



Female-male

“Dance is for girls!” What boy who has chosen to dance has not been bombarded and taunted with this cliché by his foot-balling classmates in the playground? Remember how *Billy Elliot* was obliged to take up boxing rather than *entrechats* if he wanted to be accepted as a real male.

Dance evidently reflects ideas of masculinity and femininity, which differ according to the period or culture. We have forgotten how the *ballet de cour* (court ballet), the forerunner of classical ballet, was originally the preserve of gentlemen. It was only during the Romantic period that ballet became focused on the figure of the ballerina, relegating male roles to a lesser importance. The tango, a dance for couples born on the pavements of Buenos Aires, has also been turned on its head, as originally it was danced by men only. It would have been quite unseemly to have danced it like that in the Paris *salons* where it was all the rage in the early twentieth century!

So, there are clearly men’s dances and women’s dances; movements, steps and attitudes which are more suited to one sex than the other. There are others in which the two come together and, in their incessant close contact, evoke the relationship which has bound them together since the dawn of time. Social norms, values and ideals ascribed to the movement often dictate gender roles. But, it must be said, there is also a physiological dimension involved. There is indisputably a difference in muscle build, morphological structure and energy between girls and boys. Dance is a reflection of this fundamental identity issue. This *Parcours* deals with the subject.

Nevertheless, contemporary dance has sought to move beyond gender-based roles, preferring to encourage equivalent movements. Hip-hop has moved in this direction, too. Urban dance originally grew out of virile challenges, but has since given ground to female performers.

“**Baroque dance**”, as we know it today, is a reconstitution of *belle danse* (French noble style) as practised by nobles and courtiers from the sixteenth century, and which forms the basis of western classical ballet. Originally it was performed by men only. Indeed, dance formed part of a gentleman’s education. It fostered agility, as a preparation for combat. It ensured the good posture and physical elegance which were essential attributes for members of the aristocracy. A great dancer himself, Louis XIV had a dancing lesson each morning before going out hunting. In the 1970s, Francine Lancelot initiated the restoration of this choreographic heritage. She based this on the numerous tracts written by dancing masters of the period, in particular Louis Guillaume Pécour. Here, the dancer *étoile* **Jean-Christophe Paré** brings one of his many



choreographies to life.

Over the course of the succeeding centuries, ballet continued to develop and, during the Romantic period, pride of place was given to ballerinas.

In a classical ballet *pas de deux*, like the one shown here from the second act of *Swan Lake*, the male dancer is there to support his partner. He can then help her to accomplish extreme *arabesques* and *développés* and moves aside whenever she is able to perform a figure alone. His participation appears to be limited to that of a counterweight or porter. For, just as the *corps de ballet* serves as a backdrop to the leading couple, the male dancer's role is to show off the virtuosity of the ballerina he is supporting. But his few mimed gestures communicate the meaning behind the duet, expressing the fire in his heart which is enflamed by the grace and elegance of this strange bird-woman. But make no mistake, this *pas de deux*, which was restructured by Marius Petipa in his 1985 choreography of the ballet, also includes sequences or variations in which the male dancer can display his talents to the full. Even so, the story seems to revolve more around the female character and reveals her ambivalent nature. The other face of the pure white Odette is that of the dark, malevolent Odile. Other choreographers have nonetheless offered alternative interpretations of this famous ballet. Fascinated by the tormented soul of the prince, Rudolph Nureyev placed the character at the centre of the work, so providing himself with greater choreographic scope.

One might describe the relationship revealed by the tango as “stormy”. As they face each other with torsos held close or more distant, the dance is built on the imbalance between the partners, who hold each other tightly then break apart. This tension between embrace and separation inevitably evokes the passion of love. It is up to each couple to interpret this in their own way, as shown in these extracts from *Tango Vivo*, a show by the company **Union Tanguera**. However, it is always the man who leads and the woman who follows. This archetypal formula brings out the virility of the male dancer, set against the feminine qualities of his partner. Taking the lead still demands alertness, sensitivity and responsiveness to one's partner, without which there can be no alchemy. A walk, with the dancers' steps interlacing with one another, is embellished with figures of a more erotic flavour. The *gancho*, for example, is a suggestive crossing of the legs. It was inevitable that such sensuality outraged the guardians of morality when the tango first arrived in France in 1905.

1. Male energy / female energy

The *malambo* is a dance that originated in Argentina. Traditionally a *gaucho* dance, it challenges the rhythmic and physical endurance of the protagonists in



vigorous stamping (*zapateados*). Captivated by the virile power emanated, Gilles Brinas wanted to create a show based upon it. ***Che Malambo*** brings together fourteen dancers, who set to with fervour like some savage horde. They thrust out their chests with pride. To cries of bravado, their intense stamping continues non-stop. The wild spirit of these herdsmen, galloping across the Pampas, is given unfettered expression here.

The art of **Madhavi Mudgal** offers a striking contrast. *Odissi*, of which she is one of the most brilliant exponents, is a dance for women. Formerly the preserve of temple dancers in Orissa, a state in the north-east of India, nowadays it is one of the major styles of Indian classical dance. It is characterised by stamping of the feet according to a codified rhythmic structure, and flexibility of the torso and arms which undulate delicately. One of the basic postures underlying the movement is called *tribangha*. It consists of three marked flexions at the level of the head, bust and hips. This gives the body refined sensual curves. In its overall rounded quality, *Odissi* is the very expression of grace and femininity.

A blond straight out of a Hitchcock film, cinched in a little black dress and teetering on make-believe heels, throws herself around the neck of a man with whom she is obviously in love. In ***Welcome to Paradise***, a central piece of contemporary repertoire from the late 1980s, **Joëlle Bouvier and Régis Obadia** portray the successive states experienced by a couple. The two dancer-choreographers know what they are talking about as they are inseparable in both their private and performing lives. On stage, they turn this way and that like ships adrift, seek each other out, part, then come back together with the urgency of desire. There is no narrative structure to this lengthy *pas de deux*. The choreography proceeds rather as a linked series of views, like in the cinema, from which the piece borrows frequent references. One lift, in which the female dancer takes flight, is suggestive of sexual ecstasy. Moments later, another very similar one signals a painful and unaccepted break-up.

Another reference work of contemporary dance is ***Blue Lady***. In this solo, which has become legendary in its capacity to affect audiences, **Carolyn Carlson** depicts the different ages and moods of one woman. As she herself says, she wanted to reveal the thousand and one facets of her identity. Without necessarily following any chronological order, the choreography evokes the blossoming of a life, the lightness and joy of childhood, the mystery of motherhood and the aging which weighs down the body and causes movement to falter. In this passage, she is the mischievous young girl amusing herself as she frolics about.

2. Beyond differences

Sequences 8, 9, 10



After dancing *Blue Lady* herself for some years, Carolyn Carlson looked for a female dancer to whom she could entrust the piece, but to no avail. Finally, she turned to **Tero Saarinen**, a Finnish male dancer, with whom she felt a strong affinity. Could she entrust the danced autobiography of a woman to a man? The idea seemed preposterous. For a start, the two artists had a completely different morphology: one tall and slender, the other shorter and more muscular. So, the project had to be approached another way: a revisiting of the original work. “I had to ask myself the precise reason behind each of the gestures and, in the end, the transfer was successful”, Tero Saarinen explains. By avoiding an exact reproduction of the original choreography, but retaining its dynamic principals and fully embodying its “Carlsonian” movement, Saarinen was able to recreate a woman’s interior world with such poetic strength that this reaches beyond just the female body. ***Blue Lady Revisited*** is thus a masterly commentary on the craft of the dancer-choreographer.

From the outset, hip-hop has left little room for women. Aware of this discrimination, **Mourad Merzouki** chose to tackle the subject. In ***Corps et Graphique***, he invites four male and four female dancers to share the stage, to compare their respective qualities and show that, in the end, choreographic issues and artistic aims take precedence over the gender of the performers. The commitment, agility, physicality and skill displayed by everyone prove that these are not a male prerogative.

Ostracism and segregation are central preoccupations for Liat Dror and Nir Ben Gal. Key figures of the Israeli dance scene, with ***Dance of Nothing*** they wrote a manifesto for peace in the Middle East. Depicting a story of forbidden love between a Palestinian woman and an Israeli man, the dancers perform sequences with circular arm movements, joined hands, sensual undulations of the hips, drooping or thrusts of the upper body. The dancers, both male and female, perform the same choreography together. Each as he or she feels it, with no attempt at homogeneity. This difference within similarity gives birth to the idea that, in spite of our distinctions of gender, culture or religion, we all belong to the one big family of humanity.



To go further :

DUROSIOIR, Georgie. *Les Ballets de la cour de France au XVII^e siècle : les fantaisies et les splendeurs du baroque*. Suisse : Papillon, 2004. 160 p.

LÊ-AHN, Claude, CARLSON, Carolyn, SIMEON, Jean-Pierre (trad.). *Paris-Venise-Paris*. Arles : Actes sud, 2010. 311 p. (Danse).

MONETTE, Pierre. *Le guide du tango*. Paris : Syros/Alternatives ; Montréal : Tryptique, 1992. 257 p. (Les guides culturels Syros).

SERRES, Gilbert. *Le pas de deux, les portés : manuel d'apprentissage*. Meolans-Revel (Alpes-de-Hautes-Provence) : Désiris, 2002, cop. 2002. 255 p.

VENKATARAMAN, Leela, PASRICHA, Avinash. *La danse classique indienne : une tradition en transition*. [S.I.] : Editions de Lodi, 2003. 144 p.

APPRILL, Christophe. « L'hétérosexualité et les danses de couple », in DESCHAMPS, Catherine, GAISSAD, Laurent, TARAUD, Christelle (dir.), *Hétéros. Discours, lieux, pratiques*, Paris, EPEL, 2009, p. 97-108.

« Danse et amour », in *Danser*, numéro spécial 311, Monaco : Editions Du Rocher, juillet/août 2011.

KLEIN, Gabriele. « La construction du féminin et du masculin dans la danse des modernes », in *Histoires de corps : A propos de la formation du danseur*, Paris, Cité de la musique, 1998. p. 185-194.

LECOMTE, Nathalie. « Maîtres à danser et baladins aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles en France : quand la danse était l'affaire des hommes », in *Histoires de corps : A propos de la formation du danseur*, Paris, Cité de la musique, 1998, p. 153-172.

OBADIA, Régis, BOUVIER, Joëlle. « L'effraction du silence », in *Mémoire vivante*, tome 4, Paris, Plume, 1994, 63 p. (Mémoire vivante).



Credits :

Anne Décoret-Ahiha is an anthropologist of dance, doctor of Paris 8 University. Speaker, trainer and consultant, she develops proposals around dance as an educational resource and designs participatory processes mobilizing corporeality. She animates the "Warming up of the spectator" of la Maison de la Danse.

Excerpts selection

Olivier Chervin

Text and bibliography selection

Anne Décoret-Ahiha

Production

Maison de la Danse

The "female-male" Parcours was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.