

## ‘Whether you are gay or straight, I don’t like to see effeminate dancing’: effeminophobia in performance-level ballroom dance

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“Whether you are gay or straight, I don’t like to see effeminate dancing”:  
Effeminophobia in Competition Level Ballroom Dance

Season Five (2009) of the USA version of the dance competition *So You Think You Can Dance* featured its first same-sex male couple in the open auditions.<sup>1</sup> Misha Belfer and Mitchell Kiber performed a samba routine in front of the panel of judges: Nigel Lythgoe (Head Judge), Mary Murphy and Sonya Tayeh. The performance of a samba by a same-sex couple did not go down well with the judges and, during the audition, the sequence edited to shots of the judges giggling at the couple. Nigel Lythgoe, after making a tasteless joke in which he compared the couple to Will Ferrell and Jon Hedder in the film *Blades of Glory*, dismissed Belfer and Kiber by saying that they would not appeal to the voting audience at home. In a final comment, Lythgoe then asserted that he would like to see Belfer and Kiber dance with girls rather than someone of the same sex.

As can only be expected, Lythgoe’s response to the same-sex samba dancing couple inspired accusations of homophobia from a range of writers, journalists and commentators. Michael Jensen argued that in this episode of *So You Think You Can Dance* ‘homophobia was packaged and delivered to American audiences under the guise of entertainment’ (2009) while Jennifer Buscher wrote that ‘Misha and Mitch seemed to be included in the audition footage as freaks for the judges and audience to laugh at’ (2009). In response to these types of comments, Lythgoe took to twitter to argue:

I hear I’m taking a beating on the web due to my comments regarding same-sex ballroom. I thought I was the most accepting of it on the panel? I am very

sad the world ‘homophobe’ is being used. That is someone who hates homosexuals. *I dislike effeminate dancing! Wake up and listen!*’ (quoted in Dehnart, 2009, emphasis added).

If we accept that Lythgoe is not lying, and that his specific problem with the dance was *not* that it was performed by a same-sex couple but that their dancing was effeminate, this incident may be read as illuminating the subtle difference which can exist between homophobia (the fear and hatred of homosexuality) and effeminophobia (the fear of effeminacy)<sup>ii</sup>.

Indeed, Lythgoe’s dislike of effeminacy on the dance floor was made apparent in the very first episode of *So You Think You Can Dance* in which he criticised dancer Anthony Bryant for incorporating a ribbon (a prop usually associated with female gymnasts) into his routine. In his criticism of Bryant’s routine, Lythgoe said:

You have incredible technique. I did not like the Russian, gymnastic, Olympic routine at the end. I didn’t find that strong enough. I thought - I’ve never seen a guy do it to be frank. I didn’t need to see that. You were already through with your ballet work. Your extension, your lines were superb. I’m sorry I didn’t like the second part of the routine at all, at all. I like to keep you strong and I think that softens you. I think it will put guys off voting for you. (quoted in Mark Broomfield 2010, p. 7)

Even though Bryant’s audition was a solo dance, and so was not offering a metaphor of same-sex sexual activity as in Belfer and Kiber’s sexy samba, Lythgoe still asserted that male viewers of the show would be put off by effeminacy. In a similar vein, Jack Migdalek identifies an episode of the first series of the Australian version of *So You Think You Can Dance* in which the judges criticised Rhys, an openly gay-identified male competitor, for his effeminate performance. Migdalek argues that while the judges ‘had no problems with Rhys’ homosexuality’ (2012, p. 10) Rhys ‘was severely criticised by the judges for dancing in a ‘girlie’ manner during the auditions’ (ibid.)

In this article, I shall analyse how a discourse of effeminophobia underpins the competitive world of dance (in particular ballroom dance) in order to consider how effeminophobia *may* operate as an anxiety that is distinct from homophobia. I am not suggesting that effeminophobia does not often contain a very definite strand of homophobia but instead am trying to demonstrate that in some cultural arenas – such as the world of competitive level ballroom dance – effeminacy *in itself* may be a source of anxiety rather than whether it connotes homosexuality. The article will first review the debates on effeminophobia before then considering the history of classical dance. It will then focus the discussion on the specific arena of competitive ballroom dance as represented not only in official DanceSport competitions but also in television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with the Stars* and *Strictly Come Dancing*.

### **Effeminophobia versus Homophobia**

Alan Sinfield has researched in meticulous detail how fear of male effeminacy dates back to the public disgrace of Oscar Wilde – one of Western society's first identified homosexuals (Sinfield 1994). Prior to Wilde's disgrace, effeminacy was read as the signifier of upper-middle class, male laxity and not a semiotic of homosexuality (Sinfield 1994, Bristow 1995). Indeed, as John Jordan argues, effeminacy used to be regarded as the signifier of a voraciously heterosexual man who cultivated feminine charms in order to impress his female admirers (Jordan 2001, 2009). It was only after Wilde's public disgrace (Wilde was one of Europe's most famous fops or dandies and, in an era predating the mass media, could be identified as one of the first celebrities) that effeminacy became read as *the* signifier of homosexuality. Although Wilde may have entered the courtroom charged with committing acts of sodomy, after

the court case he was *identified* as a sodomite. In this respect, Wilde was one of the first bodies in which the acts of homosexuality were seen to form a specific identity and, most importantly, the signifier of this identity was Wilde's effeminacy. For the first time there was now a public figure in which homosexuality was conflated with effeminacy. As can only be expected, from Wilde's trial arose a terror of effeminacy. To be identified as effeminate was now to be viewed as homosexual rather than an upper-middle class dandy or fop. In this respect, much of the anxiety surrounding effeminacy was due to the fact that it was now seen as *the* sign of homosexuality. The sociologist Eric Anderson coined the term homophobia to describe 'the fear of being homosexual' and argued that a key element in homophobia was a 'disapproval of men's femininity because it is associated with homosexuality (i.e. feminine men are thought gay).' (2011, p. 87).

However, as I have argued elsewhere (reference anonymised), effeminacy may not only inspire anxiety because it is read as the signifier of homosexuality but that effeminacy *itself* may also be a source of fear or concern. The effeminate man is 'disturbing the presumed link between biology and expected gender behaviours' (Annes and Redlin, 2012 p. 278) and drawing attention to the performativity of masculinity<sup>iii</sup>. Given that men, until relatively recently, have had the luxury of not having to think of themselves as gendered (Wittig, 1983 p.64) an act which demonstrates that gender is a 'free-floating artifice' (Butler, 1990 p.10) may be rather troubling. As Kath Browne has argued, 'when disturbing the presumed naturalness of the man-masculinity / woman-femininity binary individuals may find themselves subject to abusive comments, exclusions and physical violence' (2004, p. 332). Ki Namaste (1996) even coined the phrase 'gender bashing' to describe the violence often mobilised to regiment and police gender norms.

Yet the effeminate man is not only deconstructing the iterative binary system of gender but he is actively renouncing masculine privilege and descending the gender hierarchy to perform femininity. Therefore, a great deal of effeminophobic abuse *may* (but not always – see Annes and Redlin below) be inspired by a finely tuned misogyny. Insulting a male body because it is doing femininity is only an insult in a society in which women are deemed inferior to men. If Western culture ever did achieve true gender equality, describing a man as “girlie” would not be any insult at all.

Arguably, we learn this discourse from an early age as school playgrounds are notorious areas of vicious gender policing in which schoolboys will insult their peers with homophobic name-calling (Paechter 1998, see also Pascoe 2011). When an eleven year old schoolboy calls another eleven year old a “fag” or a “queer”, he is not suggesting that his colleague is sexually active and engaging in same-sex passion but rather he is insulting this boy in terms of gender performance. As Paechter has argued, homophobic terms employed in the school playground are used ‘to police the boundaries of masculinity and femininity’ (Paechter, 1998 p.103) and as such are conceptualised in terms of non-hegemonic masculinity rather than an insult about sexual orientation. Although couched in homophobic language, what is being articulated is a fear of effeminacy in itself and this effeminacy could simply be that a boy is friendly with the girls or perhaps favours performing arts and music over sports (see Parker 1996).

More recently, in their sustained study of homophobic discourses in rural areas of France and the USA, Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin found ‘that masculinity is more problematic than sexuality’ (Annes and Redlin, 2012 p. 277). Annes and Redlin argue that sexuality ‘is not problematic’ but that ‘how one displays gender continues

to be the source of much discussion' as 'all informants had a negative view of effeminate gay men' (Annes and Redlin, 277). Developing the research I did on media discourses of effeminophobia, Annes and Redlin concluded that:

In fact, it became clear that they did not dislike gay men in general.....they only expressed dislike for effeminate men. What they were expressing, then, was not a feeling of homophobia, nor a feeling of feminophobia as they did not express in their interview fear and dislike of women, but a feeling of effeminophobia. This term was first coined by Sedgwick (1991), and recently, more fully defined by Richardson (2009) as the fear of effeminacy— a fear widely spread in the Anglo-Saxon culture where “the effeminate man is either, depending upon his context, a figure of fun or a monster to be feared” (p. 529).’ (Annes and Redlin 288).

Similarly, various critics have argued for re-readings of classic media and literary texts by proposing that the effeminacy of the queer characters may be the unsettling aspect of the text’s discourse rather than how this effeminacy connotes homosexuality. Jonathan Allan argues that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is a transgressive text because of the way it ‘discomforts and unsettles the fixity of gender’ (2014, p. 81) as opposed to its identification of Molina’s effeminacy as ‘a stereotype for homosexuality’ (ibid) while I have suggested that many contemporary transphobic stereotypes in popular media may be a revision of the gender-dissident sissy characters found in classical Hollywood. Arguably, spectators of classical Hollywood films may have been giggling at the sissy’s gender transitivity as much as the suggestion of homosexuality (reference anonymised) and stereotypes of non-passing trans woman inspire the same response.

Sociologists have also considered how effeminacy is stigmatised and demonised within gay male culture – particularly in the realm of (internet) dating (see Baker 2003, Bergling 2001, Dam 2005).<sup>iv</sup> While there is certainly a case that in very homophobic locations gay men do not wish to be seen in public with another

effeminate man, as effeminacy is read as the signifier of homosexuality and so increases the risk of being gay-bashed, there is also the argument that, for many gay men, effeminacy is viewed as erotically numbing (Baker 2003). If a gay man's erotic investment is in the iterative acts of masculinity, then a body which does femininity may well be viewed as un-erotic.<sup>v</sup> Thankfully, there is no accounting for personal taste and a great many gay men do indeed desire effeminacy. However, it is fair to argue that given the discourses of effeminophobia in circulation in many internet dating ads (which may even be read as an attempt to eradicate effeminacy in gay male culture (Mowlabocus, 2010 p. 78)) the effeminophile is a minority in metropolitan gay culture.

### **Classical Dance and Effeminacy**

These particular anxieties about male effeminacy have always had specific relevance for the world of dance given that, in Western culture from about the 18<sup>th</sup> century, dance 'has been routinely gendered as a feminine cultural practice' (Boyd 2015, p.678; see also Hasbrook 1993). For this reason, dance 'has not been considered an appropriate activity' for men (see Burt, 1995 p.1).<sup>vi</sup>

This coding of dance as feminine may have arisen from the Cartesian dualism, which views preoccupations of the body as feminine (Bordo 1993; Spelman 1982); from an awareness that professional dance offers very poor employment prospects and financial security but most probably because of the way the dancer's body is objectified on the stage (Burt 1995). The male dancer challenges regimes of gendered spectatorship by displaying his body as an object of beauty and inviting the gaze of the spectator. As Mary Louise Adams explains, 'male dancers challenge expectations of how men should use their bodies' (2005, p. 67) as their physical presence is being

deployed 'expressively' (ibid) rather than 'instrumentally' (ibid) as would be the requirement in most accepted masculine arenas such as sports or athletics.

Given this reading of dance as feminine it is hardly surprising that, in recent years, one of the agendas in professional dance organisations has been to promote dance, especially professional dance such as ballet, as a 'macho activity' (Fisher 2009, p. 32) and so 'dance writers have borrowed heavily from discourses of sport and male athleticism' (Adams 2005, p. 64) in order to emphasise the strength and fitness required for dance rather than its artistic expressiveness. This has not only happened in the "high" art world of the Ballet but also in popular cultural representations so that Hollywood male dancers, from Gene Kelly onwards, have been marketed in terms of their sporting fitness, strength and athletic prowess. Kelly is actually famous for mapping particular dance moves to sporting gestures in order to masculinise the activity of dance (Clover 1995).

In very recent years, cinema and ballet have joined forces in their agenda to masculinise dance and one of the most popular British films in the past twenty years - *Billy Elliot* - may actually be read as a text *devoted* to the examination of the politics of effeminacy, effeminophobia and male dancing.<sup>vii</sup> As I have proposed (reference anonymised), *Billy Elliot* is arguably *not* articulating an anxiety about the assumed homosexuality of male dancers but instead demonstrates a greater concern with the supposed effeminacy of the activity. Billy's sexuality is never confirmed and indeed is not even a point of discussion within the narrative. Instead the film strains to demonstrate that dance is a masculine rather than effeminate activity. Throughout the film Billy often dances when he's angry and his impassioned flicks and kicks are coded more as aggressive blows rather than artistic expression. In one sequence, Billy punches the wall before his violent rage develops into one of his dances.

Similarly, for a film which is supposedly interested in ballet, it is interesting that *Billy Elliot* fails to show *any* actual ballet dancing on the screen (Sinfield 2006, p.167). Billy's dancing itself bears more similarity to folk, tap (Hill 2004, p.104) or even contemporary street dancing and the final sequence does not actually represent ballet dancing but simply finishes with an image of Billy's flexed calf muscle as he makes an athletic leap into the air.<sup>viii</sup>

Most importantly, *Billy Elliot* employs a convenient defining other in the form of Billy's childhood friend Michael. As Sinfield has argued, Michael is performing a type of 'queer inoculation' – a defining other for Billy (2006, p. 166). Yet, the interesting point is that Michael is *not* coded as gay but as incipiently transgender and so the final sequence represents Michael in the process of transitioning. In other words, if the film were investigating the anxiety of homophobia it would have given Billy a gay defining other rather than one which absorbed the fears of gender transitivity. Similarly, the final sequence of the film is all-male and the ballet production is Matthew Bourne's overtly homoerotic *Swan Lake*. In this respect, *Billy Elliot* can be read as text which is *not* overly concerned with the homosexual connotations of dance but with challenging 'the stereotype of the male dancer as weak and effeminate' (Morris 2001, p. 250). As Fisher points out, *Billy Elliot* was extremely successful in its endeavour to masculinise dance as (in a trend known as 'the Billy Elliot effect') applications from aspiring male ballet dancers increased dramatically after the film was released (Fisher 2009, p. 36).

This reading of *Billy Elliot* is *not* to suggest that homophobia is no longer an issue which shapes the public's perception of the world of male dancing. In recent years, greater acknowledgment of LGBT issues has meant that the world of dance has now been publically identified as a space that has always functioned as a safe haven

for gay men (see Morris 2006, p. 34). This is supported by quantitative research which has revealed that as much as 50% of male dancers in the U.S.A are gay-identified (Bailey & Oberschneider 1997). Indeed, many professional ballroom dancers, especially those in the Latin ranks, identify as gay (Marion 2008, p. 143).

However, the point is that dismissing anxieties about male dancers *purely* as homophobic is reductive as this must also be tempered with an awareness of effeminophobia. For example, Mark Broomfield argues in his qualitative analysis of the prejudices encountered by black, male dancers that:

What connects the three case studies might more accurately be described as effeminophobia. Though homophobia correlates all three case studies, it is the continued anxiety associated with the black queer male dancing body exhibiting characteristics apprehended as feminine that garners attention. (2010: 178)

As Doug Risner has argued, this anxiety about effeminacy is a definite problem within the dance world itself so that dance teachers and directors often use homophobic terms of abuse 'in order to emphasise the importance of adhering to strictly masculine behaviour' (Risner 2007, p. 144 and Boyd 2015, p. 680). Similar to the discourses within schoolyard bullying, when the dance teacher says '...you dance like a fag. We'll need to show you how to dance like a man' (Williams 2003, p. 71), that teacher is not suggesting that the student is gay (in a world where 50% of the men are gay-identified it would be a rather inappropriate insult) but rather that the dance performance is failing to demonstrate accepted codes of masculinity. In short, male dance is an activity which has not only inspired anxieties about homosexuality but has been subject to considerable effeminophobia - both inside and outside dance circles. This becomes particularly relevant when we consider the world of competitive ballroom dance.

## **Ballroom's Effeminophobia**

The world of competition level ballroom dance (DanceSport) is regulated by the *World Dance Sport Federation* (WDSF) which sets the rules for competitions in Standard and Latin ballroom dance. The five Standard dances are: waltz, tango, foxtrot, Viennese waltz and quickstep. The five Latin dances are: samba, cha cha cha, rumba, paso doble and jive.

On one level, ballroom dancing performs traditional, pre-feminist, gender dynamics in every dance (Leib and Bulman, 2009 p. 603). The man is not only permitted to lead a woman around the dance floor but 'is obligated to do so' (Marion 2008, p. 141). If male dancers are praised for their "masculinity", "strength" and "control" the judges' comments about female ballroom dancers will usually praise their "femininity" and "grace". As Leib and Bulman point out, on the competition ballroom dance floor, 'costumes, songs, and gestures coordinate seamlessly to produce traditional images of aggressive, domineering males and delicate, sexually receptive females' (Leib and Bulman, 2009 p. 603).

Yet, ballroom dance is not only a form of gender amplification but is also, in many ways, 'high camp' (Gainor 2006). Ballroom dancing may be performing archaic, if not even, exaggerated gender roles but, by their very extreme gender politics, these dance routines can be read as drawing attention to the performativity of gender. For example, in the paso doble the man plays the role of the matador and the woman is his cape. Men do not, in civilized society, wield women like capes and so the cartoonish gender politics of the dance have the potential to queer gender roles. Ballroom dance, in this respect, has the ability to emphasise that gender, like dance, is a learned and rehearsed script.

Leib and Bulman (2009) have argued that this awareness of ballroom dance as a high camp spectacle is one of the reasons why so many young, well-educated men and women – all of whom are the product of third wave feminism and contemporary gender politics – are prepared to conform to the regressive gender ideologies of ballroom dance. Leib and Bulman suggest that young people are not simply renouncing their political beliefs when they get on the floor but that these dancers are able to reconcile the performance of ballroom's pre-feminist gender ideologies with their more enlightened contemporary gender politics. It is for this reason that a ballroom dancing competition could see an 'assertive and confident business woman passively following a domineering male lead' (Leib and Bulman, 2009 p. 605) on the dance floor while such an action would have been unfathomable for this woman in any other area of her life. This 'assertive and confident business woman' being led around the floor can be read as indicative of contemporary postfeminist identification in which contradictory politics are often reconciled with a playful, ironic wink.

However, although dance is challenging gender regimes by its exaggerated pre-feminist ideologies a more transgressive element of the performance is the queerness of the dance technique itself – especially in relation to male dancers. A dancer once remarked to me that I danced 'a masculine cha cha cha'. A non-dancer, when told of this, asked innocently, 'Can there actually be a *masculine* cha cha cha? That sounds like an oxymoron.' The non-dancer's question draws attention to one of the key dynamics within standard and Latin dance in that men are required to demonstrate masculine traits such as strength, control and the illusion of macho dominance but that this must be synthesised with performative gestures which are traditionally deemed to be feminine (Leib and Bulman 2009, Bailey and Oberschneider 1997). Juliet McMains, one of the most respected critics of

competitive ballroom dance (2001, 2006, 2010), points out that male Latin dancers are queering masculinity in the very stylistics that are required of competition-level Latin dance itself:

Male DanceSport Latin dancers similarly straddle the two poles of hyper-maschismo and effeminacy. These men could be read as brutish and sexist in their continued need for physical control over women. They might also be considered as queer as drag queens in their exaggerated hip action and affected gestures. (McMains, 2006 p. 143)

For example, the basic technique of Latin (samba, cha cha and rumba) requires that a man move forward through the toe and ball of the foot rather than leading with the heel as a body would usually walk. The dancer then drives his weight forward, pushing into the floor, so that his knee and, most importantly, hip are locked into position. This not only gives the illusion of Latin dancers dancing on straight legs but, most importantly, creates the Latin hip movement or what many non-dancers identify incorrectly as a “wobble”. Obviously, this is not a traditionally masculine gait by Western standards and any man performing this hip-movement on the street would likely be subject to effeminophobic stares if not even verbal taunting. However, although this particular Latin movement of weight forward, toe-ball lead and locking hips and knees to create hip-movement may well give an impression of femininity this must also be paired with strong arm movements and deeply retracted shoulders blades to expand the chest and promote a peacock stance. Therefore, the official dance requirements of Latin American dancing creates a surreal haemorrhaging of gender semiotics in which signifiers of hyper-masculinity are paired with signifiers of femininity. This fusion of masculine and feminine is also echoed in the Latin dancer’s iconography as he may well wear a shirt which is open to the waist, often revealing a muscular and sometimes even hairy chest, but this costume will also be ornamented by rhinestones, sequins and sparkles.

Standard dancing may not be quite so queer, given that it does require a heel lead and the male dancer is attired in more traditionally masculine costume, but yet the heel lead of the Standard dances (with the exception of tango) must be followed by a rise onto the toes to give the graceful rise and fall so characteristic of waltz and foxtrot. Therefore, like Latin dancing, Standard requires a learned technique which reworks or even challenges gendered assumptions of masculine movement.

Arguably, this is why so many non-dancers identify the world of competitive ballroom dancing as camp. Ballroom dancing is not only exaggerating gender roles which, by their very excess, can be read as caricaturing gender politics but it is also combining gestures which may be read as both masculine and feminine so that sashays and swinging hips are paired with macho bravado. It is for this reason that Celine Pettyjohn argues that ‘dance in general has played both a conservative and a progressive role in gender norms.’ (2007, p. 30).

However, this interpretation of ballroom as a camp activity, which draws attention to the performativity of gender roles and critiques essentialist ideas of masculinity and femininity, is *not* the reading shared by professionals within the world of competitive dance. Although participants seem prepared to accept that they must perform archaic gender roles on the dancefloor (Leib and Bulman 2009), they view these roles as a fixed binary that is premised on ideologies of essentialism. Juliet McMains argues that although non-dancers may read ballroom dancing as ‘a self-conscious parody of gender’ (2006, p. 144), DanceSport participants, by contrast, ‘usually read the performance of gender in competition as merely an extension of gender roles assumed in heterosexual courtship off the dance floor, behaviours most assume to be universally recognised’ (2006, p. 144). Hazel Fletcher (one of the most respected ballroom dance tutors and judges in the contemporary scene)<sup>ix</sup> argues that

the movements in ballroom dance are simply exaggerated versions of gendered actions which are not only accepted as hegemonic in contemporary society but assumed to be physically inherent (see McMains, 2006 pp. 144-145). In her interview with McMains, Fletcher pointed out that dance coaches should not have to teach a male dancer how to be masculine or a female dancer to be feminine as the gendered performance in ballroom dance is something which is a development of the dancers own gender identifications off the dance floor. Fletcher concludes that dance coaching should simply be about ‘reminding the dancers of their own role in life’ (Fletcher quoted in McMains, 2006 p.145). As Jane Boyd points out, this reading of dance as an extension of essentialist gender identities may well arise from the fact that dance is a ‘body-based expressive form’ (Boyd, 2015 p. 677) and, as such, is ‘associated with truth, “realness”, or authenticity despite being highly codified’ (ibid). Although the body is a cultural construct (we are all body-builders who shape and style our bodies on a daily basis and there cannot be an interpretable body without cultural regimes which both inscribe and reify the body)<sup>x</sup> there still seems to be an assumption, especially in professional dance circles, that the body is immutable and essentialist.

However, as I’ve argued already ballroom dancing – especially Latin – does not require a performance of traditional masculinity but a constructed, queer masculinity in which feminine movements and gestures are blended with extreme machismo. Ballroom dancing requires that boys revise and relearn masculinity. A male Latin dancer may not stride across the floor, charging forward with a confident heel lead as this, in accordance with WDSF regulations, is incorrect technique. Instead, the young male ballroom dancer is compelled to learn a particular feminine movement (in the case of Latin this is the toe-ball lead and hip movement) and then superimpose codes of masculinity onto this.

This, however, raises the key point in that these issues – performing camp gender roles and combining extreme masculinity with femininity – have considerably more relevance for the *male* ballroom dancer than for the female dancer. The female ballroom dancer presents only traditional gender performance in all the dances. There are no examples of the woman requiring to synthesise a performance of masculinity with her femininity in the Latin or Standard repertoire and although great strength is required for couple dancing (Ginger Rogers famously quipped that she had to work even harder than Astaire – doing everything backwards and in three inch heels) this strength or labour must *not* be visible. Ballroom dancing accords with the traditional requirement of femininity in that great effort is required to perform feminine iconography but this labour must always be concealed (Skeggs 1997).

Even when a female dancer does challenge the requirements of femininity, and brings masculine traits to her performance, the world of competitive ballroom dance is able to strategically contain this threat through recourse to the narratives available to make female masculinity acceptable. This was evidenced in Season 13 (2011) of the U.S version of *Dancing with the Stars* in which the professional female athlete – Hope Solo - was one of the celebrity contestants. As Butler et al. argue (2014), Solo's performances were extremely problematic for the show in that they challenged ballroom's coding of femininity. Solo, a professional women's soccer player, troubled the judges because of the 'masculine athleticism' (Butler et al. 2014, p. 362) she brought to every dance. However, although Solo's masculinity was troubling for the heteronormative framing of the dance, this gender dissidence was contained in the show's episodes through being couched in a tomboy narrative (Butler et al. 2014, p. 364). The suggestion was that, like young tomboys, Solo was going through a learning process and would eventually be able to demonstrate appropriate femininity.

Butler et al. argue that the choreography for Solo's dances often reinforced this tomboy narrative as, for example, her foxtrot which was set to the song *You've Got a Friend* which was featured in the children's film *Toy Story*. Butler et al., point out that the narrative of Solo's foxtrot 'prompted a dance and costume that was playfully childish' (2014, p. 369) and therefore helped to frame Solo as the immature tomboy. As Butler et al. suggest, it is hardly surprising that 'the climax of the narrative constructed by *DWTS* had Solo transformed from overly masculine to significantly feminine' (2014, p. 368).

The case of Solo evidences one of the key distinctions between the anxiety surrounding a female dancer who is failing to perform femininity and a male dancer who is failing to perform masculinity. The female dancer's masculinity is read in terms of childish inability or incompetence. She has simply failed to master the technique of feminine dancing. By contrast, the male dancer who is not succeeding in performing the intricately queer performance of ballroom masculinity is read within the existing discourses of effeminophobia which have coloured the world of dance for many years. As Fisher emphasises, 'it's not so easy for men, who are rarely able to play with conventional markers of masculinity without being suspect' (2009, p. 38). The female dancer has never been viewed as suspiciously gender dissident in the way the male dancer has been. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a female version of *Billy Elliot*.

Given these anxieties about gender performance, which exist within and without ballroom dance cultures, it is hardly surprising that a distinct effeminophobia pervades the arena of competitive ballroom dance. Echoing the criticisms voiced by Lythgoe on *SYTYCD*, Hazel Fletcher affirms that she has no concern about the

dancers' sexual identification but that she is troubled by effeminate dancing on the competition floor:

'I have no interest in what kind of sexuality you want to pursue off the dance floor, but when I'm judging, when I'm watching a dancing competition, I want to see a man dancing as a man with a woman dancing as a woman. .... *what I am anti is effeminacy on the floor, from a man.*' (Hazel Fletcher, quoted in McMains, 2006 p. 143, emphasis added)

On one level, Fletcher's comments are simply emphasising that ballroom dances are metaphors for heterosexual courtship and, as Butler as pointed out, 'the heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine"' (1990 p. 23). If dancers are not performing appropriate gender roles then how can the dance function as a symbol of heteroeroticism?

Yet, I should also argue that effeminacy on the ballroom dance floor shatters the practitioners' belief in inherent gender identities and force a tacit acknowledgement that gender is both iterative and performative. Effeminacy draws attention to the fact that the male ballroom dancer is not dancing *as* a man but *like* ballroom's construction and codification of masculinity. Effeminate dancing can show that ballroom is a type of masculine drag in which men are very much doing a specific type of masculinity.

Arguably, one of the pleasures of ballroom dancing (especially Latin) is that it flirts with the codes and conventions of masculinity but always secures this gender dissidence within a heterosexual framing (see Boyd, 2015 p.679). The male ballroom dancer's camp or queer performance, therefore, becomes merely a stylised aesthetic; the rollercoaster thrill of watching a male body perform both masculinity and femininity in the safe containment of a heteronormative dance. What protects the gender-dissident Latin dancer from being read as effeminate is that he is paired with a

female body performing excessive femininity. Dancing on his own, the hip-flexing Latin dancer may well look effeminate but, when paired with the hyper-feminine female partner, his movement appears masculine by comparison. In this respect, it is the female body – performing exaggerated femininity – which inoculates the male dancer from the dangers of being read as effeminate.

Returning to Lythgoe's comments about same-sex ballroom dancing couple Misha Belfer and Mitchell Kiber on *So You Think You Can Dance*, it can be argued that his negative comments were not expressing an anxiety about the suggestion of same-sex passion in the couple's samba but of how the already precarious identification of masculinity within the performance of ballroom dance was destroyed without the all important anchorage of the female body as one half of the partnership. Without the foil of the female partner's excessive femininity, the same-sex male couple challenges not simply gender roles but, more importantly for the competitive dance world, the very technique of dance itself. The male ballroom dancers' feminine moves would cease to be an aesthetic or style but become an identification and, as such, strengthen the assumed association of male dance with effeminacy. Given that dance has struggled for so many years to be viewed as masculine sport, practitioners may, quite understandably, be anxious about any representation which suggests that dance may actually be an effeminate activity.

### **Negotiating effeminophobia in same-sex ballroom dancing**

Following Lythgoe's much debated criticism of Misha Belfer and Mitch Kiber, there have been two other performances of a male same-sex ballroom couple on dance talent shows. The following season of *So You Think You Can Dance* (Season 6), featured same-sex couple Willem De Vries and Jacob Jason (performing a rumba –

the dance often described in dance circles as “a vertical expression of a horizontal act”) while the UK talent show, *Britain’s Got Talent*, featured in 2012 (Season 6) a same-sex married couple - Bradley and Soren Stauffer-Kruse - who managed to reach the semi-finals with their elaborate ballroom routines.

De Vries and Jason received considerably more favourable comments from the *So You Think You Can Dance* judging panel than Belfer and Kiber in the previous season.<sup>xi</sup> The most effusive praise for the couple’s dance came from the third judge, Mia Michels, who, throughout their performance, had been rather teary eyed. However, instead of praising the technique of the dance, Michels lauded the gay affirmation politics of this representation saying that ‘I celebrate the courage that you guys have to just expose yourselves and your hearts and your passion and who you are’. In other words, Michels’ praise of the couple’s dance was not premised upon their technical accomplishment but how these brave men were ‘advocates for young gay people’ (Buscher 2009). The point is that the judging panel were now emphasising issues of gay affirmation politics rather than focusing on the intricacies of the dance routine and technique. Perhaps due to the backlash of criticism *So You Think You Can Dance* received over Lythgoe’s comments about Belfer and Kiber, this episode of the talent show coded a same-sex male couple as ‘champions for the world of same-sex dance’ (Buscher) and, as the couple also emphasised, their dance audition was more concerned with making ‘sure that America knows that there is a whole world of same-sex dancers’ (Buscher) rather than affirming how strong and masculine a male same-sex couple could be. In this respect, the representation of Belfer and Kiber was actually side-stepping the issue of ballroom dance culture’s effeminophobia by placing the emphasis on gay affirmation politics, and the

importance of positive media representation for young gay viewers, than in challenging concerns of how same-sex ballroom dancing was read as effeminate.

A similar strategy happened in Season 6 (2012) of *Britain's Got Talent* where married gay couple Bradley and Soren Stauffer-Kruse (who performed under the title 'The Sugar Dandies') were coded as representatives of the political importance of same-sex marriage. All the judges (with the exception of Simon Cowell) praised the couple's expression of love for each other in their dance routine. Given that discussions of legalizing same-sex marriage were happening in Britain at the time it is hardly surprising that *Britain's Got Talent* was interested in representing a charming married couple as ambassadors for the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Yet, as with De Vries and Jason on *So You Think You Can Dance*, the issue of effeminacy, and the possible anxiety this may cause, was cloaked in the rhetoric of gay affirmation politics. Like De Vries and Jason, The Sugar Dandies' dance was praised by the judges because of the way it was a shining example of homonormative coupling rather than how it challenged the issue of effeminacy in the same-sex couple dance.

Recently, there have been discussions about whether or not the British TV dance show *Strictly Come Dancing* will feature a same-sex couple in forthcoming seasons.<sup>xii</sup> While those in favour of the inclusion have pointed out that same-sex marriage is now legal, and so there should be no problem with the representation of a same-sex couple on a BBC television show, those opposed to the inclusion have argued that a same-sex male couple will look 'ridiculous' and will (echoing Lythgoe's comments) lose viewers from the show.<sup>xiii</sup>

It is important to note that *Strictly Come Dancing* is one of the more gay-friendly television shows on the BBC. *Strictly* has not only included a number of

openly gay male celebrities (Julian Clary, Russell Grant, Julien MacDonald, John Barrowman) and gay-identified professional dancers (Robin Windsor and Ian Waite) but has foregrounded a particular gay male sensibility through its inclusion of two openly gay-identified judges, Craig Revel Horwood and Bruno Tonioli, who have often couched their critique of the couples' performances in nudge-nudge-wink-wink style innuendo. (Toniolo crooned about the pleasures of watching Harry Judd's 'rippling muscles' and 'samba with pecs appeal' in season 8.) Indeed, *Strictly* even represented male-male kisses. Gavin Hensen's quickstep contained a moment where he kissed (some might even say "snogged") Toniolo (who performed swooning delight after the smooch) while in series 12 Mark Wright, overjoyed that Revel-Horwood was finally praising his dancing, ran up to the judges' table and kissed Revel-Horwood on the lips. Given that there is remarkably little lip-on-lip heterosexual action in the show (couples usually only have a peck on the cheek after their dance) these two same-sex kisses do stress that *Strictly* is not a show which is articulating an anxiety about identifying homosexuality in its diegesis.

The question remains as to whether *Strictly Come Dancing* will actually feature a same-sex couple but as I have argued here, the anxiety within the world of dance about this possible inclusion may have more to do with effeminophobia than homophobia. Unlike the representation of De Vries and Jason and the Sugar Dandies, *Strictly Come Dancing* does not feature couples who are romantically involved and so couching the dance in a narrative of gay affirmation politics or homonormative coupling would not be applicable. Instead, a same-sex male couple would simply be a display which draws attention to the performatively queer spectacle of ballroom dance and challenges assumptions of dance as a "natural" extension of innate gender. Without the binary structure of the male dancer paired with the hyper-feminine female

partner, the gender dissidence of male ballroom technique becomes clearly visible. If the masculinity of ballroom choreography is exposed as a learned and stylised technique then the spectator may become aware of how *all* masculinity is merely an iterative script. If the ‘Billy Elliot effect’ recruited more boys into ballet, it has been suggested that *Strictly*’s inclusion of male sports stars, such as Matt Dawson, Gareth Hensen, Mark Ramprakash, Louis Smith and Darren Gough (who all ranked highly in the competition), may have inspired boys and young men to take up ballroom through the show’s conflation of dance and masculine sportsmanship (Holdsworth, 2013 p. 171). *Strictly*’s rhetoric suggests that male athletes do well in the competition *because* they have physical strength and so the show draws a conflation between an assumed inherent masculinity and success in the world of DanceSport.<sup>xiv</sup> The movement in the cha cha is not a wiggle but a muscular flex of quads and glutes. If competitive level ballroom dance has struggled to conflate and essentialise masculine strength and dance technique in the public perception of the sport, a same-sex couple could challenge this ideology. Without the hyper-femininity of the female partner, the hip-flexing cha cha dancer or toe-rising waltzer is demonstrating that masculinity is as much a learned technique as ballroom dance.

When Canadian dance legend Rex Harrington<sup>xv</sup> states ‘Whether you are gay or straight, I don’t like to see effeminate dancing on stage’ (quoted in Boyd, 2015 p. 680) it seems that effeminophobia, rather than homophobia, may well be an obstacle in integrating the world of competitive dance with contemporary gender and sexuality politics. It may take many more Billy Elliots and *Strictly* sportsmen to make young men consider that there is such a thing as a masculine cha cha cha.

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### **Video and Television Texts**

*Strictly Come Dancing*. 2004 - . BBC1. UK.

*Dancing with the Stars*. 2005 - . ABC. USA.

*So You Think You Can Dance* 2005 - . FOX. USA

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<sup>i</sup> *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005 -) is an American dance talent show in which dancers perform in open auditions, held in major US cities, in order to demonstrate their dance ability. If these dancers are allowed to progress to the next levels, their dance technique is tested as they are required to dance in a variety of different styles and genres. The series is an international franchise with shows broadcast in more than thirty different countries.

<sup>ii</sup> The word “effeminophobia” was coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991).

<sup>iii</sup> The concept of gender performativity was developed by one of the most influential gender theorists in recent years: Judith Butler. Reworking the Nietzschean philosophy that there is no doer that precedes the deed, Butler argued that ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its result’ (1990, p. 33).

<sup>iv</sup> Tim Bergling coined the term ‘sissyphobia’ which, in many ways, is a synonym for effeminophobia. However, Bergling’s focus is on the anxiety about effeminacy within gay male culture and, in particular, gay male concerns about being labelled as a sissy (p. 9). In this respect, it is fair to think of effeminophobia as the general anxiety about effeminacy, as expressed by both gay and straight cultures, while sissyphobia denotes the specificity of discourses within gay male cultures – particularly the world of dating.

<sup>v</sup> Of course, this interpretation is premised on the idea that gender is the defining attribute in eroticism. It has been the agenda of much of queer theory to argue that the gender of the sexual object choice may not be the only factor in sexual desire. Some people, for example, may desire a specific sensation or sexual act rather than the gender of the person who is performing the act (see Sedgwick 1990).

<sup>vi</sup> It is interesting to note that, initially, the anxiety about the male dancer may have had more to do with class discourses than with concerns about effeminacy. As Ramsay Burt argues, cultural concerns about men entering the realm of professional dance were inspired by ‘the development of modern,

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middle-class attitudes towards the male body and the expressive aspects of male social behaviour' (Burt, 1995 p. 12).

<sup>vii</sup> A commercial and critically acclaimed success, *Billy Elliot* has also been the subject of considerable academic debate (Hill 2004, Lancioni 2006, Sinfield 2006, Weber 2003). The film narrates the story of a young, working-class boy growing up in a mining village in North East England during the miners' strike of the 1980s. Instead of attending his boxing classes, Billy develops an interest in ballet and has to contend with his family's reluctance to allow him to engage in the activity.

<sup>viii</sup> As Brenda Weber points out, the final scene of Billy moving to the stage wing and having his cloak removed bears more similarity to the action performed by a boxer before his match than a ballet dancer (2003). This is not only an ironic reference to Billy's past, in which his family tried to insist that he should take boxing rather than ballet classes, but is also a visual coding of ballet as masculine athleticism for the film's spectator.

<sup>ix</sup> Hazel Fletcher and her husband Alan were World Professional Latin Champions 1977 – 1981. Fletcher now sits on the *Committee for Artistic Standards and Excellence* set up by the *World Dance Sport Federation* in order to maintain standards of technical and aesthetic performance in the world of competition ballroom dance.

<sup>x</sup> As Butler asked 'Is there a "physical" body prior to the perceptually perceived body? An impossible question to decide.' (1990, p. 146.) As the body is both discursively constructed and perceptually inspired, the concept of a fixed or immutable body is open to debate.

<sup>xi</sup> It is important not to overlook the fact that De Vries and Jason presented a more technically accomplished, professionally executed dance sequence than Belfer and Kiber had in the previous season. In De Vries and Jason's rumba, lines were sharper, cleaner and, most importantly, there were no stumbles in the dance.

<sup>xii</sup> *Strictly Come Dancing* (known affectionately as *Strictly*) first appeared on the BBC in 2004 and was a revival of the 1980s show *Come Dancing* with a new twist in the format of pairing celebrities with professional ballroom dancers. A cross between a game show and a talent show (McCains 2010 p. 262), *Strictly* also bears similarities to the type of transformation narratives made popular in make-over TV shows in which the participant gains a new skill and sense of personal and/or physical improvement (McCains 2010, p. 261). Now into its thirteenth season, *Strictly* continues to be one of the BBC's most popular shows and the format has been sold to many countries around the world where it has the title *Dancing with the Stars* presumably because other countries would not appreciate the reference to the original *Come Dancing* series. The premise of the show is that a celebrity is paired with a professional ballroom dancer and, every week, dances one of the set dances from the ballroom repertoire of standard and Latin American dances.

<sup>xiii</sup> Opponents of the proposed changes have included the heterosexually identified professional ballroom dancer James Jordan (see McCormick 2015, Powell 2015) and the gay identified celebrity GP Dr Christian Jessen (2015).

<sup>xiv</sup> In a number of interviews, the professional dancers on *Strictly* have affirmed that the best celebrity contestants are always sports people because they have strength and endurance; a mind-muscle connection and a commitment to the regimes and demands of training.

<sup>xv</sup> Harrington is one of Canada's most acclaimed ballet dancers. Made an *Officer of the Order of Canada* in 2000, he was then added to *Canada's Walk of Fame* in 2005. In 2006, York University Canada awarded Harrington an Honorary Doctorate for his outstanding contributions to dance and the performing arts.