

Sofi Goldwater

Mr. Greco

English III

4 April 2023

## Boys Can Dance!

A young boy loves to dance and gets his dream job of dancing professionally at the Radio City Rockettes Christmas Spectacular. He quit dancing soon after. Peer ridicule, the most common expression of the extreme negative stigma in modern society against young male dancing strikes again, dashing another boy's dream. There is a prevalent cultural attitude in society that boys should not dance.

According to Scott Gormley, guest writer for the Huffington Post, “most boys who dance ballet face tremendous resistance – from their families, from friends and from society at large.” Gormley cites Doug Risner, professor of dance at Wayne State University, as finding “nearly 96% of all boys who dance have faced verbal and/or physical assaults from their peers.” Perhaps that explains Gormley's claim that boys only make up 10% of the students of ballet nationwide. At Mountain View High School's Dance Spectrum, a student centered dance program that teaches students to choreograph their own dance routines, only 3% of the students this year—two out of sixty—are boys.

One of these boys is Luke Barrett, a junior at Mountain View High School. Luke has been dancing since he was 6 years old. He said that middle school was the time when other kids made the most fun of him, when he was getting made fun of much more than he was getting praised. It could be quite depressing at times, but he was able to get through it. Since middle school, the rude remarks have greatly decreased.

Unfortunately, most young boys have a much more difficult time getting past the ridicule. Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily, authors of *Playing it Straight: Masculinities, Homophobias and Schooling*, believe that schools are a primary place to promote and enforce negative stereotypes against male dancing. This is the primary location where young males establish their identities and their concept of masculinity, so it is natural that they strike out with ridicule against any behavior that challenges their personal sense of masculinity.

There is a common belief that dance is primarily an activity for girls, and that boys who dance are somehow less masculine or less “manly.” This belief is false, because many boys are excellent dancers. It is also harmful, because it can discourage boys from pursuing their interests and passions. Dance is a form of expression and art that can be embraced by anyone, regardless of their gender.

Still, this belief is strongly held by many people. “It can get lonely.” Luke said, “There's lots more female dancers than male dancers. It just makes me feel sometimes sad, just wishing that there were more male dancers that I could relate to and talk to and just share the same passion with.” Being one of the few boys among lots of girls, he feels pressure to do well so other boys will feel represented in dance.

Why do people think that boys can't dance? Emma Heineman, a lifelong dancer of classical ballet, put it this way: “A little girl dresses in a tutu and ballet shoes for a dance recital and the world applauds, but when a boy does the same, the cultural penalties are swift and harsh.”

Other people have a slightly different take on this. Roger Copeland, who teaches at Oberlin College and is co-author of *Dance Theory and Criticism*, wrote an article about this for the New York Times. Prior to the 1800's, men were dominant in dancing. That began to change as more women started dancing in ballet. A number of women, such as Isadora Duncan, rebelled against the prevailing Victorian morals that forced women to wear uncomfortable, heavy, poor fitting clothes. Once women could wear lighter shoes and dresses that didn't cover their ankles, they became more free to express themselves. Their fancy footwork made them much more popular than men. Eventually, women became so dominant in ballet that men who danced with them were often considered to be involved in a 'feminine activity.' To do something that would

make them feel more masculine, men started moving away from dancing and into competitive sports.

According to Ramsay Burt, Professor of Dance History at De Montfort University and author of *The Male Dancer Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality*, in many western societies, male dancers “challenge the very foundations of the masculine ideal,” such that male dancers are considered to be failing in their masculinity. Due to this way of thinking, Risner says that male dancers participate in a sport that “casts social suspicion on their masculinity,” and therefore it is no surprise that young men avoid dance at an age where they are trying to establish and understand their masculinity.

It is clear that there is still a social stigma around male dancing. Just 4 years ago, when Prince George of England was 6, the host on Good Morning America, Lara Spencer, mentioned that George likes ballet lessons—and then mocked him based upon negative stereotypes, hoping to get a laugh out of the audience. There was intense backlash from viewers. The reaction from dancers was particularly fierce. Debbie Allen, a famous dancer, came out with a video on Twitter that called Spencer out for sounding like she belongs more on Saturday Night Live than on a respected news show, and that called for her to apologize to the royal family and the entire dance world. Spencer was forced to apologize for her behavior.

Lauren Kato has been dancing since she was two years old. She has been a dance teacher since high school, when she started substitute teaching dance. She went to Mountain View High School and is now a dance teacher there. Kato says that she enjoys teaching dance, because she gets to work with students at all skill levels. She said “I wish that there were more young boys who didn't feel so afraid to take a dance class. I do think things are changing now, especially with things like Tik Tok; dancing is just more of something that people do regularly.”

TikTok is a fairly recent app where many teens love posting all sorts of things, including dancing videos. Luke has posted some of his dance videos on TikTok, recording himself practicing routines in the studio or dancing with a partner. Some of his videos have gotten millions of views, with many comments like “You made my day” and “Wow, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.” For people all around the world to see him dance so gracefully brings him so much joy and makes him feel special.

Kato believes that dancing needs men as well as women. She said, “With boys in general, they bring a certain type of energy and strength to movement. You can have very strong females, but when there is a male presence in a dance or a routine or a piece, there is just something that is added. I really do think it is a sense of strength and groundedness, like ‘I am here to support the others and be strong.’” Kato seems to be saying that not only can men dance, but they

must dance in order for society to be able to take full advantage of the beauty of this art form.

There are many benefits to dancing, for boys as well as girls. Luke makes this point clearly when he says that dancing has given him a sense of why he is here on this earth. He has developed such a passion for dancing that it has led him to dance all around the country, winning numerous NYCDA awards over the years. Last summer, he went to Nationals, and “won the whole thing.” Dance has helped build his confidence and give him a sense of purpose.

Additionally, Luke has found that dance gives him a way to express emotion. When he’s happy, or sad, or mad, he dances. When asked how dancing has impacted his life, Luke responded with “I live for dance, basically. It's just something that I always do, and I'm dedicated to it every single day and every week, every month, every year.” Everyone should be so lucky as to find something that they can be so passionate about.

We live in a time of tremendous social change, where young people are rapidly rejecting divisive, discriminatory attitudes of the previous generation. Positive, inclusive attitudes are becoming more socially appropriate in mainstream American culture, and its effects are being felt at all levels of society, including within the dance community. People are rethinking appropriate male and female behaviors. Attitudes towards male dancers are also changing. Young men are focusing on the many benefits of dancing such

as discipline and self-esteem, rather than thinking about increasingly outdated societal stereotypes.

There are a number of groups trying to help young men get past the stigma all too often attached to dancing, and who are trying to remove the stigma entirely. For example, the Boys Dancing Project, launched by the Warwick Arts Centre in 2005, is attempting to create a stigma-free culture where boys enjoy dancing. Additionally, Ballet Jörgen started a program called “Boys who Dance,” which offers support to young male dancers in dealing with bullying and other obstacles. These and other groups are slowly changing the culture of discrimination against young male dancers. This has led to many more boys discovering the joy and benefits of dancing with less of the negative side effects.

Far fewer boys dance, for fun or professionally, than girls due in large part to the extreme stigma against boys dancing that has plagued the last century. However, the current era of rapid social change toward greater positivity and inclusivity is enabling more boys to work through the stigma, slowly removing the stigma itself. My hope is that in the future this trend will continue, and that eventually boys and girls will find themselves free to pursue whatever passions they have, dancing or otherwise, without fear of pressure to conform to remnants of outdated, socially imposed gender roles developed and maintained by earlier generations.

## Works Cited

### Secondary Sources:

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-gormley-ballet-boys-bullying-fat-hers\\_n\\_5b02ca77e4b0a046186e2954](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-gormley-ballet-boys-bullying-fat-hers_n_5b02ca77e4b0a046186e2954)

<https://nsucurrent.nova.edu/2019/09/10/ballet-is-a-passion-not-a-punch-line/>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569783.2013.787255>

<https://journals.openedition.org/rsa/1048>

<https://www.danceplug.com/article/boys-dance-too-breaking-the-stigma-around-male-dancers>

<https://dancemagazine.com.au/2019/09/why-arent-more-boys-dancing/>

<https://universe.byu.edu/2013/04/09/men-tackle-female-dominated-fields1/>

### Personal Interviews:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-f\\_n30aw\\_TyfvSVKD2koMPkfkSz-LDZK\\_nNTConaE/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-f_n30aw_TyfvSVKD2koMPkfkSz-LDZK_nNTConaE/edit)

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F1erMNTZ\\_Ydy3L98VimCph7b5zI9wxJ7Tt92GzXBOn8/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1F1erMNTZ_Ydy3L98VimCph7b5zI9wxJ7Tt92GzXBOn8/edit)