

Dad's Don't Dance (or do they?)

By: David J. Popalisky

Scenario One: Yeah, well, my Dad can jump higher than your Dad, he's a modern dancer, and your dads are old – my dad is (pause) modern.

Scenario Two: Uh, Mollie, would you like to go to the ballet on Sunday, my Dad got some extra tickets. (Mollie) The ballet, (pause) yeah right, Dante. And then she walks away.

As a father of two boys, eight and sixteen, I wonder if interchanges like the above ever occur between these sons of a dancer and their friends. I've seen their attitudes and feelings about dance transition over the years from curiosity and excitement about dance to one of friendly ribbing and frank disdain about the occupation I pursue, which incidentally puts a roof over their heads.

When my older son was in first grade I enjoyed a certain star status in his class for the month or so after they had come to see me perform in Tandy Beal's *Outside Blake's Window*. My younger son only a short year ago, clamored for me to witness his improvised, vigorous dances. Yet here are more recent comments of a different tone. In reply to some teasing my older son Dante said, "Dad, you're a dancer – the last thing you can talk about is being manly." And from my younger son Jadon, "what do you know – you wear tights" Can you imagine Marie Taglioni or Marius Petipa using that line as a put down of their own dancing dads?

Where do they get this information? The perception that dance is a feminine activity and unbecoming or at least atypical for a man percolates through our culture. Certainly many adult men are no different. The typical reaction when I first meet another man and share that I am a dancer is; "Oh that's interesting – I saw a ballet once (dance equals ballet). To restart the conversation I generally reply – so how are the 49ers doing? Dance is a total unknown for most men. Although, in contrast, at a recent talk I attended on the affect of

the arts on the brain, when unknowingly introduced to the Executive Director of Silicon Valley Arts Initiative, he responded, “I always like to meet dancers and hear their perspective.” I couldn’t believe my ears. You mean I’m not some alien life form that has invaded a middle aged, white American heterosexual male. Rather you acknowledge that I am one privileged to enjoy moving in my body fully and expressively and that I might actually have a unique perspective that interests you.

This research grew from reflections about the apparently disconnected aspects of my identity – a male dancer who has pursued a dance career in contemporary dance, and a father of two boys. These reflections were sparked while attending a panel on motherhood and dance at the 1999 Not Just Any Body conference in Toronto. As I listened to their experiences I also thought, “this is great but what about me?” There was no suggestion that motherhood and dancing didn’t belong together. Isadora Duncan celebrated her motherhood and later drew artistic inspiration from the tragedy of her lost children. Celebrated dancers from Fanny Ellsler to Trisha Brown have had children. And although Martha Graham never did give birth to a cube, motherhood and dance, while not without complications, have been culturally accepted. As I began to consider my own and other’s experience as fathers in concert dance I also wondered if non-dancer dads might not enjoy some of the affirmative and liberating aspects of dance that I find so essential to my life. The vehicle to answer this second question became a workshop over two summers called *Dad’s Don’t Dance (or do they?)* with the goal of “investigating and celebrating fatherhood through movement exercises, asking questions, reflecting and sharing insights.”

I am only at the beginning of this multifaceted exploration of fatherhood and dance. What defines fatherhood is obvious, although my concern is with men actively engaged with children in the home. The dancing under consideration can range from professional to social to someone open to dancing as the occasion arises, although dancing in amateur performances plays a special role in my investigations so far. How are these identities in tension and do they affect the quality and nature of the relationships in one’s life – with a spouse, children, colleagues and friends? What are the cultural boundaries that a dancing

dad resides in and/or pushes up against? What are the historical antecedents to this combination of identities – certainly the ballet world has been populated with dancing families where significant dance artists were fathers as well. If fatherhood and dancing were once a culturally accepted reality, when and how did that change? Or in fact has it changed and to what degree? Is there an untapped need for fathers in our culture to discover an expressive channel for genuine feelings? My own inspiration to pursue dance, Zorba the Greek, used dance regularly to express joy, communicate stories and process grief. Do fatherhood and dance mix differently in other ethnic groups? The short answer is most likely yes; therefore today's discussion focuses primarily on white males

I will share three initial threads that have emerged so far from the questions above: first, a brief sketch of certain renowned dancing fathers along with abbreviated comments on men/fathers in dance in the United States; second, some recent research on fatherhood in juxtaposition to a few cultural snapshots that comment on fatherhood in; and third, some of the goals, activities and conclusions from the workshop *Dad's Don't Dance*. Afterwards I welcome your comments and suggestions for further inquiry into this subject.

Brief historical context:

The complex issue of men in dance and fathers in dance are directly interconnected. The following patchwork history will be likewise interwoven.

In previous centuries it appears that certain men accomplished unifying fatherhood with a successful and celebrated career in dance. One of the first gods of the dance in the 18th century, Gaeton Vestris, originally from Florence, was a star at the Paris Opera and later its director. Gaetano was known for his grace and elegance although not his modesty. He said about his son August, the Barishnikov of his day, "Auguste is cleverer than I, which is natural enough; he has Gaeton Vestris for a father, an advantage nature denied me." This comment, humorously obnoxious, actually aligned with some of the expectations of a father in 18th century France. In *France in the Enlightenment* Daniel Roche notes that procreation

in marriage and the key role of the father mirrored the authority of the monarchy over the state. “It was a man’s duty and justification to perpetuate his line by engendering offspring. He did not marry solely for his own sake but, as Montaigne put it, for the sake of ‘our race in the far-distant future’” (Roche 524). Gaeton’s bragging fell in line with his culturally sanctioned duty – in this case for the betterment of the art of ballet as well. One primary responsibility of fatherhood was education of the child. “There the father’s authority reigned supreme and children learned to behave as individuals” (525).

Another famous dancing father in the next century, Filippo Taglioni, took the role of educator to the extreme. He is famous for the rigorous training regimen to which he subjected his celebrated daughter Marie. Critical reviews of the Taglioni’s several visits to Russia discuss the tension between Father Taglioni’s choreographic talent and its reliance on the extraordinary dancing of his biological and artistic offspring Marie. Applauded for his white ballets reviewers noted the authoritative rationality with which Filippo crafted the corps to perfection as a complimentary frame for Marie’s virtuoso turns. “The corps de ballet as an organized unit was especially important in the system of expressiveness of F. Taglioni’s romantic spectacle” (Wiley 84). Critic Fyodor Koni wrote, “When his daughter represents the Sylphide, it seems that she is the poet’s thought personified, or his corporal child turned into a visible spectre of imagination” (85). Yet he later wrote of Taglioni’s ballets that without the magic of Marie performing in them, “the spectator fell asleep and felt the whole oppressive stupidity of the ballet” (86). Taglioni’s artistic legacy is inextricably tied to the artistry of his daughter and the very meaning of his choreographic accomplishments were an expression of his fatherly role.

Perhaps the most famous dancing father of the 19th century ballet was Marius Petipa whose dual identity coexisted in the Russian imperialist culture. Petipa, the father of five daughters four of whom were dancers, also shaped the late 19th century Russian ballet tradition into a vehicle to present to the West strong male dancers who could convey sensuality, virility and gracefulness through dance.

In turning to America an early Puritan document on dancing reveals the origins of certain prominent attitudes toward men dancing in the U.S. The prominent Puritan ministers Increase Mather and his son Cotton Mather both wrote texts arguing against the attractions of dancing they saw growing in their 17th century Boston. Increase Mather wrote “An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of the Scriptures,” in 1685. “Arrow” contends that only “mixt” dancing is the source of the evil, yet throughout there is virtually nothing positive to be said about any kind of dancing unless it be taught with “gravity and sobriety” and then only Men with Men. This clearly left out the various male dance masters in Boston who are condemned as Blasphemers who teach *Promiscuously*.

Significantly though they attack personal expression as the root of the sin of dancing, a sin that was diminishing the power these Puritan ministers had over their community. Mather writes “A man sinneth in Dancing in divers wayes; as in his Pace, for all his steps are numbered; in his touch, in his Ornaments, in his hearing, sight, speech, and other Vanities (41). These attributes define one’s individuality, one’s selfhood that if expressed through dancing was sinful. “The very motion of the Body, which is used in Dancing, giveth testimony enough of evil (42).” Individuality, bodily motion or agency were condemned.

In the early part of the 18th century in Westover, VA William Byrd’s daily diary reveals a very different attitude toward the dance than that set forth by the Mathers in Boston. William Byrd was a one of the most influential, wealthy and learned men in Virginia at the time and a father of several children. Despite managing his multiple plantations he maintained a regular habit of scholarly reading and pleasurable pursuits including dancing.

In fact, during some periods almost daily (Dec 24, 1710 through January 1, 1711, 276-281) and at other times with some breaks, he includes a simple unexplained line about his early morning activities. “I danced my dance.” Louis Wright, the editor, suggests that it may have been a form of calisthenics that he used for daily exercise. Yet it is significant

that he phrased it as he did, which indicates both an understanding of the efficacy of bodily movement and a comfort with private regular physical practice. Since he was an avid dancer in mixed company, we can assume he understood the aesthetics of the current social dances. Therefore his use of the term “dance” for a morning workout implies that it incorporated some degree of aesthetic or expressive movement that satisfied this cultured man in a more holistic manner than merely a physical workout.

Variables that play a role in dance then are its utility, “grave and serious” versus dancing for pleasure or personal expression. At this point I want to qualify this discussion as circumscribed to predominantly white males more than men of different racial groups. Clearly for African American men dance prominently figured in their survival and adaptation to shifting circumstances in American as chronicled in Lynne Fauley Emery’s Black Dance: From 1619 to Today among many other texts. Significant as well was the attraction to portraying the expressive body that the early Irish minstrels felt through their stereotypical portrayals of Black life through minstrel shows in 19th century United States. Through the blackface mask these men were able to access the need for personal physical expression that my workshop experiences suggests still exists. Even today this aversion to dance appears to be more predominant among Caucasian men. A colleague, in response to my advertisement for **Dad’s Don’t Dance** pointed out that when he goes to Salsa Clubs that very few white males are among the men dancing.

In the 20th century another key factor becomes critical - one’s sexual orientation. Ramsey Burt’s 1995 text The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities fully considers the theoretical underpinnings for the representation of masculinity in theatrical dance throughout the 20th century. In his introduction he states a clear premise. “Professional dance during approximately the last hundred and fifty years has not been considered an appropriate activity for white men to engage in” (1). In his section on “Homophobia and the Male Dancer” Burt discusses how a man who appeared soft or emotionally expressive was deemed “not a proper man,” or by inference a homosexual. He points to the early 20th century as the time when male ballet dancers became in the public’s mind synonymous with homosexuals.

In “Dance is For American Men: Ted Shawn and the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality and Nationalism,” Julia L. Foulkes traces the contradictory threads of Ted Shawn’s offstage homosexual life with his on stage virility and American patriotism. Extending the Puritan concern for utility, she introduces the key factor of financial reward for dancing. “The lack of financial security in a dance career was also more problematic for men because of their traditional roles as breadwinners. Financial instability and the gentility associated with the arts only further strengthened the conventional union of dance and femininity” (Foulkes 114). While his business acumen kept Denishawn afloat in the 20’s, Shawn never became a father, freeing him from this added financial concern which perhaps allowed him that extra measure of freedom to pursue dance with his all male company in the 30’s.

Foulkes discusses Shawn’s men dancers as “more than a sales campaign for dancing as a career for men. It was also a philosophical ideal – which included homosexuality – in action (120).” Traditionally homosexual men are not fathers and Shawn’s attempt to unite dance and homosexuality, while it may have legitimized dance for certain men, most likely reinforced the aversion to dance for any man who identified himself as a current or future father.

Interestingly the 30’s were, as well, an important period of change in the cultural representation of fatherhood. Ralph La Rossa’s “The Modernization of Fatherhood,” notes that fathers did increase their involvement with the mundane aspects of parenting. Yet there was a shift in popular magazine articles (primarily *Parent’s Magazine*) away from promoting “domestic masculinity that denotes the creation of a ‘softer,’ more playful man,” toward a new trend emphasizing masculine roles in the domestic sphere. LaRossa concludes, “when the goal of an individual or group is to highlight men’s value to the community, the father as male role model is likely to be emphasized” (La Rossa 200). That model included the expectation if not the accomplishment during the depression of being the breadwinner and representing a significant and positive presence in the family and community. Therefore both associations of homosexuality and the

minimal compensation for dance labor both advocated against dancing fathers despite Shawn's attempt to ennoble homosexuality through bodies dancing out patriotic and masculine themes.

Part II Contemporary Cultural Commentaries on Fatherhood and Dance

Depictions of fathers are rife in our culture, often lampooning their ineptness, but before considering a few examples that intersect with dance let us consider what are some genuine attributes of a good father.

Jerold Shapiro outlines current conceptions and expectations of fatherhood in *Measure of a Man*. Of the twelve core characteristics of effective fathering the top five manifested in the work of Dads Don't Dance. They are:

- 1) Protecting and providing – the prime directive
- 2) Loving and being engrossed with children
- 3) Facing performance fears
- 4) Being encouraging and supportive
- 5) Being courageous (Shapiro 10)

Protecting and providing we utilized specifically to create various exercises. That characteristic along with the others surface as variables in various cultural contemporary depictions of dancing dads.

One of Shapiro's conclusions is, "Much of what a father needs to sustain him in his efforts to be a better father will be generated personally by exploration and examination of his own past, his feelings, his beliefs, and behaviors" (357). My premise is that dance can be an excellent vehicle to achieve these goals; that dance can promote internal reflection through sensitivity to our physical beings which can be focussed on our feelings/thoughts about fatherhood. I was surprised at how many of the final reflections of the participant fathers pointed to exactly these types of experiences.

Shapiro's also reconfirms in 1993 the total compulsion men feel to be breadwinners. "The thought of not being the provider is so psychologically unacceptable that it was unconsciously denied. Their need to provide financially (protect) their families was so intense that failing to do it well constituted a shameful inadequacy" (11). Several dads brought up payment jokingly as a prerequisite to possibly performing some variation of our dance for the general public. The financial factor runs deep.

Shapiro also acknowledges the cultural landscape of fathering and "the considerable social pressures to emulate popular male stereotypes, caricatures that detract from the job of fathering well" (135). Let's look at a few examples of these in reference to dancing

A number of the issues discussed so far surface in the 1977 hit film "Turning Point." Wayne a former ballet dancer and the husband to Shirley McClain's main character, the former ballerina Dede, portrays a fusion of the domesticated masculinity and the masculine domesticity that La Rossa discussed as in tension in the thirties. He occasionally inserts his authority to quell family squabbles yet predominantly is caring and supportive, especially of his daughter's choice to start her professional ballet career and his wife's anxious need to go to New York to unravel her past professional choices. One pivotal admission that Wayne and Dede accept is that he got her pregnant at a critical point in her career to prove that he wasn't gay, still an assumption worth mining in 1977. While the film reinforces Wayne's youthful sex appeal - "the whole company wanted him." male dancer as heterosexual icon is primarily depicted by the philandering of Mikail Baryshnikov's role, seen either flirting with a ballerina, making love, or dancing brilliantly. Baryshnikov, a key advocate for men in dance through his virile dancing, and sex appeal, gets to demonstrate his importance in the film through a significant amount of dancing. In fact in a quick aside at Dede and Wayne's opening party scene, Wayne comments that "this fantastic Russian is going to make it respectable for American boys to be dancers." Nonetheless Barishnikov's "fantastic Russian," at least in 1977, still exuded an exotic flavor reminiscent of the arrival of the purported "primitive" virility of the Ballet Russe when they stormed Paris in 1909.

To further advocate for the normalcy for men dance, Wayne's son's both trains as a dancer and plays baseball.

Wayne as a dancing dad, now successfully running a financially solvent dance school is therefore portrayed relatively positively if minimally and simplistically. In contrast to Dede he is well adjusted regarding his transition from performer to teacher. Yet Wayne doesn't get to reminisce or feature any of his glory days as a dancer. The conflicted emotions are left to the women, as is the dancing except as noted for Baryshnikov. Wayne's father role is predominantly as cheerleader and understanding cuckold, as Dede has a little affair in NYC during that summer. The film reinforces the notion that fathers do not have drama in their lives. They are there to support the ambitions and anxieties of others, the protector role, rather than being perceived as expressive dancers themselves. Emma reflects this perceived effortlessness of fatherhood by musing wistfully, "If I was a man I could have had all the children I wanted and still danced." Perhaps but in 20th century America that certainly would have come with some serious baggage.

An interesting aside is that Baryshnikov has fathered four children but this is hardly his public persona. An internet article about his breathing show notes this fact at the very end of the article? He comments "This is a time just to find peace with myself ... and see my children grow as long as I can."

Let's turn to another fatherhood icon whose essential identity is as family man, although he's been a political activist, a hippie, a celebrated avant-garde artist, and yes a dancer. Homer Simpson, quintessential couch potato, doughnut inhaler and Duff beer devotee is willing to shake his money-maker for a good cause. Of course, Homer exhibits all the assumed aversions to dance as an art form, in one episode conveniently missing the ballet by getting his arm stuck in a vending machine trying to steal a soda.

Clip 1 (go to "ballet and dragging soda machine)

And Homer, never fazed by exhibiting politically incorrect behavior has the hutzpah to seize the moment and experience the sensuality of dance. While his peers can only cheer him on he jumps up on the table to dance with the bachelor's party featured belly dancer. Yet in the 1990 episode *Dancin' Homer* he embraces dance as a life changing experience when he becomes the dancing mascot for the Springfield Isotopes ball club. At first Homer rallies the team to victory fueled by enthusiasm and a number of tubs of beer. His dancing falls between a sense of duty to the cause, conscious performing and drunken display. As the episode continues his pleasure and pride in his dancing manifests into a new Homer that affects the entire family. Ultimately he's called up to the big leagues only to fail miserably. Yet the saga of his meteoric rise to dancing fame and sudden demise renders him celebrity status at the local pub. Here are some excerpts.

Dancin Homer Clip

A number of issues coincide here. Homer embraces the expressiveness of dance, the illusive high of performance and takes great pride in the quality and style of his dancing (the reggae beat). Having invested consciously into his performance Homer gets recognition and support from both his family and the community for actualizing himself through his body, essentially dancing for the crowd. In direct contrast with Wayne he gets to strut his stuff. Here the supportive role is reversed where Marge, Homer's wife, supports him as perhaps finding his life's work. When he is offered four to five years leave of absence from his plant job to go to the big city we assume he will be paid a living wage. Therefore Homer bridges the gap between dance and money.

The performance high Homer experiences reflects the anticipation and personal commitment desire to look good, to perform respectfully in a traditionally unfamiliar environment. His investment in the quality of his performance defines, I suggest, when it becomes personally expressive. In the early innings Homer's inner dialogue reflects just this investment This investment clearly manifested for the dancing dads. Homer's personal choices, courage etc. have positively affected his relationship with his son Bart if only briefly (confused by feelings of respect for me). And even in failure his family is supportive. As he regales his bar buddies with his tale Homer identifies with his

humiliation reinforcing the level of commitment he felt for his dancing job. What does Homer despair for – simply failure or perhaps the lost freedom and recognition that dancing afforded him which sparked his mundane life.

Another Simpson episode finds Bart studying ballet. At first resistant he eventually gets excited and becomes instantly a brilliant dancer. He buys into the blend of grace and power. When scheduled to dance at the school assembly he agrees to only with a full body mask. As an invisible person he can revel in the innate beauty, strength, and skill of dancing. All these are laudable attributes yet when they are revealed as being embraced by a specific man, in this case Bart, there are serious consequences. Like his dad the applause of his peers affirms him and emboldened he takes off his mask. Quickly the applause turns to surprise and derision and Bart is run out of town.

Fresh into the 21st century are we in a better place? Jack in the Box fast food commercials suggest perhaps no. Around Christmas 2002 I witnessed this television commercial. Foam ball headed Jack as a father figure is sitting on a park bench with his arm around a young boy, most likely his son, apparently pointing out the facts of life. He points to one direction and a vision of little girls dancing and twirling in blue sparkling dresses with glittering lights appears. Then Jack and son look the other way at a boy sitting, essentially inert, in the sand with a pail over his head. The next image is of a Jack in the Box burger. Message – girls dance in beautiful transcendental scenarios and boys, cut off from any vision of the world, eat meat. The fantasized image of girls dancing clearly represents a male's perspective, as it isn't girls at dance play in the park but a romanticized theatrical moment. Of course it also sells hamburgers, and dancers, generally diet conscious in a healthy or unhealthy way are perhaps not the best Jack in the Box customers.

On a positive note and again supporting the notion that this aversion to dance is more specific to white males was a concert I recently witnessed by Fua dia Congo in Oakland, CA. The most poignant moment in the show for me was watching Malonga Castelord, his son and his lead drummer dancing, a simple side to side accented undulation as they sang

and played thumb pianos (marimba). This performance presentation of fatherhood was a positive and powerfully reality.

Part III Dads Don't Dance (or do they?)

Slide

The goal of DDD **was to investigate the line between dance as a fresh vehicle for better understanding fatherhood and fatherhood framed as a dance.** First offered in the summer of 2001, I initially invited literally every father I knew. About 50 letters with this text netted about ten different participants for that first series.

Slide

The mothers I mentioned this to were almost universally excited about how wonderful this would be for their husbands, few of whom ever showed up.

Please join us for a different kind of fun!

Dads Don't Dance (or do they?)

How do we move with our children? We play baseball, football, and soccer. We race and dodge and wrestle, we gesture enthusiastically on sidelines, we trip over strewn toys and we snuggle close to read bedtime stories. We toss babies in the air, twirl toddlers in circles, carry tired kids on shoulders, bear hug teenagers and handshake graduates. We teach the tasks, values, lives we learned from our fathers and mothers (at least we try to). We raise voices, arms, and heart rates in occasional frustration, anger or disappointment. How does all this feel in our bodies? Do we move the same at our places of employment as we do in the company of our children? Do we dare to be a bit more ridiculous or “out of control” with them? Can all this be conceived of a dance, an art that grows out of our everyday actions as human beings constantly in motion? Can we “dance” these real physical experiences

and discover something more about ourselves as fathers, as sons of our fathers and share with fellow fathers our experience of the ever-changing role of fatherhood?

The participants included several computer engineers, a school psychologist, a graphic artist, an actor, a controller for a bicycle manufacturing company, a geologist and a math and chemistry professor. Conceived as a grand experiment, each week's exercises were built from my fatherhood reflections, research about contemporary fatherhood gleaned primarily from Shapiro's text and on the prior week's participant feedback.

The process grew from these intentions:

- 1) To explore the differences between a child's perspective and our points of view as fathers and all that may imply – authoritarian, protector etc.
- 2) To investigate recollections of our own father's and our relationship with him as a child, teenager, and adult.
- 3) To investigate the differences and similarities of our fathering experiences based on our ages, the developmental stages of our children and the memories we have of fathering.
- 4) To build raw material for a dance to explore and give voice to this experience, which is minimally commented on in contemporary dance.

Opening warm-ups included simple stretching and games – name sharing , playing tag and skipping through space to access a child's physical reality. A highlight of that first session revolved around witnessing the birth of our children, which according to Shapiro has become common for men of my generation.

Birth Dance #1

The significance of this event for a father is often overlooked with all the appropriate attention on the mother and child. But it is pretty magic and I suspect few men get to relish that feeling.

- 1) Think back to your first reaction when you saw your first child born. Was it joy, surprise, fear. Draw this on paper with markers.
- 2) Now think of a second memory of your newborn - was it a deepening of the first, a corrective, a contrasting feeling, (fear, concern, or relaxation from initial anxiety). Draw this feeling.
- 3) Try to give expression to your two memories, feelings, or drawings whichever generates the most clear response. Expand the gestures or repeat them several times. Build them into a dialogue the one to the other – a short phrase.
- 4) Teach your phrase to partner and learn theirs. Together choose a way to put them in a sequence. Rehearse and share.
- 5) Verbally share experience of making with a partner. Group sharing of your experience of watching, making solo and then duet.

These men had never used dance as an expressive medium yet several of these short dances by were quite poignant. The most powerful duet included lean framed Phil who partnered with Aldo, a large black man. They both created a hunched over protective posture of holding of a newborn and delicately walked through the space. Their bodies simultaneously conveyed a protective armor and a gentle holding an imaginary life. In sharing they were both visibly moved by what they had tapped in memory and created out of nothing.

Another exercise built upon the physical reactions men often have while watching sports. In my experience this has been a primary bonding opportunity with my sons. Here we limited our verbal expression to Ah, Yes, and Go and physical reactions to gestures and jumping up enthusiastically from chairs etc. Is this a dance or just guys being guys?

Framed as a dance it certainly becomes a highly charged and somewhat comic expression of a typical fall Sunday afternoon across the country.

When we performed an exercise built upon memories of actively doing something with our fathers, one participant was deeply saddened by the absolute lack of memories he had of being physically active with his father.

This past summer we continued with similar exercises integrating fatherhood and dance. Based on a participant suggestion we dedicated one class to exploring competition as a factor in our world and in our relationships with our children. In this Augusto Boal exercise you lead another person through the space by guiding their face with your hand.

Start clip – keep talking

You can be gentle, challenging, more or less manipulative as you control another person's entire body. Influencing one's choices was the knowledge that the roles would be flipped momentarily. As you'll hear in one person's reaction, being totally under another's influence, as certainly our children feel, can be quite intimidating and instructive about how one exerts control. At the same time this short clip demonstrates for me an improvised dance of similar partnered forms moving through space. Next we did some races that were designed to be fair and unfair. **Start Clip -Race**

Here is another clip of a race in a constrained space that necessitated competitors to cross paths inviting options for graceful cooperation or interruptive bumping.

These and other exercises generated competitive situations. We reflected on our feelings and perceptions connecting them to parent child relations, the various power struggles that ensue for instance in game playing. To what degree do you let a younger child win and then how do feelings change once the more grown child wins despite one's best effort. **Atom** – “what felt bad about competition was when I lost I felt inferior yet the opposite wasn't true, as a victor in a race I didn't feel superior.” **Don** – “when I was in the unfair position I joyfully cheated.” In the constrained race several noted that the sense of racing disappeared and the spatial logistic problem become prominent. The need to physically negotiate with another in a constrained space, to dance through a mutual

problem unconsciously refocused the personal ambition of winning toward one of understanding a collective need. The goal of reflecting after exercises was not some automatic improvement of parenting but rather to sensitize the fathers to the multifaceted relationships parenting entails and to emphasize that feelings are significant for both father and child.

This past summer the group also decided to build a simple dance to share with our families and friends. Once this decision had been made it drove the rest of the summer. The fathers became very invested in learning and improving the quality of their dancing. Here is a clip of the final performance of Dads Don't Dance.

Show Clip – Final Perf

The guys are pantomiming typical dad jobs or perceived ineptness before we fall into rhythm. Dancing steps in rhythm in fact was the hardest part of this dance.

Next without prior warning an audience participation section followed.

Show Clip –Lead the Follower

This simple improvisation dance integrated children from pre-school age to teenagers, wives and family friends. Called “Lead the Follower” it builds an evolving shape flow by each new person extending the shape of the person who has preceded you. Lots of laughter and anxious excitement accompanied the first several passes through the room. Then when the lines of evolving human shapes where designed to intersect, it presented the complication of staying connected to your group's shape flow as you had to pass though several other evolving lines of shapes. The exercise is designed to minimize self-consciousness through maximum involvement with the moment. The intersecting lines inevitably creates close encounters with others putting participants in curious new relationships with each other and generating a delicious tension between the humor of the situation and the commitment to the task of keeping the shape evolving.

We closed the evening with a reprise of the **Dads Dancing**. The second viewing permitted an opportunity for the audience to see the dance as a choreographed entity, which many commented on. The fact that their husbands and fathers were the dancers

making this dance come to life became all the more impressive. In the first performance the humor and novelty of the event minimized this possible perception. The evening overall went over quite well. Here are some questions and responses from the audience.

Was this what you expected? How different?

“It was way cooler.”

“Yes and No. It was more together than expected.”

Not exactly – I didn’t expect something so choreographed

Yes, but more fun. I didn’t expect to dance, but that was fun too.

What struck you the most about the dance performance by the dads? Did you focus mostly on your family member or friend?

“They stayed synchronized quite well.”

“They sweat too much.”

“How people’s personalities were expressed in their dancing.”

“How much I laughed at first and how much the dancers enjoyed themselves.

“Focussed a lot on our closest friend, but was struck by the courage this demands for men in our society.”

“I’ve never seen my husband dance, so I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him.”

“I tried to not watch my dad, it was like a train wreck.

The fathers by the way were mostly surprised that the audience didn’t laugh them off the stage. Everyone enjoyed the Lead the Follower despite reluctance to participate for some.

What will you tell your friends/colleagues about what you did/saw tonight?

“I’ll try to hide it, no one will ever find out!!!

“A rare sighting indeed”

“That it was one of the most pleasant and happy experiences I’ve been to in a while”

Hell no, deny, deny, deny”

“That I saw joy in his face”

Do you think we are ready to go on the road? A chorus of yes's

“As bums, or hobos?”

“Yes but just to Togo's” – the eatery across the street.

“Yeah, hit the road and go away

Reflections – Mine and the participants

- The class built in quality rather than numbers. Average of eight participants each evening from a group of twelve. This size worked well for the reflection process.
- Some comments – “I was able to access a child's reality through skipping.
- Have become more aware of the physical aspects of fatherhood, whether a stand off gesture or a gentle caress – from poses of fatherhood.
- In competition – when it was unfair I didn't try, but got positive energy from racing excitement from the challenge.
- I came because my daughter is beginning to dance and I wanted to do something she is doing to understand her experience.
- Learning steps is hard – free dance is easy.
- There was a clear desire by mid-summer to do more dancing, warm-ups and practice. They accessed the pleasure of feeling in flow. The final performance may appear painfully simple to dancers yet it took tremendous patience for everyone to achieve that degree of unity and organization.
- Skipping a hit, gave access to a child's sensibility. They found it very enjoyable.
- Majority cited the camaraderie of sharing with other fathers.
- **Clip – camaraderie**
- A number mentioned the exercises allowed a uniquely compelling and positive vehicle for self-reflection.
- **Clip – SR**
- No clear answer to the overarching premise - **dance a vehicle to understand fathering or fatherhood as a kind of dance**. General consensus that this was a special and informative opportunity to engage with other fathers.

- The last two points answer s Shapiro’s call for self reflection as necessary to improve the quality of one’s fathering. I suggest that this may have been simply because of the special and unique focus put on the issue through DDD.
- Almost all spoke positively of the performance experience. The performance as with Homer fostered investment and personal pleasure. **Bill clip** “ I’ can dance, maybe not well, but I can dance and have fun. This self-realization contradicts the Puritan strictures against personal expression through pleasurable dancing. This was not a frivolous past time for these men with successful careers.
- The performance was a special kind of sharing. Dancing with wives and children for this particular cultural group is a relative rarity. Therefore the sharing both in our performance and in the group exercise was special.
- Dancing serves to blur the line between pleasure and serious goal orientation. The work to prepare was acknowledged by all yet it was simultaneously fun. This is not a new insight but one that perhaps needs to be promoted for more fathers in our society. The body through dance can be a vehicle of introspection. Can the dancing father somehow contradict the “Jacks” of this world and blend more domesticity and masculinity as did Wayne, demonstrate courage to construct a new role model for fathers in our culture.

Let me close with the title of a poem I found on one of the 248,000 web sites I found when I typed “fathers and dance” into Google – this an entirely additional study.

Fathers dance with your children

END

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