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Imagine a ballet teacher, and you will probably imagine a woman.

OF

But more men are beginning to teach ballet.

A

Deirdre Kelly asks about their challenges and distinctive approach.

KIND

Illustration by Tom Allen for Dance Gazette



'A male teacher is like having a new pair of eyes'

HAYDEN DOUD, STUDENT



Tread lightly... (left to right) Glen Curtis; Terry Gardiner; Guy Burden Photos: Benedict Johnson; courtesy of teachers



choreography with boys in mind and maintaining a culture of mediocrity just to keep the few boys engaged.'

A former elementary school teacher and public school administrator who three years ago took over the dance school his mother founded, Burns sees all teachers sharing common ground. 'We change lives, build life skills, and create wonderful humans. If the relationship a teacher builds with their students is solid, great things happen, regardless of gender.'

Guy Burden, a lecturer in dance education for the RAD in London and formerly a dancer with English National Ballet, would agree that gender is no predictor of teacher effectiveness. 'It totally depends on the experience and character traits of the person rather than their sex,' he asserts. 'Regardless of gender, everyone will bring a unique perspective to teaching.' Burden benefited from a combination of male and female teachers. 'I learned a lot from both sexes. It is important to have a combination in order to develop a rounded perspective and appreciation.' Jonathan Sharp, a former Broadway and Boston Ballet dancer now teaching at the Idyllwild Arts Academy in California, echoes the sentiment. 'I find the best dancers have strong input from male and female teachers,' he says. 'This brings different approaches to the same material. It

gets dancers ready for what it will be like to deal with a variety of choreographers and styles in the real world.'

But male teachers will still stand out, especially when they impart lessons gleaned from their own experiences as maverick dancers. Lee Davall, also an RAD dance education lecturer, recalls the distinct approach of his male teachers at London Contemporary Dance School. 'I think the general difference is that the male teacher has a contrasting physicality in demonstration of the movement and a way of structuring material that often is more virtuosic,' he says.

That difference is also felt by girls. 'A male teacher is like having a new pair of eyes,' observes Hayden Doud, 18, a student of the Foothills Dance Conservatory in South Carolina. 'A female teacher is really stressing artistry and grace; so does a male, but the male teacher brings in the power and force of a turn or jumps.'

But when teaching girls, especially young ones, a male dance teacher must tread lightly, says RAD teacher Glen Curtis. 'A male teacher has to be more respectful, asking permission to adjust a position before touching the student, for example. One quickly learns which students are uncomfortable with a hands-on approach and which can be corrected both verbally and physically. Where pointe work is concerned, I am not shy about asking other

female dance teachers for advice. I can only imagine how it would feel, having not had the experience.'

Are there things men do better? Don Hewitt thinks so. Born in 1935 in Portland, Hewitt developed a reputation as an exceptional teacher after opening, with his partner Joey Harris, the International Ballet School West in Santa Monica in the 1960s. He taught regularly at the Beverly Hills academy run by Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo stars Tatiana Riabouchinska and David Lichine, among many other prestigious schools. 'I wish more men would teach,' says Hewitt from his home in California. 'Although there are many ways of moving, in the most basic sense a male teacher can convey a more masculine sense of interpretation that is sometimes especially suitable in classics. That is not to say there have not been many magnificent female teachers. But many times a male teacher is called on to interpret the many small things in the world that contribute to a young man's career, and which only a man can do.'

Hewitt's former students include Matthew Rushing, now rehearsal director with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He believes that Hewitt embodied both male and female qualities, and couldn't identify a difference between the genders in teaching. Hewitt, he explains, was both

nurturing and authoritative; he insisted on hard work and also that his students learn culture as well as dance and so would ask them to listen to the music they were dancing to in class, to know what ballet it came from and which composer created it. 'Mr Hewitt instilled in us morals which I follow till this day,' Rushing told me.

That distinct approach extends to men being good role models in addition to good interpreters of technique. 'Dance is an embodied art form,' Terry Gardiner says, 'and demonstrating and showing, serving as the model after whom students pattern their learning, is a key part of the process through which we teachers pass on technique, style and ultimately the whole of the art form to future generations. The responsibility to be effective is great.'

Are you a male dance teacher? Did a man teach you to dance? Do men teach differently? Share your stories at gazette@rad.org.uk

What was for decades an “old girls’ club” may be changing,’ says Glen Curtis, a male RAD ballet teacher in Canada’s prairie province of Saskatchewan. ‘Balanchine’s belief that “Ballet is Woman” has long been proved incorrect. Ballet and dance belong to humanity and are not gender based.’

Few professions can be called female-dominated but dance – and especially dance teaching – remains one area where males constitute a true minority. Yet male teachers, operating in a predominately female world, want to make a difference. I spoke to men aged from 40 to 80, with experience in everything from Broadway to the Ballets Russes, leading a quiet revolution that would open dance up to a greater diversity of gender representation.

“Naturally there are more female teachers due to the numbers of girls and women who study ballet. But I have noticed a larger number of young men interested in ballet over the last decade,” observes Don Hewitt, a seasoned dance teacher in Los Angeles. “I see this resulting in more male dance teachers, which could only be a good thing as men in dance have much to offer.”

The shift has already started. ‘There seems to be a greater interest in pursuing dance teaching as a career by men over the past five to six years,’ reports Sonia Briglio, the membership services officer for RAD Canada. ‘Previously, we would typically have around two or three male dance teachers registered in any given year. Currently we have five with another potential graduate from the teaching programme expected for next year.’



Men who teach dance, often to classrooms packed with girls, cite various reasons for wanting to take up the profession. For some, dance is more than a discipline – it’s an approach to life. ‘It’s not so much about being male-directed in the way I approach the profession,’ elaborates Terry Gardiner, who teaches ballet to inner city youth in Toronto. ‘It’s more the awareness that as a male I have specific knowledge and experience to share, along with specific responsibilities, in taking dance to young people whose lives have been circumscribed in many ways.’

A 46-year-old native of Montreal who grew up in the Caribbean, Gardiner danced with Dayton Ballet and Ballet BC before taking degrees in early childhood education and social work at the University of Toronto where he now works as an administrator. An in-demand teacher at Citadel Centre for Dance, which is located in Regent Park, a neighbourhood more known for drugs, gangs and guns, Gardiner is proficient in tap and jazz. But he prefers to teach classical dance, seeing it, interestingly, as a tool for social change.

‘My teaching dance is a conscious effort to share ballet with marginalised children and youth, and in particular to demonstrate that people of colour are conversant in this very particular language and art form,’ Gardiner says. ‘My dream is to see more brown bodies in ballet, and more boys, sharing this form of expression that has added so much to my life.’

For Jhe Russell, dance embodies the life force. It’s a conceptual approach, formulated after he first began teaching in 2006 while still a professional dancer. Self-guided studies of symbolism and numerology led the former member of the National Ballet of Canada, Dance Theatre of Harlem and Béjart Ballet Lausanne to evolve a

methodology incorporating geometry and the five natural elements. He links them to the five major positions of ballet as a way to illuminate the relationship between dance and the universe.

‘I use the dodecahedron, which is the shape of the sun, to help children understand that the human body has a “solar” plexus, fed by the energy of the sun,’ Russell, 40, says. ‘This connection helps boost quick learning responses while also boosting self-esteem and confidence.’ Both male and female students credit Russell for instilling a heightened sense of connectedness with the art form. ‘Mr Jhe teaches in a very unique way from any other teachers I’ve ever had before,’ says Caleigh Noonan, 13, from South Carolina. ‘He helps dancers make connections to movement using their minds and bodies.’

Although Russell insists that ‘my teaching celebrates the light that shines from within,’ he acknowledges that ‘I have taught at dance studios run mostly by women which my presence has helped to balance with the much needed energy of a positive male influence.’ That matters also to some of his male students. ‘I often don’t get a male dance teacher, so that’s very nice,’ says William Taylor, 16. ‘The physical looseness and relaxed approach that come along with that is something I really value.’

Corey Burns, owner of the Burns Dance Studio where Russell teaches, believes that the difference between male and female dance teachers lies in how they adapt to the boys they teach. ‘Most male dance teachers trained and developed with females and so have a schema to draw upon when working with young female dancers. But a female teacher unfamiliar with the dynamics of the male dancer can create difficulty when not altering

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TERRY GARDINER, TEACHER