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The cool stuff!: Gender, dance and masculinity

Helen Clegg, Helen Owton & Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson

Within the dance world, gender (as a binary concept) appears to be central to lived experience. Whilst dance is known as a feminine activity, males tend to be even more in the minority in more 'feminised' genres, such as ballet. However, in other genres, such as street dance, which allows them to conform to a more traditionally masculine identity, they are in the majority. Regardless of genre, however, males are more often found in positions of power within the dance-performer's world compared to their female counterparts. Dance teachers clearly have an important role to play in dance students' perceptions of gendered (in)equalities within the dance world, where the majority of dance teachers are female. To date, however, their perceptions have been under-researched. To address this research gap, 10 female professional dance teachers, ranging in age from 24 to 71 years, were interviewed. Data were analysed using thematic analysis through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism. Two salient themes were identified: coolness and masculinity, and male privilege. Participants perceived that gender inequalities did exist within dance genres and in the opportunities afforded to male and female dancers. These inequalities appeared to lead to a greater valorisation of male dancers in terms of physical and psychological characteristics. The perceptions of female dance teachers in general are important in relation to the socialisation of future dance professionals.

As Wainright and Turner (2006: 242) note,

Training the body invariably increases the physical capital¹ of a person. What we describe as 'athletic physical capital' can be divided into four main aspects: speed, strength, stamina and suppleness. [...]Without such discipline, a ballet dancer cannot achieve the 'attack' (the sharp, clean and incisive performance of a movement) that is necessary for style and effect.

For men, whilst sport is often constructed as a masculinising experience, exposing them to an environment emphasising purportedly masculine ideals such as "mental toughness" (Cook et al., 2014), and developing a masculine body, dancing is viewed as an "effeminate and suspect activity for a male body" (Migdalek, 2015, p.76). This is despite demanding physical characteristics involved in developing a highly trained male dancer. The "feminisation" of dance genres, such as ballet, often leads to stigmatisation and bullying of those males who do engage with certain dance styles (Polasek & Roper, 2011; Risner, 2014). To counteract this tendency, some who work within the world of ballet have engaged in what Fisher (2007) has termed the "making it macho" strategy. This attempt to hyper-masculinise dance for male dancers includes referring to dancers as athletes and sportsmen (rather than dancers), focusing on more physical, athletic dance moves for men, and highlighting the opportunities for a wide range of heterosexual "conquests" for male dancers. Risner (2009), however, found that boys can experience frustration at these attempts. Furthermore, whilst masculinisation of certain dance genres, such as ballet, emerges from a constrained understanding of what it is to be masculine, other genres are already seen as highly masculinised, for example, street dance (Holdsworth, 2013), and often attract more males. Thus, male dancers may perpetuate the dichotomisation of dance genres into "feminine" and "masculine" forms.

Although often initially bullied for engaging in what are perceived as more feminised dance genres, once situated within this subcultural world, males often experience a privileged position (Risner, 2014; Wright, 2013). Male dancers, for example, are often given more prestigious roles in productions compared to their female peers, even when the latter have more dance experience, and it has been found that males are more likely to win prestigious scholarships than are their female

¹ Bourdieu's concept of habitus as described by Crossley (2001) "illuminate[s] the circular process whereby practices are incorporated within the body, only then to be regenerated through the embodied work and competence of the body" (p. 106).

counterparts (Wright, 2013). The empowerment of dancers also appears to be drawn along gendered binary lines; males are encouraged to be creative and risk-taking whilst females are expected to be passive and to be an unquestioning “receptacle” for the wisdom of the dance teacher (Stinson, 2005). Such gender privilege and valorisation extend beyond the children’s dance studio and into the adult world of professional dance where men overwhelmingly occupy higher positions (Meglin & Brooks, 2012; Wright, 2013). For example, within the six top ballet companies in the USA only one executive position is held by a woman (Meglin & Brooks, 2012) and, in the UK, currently only a quarter of the Associate Artists appointed by Sadlers Wells are female (Associate Artists, n.d.). Meglin and Brooks (2012) highlight the frustrations of female choreographers in ballet who often encounter an occupational glass ceiling; they recount numerous examples where males predominantly, if not exclusively, occupy the highest positions in various ballet companies, especially companies that have gained national or international status.

Males in higher positions may act as role models for males who have already entered the dance world. However, within dance teaching the rarity of male teachers means that boys can lack the male role models considered so important in engaging and maintaining their involvement in dance (Risner, 2009). Research has found that male dance teachers highlighted the importance of a trusting and supportive relationship with a male role model in allowing them to negotiate their desire to dance and to feel safe in a profession that is considered inappropriate for men (Buck, 2011).

Dance teachers are four times more likely to be female than to be male (Risner, 2014) and their conceptualisations of such gendered disparities are important to capture given the impact that perceptions may have on teachers’ practices and identities, as well as on their students. This study sought to explore the perspectives of 10 female dance teachers vis-a-vis both their own and their male colleagues’ reported experiences of gender in dance. Drawing on symbolic interactionism as our theoretical framework, and employing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data from our interviews, below we analyse the key findings that emerged from the study. First, we portray the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism.

Theoretical Framework

Previous research (e.g. Thomas, 1996, 2003) has adopted various theoretical lenses, such as “male gaze theory” (e.g. Kaplan, 1983), through which to address gender and dancing. A slightly different key theoretical perspective that draws on social psychology and micro-sociology is that of symbolic interactionism, with its focus upon identity as an ongoing interactional achievement (Blumer, 1969). This theoretical framework emphasizes the processual nature of self and identity, as being actively developed and negotiated with others via interactional “work”, in an intersubjective and dynamic social process (Mead, 1934). As Jenkins (1996) notes, each individual’s reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity is constituted in relation to others in terms of similarity and difference. Furthermore, Snow and Anderson (1995) draw a distinction between: *social* identities and *personal* identities. The former are those we attribute or impute to others, whilst personal identities refer to the meanings attributed to the self, and the two may not necessarily coincide. Individuals seeking to present themselves in a certain way may find that this identification is contested by others. For example, male dancers seeking to present themselves in accordance with traditional “masculine” identifications may have such identities challenged by others who cast doubt upon their hegemonic masculinity due to involvement in what is often deemed the feminised world of dance.

Symbolic interactionist theorists, including Goffman (1959) in his dramaturgical approach to analysing everyday life, have highlighted the use of “props” such as clothing in people’s “presentation of self” as a particular kind of person to different audiences. Of relevance to our purposes here, Goffman’s work relates to the body and the ways in which people devise and maintain strategies for carrying out interactions with each other using the body as a vehicle for conveying a positive and credible presentation of self. For Goffman, as for other theorists working within this tradition (e.g. Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007), the body is a site upon which meaning is inscribed, and which mediates the relationship between personal identity and social identity. Consequently, the social meanings attached to the expression of bodily display are an extremely important factor in an

individual's sense of self, and in his or her feelings of social worth (Goffman, 1959). Germane to the current research, we sought to investigate how male dancers might be seen by female dance teachers in terms of displaying a traditional masculine self, given the feminine connotations of involvement in the dance world, particularly in relation to certain dance genres such as classical ballet. We were therefore interested in eliciting and examining the meanings held by our participants, rendering qualitative interviews the most appropriate research approach.

Method

Participants and data collection

Procedures involved the authorisation of the Ethical Review Application Form by the relevant UK University, and participants were required to provide full informed consent prior to the interviewing process. Recruitment of participants was via convenience and snowballing sampling, with the researchers contacting private dance schools² as well as placing an advertisement on the One Dance UK website. In order to be eligible for inclusion in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (i) being a female dance teacher, and (ii) teaching/having taught dance to both girls and boys. Via this approach, we assembled a sample of 10 full-time professional dance teachers, with ages ranging from 24 to 71 years (mean = 37.8 years). Participants taught a variety of dance forms including ballet, contemporary, street jazz, and modern, to a variety of age groups of girls and boys in the UK (see Table 1 for demographic information). Although participants highlighted the genres they consistently taught, many also indicated being able to teach a far more varied range of styles. The length of time participants had worked as a dance teacher ranged from around 3 to 30 years. Many of the participants had, however, helped out in dance classes since their teenage years, and had taught dance whilst completing their own dance teacher training. In effect, therefore, their experiences extended beyond their acquisition of formal dance teacher qualifications. Whilst relatively small, this sample size is common in thematic analysis research, and did permit sufficient in-depth data to be collected from the semi-structured interviews, in order to achieve data saturation.

Table 1: *Participants' demographic information*

| Pseudonym | Age (years) | Genres of dance taught | Type of school participant teaches at |
|-----------|-------------|--|--|
| Melanie | 71 | Ballet | Private dance school |
| Eva | 25 | Contemporary | Freelance dance teaching company |
| Claire | 62 | Ballet | Private dance school, recently retired |
| Freya | 41 | Ballet, Modern, Greek, Lyrical | Private dance school, primary schools |
| Anne | 29 | Ballet, Contemporary, Street, Commercial | Private dance school, primary and secondary schools, local theatre |
| Avril | 27 | Ballet and modern | Private dance school |
| Caitlin | 24 | Contemporary, musical theatre | Primary and secondary schools |
| Laura | 39 | Ballet, tap, modern | Private dance school, secondary schools, |

² Only private dance schools that provide after school, part time dance classes were contacted. Full time, vocational dance schools were not contacted as the female teachers in such schools may have a different experience of dance teaching and a homogenous group of female dance teachers was required for this study.

| | | | |
|-------|----|---|--|
| Heidi | 31 | Ballet, modern theatre, tap, lyrical jazz | FE college Private dance school, FE college |
| Esme | 29 | Contemporary, street, Bollywood | Secondary school |

An interview schedule was employed in order to focus the semi-structured interviews, and was informed by salient findings from the literature. Interviews focused on the following themes: (i) dance background; (ii) life experiences; (iii) experiences (and challenges) of teaching dance to boys and girls. Interviews were carried out at venues that were convenient to participants, and which afforded a quiet and private location where they could feel comfortable and relaxed, for example in an interview room of a UK university and, when interviewed by Skype or phone, in their own homes. Employing a semi-structured format allowed us to guide the conversation, whilst remaining open to our interviewees' introducing and developing their own areas of discussion. We thus used the interview format as a "conversation that has a structure and a purpose" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 3). We describe the interview here as "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena." (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.3)

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then read and reread to ensure familiarity with the data. Braun and Clark's (2006) 6-phase guide to undertaking thematic analysis steered the analysis, which involved Authors 1 and 2 immersing themselves in the raw data; moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data and the analysis of the produced data. Authors 1 and 2 searched for and identified patterns of meaning and interest in an attempt to understand the participants from an empathetic rather than a sympathetic point of view. Stages of data analysis included using an initial discovery sheet of recurring words, concepts and ideas that emerged from the data, to generate initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming the themes (Braun and Clark, 2006). Author 3 acted as a "critical friend" (Sparkes and Smith, 2014, p.182) in scrutinising and critiquing the results of the data analysis and in providing a more "distanced" perspective, as she was not directly involved in the data collection and so came to reviewing the analysis with "fresh" analytic eyes. This approach thereby provided a degree of research bracketing (Allen-Collinson, 2011), encouraging critical reflection on existing assumptions, and on initial interpretations. Interpretations of the data and analysis were thus reviewed, discussed, and critiqued by all authors, and member checking was used to enhance trustworthiness and credibility in a qualitative sense (Owton, 2015; Owton & Sparkes, 2015; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2016). Member checking occurred through participants being provided with their transcript, and later a draft of the paper, with a request to contact authors 1 or 2 should they have any comments. No participant wished to alter or make comments on either document. Participants' reflections are conveyed in their own words in the results section below, with pseudonyms employed to protect participants' identities.

Results and Discussion

From data analysis, the following themes emerged as salient: (a) Coolness and masculinity; (b) Male privilege.

Coolness and masculinity

Participants clearly identified the lack of males in dance teaching, particularly in ballet, tap and modern. They highlighted, however, that street dance appeared to have many more male dance teachers, with Caitlin (24yrs) noting that: "genres themselves are almost gendered". Previous research has documented males' reluctance to engage in dance styles such as ballet, due to its feminisation (Risner, 2009). In contrast, Anne indicated that street dance was the "cool stuff",

perhaps due to its embodiment of characteristics often associated with hegemonic masculinity displays (e.g. high levels of energy, strength, competitiveness). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this permits men to engage in presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) that conform to traditional notions of masculinity. Street dances such as hip hop can also enhance popularity and attractiveness to boys, given the masculinised image of these dance forms (Pascoe, 2005). Conversely, males who wish to express themselves through other, more “feminised” dance genres, such as ballet, are often interactionally-constructed and labelled as “homosexual” and may be subjected to bullying (Polasek & Roper, 2011; Risner, 2014) for contravening conventions of hegemonic masculinity presentations. However, Claire suggested that by incorporating more traditional notions of masculinity within a dance class any genre could be transformed into being “cool” for males:

I think the reason that the Northern Contemporary School of Dance in Leeds became such a Mecca for boys was they offered modern classes with sort of gymnastic element, much, lots of athleticism and it suddenly became cool and groovy. (Claire, 62yrs)

Interesting, cross-cutting gender-related elements emerged from the data analysis in relation to the socially-perceived gender-appropriateness of different dance forms, and consequently whether women or men were deemed more appropriate teachers for particular genres. Freya, for example, noted how one young boy preferred to do ballet rather than to do street dance with a female teacher:

The little boy that comes to do ballet, he does Ballet 1 with me... He won't do street with us, because it's being taught by a girl. And street dance in his mind should only be taught by a boy. He wants to be taught by a boy. So she's [his mum] looking for a class for him where he can be taught by a male teacher. Which is fine, but he's quite happy being taught modern and ballet by me. But he wants, he wants a boy teacher for street. And he won't consider going to my street dance teacher's classes, cos she's a girl. (Freya, 41yrs)

Such reinforcement of gendered boundaries in relation to dance genres may thus become socialised and ingrained into social actors at a young age.

Gendered assumptions also appeared to influence how male students perceived support from female dance teachers. Caitlin suggests that when male dance teachers say to the boys, “I've been there, you don't need to give up”, this is valorised by the boys because the male teachers present themselves as speaking with authority from their own lived experience. If Caitlin herself makes a similar supportive statement to a boy, they identify it as being “girly”, she reported, leading the boys not to “believe” her. This suggests a differential valorisation of women's and men's lived experience of dance in the context of male students' perceptions.

Along with differential valorisation of women's and men's experience and knowledge, it emerged from data analysis that the more muscular physiques, usually associated with, and displayed prominently by male dancers, were similarly prized. Heidi, for example, considered that her more muscular body permitted her to engage in and to display exuberant jumping and turning movements commensurate with those of male dancers. Male students could readily seek to emulate such movements:

...my build naturally is quite muscular and my natural ability within dance is jumping and turning anyway [...] Particularly grand allegro [...] so generally when I demonstrate I have the exuberant virtuoso elements that most boys are aiming for anyway, which I have often found quite helpful. (Heidi, 31yrs)

Despite being “more muscular”, she (and other women teachers) felt limited by the female body in terms of acting as a physical role model for boys. Heidi considered that there was a limit to how frequently and sustainedly female teachers could realistically expect to engage in these more “masculine” movements and bodily presentations:

I think female teachers can do a good job to a point and then at that stage there does either need to be two classes a week, one of each [mixed gender and single sex], or it does need to be handed across. Not because we're not capable, but because there is a realistic fact: we are not male. We will not be able to emulate those movements to the right extent all of the time. (Heidi, 31yrs)

Female teachers not only highlight the complexity involved in teaching boys but the balancing of performing masculinity and femininity through the female dancing body. Indeed, Risner (2009) found that whilst half of the male dancers in his study identified the importance of male role models and called for more male role models, to encourage boys to engage in dance, over two thirds of the dancers claimed that male dance teachers either had no noticeable effect or even a slight negative effect on their dance study. Such apparent complexities highlighted by the female dancers in the current study and in Risner's work may highlight the need for a heightened understanding of gendered bodies and for male dance teachers to help counterbalance the "feminisation" of some dance genres, in order to encourage boys to take up dance. Indeed, female dance teachers heavily dominate the teaching profession in terms of numbers and yet the concept of "male privilege" seems to exist in dance, as we now discuss.

Male privilege

It has been found that once men make the decision to begin and then remain dancing, they are often nurtured and privileged within the dance world (Risner, 2014; Wright, 2013) This may be due to their relative scarcity value, as identified by Eva when talking about how it is "significantly easier for boys to get positions" in dance schools and the dance-performer's world.

There's going to be so many more girls going to these auditions than boys and I think that's the funny thing, that we've got so many girls who are incredibly talented at it, that even I do it, myself like: oh God, we need some more boys, like we want some boys in the group, it's great to have boys in the group. (Eva, 25yrs)

This privileging was further reflected in the data from participants in this study who seemed to engage in presentations of a caring, nurturing self vis-a-vis the male dance students in their dance classes. For example, Anne describes how women on her dance teacher course treated a male student on the course,

he was useless [laughs]. But we used to mother him and look after him, so he passed, because he was so crap. I've got no idea how he got on the course, which is such a horrible thing to say. He never knew any of the work. He never, we used to have all these assessments and he never had a clue. So we just used to mother him and teach him everything and I don't know if he passed in the end. ...But we all tried our best to help him pass [laughs]. (Anne, 29yrs)

Such nurturing behaviour coheres with the presentation of a "feminine" caring self, and with normative expectations of girls' and women's "mothering instincts". In the dance world, it has been argued, girls and women are encouraged to be caring and sensitive whereas boys and men are guided to be strong and tough, thus encouraging the acceptance of stereotypical gendered behaviours in the classroom (Stinson, 2005).

When asked if her classmates would have responded to the male student in the same way if he had been female, Anne considered that this would not have been the case and identified that the male student did "get special treatment". Such privileging of males can occur early on in a dance teacher's career and is often part of the accepted occupational milieu within both the dance studio and dance teacher training (Risner, 2009; Stinson, 2005; Wright, 2013), which is heavily dominated by females in terms of numbers. Freya elaborated upon the notion of male privilege, extending it into the dance-performer's world, which, she argued, men were able to enter with relative ease:

Dance is such a fast-growing industry and it's so easy for the boys. So easy. They just, they have such an easy life. They can be so poor [in dance technique] and do so well. The guy that I was talking about that we grew up together. I perhaps would have liked to have done more choreography. I didn't push myself down that route necessarily, I was very set on teaching. But I was very good at choreography. We used to do competitions against each other and it would always be one or the other of us. But he's now working as a choreographer... And you think: hmm, that sounds like it would be rather nice. You know, it's, it's interesting when you weigh it up. But those opportunities are there for males, like they're not there for females. (Freya, 41yrs)

Interestingly however, Freya had previously claimed that the male dancer to whom she refers to above was "very good" in terms of his dance ability. In this instance, it can be argued that even when males are highly talented, they can face accusations of gender privilege. Such claims may in part arise from historical conceptualisations of the quality of male dancers. Claire and Melanie, both of whom were established professional dance-performers before retiring and becoming dance teachers, identified a change over time in the expectations and calibre of professional male dance-performers:

A lot more is expected of a man dancer now. Because you don't only [...] have to lift the girls and partner them, you have to be able to dance well yourself. (Melanie, 71yrs)

Moreover, Laura felt that the perceived privileging of males was, in part, due to boys being in a minority in the dance world so having scarcity value:

...there's not as many of them, whereas the girls are going to auditions and they're, you know, they're literally climbing over one another to try and get the job. Whereas with the boys there's not as many there. So maybe in a way it's easier for them to get work, I don't know. (Laura, 39yrs)

Nevertheless, research does provide evidence of male privilege within the dance world (for example, Meglin & Brooks, 2012; Stinson, 2005). Meglin and Brooks (2012) argue that many women in the world of ballet encounter a glass ceiling, with men overwhelmingly found in higher positions. The notion of the privileged male dancer seems hegemonic; so powerful and widely accepted that it is rarely challenged. Such gendered imbalances in power may, regardless of ability, encourage boys to develop a stronger self-concept and more confident presentation of self, which engenders belief in their *right* to aspire to the high status positions within the dance world, whereas girls might not envisage their aspirations in the same way. Within the dance studio girls are expected to engage in a presentation of self as passive and compliant, whereas boys are encouraged to engage in and display their bodies in more risky and challenging roles (Stinson, 2005). For girls this may promote the belief that they should perform as directed by others but not be creative or "create" (Meglin & Brooks, 2012) dances, thus preventing them from entertaining careers such as that of choreographer.

The issue of the quality of male dance teachers, highlighted above, was raised by several participants. Most considered the male teachers they had met to be highly skilled. It was, however, observed that males were even more of a minority in teaching than in the dance-performer's world. Both Freya and Esme considered that even for those males whose professional dance-performer's careers had ended, many would not even contemplate a career in dance teaching. Esme sought to explain this by associating it with the lack of recognition in dance teaching:

...maybe it's linked to sort of like the ego, maybe. Because being a teacher of dance you [...] don't really get that recognition of, erm: oh you can do that, or you can do that move. Or you don't get that applause all the time, or that well done, that was you know, that kind of recognition. Because generally you are the person giving that recognition. [...] I wonder if

the few boys who do start dance and then continue with dance, erm, maybe want a little bit more of that and maybe going into teaching doesn't really fulfil that desire. (Esme, 29yrs)

The privileging of boys in the dance studios and the expectations of higher status dance careers engendered by such privileging may create a hierarchy of careers associated with dance, which situates dance teaching as low status for males. The predominance of female dance teachers may serve to reinforce such conceptualisations. Nevertheless, for those males who do seek to teach dance, the relative rarity of male dance teachers *could* enhance teaching opportunities for males, even when not suitably qualified. Avril, for example, discussed her male employer's enthusiasm for employing male dance teachers for boys-only classes, without checking their credentials, and the subsequent deleterious consequences for student progress:

He's [the boss] so enthusiastic to have male teachers that he's hired men who are not qualified, without really vetting them, watching them, and then had to fire them. He had a very high turnover of male teachers. And what this does to the progress of the students is of course to slow them right down. (Avril, 27yrs)

The majority of participants related this privileging of male dance teachers to the perceived need for boys to have male role-models, reporting that gender can thus be perceived as more important than the skills and knowledge of the dance teacher, in inspiring boys to dance.

Throughout the interviews, the importance of presenting a credible dance self – and a visibly gendered self - to audiences (including teachers and fellow students) emerged as salient. In particular, Goffman's (1959) insights into how the body is used as a vehicle for conveying meaning proved illuminating. Interviewees revealed how the presentations of self of both male and female dancers and teachers were perceived in terms of gender-norm conformity – and in some cases, gender-transgression, for example when boys expressed a wish to engage in “feminised” genres such as classical ballet.

Closing points

For the female dance teachers in this study the gendering of dance genres highlighted the supposed limitations of their feminised bodies, thus valorising the male body. It also emphasised the restrictiveness of such categorisation of genres, which may impact on the ability of male dancers to explore their gendered selves. Many of the characteristics associated with participating in dance are often deemed antithetical to received norms of “masculinity”. Indeed, men seem to have more limitations on what is deemed acceptable especially when ascribing to dominant (and narrow) forms of masculinity. Therefore, men must negotiate their identities as men when engaging in dance, and one of these ways is to lean more towards the “cool stuff” that embodies more traditionally acceptable forms of masculinity. It could be for this reason that males constitute the minority in more classical dance environments within the “western” world (Risner, 2007) both as students and as dance teachers. Nonetheless, our research seems to support previous research that suggests that once men make the decision to begin and then remain dancing, they are often perceived to be nurtured and privileged within the dance world (Risner, 2014; Wright, 2013). Female dance teachers often conform to the gender stereotype of being “motherly” towards the male students, which privileges the male students within the dance studio. When this privileging extends beyond the studio and into the dance-performer's world frustrations may emerge around extended opportunities for male dancers that are justified in terms of the requirement for male role models. Female dance teachers play an important role in socialising their students into the dance world, and their perceptions of male dancers may impact on constructions of gender in dance, which then serve to perpetuate the perceived (and actual) gender inequalities in dance. It is important to note, however, that the males' experiences are available to us only second-hand. Future research could thus profitably explore male dancers' experiences directly, to give voice to their lived experiences of gender within dance.

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