

ICDF NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2014: "Men in Dance"

MEN DANCING

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Revelations, the outstanding signature piece by the esteemed Alvin Ailey dance Theatre Company, is one of my favourite dance works to watch. Something stirs within my soul and body whenever I see this piece. As a professional dancer of African ancestry an obvious explanation for this stirring could be the deeply moving negro-spirituals and African American cultural stories and physicality that drive the work. Yet I find that beyond the obvious, I am completely won over by the strong male presence in this modern dance choreography. As I witness men of high stature, moving powerfully and expressively alongside their female counterparts, I experience a heightened sense of humanity, artistic wholeness and fullness that leaves me deeply satisfied.

I am currently a dance professor at the School of Dance at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. The school offers undergraduate and postgraduate studies in dance that aim to prepare dancers (18-21 years old) for a professional career primarily in dance performance and choreography. My area of pedagogy at the institution is contemporary dance, but I choreograph in a hybrid style of contemporary/modern dance and Afro-Caribbean aesthetics. Although a professional dance artist in the market place, my experience with male dancing has been both in church and marketplace context and have largely been with African males. These dances are performed in various settings such as the concert stage, churches, schools and community events. As with most levels of dance teaching and learning, males are under-represented in the dance studio. As a contemporary dance teacher I do enjoy having males in the studio as they tend to bring an added dimension to the space in terms of gender, dynamics and physicality. Just by being a masculine body in the space usually dominated by female bodies creates a fuller picture of humanity; man and woman reflecting God's image and beauty through movement. I find that the male dancers, those with both limited and vast technical experience, also often bring a dynamic that encourages the group to greater levels of physicality and risk taking.

Teaching boys to dance or choreographing a dance with males can be daunting. When I was asked several years ago to teach dance to a group of young adults (18-25) from a training group in Jamaica I was petrified. The demographic of the youths was such that there were far more males than females and I felt inadequate due to a lack of experience with teaching boys who had no formal dance training. I feared making them look effeminate and did not have much confidence in my ability to maintain their interest in dance. After 3 years of working with those young people, I can declare that it was one of the most satisfying teaching experiences I have had in my early dance teaching years. I found the following strategies effective when working with this particular group of dancers in choreography.

- ***Make the choreographic process a collaborative one*** so that not all movement ideas are generated from the choreographer, but that they also come from the dancers themselves. While I held the bigger conceptual framework for the choreography in terms of its message, desired aesthetics and overall structure, the creative process of creating the choreography with this mixed gender group was made easier with giving the dancers material to explore and improvise around the concept, and including some of their movement ideas in the work rather than simply set the choreography on them.

In this particular group the boys enjoyed making suggestions and felt empowered by the opportunity to do so. It is very important to find ways to empower the males in dance due to the legacy of the form's association with the female gender. I found that the collaborative choreographic process ensured that the dance was pitched at the dancers' strengths and abilities and kept the dancers, in particular the males, engaged in the process. It must be stated, however, that expertise and skills are also needed to work in this manner effectively.

- ***As much as possible, provide the boys with a physical challenge.*** Their interest is maintained if there is a physical goal to work towards and to be overcome. With this particular group the males thrived on the challenge of lifts (with each other and with the females) and acrobatic feats or moving on different levels quickly. With knowledge of the males you are working with, you will be able to set the appropriate challenge at a level suitable for that particular group. All this, of course, must be guided by safe dance practice so as not to cause injury.
- ***In the choreography, vary the demographic of the groupings*** so that at some point in the dance the dancers are mixed gender, males and females dancing together; and at other parts in the choreography a group of males dance together or the females dance together. The females dancing together and the males dancing together create different energies in the choreography as well as create a sense of safety and security for each gender group. I found some of the young males to be less conscious about themselves and more bold and creative in their dance expression while dancing with other males.
- ***To facilitate artistic growth and development of the male dancer*** I would encourage exposing them to various dance styles: for example hip hop, modern/contemporary, lyrical jazz and Afro-Caribbean. The different genres allow the dancers to explore a wide range of emotions and dynamics. Utilizing the effective teaching principle of starting from the familiar and then moving on to the unfamiliar, I begin with what movement language they know - be it hip hop or cultural dances - and then extend them into further territories, say for example contemporary or lyrical dance.

In my formative experiences choreographing dances with mixed gender groups within a church context, I often utilized large, acrobatic movements with strong, forceful dynamics for the males and contrasting lyrical, soft qualities for the females. Not wanting the male dancers to appear effeminate, I ensured that the movement vocabulary reflected the traditional and expected notions of masculinity and femininity respectively. This was useful in the beginning, but over time this continuous choreographic menu becomes monotonous and predictable, and fails to expand the expressive range of the dancers.

In my current choreographic approach with unisex or mixed gender groups I tend to work in contemporary dance where the physical lines of distinction between males and females are blurred, meaning that both males and females perform movements of similar intensity, strength, speed and dynamics. Both my male and female dancers tend to enjoy the challenge but I have on a few occasions found my choreography conflicting with church viewers' expectations. From experience I have found that some congregants in the westernized church prefer not to have their feathers ruffled by men dancing lyrically or women dancing combat style or lifting males.

On one occasion I choreographed an all male dance piece with a group of young men from the church training program that I mentioned earlier. The piece was performed in a Sunday morning service and I was startled to get feedback from some of the male church leaders that they found the dance to be emasculating. It was not the first time these young men were dancing in church to my choreography and never before had there been such feedback. As I reflected on the situation to ascertain what was different this time, I realized that it was my first time exploring softer, more tender-like movement qualities with the men for a church performance. This dynamic quality I felt was rather fitting for the penitent and reflective mood of the song *Man After God's Own Heart*. I was moved by the authenticity of their performance but perhaps for many of the men in the congregation this was their first time witnessing the kind of dancing they would associate with men in tights in a theatre. Perhaps the inexperienced young men did not execute the movements as confidently as a more mature dancer would have. Glaring through my speculations was the uncomfortable revelation that some men associate tenderness with weakness and vulnerability.

As Christian choreographers, however, we need to challenge such perceptions in our choreography with men, as our Lord Jesus Christ himself was described as being both the *lion* (forceful and strong) and the *lamb* (gentle and calm); in both metaphorical images of Him all power dwells. While I would not have changed the lighter dynamic qualities used in the work - as I consider it important that this softer side of men be accessed and represented rather than feared - I would suggest that choreographers have a trusted leader in the church community screen the choreography before it is shown in the service if the dynamics or theme used for the particular gender counters traditional expectations. This is not screening in a sense of policing the efforts of the dance choreographer but to facilitate the type of meaningful dialogue and feedback that can enable the dance work to better serve and impact the community it is intended for.

I will conclude by saying that there is no prescriptive choreographic formula for including men in a piece of choreography. The approach a choreographer takes, I believe, is a function of the dance. Sometimes it may be necessary to have the men contrast the women in their movement qualities; at other times the meaning of the dance may be best communicated through the whole group displaying the same dynamics. I have found it important, however, due to dance still being considered the domain of women, that they be encouraged, empowered and engaged in the choreographic process and be guided like their female counterparts to worship and praise their Maker with absolute confidence and abandonment. A fearlessly expressive male dancer, trained or untrained, captures my attention every time.

Lisa Wilson