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Historical Approaches

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Stoic Heroics

Skin, pushing against the air, muscular bodies presenting themselves to the world. Watch them move, sweat visible on their brows, legs propelling them into the vertical space. See their strength, slamming against the ground and rebounding without a single moment of weakness or recoil. Men, not touching to feel warmth; no look too longing, and no pain too painful for the audience to see. Masculinity is represented through strength and bare chests covered in muscles, but the hearts underneath must be made of stone. In its physical manifestations, machismo is a representation of emotional constipation while also being performatively robust on the surface. Through the case study of *Heroes* choreographed by Allain Lupien and performed by the Canadian Dance Company, performative masculinity can be deconstructed into these two parts, both the external physical manifestations and the internal absence of connection between human beings in the world of competitive contemporary dance with the use of Susan Foster's model presented in her book *Reading Dancing*.

The dance is framed in a specific light because of the skillful cinematography and the fact that it is performed on a competition stage. Showstopper, a reputable national competition bracket, hosted *Heroes* at their national competition ceremony and awarded it first place, which can all be found in the caption of the video. This raises expectations about the level of professionalism and perfection expected for these dancers by the viewer. The stage is a raised

proscenium stage which helps separate the dancers from the audience in a traditional way. The costumes help to shape our perspective on the gender and physicality of the dancers; bare chests and shorts displaying muscular bodies, albeit some bodies with slightly different musculature than others, helps us to see that these dancers are very conventionally masculine in the American sense. Before the dance even begins, the way in which the dancers carry their inflatable boat prop strongly overhead establishes that they are owning the space.

The vocabulary is very diverse but not in a justifiable way, which leads me to believe that the style of the dance is in the realm of reactive postmodern as described by Susan Foster in *Reading Dancing* (Foster 260-261). The dance is a melting pot of vocabularies with an emphasis solely on the choreography. *Heroes* uses kicks, fouettes, jumps, lifts, dive rolls, handstands that walk, roll ups, and long reaches within the choreography, but the way they are used contributes to the style. The turns used suggest a ballet foundation, as do many of the lines and the orchestral tone of the music that accompanies the movement. The bare feet, use of contractions and releases, and the fluidity of the floor work, however, suggest an African diaspora influenced modern presence within the choreography as well. There are moments where the dancers are borrowing from gymnastics, pilates, and even some breaking. All of this compiled together do not help to further the theme of the dance or even provide specific historical context to why choices were made, which would describe it as reactive postmodern (Foster 260-261). The wide vocabulary is not explained or justified in any way and is simply used for spectacle, a technique applied by almost all choreographers who create dance for the competition bracket.

One of the first pioneers of reactive postmodernism was Twyla Tharp. Her work began in another realm; resistant postmodernism. This juxtaposed branch of postmodernism resisted

traditional thoughts about dance and the world through subverting norms, stripping dance down to the bare pedestrian bones, or working in the realm of dance for dance sake, whereas reactive postmodernism, which was where Tharp's work evolved to and where *Heroes* rests, addressed universal issues while still adhering to the status quo. Reactive postmodernism is more "conservative" with its messages (Foster 260). This split in the late 70s and 80s has led to a split today between "concert dance" and "competition dance". *Heroes* clearly lives within the realm of competition dance which follows the lineage of reactive postmodernism more so, and can trace its historical roots back to works like that of Twyla Tharp in the 1970's-80's. Concert dance, which is often presented as an antithesis in the competition world to competitive dance ideals, when performing newer works often is categorized as resistant postmodernism. *Heroes* is an interesting case study in the world of competition dance because of the extreme presence of performative masculinity, but the way in which it is addressed does not make a new argument or present a new thesis about masculinity; the dance says what has already been said in an artistic way.

Using a combination of mimetic patterns with the music and pathos surrounding the sequence, the dance presents a common syntax while analyzing competition dance. While there is a particular structure to the dancer's choices which can be attributed to their relationship to the music, these choices are not exactly with each instrument all the time. The moment when the four dancers open up their chests with high energy and have a high lift to the ceiling when the vocalist is singing "I..." is a moment of direct mimesis, whereas the opening sequence after the first dancer dives out of the boat and other dancers break off into their own phrases or feats of strength is fueled by pathos. The pathos fuels how the dancers are arranged on the stage as well-

who gets lifted when, who is turning while others are doing different choreography- due to the pathos evoked by their body types. The smallest dancer is often placed further from the audience and lifted more often than other dancers.

Through all of the above methods- how these dancers are framed, the style and vocabulary used on these particular bodies, and the mimesis and pathos used in the syntax- *Heroes* presents two different themes within the dance. The first is obvious even to the untrained eye; sailing on a dangerous trip together. Whether it be a band of boys in adolescence being lost at sea or members of the coast guard saving one another, there is some kind of mission on the sea that needs to be fulfilled. Because the relationship and story isn't explicit to the audience, the mode by which this first theme is being represented is a mixture of mostly replication with some imitation dispersed throughout. There is direct imitation of being tossed around at sea when one of the dancers flies onto the edge of the boat and rebounds off, falling off of the boat. There are moments where they imitate the flow of water with their hands interlocked in front of their torso and they wave from one forearm to the other. The music also helps to support this narrative through the cyclical nature of its violins and the layering of different sounds to reach crescendos that don't sustain themselves for long, just as when a wave hits its peak it crashes back down quickly. This is the overt story of the dance, seemingly what the choreographer's main goal of creating this piece was.

The covert theme of this dance is performative masculinity and emotional constipation. This starts with the vocabulary and style. The vocabulary lacks any movement of the pelvic area and spinal angulations that may be considered feminine or having to do with fertility in the feminine sense. This choice of vocabulary deducts a traditionally white style of masculinity. The

costuming as well does not read to the audience as sailors, water, or even voyage; the choice of bare chests and stiff shorts with a belt help to contribute to western masculine ideals and force viewers to see these dancers as men. Through a mixture of replication and imitation, performative masculinity is apparent. In the opening break away sequence, dancers are seen walking on their hands, balancing on one leg, doing movements with open chests and broad, pulled back shoulders to emphasize physical strength. It's a very virile display of manhood, making a statement along the lines of "I dance because it's strong; I dance because it's dangerous and I could hurt myself, therefore it is manly," and do not express any sort of other emotions except for those associated with masculinity. Anger, stoicism, and emotional fortitude are on display, but any and all vulnerability is absent from the narrative.

This is not the first instance of performative masculinity in modern dance. At the height of the Great Depression, Ted Shawn had an all-male dance company that produced repertoire of the same degree of extreme masculinity. Although he himself was gay, Ted Shawn's message was that dance is not simply made for feminine and queer bodies, it is also made for straight men who wish to make dance their vocation. His work focused on the "athletic and virile male body", and had apparent emotional constipation as well (Desmond 162). His philosophy of dancing this way stemmed from the idea that dance was a low brow form due to the fact that there were not as many men performing it, making men the more exciting and relevant dancers of this time. This is something widespread in the competition dance world as well, and often competitors have a myth about points given to dances that have male people featured in them, crudely named "penis points". This idea of dancing for boys and men should be all about strength, not in the emotional sense or the kind of strength it takes to perform feminine and graceful movement, but visibly

difficult dancing that utilizes multiple muscle groups. *Heroes* is like a modern interpretation of Ted Shawn's ideals, minus his outward racism and blatant sexism.

Any and all contact between the dancers of *Heroes* is out of functionality. Whether it be a hand on the shoulder telling them to change directions, embracing only briefly to do a lift, none of the contact is emotional. This is another echo of Ted Shawn's ideals within this modern context. There is no melting into one another, it's only to show off how strong some of the dancers are in comparison to others. One of the dancers is noticeably smaller than the others and is lifted, left inside of the boat, and thrown about the stage as almost a display of a "manly hierarchy" within the dancers; if one does not possess enough strength then they do not have as high of value within the group. It is an interesting microcosm of masculinity and the idea of "being gay" that appears frequently. Sometimes it's seen when people say "no homo" after some kind of compliment, or when parents tell their sons not to cry because "boys don't cry". The performativity of it does not change the fact that the further someone physically or emotionally gets from being a traditionally masculine, straight, cis male the more abnormal they seem, therefore outcasting them. While this dancer is still a part of the group, he is thrown around and treated as a malleable resource for the other dancers to show off with.

The absence of pelvic movements of any kind not only denotes a kind of sexism as stated by Shawn, but it also emphasizes his racism. His concepts around Negro dance were that it was inherently sexual due to the way in which it was danced by black bodies (Desmond 162). The "primitive" and "savage"-ness of the movement, according to Shawn's assessments, gave way to an unsophistication of emotions that was "disgusting" on a white man's body because their "emotional and mental conditions cannot be translated" onto their bodies. While *Heroes* is not as

overtly racist as Shawn and his company, it does show a lack of africanisms that follows this lineage and continues to push this message that white male bodies, or bodies placed into white spaces, should not use these ways of expressing themselves.

Heroes is an example of both modern echoes of reactive postmodernism and the performativity of masculinity within dance. By utilizing the competition stage as a frame and a contributor to the style, along with pathos and mimesis in the world of syntax, a diverse and unjustified vocabulary, and two parallel narratives, *Heroes* is a brilliant contemporary case study of how history transforms into the present under the guise of a new name. The intersection of Ted Shawn's aesthetics, Twyla Tharp's ideals, and a diversified modern vocabulary is where this dance thrives. The thesis presented in the dance are not attempted to be subverted in any way, making the dance a presentation of the status quo rather than a conflicting ideal. While *Heroes* is a brilliant, award-winning artwork performed impeccably by the dancers in question, it does not change the world that it rests within in any way. This is the downfall of competition dance, and a downfall of masculinity itself. By not addressing problems, we create new ones that can deteriorate at core values, which happens to people who fall prey to masculinities emotional constipation and the diluted messages behind competition dance. Why create new problems when art can be made to address already existing ones?

Works Cited

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