity of the male roles. As opposed to the otokoyaku, a female role need to keep her elbows pinned against her side to show the constraint freedom required for her femininity.

Although exemplary of gender bending performances which seemingly challenge conventional gender norms, neither onnagata dance in kabuki or otokoyaku dance in Takarazuka is subversive to the domineering patriarchy in Japanese society. In fact, while providing a potential platform for non-normative sexualities during the performance, both dances even reinforce the prevailing gender norms in Japan. The reason is quite straightforward: exactly like the choreography team in classical ballet, both the production teams of Kabuki and Takarazuka are dominated by male, and therefore, both dances represent the male-oriented archetypes of female. Needless to say, Kabuki creates the ideal image of women who follow the commands of men, while the ideal image of men portrayed in Takarazuka also serves to elevate the image of men in order to attract female fans, both of which place male roles at a higher position compared with the female. Finally, since the 'gender-bending performance' in Kabuki and Takarazuka only deals with stories of heterosexual relationships, but never homosexual ones, we can hardly call the dances 'subversive' to the normative gender codes based on heterosexuality.

IV. REVOLUTIONARY CONTEMPORARY DANCES THAT DISRUPT GENDER NORMS

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler 'emphasized the agency of the body in the construction of gender and, by extension, of other facets of social identity' (Cohen, p.485). That is to say, the body is the primary site of 'gender trouble', where the social norms of gender not only get reflected, but also potentially get disrupted and remade. In the last section, we have seen that the practice of cross-dressing and non-normative gender performance in Kabuki and Takarazuka are still subject to heterosexual patriarchy and not demonstrating any motivation to revolutionize gender representations in dance to truly 'disrupt' the social gender construction. However, the 21st century has witnessed a great number of inspired modern dances and dancers attempting to bravely challenge the long-established gender norms based on heterosexuality and patriarchy.

As the definition of masculinity and femininity has grown more fluid recently, various forms of androgyny have been accepted in the art and entertainment industry, and equal rights between genders have made remarkable progress. Contemporary dancers are among those who constantly make efforts to demonstrate the equity of both gender dancers and issue of homosexuality through performance, and raise the public concern to eventually disrupt the gender norms, using stylized body representations. For example, some dancers have enabled the 'switched roles and equal roles between female and male dancers' (Contact improv, 2015), which deliberately dissociate male dancers with a strong image and female with a weak image, as opposed to before. In these dances, audiences will be able to see choreography that symbolizes equal strength of both genders. For example, in the dance 'contact improvisation' recently created by choreographer Steve Paxton, both the male and female actors have to rely and trust each other equally in order for the dance to work out smoothly. 'Contact improvisation' involves leaning one's weight on the other person reciprocally. The set of repeated acts (dance moves) in this dance does not only translate equal strength of both genders into patterned, aesthetical physical representations, but also shows how people's definition of masculinity and femininity has evolved recently. Furthermore, an increasing number of homosexual and transgender dancers have stood up for their dignity and rights, by

involving in the composition of dances that address stories of LGBT, and challenging the gender norms onstage and off.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the repeated stylization of the body, gender is performed and conceptualized in dance. As shown in the examples in this essay, although gender representations take various forms in different dance genres during different periods of time, each dance reflect the ideal of gender roles in the perspective of a specific group of people. With the evolution of the society, one should expect a greater variety of gender performance in dance which embraces inclusivity and constantly shapes the current gender norms.

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