The sprawling hills and lush greenery of Morgantown, West Virginia, served as the backdrop for “Men in Dance: Bridging the Gap,” the first symposium sponsored by the National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) to focus on male participation in dance.

Approximately 60 dance educators and aficionados converged at West Virginia University June 29 to July 1 to discuss practical remedies to the dearth of male dancers in schools, studios, and companies. The goal was to devise and share methods

Focus turns to male dancers at National Dance Education Organization symposium

by Ryan P. Casey
More than 550 members have since joined this group, called Men in Dance, to discuss the unique challenges facing males in dance. Two of the Special Interest Group members, Christopher Rutt and Yoav Kaddar, joined Blumenfeld in a choreography project entitled *Men in Dance: The 4% Make a Statement* at NDEO’s 2014 conference. Along with fellow group member Andrew Jannetti, Rutt, Kaddar, and Blumenfeld suggested the idea of a Men in Dance symposium to NDEO, which approved it. Kaddar, a WVU associate professor of dance, offered the campus as a location, and the symposium’s formal plans were developed over the past year.

Those plans included inviting Doug Risner, a dance researcher and choreographer who has published three books that focus on gender in dance. At this summer’s seminar, Risner delivered a keynote speech that called for fostering a culture of gender equity in the dance classroom.

Among the salient points of Risner’s presentation was the fact that many of the reasons boys are attracted to dance—they love to perform, enjoy creative expression, and crave its physicality—are the same reasons girls are drawn to it. However, many boys told Risner during the course of his research that lack of teasing and increased parental support were the top two factors that would make them more likely to dance.

Risner’s research also found that while the population of male dance teachers at the college level decreased from 37 to 34 percent between 1994 and 2014, the number of male dance students in that environment jumped from 8 to 14 percent. Risner, a self-described dance sociologist, said that this data challenges a long-held assumption that having more male instructors will draw more male students to dance programs. And as the percentage of male students increases, satisfying a long-held belief that dance needs more boys and men, Risner said, “We must, at some point, ask ourselves: ‘How many is enough? What and who are we willing to sacrifice to achieve this goal?’”

To answer these questions—and many others—he suggested participants go directly to the source.

“Learn more about males in dance by learning from the males in our programs, schools, and studios,” he advised. “The experiences of these boys and young men are your most effective way to informally research why boys dance in your particular setting and location.”

Attendees got some of that insight from watching a rough cut of *Danser,* a forthcoming documentary chronicling the personal stories and experiences of male dancers.

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—Lakeisha Sharpley
struggles of male ballet dancers. Director and producer Scott Gormley noted that the adversities his own son faced as a ballet student inspired the project. The film, which includes well-known dancers such as James Whiteside and Derek Dunn, not only reflected the experiences of many symposium participants, but effectively framed the discussions that followed, serving as a reminder of what was at stake.

Throughout the conference, panel discussions and lectures focused on a broad variety of themes and problems surrounding the male dancer, including understanding the unique challenges of men of color in dance, catering ballet technique and contact improvisation classes to males, mentoring male dancers, and redefining masculinity.

One recurring message was the need to remain mindful of, and perhaps change, the use of gender-specific language.

“At a time when our country is beginning to engage in a discussion about gender identity and fluidity, I wonder how we can begin to analyze and deconstruct some of our notions around how we interpret movement in regards to more traditional attributes of gender,” said Jennifer Pommiss, a choreographer and teacher at New York City’s Grace Church School, who participated in a panel entitled “From Boys to Men: Male Identity in the Studio and on Stage.” She advocated refraining from calling certain moves masculine and others feminine. However, she noted that teachers still need to acknowledge that some boys may be uncomfortable with certain movements, such as hip isolations in a jazz class, because of assumptions they worry other people might project onto those movements.

Adolescent boys were also the subject of several sessions. Brian Palmer, a Jacksonville University dance professor who also teaches part-time at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts in Jacksonville, Florida, holds biannual discussions with his male students about topics specific to being a male dancer. He noted that his students often struggle to balance their love for dance with their dads’ lack of knowledge about it.

“Offering ways for the fathers to communicate directly with the teacher about understanding their dancer sons has been helpful in retaining male students,” he said. “Some [fathers] have taken me up on being available to answer questions, and these questions have led to some wonderful lessons for me and the breakdown of stigmas and stereotypes for them.”

Lakeisha Sharpley, lead dance teacher at Horace Mann Arts & Science Magnet Middle School in Little Rock, Arkansas, emphasized the importance of establishing class policies and expectations, posting them in the classroom, and referring to them throughout the year.

“Boys this age are very active and still a bit immature compared to girls of the same age,” she said. “Rules and procedures are your best friend.” For example, her students know that they have four minutes at the beginning of each class to change into their dance clothes and sit stretching while she counts down the remaining time. Although the same rules apply to her female students, she said a more “hurried” tone seems to encourage the boys.

She has also found that Luigi jazz exercises are good for young bodies that are growing and changing. “My boys’ bodies are being manipulated in every way as athletes, so it is important to do a warm up that is safe and easy to learn, and that promotes balance, body awareness, and core strength,” she said. She also advised using the inherently competitive
culture of middle school boys to the teacher’s advantage.

“I challenge them to do things,” she said. “For example, I might say, ‘Can you jump over that crate?’ They’ll all want to show me that they can. Then I’ll say, ‘Can you do it leading with your right foot? Can you do it while pointing that foot?’” By engaging her boys in the activity right away instead of introducing terminology first, she keeps them interested from the beginning of class.

During the panel “Identifying and Exploring New Masculinities in Dance,” Ryan Corriston, assistant professor of dance at Virginia’s James Madison University, agreed that getting male students moving and sweating right away is key.

“At a young age I was drawn to dance because it gave me an outlet for physicality with an element of creativity and play,” he said. “I believe these ideas of physicality and play are crucial in attracting males to the field. We need to refocus our efforts on creating an environment in our dance classes where one’s physicality is pushed and creative potential is explored.”

The conference concluded with a wrap-up session in which everyone split up based on their primary affiliations: elementary, secondary, or higher education; private studios; and performing arts organizations. Each group discussed the primary challenges its sector faces in recruiting male students, and discussed steps to take in the future.

Symposium participants generally agreed that key objectives should include setting up a repository of online resources to connect males of all ages who dance, establishing a directory of conference participants, and providing a list of colleges with strong male dance programs. Some resources should also be directed toward parents, providing information about the importance of studying dance, and an overview of vocabulary useful for discussing dance.

Blumenfeld says the next step is meeting with NDEO to discuss whether it can host the resources on a designated NDEO website or if a separate site would be better.

The discussion about parental resources led to another key question: How do we help parents see that dance is a boys’ activity?

“We’ve got to educate them and reach out to them,” Blumenfeld said. Noting that there seems to be much less concern about social dancing, he added, “Somehow, we have to get more parents to feel comfortable having their kids perform in front of other people.”

Although the next symposium on this topic has yet to be scheduled, Blumenfeld and the other organizers would ultimately like to host a larger conference someday at Jacob’s Pillow, the dance mecca in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts where founder Ted Shawn famously showcased his all-male modern company.

“There’s definitely a big momentum to do that,” he said. “We’re really on track to expand the conversation.”

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