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So You Think You Know Dance?

Popular Dance and Cultural Identity on Television

Eleni Koutroumanis
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[1] http://www.pbase.com/rcalmes/image/109412611

The art of dance has always had its place in American popular culture and society, but in the past five years America has seen dance through a new medium: reality television. In the summer of 2005 *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with the Stars* first aired on FOX and ABC. Shortly after came many spin-offs including *Dance Your A** Off* and *America's Best Dance Crew*. These shows have become some of the most popular and controversial shows in the country, reaching out to a wide audience. As a result, a dance phenomenon in America has been triggered, and people are more interested in the art than ever before.

Up until the premieres of these shows, the opportunity to watch so many styles of dance was limited. There have been a number of movies, music videos, and theatrical productions that have featured dance, however none of them allowed the American public to participate in and learn about the dance world. For this project, the dance world refers to the dancers, choreographers, and producers of professional dance based mainly in New York and California. Although the bases are on opposite sides of the country, the dance world is a tight-knit community with two main sections. One is the professional company sector, the most popular of which are ballet and contemporary. The other sector, which is most important to this project, is the group of dancers and choreographers who perform for media based performances, including shows, live performances, movies, and music videos. This is the group that is establishing today's popular dance. Prior to these shows America's popular dance referred mostly to any dance that was considered "white" dance, but the new images of dance are expanding popular dance in today's society. [2]

America's increase in knowledge of the dance world, which has been manifested through these shows, has opened the door for much change in the dance industry and also in the way

[2] Dixon, Brenda. "Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public: A Prolegomenon to Problems of Definition." *Black American Literature Forum*; Vol. 24: Iss. 1. Spring, 1990.

America views dance the world, and thus its dancers. I have found that these shows are confronting some unsaid expectations of society about race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, certain stereotypes are being diminished and even changed, while others are just being reinforced. These concepts are giving the larger public sphere the impression that they truly know dance. But in reality while perceptions outside of the dance world are changing, not much is changing in the actual business of dance. There is an ongoing tension between the realities of the dance world and the effects the shows are having on the larger public sphere. On the one hand there have been changes in America's perceptions of the dance world that are further popularizing and creating a new respect for dance, but the portrayal of the dance world on these shows is not completely accurate. These different perspectives are forcing the question of how much Americans really know about dance, and if the aforementioned tension has the potential to distance all Americans from dance at a point when they thought they knew it best.

Before addressing what these shows are demonstrating to change perceptions, it is necessary to explain how they work. *So You Think You Can Dance?* (*SYTYCD*) is the most essential to this project because it features a mix of amateur and professional dancers who are being judged by famous producers and choreographers. Talented dancers throughout the country audition for the show in open auditions near them. If they make the first round then they are sent to Vegas for a week long intensive training. Throughout this week most dancers are eliminated, and in the end only twelve males and twelve females make it to the actual show in which viewers can vote for them. Every week a male dancer and female dancer partner up to perform various styles of dance taught to them by a well-known choreographer of that style. Dancers normally pick their partner and dance style out of a hat, or receive them at random. One male and one female dancer are voted off weekly until the finale which features the top four dancers. This past

season, Season 7, there was a change in the format which led to some interesting changes that I will later address. On this season the judges selected the top eleven dancers from Vegas Week and had them perform with All-Stars, dancers from other seasons, in order to improve the integrity and the technique of dance on the show.

ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* (*DWTS*) shares a similar format with *SYTYCD.* Every season about eleven celebrities are invited by the producers to perform alongside professionals, many of which had competed on *SYTYCD* at one point, to dance for America's votes. These celebrities stay with their partners throughout their duration on the show, and it is the professional dancer who choreographs the routine. Each week the partners on the show have the option to choose between two dance styles to perform. Therefore, unlike on *SYTYCD* where everyone is performing a different style, the competitors on DWTS are performing similar styles of dance. Also, this show is restricted to ballroom dancing, while *SYTYCD* introduces many more styles of dance. MTV's *America's Best Dance Crew* (*ABDC*) is also very similar to these other two shows. In this case hip-hop groups compete against each other for America's votes. Each group choreographs their own routine every week incorporating a theme or a prop that the judges give them. Finally, *Dance Your A** Off (DYAO)*, which appears on Oxygen, "features talented, full-figured contestants who struggle with their weight and dance to unleash their inner thin."[3] Like *DWTS*, the competitors are partnered with a professional dancer who trains them in different styles, not limited to ballroom. Every week the dancer's score on his or her performance and the weight he or she has lost are added up to determines who stays and who goes home.

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[3] "About Dance Your A** Off." *Home DYAO | Dance Your A** Off | Oxygen*. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://dyao.oxygen.com/about-dyao>.

Although these are just four shows among hundreds of primetime shows, they are being watched, especially *DWTS* and *SYTYCD*. All four shows are shown during primetime hours on their respective networks. Other than *SYTYCD*, each show has hosts and judges who are not even considered part of the dance world, and are well-known outside the context of dance. This is just another sign that people outside of the dance world are becoming interested in it, and it also plays a potential role in attracting viewers who would not normally tune in just for dance. The ratings for these shows are surprisingly high. *DWTS*, which proudly states that it is "America's Favorite Show," has 22 million viewers tuned in every week.[4] FOX's *SYTCD* airs during the summer months, yet still maintains a viewership of over 7 million.[5] *DYAO's* second season premiere only had 1.3 million viewers, but that was enough to deem it Oxygen's "best series premiere ever."[6] Even if fewer people are watching this show, many individuals are aware of its controversial premise. The fact that these shows have maintained high ratings, in a competitive time slot, for multiple seasons, demonstrates that the American public is continuing interest in the dance and other content of these shows.

While the dance on the shows is highly entertaining, it is the mostly the content that is breaking socially constructed barriers. *SYTYCD* has been called a "culturally radical show" because, with all dancing aside, it presents real life drama that few other shows do, both scripted and not. Miles Mogulescu of the *Huffington Post* claims that this show puts a hold on the culture wars of the past 30 years and he questions in what other show one can see:

> An attractive, shirtless, African-American man engaged in a passionately sexual dance with a lithe, beautiful blonde wearing almost no clothes, without controversy or

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[4] Sheffield, Rob. "American Freak Show: The 'Dancing With the Stars' Finale."*Rolling Stone* 23 Nov. 2010. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/17389/236330>.

[5] Rice, Lynette. "'So You Think You Can Dance' Wins Night, 'Big Brother' Remains Strong." Entertainment Weekly, 13 Aug. 2010. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://insidetv.ew.com/2010/08/13/so-you-think-you-can-dance-wins-night-big-brother-remains-strong/>.

[6] lShea, Danny. ""Dance Your Ass Off" Sets Oxygen Record as Best Series Premiere Ever." 30 Jun. 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/30/dance-your-ass-off-sets-o_n_223489.html .

> comment? Or a Hispanic B-Boy with jerry curls performing a hip hop dance with a young Asian woman? Where else on network TV do you see such overt eroticism, rather than the fake, snarky kind that passes for sexual innuendo on many shows? On what other reality contest show do you see an obviously gay judge calling an obviously gay contestant "honey?" [7]

This quote alludes to most of the controversial issues that are implicitly and explicitly addressed on these television shows including race, ethnicity, and sexuality. It also points out a very important aspect of these shows. Even though it is the shows that are confronting these dance stereotypes and larger issues of race, gender, and sexuality, it is the dancers themselves that are active agents in changing perceptions. Also, the dialogue among judges, hosts, and dancers of these shows plays a significant role in creating controversial material.

The first set of stereotypes that have been created in the dance world that I will address regard race and ethnicity. Before discussing the boundary crossing and any unsaid expectations that have been altered as a result of these shows, it is important to note how these shows are very ethnically aware. They make an apparent effort to introduce America to styles of dance outside of its repertoire, and also provide explanations and origins for all of the dances. Take for example Latin Ballroom dancing on *SYTYCD* and *DWTS*. Firstly, all cast members refer to styles of ballroom very distinctly instead of clumping them together. There is specificity between the samba, the rumba, the Argentine tango, salsa, bolero, and the cha-cha in both style and explanation. In the past three seasons the producers of *SYTYCD* have also invited choreographers onto the show who never thought that their work would appear on a primetime television show. These styles include Bollywood, Russian Folkdance, a Tahitian Dance, and multiple Afro-jazz performances. By presenting ethnic styles in this manner, the shows are demonstrating that any dancer can perform them; it does not require a dance that has a particular look.

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[7] Mogulescu, Miles. "The Most Culturally Radical Show on TV (and Sometimes One of the Cheesiest) Is on Fox." *Breaking News and Opinion on the Huffington Post*. Web. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/miles-mogulescu/the-most-culturally-radic_b_645943.html>.

The larger issues regarding race is the confrontation of race and class in different styles of dance. The audiences of the shows see countless examples of dancers performing and excelling at dance styles in which they would not be expected to do so. This unsaid expectation comes from stereotypes formed by society. For example, there is an expectation that black, Asian, and Latino dancers are hip-hop dancers, and that hip-hop dancers are minorities. This idea stems from the fact that hip-hop, like Breakdancing, began on the streets in poor urban areas. Realistically, it is minorities who live in poor urban areas, and thus they are the ones who were first introduced to the style. However, *SYTYCD* and *ABDC* have taken hip-hop off the streets and out of just music videos, and placed it in an academic dance setting. As a result, hip-hop has gained more respect as a style and trained dancers are dabbling in it, while minority dancers who were originally just hip-hop dancers are able to pursue other styles. Hip-hop is no longer seen as a style meant solely for lower class minorities, and minority dancers are able to break from this stereotype as well.

Another perception of race, class, and dance is reflected in the expectation that the dancers who excel in ballet, jazz, tap, and contemporary are white. The ground for this assumption is that the cost for receiving the proper training in these styles of dance is very expensive. If a dancer were to truly find success he or she would have to have started dance at a young age, and maybe reached a professional level fifteen years later. Fifteen years of lessons, costumes, shoes, and competition fees can easily add up. Clearly, dance is a luxury, and thus the majority of dancers up until this point have been those who grew up with this privilege. The reality of America is that the majority of the privileged are white, and as a result these styles have always been pursued by predominantly white dancers.

There is definite truth and validity in these stereotypes, mainly because of economic reasoning and culture, but these shows are offering America a new vision in two ways. One is that they are showing some of the exceptions to these stereotypes, for example an Asian ballet dancer and a white break-dancer. The other way is by giving those who were victim to these stereotypes because of economic restrictions, the chance learn new styles. As a result, audiences are watching these performances, acknowledging the change, and potentially realizing that they can do the same. In this past season of *SYTYCD* Lauren Froederman (a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, contemporary dancer) was announced "America's Favorite Dancer" right after she performed a raunchy hip-hop dance. Her partner in this dance was a six-foot black male named Twitch. This is not a likely pair to be performing an intense cowboy-themed hip-hop number, yet they both performed flawlessly. Twitch's being black did not put him at any advantage in his actual dancing because there was a petite, white girl right next to him who performed the number just as well. Any difference in movement was a result of gender and choreography, not race.

A similar example occurred in season five when *SYTYCD* presented its first ballet performance by competitors. The female dance in this piece, Melissa Sandvig, was a trained ballerina who looks exactly as one would expect a ballerina to look, white and thin. Her partner in this monumental piece for the show was Ade Obayomi, another tall black male, who specializes in contemporary. There are two interesting elements to this example. One is that Obayomi is one of the few black males that the show has featured that is not a hip-hop dancer or B-boy (male break-dancer). The second is that producers selected him to perform this piece with Sandvig, despite the fact that there were other white male dancers capable of performing this piece. But as a viewer, I would have to say that it was Obayomi who would best dance this piece, though the aesthetic would have been affected. In terms of ballet, having a black male lead is

very provocative, so the decision to feature Obayomi in this ballet piece demonstrates that the show attempted to transcend these conservative views in order to improve the integrity of the number.

Although these examples are showing significant boundary crossing by the shows and the dancers, this is not to say that everyone is completely comfortable with doing so. Take Sandvig who commented in an interview, "I'm a nice, little white ballerina girl, so trying to be ghetto and doing hip-hop will be a struggle, but I'm just going to have fun and do my best."[8] Describing herself as "nice" and "white" and juxtaposing it to a "ghetto" hip-hop dancer shows that the aforementioned stereotypes have not been completely remedied. However these shows are teaching dancers and audiences that dance styles are universal, and that a good dancer can conquer any style he or she wants to.

When looking at race and class, gender is intrinsically involved. Gender and sexuality are very interesting to examine in regards to dance because they are some of the most controversial stereotypes associated with the dance world. There are two aspects of gender and sexuality that I will address in the section. The first is a discussion of the sexuality of dancers. One of the most common stereotypes of the dance world is that all male dancers are gay. Because dance requires grace, it has always been considered inherently feminine, which has lead to the social construction that "dance is for girls." For boys, crossing the gender boundary and pursuing an act considered feminine is especially difficult. "Boys and men who succeed in supposedly feminine areas…risk a much more compromised identity due to their accountability to social assessments

[8] Stanhope, Kate. "'SYTYCD' Finalist Melissa Sandvig Is Ready to Break out of the Ballet Box ." *Los Angeles Times*. 8 June 2009. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2009/06/sytycd-finalist-melissa-sandvig-is-ready-to-break-out-of-the-ballet-box.html>.

of narrowly prescribed masculine norms."[9] Deviating from this thin line of Hegemonic masculinity often gives a male a subordinate "other" status. For a male dancer this theory is especially true in a country that has not appreciated and understood dance very well until recently. There are two ways the shows are exhibiting that being a male dancer is not necessarily a commentary on his sexuality.

Part of the reason that some male dancers avoid this stigma over others has to do with the style of dance they are performing. In ballroom, Latin ballroom especially, there is usually an intense sexual chemistry between the male and female partner. Hopefully, the dancers create such chemistry that it is hard for the audience to believe that they are not a real couple. Furthermore, most of the dances performed on these shows are telling a story, and this story is normally about the relationship between a male and female. By having the male dancers take on the role of a lover, it is showing audiences that many of the dancers are either not gay, or at least not feminine. On top of this, Latin ballroom is from countries where being a male dancer is culturally accepted and to dance is not seen as crossing a gender boundary. Therefore, there are many Latin ballroom dancers who are straight. Hip-hop is another style in which male dancers' sexualities are not harshly judged. In fact, due to the attitude and thrusts, pops, and throws that are featured in hip-hop, the style appears more masculine than feminine. So unlike the rest of dance, a more common stereotype of hip-hop is that it is performed by men. There are countless examples in which the shows have featured girls performing great hip-hop numbers, and on *ABDC* there have been crews completely composed of girl dancers of all race. Even still, the majority of the contestants are male. But for females, crossing gender boundaries has less severe repercussions than for men, so even if hip-hop remains associated with male dancers, female

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[9] Moore, Valerie Ann. "Race, Risk, and the Emergence of Gender Boundaries: Kids Crossing Boundaries in Summer Camp". *Qualitative Sociology*; Vol. 26, No. 2. 173-198.

dancers do not receive the same subordinate "other" status that a male would for crossing.[10] Nonetheless, hip-hop is a genre of dance in which male dancers have had fewer assumptions of their sexuality.

Another important way that the shows are changing assumptions of sexuality in the dance world is that the audience is actually getting to know the dancer and their lives through the shows. The audience can hear first hand, if a dancer chooses to share, whether he or she is straight or gay. *DWTS* has played a significant role in showing America that great dancers do not have to be gay. One of the professional male dancers on the show, Mark Ballas has been in and out of the tabloids for his love life with other female dancers. And also on this show the audience watches athletes, singers, and other celebrities who are known fathers, husbands, and even womanizers dancing hard and getting into it.

An extension of this argument is that these shows are showing that dance is truly an athletic art. The clips of rehearsal that come up before every performance show the dancers in grueling rehearsals sweating and working hard. Almost every week on *DWTS* a celebrity can be heard talking about how hard dancing is and how they did not expect it to be so. The whole premise of *DYAO* is based on the athleticism and work out that dance requires. The realization that dancing requires such athleticism has even lead to Gatorade's, a company which prides itself on quenching the thirst of the most elite athletes, recent sponsorship of *SYTYCD.* Lauren Froederman is the first dancer to be featured on the Gatorade bottle and the first dancer to be a spokesperson for the company. Before these shows the only athleticism that was associated with dance is the tendency for many professional athletes, mainly football players, to take dance classes to help with their movement on the field. However, audiences and consumers are now seeing that every style of dance requires strength, balance, and stamina.

[10] Ibid.

The importance of associating athleticism with dance is that male dancers are no longer seen as boundary crossers, but rather a specific kind of athlete and artist. As I have already stated, for a male to dance was for him to deviate from the hegemonic norms of masculinity. Since the "dominant definition of masculinity is largely about expressing difference from-and superiority- over anything considered 'feminine'," it would be considered impossible that a person could do something that was considered for girls and still be masculine.[11] However, now that America sees athleticism and grace working together in a great dancer, Americans are less prone to just assume that a male dancer is gay, because he now has a very "masculine" attribute.

The second way I am addressing sexuality refers to the exploitation of male and female sexuality on these shows in both the performances and dialogue. On every show I have mentioned there is, at some level, the objectification of dancers as sexual entities. *DYAO* plays a controversial role in this discussion because it does seem that the show exploits the competitors' hard work and desire to be sexy in order to create a television show. By placing the unfit competitors onto a stage and into costumes that are too revealing, competitors are going to try harder to look the way they should look. On one hand this show seems inspirational, but on the other it has subjected the contestants to much ridicule, and only made audience members feel bad for them. *DWTS* also seems to exploit some celebrities' desires to be seen as sexy and talented by putting them in embarrassing costumes and giving them dance moves they do not look good doing. But in the end, these contestants have signed up for this, and have approved being exploited in this way.

However, for some these shows, especially *DYAO* and *DWTS*, represent the universality and acceptance of everyone in dance. On both of these dance shows the audience can tune in

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[11] Zinn, Maxine, and Michael Messner. "Sex and Gender Through the Prism of Difference." Ed. Pierrette Hondaganeu-Sotelo. Pp. 156

weekly to watch overweight, unattractive, and older people dancing and enjoying it. The producers of these shows have managed to turn dance into an activity that can be recreational and pursued by anyone, regardless of age or body. Furthermore, the shows are giving the beneficial impression that there is no prerequisite of attractiveness in order to dance. In doing this, dance has lost some of the overtly sexual connotations associated with it. Unfortunately, when taking a closer look at the shows, it become evident that this freedom only applies to the amateurs and competitors on the show that are doing this for recreation, not for the professionals who are pursuing careers.

DWTS and *SYTYCD* are the two shows that most exemplify sexual objectification since they are the shows that rely on professional dancing. On *DWTS* there is often a stark contrast between an older or unfit celebrity next to a dancer in barely-there clothing. Even the celebrities who are young and in shape are usually not dressed in as scandalous costumes as the professionals. Kim Kardashian and Audrina Patridge are both reality television stars who are famous for being young and beautiful, but when they were contestants on the show their costumes and dance moves were less sexual than those of the professional dancers. This concept applies to men too. Mike "the Situation" Sorrentino is another reality-television star who competed on *DWTS,* and who is known specifically for his abs and his tendency to reveal them on every red carpet and in every photo opportunity. But even Mike kept his shirt on a surprising amount of the time while he was dancing in comparison to professionals on the show like Ballas. Interestingly though, Mike would immediately open up his shirt after he performed, and at one point in the season he was turned into a sexual entity when the whole point of a dance performance was to glorify his topless body. This is a form of exploitation that would never be allowed for a female contestant on the show. For example, Kardashian never performed a

number that focused on her famous behind, yet on *SYTYCD* a number was literally referred to as "the butt dance" because it actually depicted a male dancer following a female dancer's behind. It seems that women dancers and all are more likely to be subjected to objectification than women who are just competing on these shows.

On *SYTYCD* almost all of the female dancers are featured as sexual entities at some point through their costumes and choreographed movement. For men the situation is slightly different. Generally, black and Latino men are sexualized much more than white men on the shows. For the most part, white male dancers are dressed in less revealing costumes and featured in fewer dances that require sex appeal. Also, they are commonly critiqued for not being a "strong" enough dancer for their female partner. Men of minority, on the other hand, often have unbuttoned or sleeveless shirts that reveal their bodies if any shirt at all. Towards the end of season 5, Evan Kasprzak was the only fair-skinned male left in the competition. There were two instances when the guys did dances all together, one time shirtless. Both times the judges desexualized Kasprzak by commenting on his size and being "white" in comparison to the rest of the dancers which consisted of two black dancers, one Latino, and one Russian dancer with a very dark complexion. There are of course exceptions to this where a white dancer may be featured without a shirt or in the role of a strong and masculine male, but rarely is it a role that is supposed to be sexy or seductive.

There are two potential reasons that men of minority, specifically dark-skinned men, are overly sexualized on the show. The first reason for this is that often in society the dark-skinned body, specifically the black body, has the stigma of promiscuity or "excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire." Although this is the stigma that normally support deviancy and racism, in a

situation where being sexy is good, this stigma carries a more desirable association.[12]A second, and much more theoretical, possibility as to why male dancers are overly sexualized on the show is that potentially more minority male dancers are straight than white male dancer. While it would be difficult to prove this, it is interesting to look at the role of crossing gender boundaries for a minority man. According to Valerie Ann Moore and her research of boundary crossing, minority families tend to teach their children more "egalitarian family relations." These parents socialize their children to be more open to crossing gender boundary lines, thus for a boy in a minority family to dance would be more acceptable than it would in many white families.[13] If this theory does hold, then it is probable that more straight male dancers are of minority which is why they are more prone to be displayed in a sexual manner. Normally in society, the image of the Latina or black woman is displayed as a sexual entity however in the dance it seems that this is the rule for men and that all women are subject to it.

As is evident from the example with Kasprzak above, the discourse and themes on this show are essential in discussing any sexual exploitation. I have already mentioned how there is always a story behind every dance, and for the most part they are about male and female relations, in which the partners must evoke sexual chemistry. Especially in Latin ballroom, which may be part of the reason for the attire on DWTS, sexuality is inherent in the style. One of the most common critiques the judges offer is that they wanted more sexual chemistry because they did not "believe" the piece. There have even been dances in which the performers have tried so hard to create a sexual chemistry that they have ended their number in a passionate kiss; this is a move the judges often rave about. Of course, technique is the key component to a solid routine, but the judges are very quick to comment about a dancer's appearance in it as well. Adam

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[12] Collins, Patricia Hill. "Prisons for Our Bodies, Closets for Our Minds", *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans and the New Racism.* Routledge, New York, 2004.
[13] Moore

Shankman, an openly gay judge on the show, will often pretend to wipe drool from his mouth or have a heart attack after a dance in which a female or male dancer came across very sexy. Nigel Lythgoe, producer and judge of *SYTYCD*, has been criticized for making racy statements towards the female dancers. In one episode of Season 5 Lythgoe made two inappropriate comments to a barley 18 year-old Jeanine Mason. After a dance where the final three women performed a "Super Girl" themed number, Lythgoe congratulated two of the dancers on a great job, then looked to Mason and made an innuendo about her chest in the costume. Just a few numbers later, Mason performed with a male dancer to a passionate, and somewhat violent, Pasodoble. As part of his critique Lythgoe commented on their sexual chemistry and how he would have enjoyed doing what Brandon, her partner, had done to her.[14] The judging goes far beyond just the technique in a performance, which shows just how important sexuality is to being a professional dancer because sex does sell in today's society.

This realization led me to question why certain dancers are chosen for these shows, specifically *SYTYCD* which tries to find "America's Favorite Dancer." How much more does it take than just being a good dancer to win this title? More importantly, are the producers, some of which are the judges, trying to create characters that appeal to the audience or trying to find the best dancers? In order to determine this I started looking into what is required to get onto the show. For the most part the criteria are explicitly stated on the show. First, there needs to be an equal ratio of female and male dancers for partnering. Second, the judges try not to select more than two dancers, of the same gender, who excel in the same style of dance because they do want some diversity in terms of dancing. Other than this, the selection is based on the judge's choices and is completely subjective.

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[14] "_sytycd_: Nigel's an Old Perv..." *Community Center*. 5 Aug. 2009. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://community.livejournal.com/_sytycd_/814601.html>.

In an interview with Chris Freer, head of the Clear Talent Group which represents the most successful dancers on the East Coast, he claimed that although he does not watch the show, he believes that for the most part "the cream of the crop always rises to the top," in response to my questioning if the best dancers make it onto the show. If anything, he saw the opposite problem. Many of the people on the show are great dancers and entertaining, but do not have the work ethic or business smarts to compete in the real world.[15] However, I have a hard time completely accepting this statement since through discussion, reading blogs, and watching the show myself, there are many instances where the reactions or selections of the judges were shocking to audience members.

One of the most controversial decisions in *SYTYCD* history occurred in season 7 when Anthony Burrell, a contemporary dancer from the Bronx, was not selected to be one of the top 12 dancers to actually make it on to the show. From his audition in New York through his performance in Vegas Week, the judges were brought to tears by his talent and could not help but label him as one of the best dancers auditioning that season. At the end of Vegas Week Burrell performed a contemporary number with two other contemporary dancers, Kent Boyd and Adechike Torbert. Burrell is a tall black man whose rough exterior represents his Bronx upbringing. Boyd is a petite, blonde-haired, 18 year-old farm-boy from Ohio. Torbert is also black but more petite, vulnerable, and overall less intimidating than Burrell.[16] After watching the three men dance together, it was undeniable that all three were talented, but the judges told Burrell that it was like "watching the men separate from the boys." In the end, Boyd and Torbert were both selected over Burrell, something which many individuals in the dance world are still

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[15] Freer, Christopher. Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2010.
[16] "'SYTYCD's' Top 10 (plus One) Revealed – The Marquee Blog - CNN.com Blogs." *The Marquee Blog Watch Showbiz Tonight Live at 5pm ET and 11pm ET/PT on HLN - CNN.com Blogs*. Web. <http://marquee.blogs.cnn.com/2010/06/10/sytycds-top-10-plus-one-revealed/>.

confused about. Burrell is definitely more intimidating and could potentially be identified by viewers as a stereotypical angry and arrogant black male, while the other two dancers represented quite the opposite. To many bloggers and members of the dancer world, as well as myself, this was a blatant case in which an exceptional dancer was pushed aside for two others who would be more appealing to a television audience.

As I have already referenced, these shows have collectively demonstrated that not all male dancers are gay. Nevertheless, there are many male dancers who are gay, some who are open about it and some who are not. This being said, producers seem to be very careful about how they present homosexuality on their shows. Lythgoe has been accused of forcing young male dancers who are gay to pretend they are straight in order keep the young girls watching and voting. According to bloggers and critics, this claim comes from clips that show male dancers who some individuals believe to be "clearly gay" talking about their dream girl or being single. In response to this Lythgoe stated that, "We've never thought about it, to be honest. I don't actually go around and say, 'Excuse me are you gay or are you straight?' It isn't a question that we ask… I'm never worried if anybody's gay. What I don't like on the dance show, to be frank, is effeminate boys that mince around the stage. I don't care if they're gay or straight. That's got nothing to do with it for me."[17] There is no evidence that Lythgoe has ever made any of his contestants hide their sexuality. Furthermore, no one that was ever "straight" on the show has come out in public afterwards. Tyrell Witherspoon, a competitor on *SYTYCD*'s Canadian equivalent, said that "homosexuality isn't 'oppressed' by any means but isn't always encouraged either."[18] Witherspoon was allowed to be open about his sexuality and brought his boyfriend to

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[17] "SYTYCD | Season 7 | Anti-Gay | Homophobic | Kent Boyd | Nigel Lythgoe | Cat Deeley | Homorazzi.com." *Homorazzi.com - Where Homos Judge Everything*. <http://www.homorazzi.com/article/sytycd-season-7-anti-gay-nigel-lythgoe-kent-boyd-cat-deeley-adam-shankman/#ixzz15fQZwTVO>.
[18] Ibid.

all his performances, but for the most part all discussion of him was cut out of interviews and articles. According to Witherspoon, the show did not try and stop relationships from forming between male dancers, but they also did not show the squeezes and winks that occurred between them on the actual air or footage.[19] Even if Lythgoe and other producers do not actually care about the sexuality of dancers, they do care about it being on their shows.

Throughout the history of the show, men have danced together occasionally, but never in a Latin ballroom piece which relies on a sexual connection to look the way it is supposed to. For someone like Lythgoe who does not enjoy watching male dancers who look feminine, a male partnered ballroom routine would be inevitably out of the question. In season 4, a male couple auditioned a Latin ballroom piece, albeit not very well. Lythgoe's response was not what they were hoping to hear: "I think you will probably alienate a lot of our audience. I mean, we've always had the guys dance together on the show, but they've never really done it in each other's arms before… Do you know what? I'd like to see you both dancing with a girl."[20] Once again, we see a sign of Lythgoe's hegemonic inclinations about masculinity, and that there needs to be a male and female for a successful ballroom piece. A year and a significant amount of condemnation later, Lythgoe was a little more generous to the second gay couple to audition in the next season. In Lythgoe's defense, this couple was much more talented than first one, and when they performed with women they maintained the same performance. Although the couple did not make it to the top 24, their courage and love was explicitly appreciated by all the judges.[21] However, I wonder if the judges would have been as appreciative if the men were good enough be in the top 24. Would they have been allowed to express their love on the actual show

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] "SYTYCD Same-Sex Ballroom Dancers Willem De Vries & Jason Jacob Headed for Top 20 Season 6, Page 2 of 3." *Associated Content from Yahoo! - Associatedcontent.com.* <http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2183021/sytycd_samesex_ballroom_dancers_willem_pg2.html?cat=>.

the way they were allowed to in the early stages of auditions? Lythgoe was forced to confront male partnered Latin ballroom once again in Season 7 when two of the male dancers had to perform a Latin ballroom piece. This piece was choreographed to be a fighting scene in which both dancers appeared very violent and they did barely any partnering. Lythgoe did not love it, but he enjoyed the piece because it maintained masculinity and he did not have to watch "effeminate boys mince around the stage." Even though *SYTYCD* has become more liberal in having men dance together, there is still a strong connection with traditional male and female partnering, and that men dance like men.

A possible, and probable, reason that many of these questionable instances occur is because these dance shows essentially are just like any other television show: they need ratings. All of the shows here are "reality-based television", implying that they are based on reality, but not necessarily reality. When analyzing reality-based television, most media scholars maintain a common approach of looking at the individuals on the shows as "discursive constructions." The way we see and hear people on the show is the way that editing and producing wants them to be viewed by the audience. Thus, the story of race or gender on a reality-based show is "assembled through the editing process."[22] Through the deliberation process of the judges on *SYTYCD*, Lythgoe can be heard saying on the show, "Remember, we're casting a television show. We're not casting a dance company." [23] This alone shows the audience an attempt on Lythgoe's part to create characters for a television show, rather than just focusing on the dance aspect. Even on shows like the ones I am discussing, where the majority of the show is filmed live, every clip has been edited, and every dance, song, and costume has been approved by producers. In addition to this, the hosts of these shows have the ability to say or do things that force the show to go in a

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Arnett, Lisa. "The Real Deal." *Dance Spirit Magazine*. 1 Nov. 2007. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://www.dancespirit.com/articles/1605>.

certain direction when it is live. This gives producers another potential way to control the story being told. Although this is reality television, and supposed to be a completely democratized version of dance, producers do need to acknowledge what appeals to an audience and make sure that is what they get.

Despite any controversy and question about how real these dance shows are, they have played a role in blurring the lines between races in terms of who can perform what kind of dance, and created an open environment for all dancers regardless of their sexualities. Overall, they have had a positive effect on the perceptions of dance and dancers in the larger public sphere of American society. But, the shows have actually had differing effects on the dance world itself. At a time when all other businesses are suffering, the dance industry has reached its most successful point and it does not seem to be slowing down. Dancers have more work opportunity and chance to earn the same credit that other athletes and celebrities do. *Burn the Floor* is a Broadway production featuring solely ballroom dance. The production has been touring the world since 1999, but once ballroom made it onto primetime television, it was able to find success in New York and the rest of the country.[24] Also, there has been in increase in dancing for recording artists' tours and performances, as well as in awards shows. Other television shows and movies, including *Glee* and *Step Up 3-D,* have featured many dancers that that were originally on some of these shows. Even your ordinary dancer and studio is benefitting from these shows since more dance classes, especially ballroom, are being offered than ever before.[25] In a hard economy, more dancers are capitalizing on their new fame for job opportunities.

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[24] Isherwood, Charles. "Shaking, Rattling, and Shimmying Under a Broadway Disco Ball." *Theater - The New York Times*. 3 Aug. 2009. Web. 15 Dec. 2010. <http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/08/03/theater/reviews/03burn.html?pagewanted=2>.

[25] Freer, Christopher. Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2010.

There is however, a huge disconnect between some of the messages the shows are giving viewers and the reality of the dance world. These discretions comment not just on the dance world, but on society as a whole. Firstly, there is much debate in the dance world that the art of dance is becoming too commercialized. Although it is good to be a versatile dancer, many dancers are losing their technique or focus and instead trying to just wow America with "big tricks." Even though the dance world is overlapping in dancers and talent more than before the shows, a division is forming between those in the dance world who want to protect the integrity of dance, and those who want dance to continue profiting off dance's new popularity. [26] Secondly, Christopher Freer believes that these shows are giving many dancers, and Americans, a skewed perception that anyone can be a star. He says that "the weeding out process at auditions has gotten ridiculous because everyone thinks they are a great dancer, when very few of them actually are." Although it is great to see that this art is being appreciated by more people, the expectations for dancers have only increased as a result of these shows, and many people have a hard time hearing and accepting the word "No."

The main contradiction between the shows and the real dance world is that as much as the dance community is very open to diversity, it is not quite as liberated as the shows make it appear to be. Dance is very visual, so the way a dancer looks does matter. In the cases where film, television, videos, or advertisements are involved race definitely comes into play because producers are trying to sell a product. Freer commented on how he has had to turn down great dancers for less talented ones who better "fit the part." Once again, Freer does not believe that race plays a role on a show such as *SYTYCD* or *ABDC* where producers are trying to find the best dancers, but he states that it absolutely does on *DWTS*. This is because *DWTS* is actually a job for many professional dancers, and producers want to create the right look for the shows. As a

[26] Arnett

result, there are no black professional dancers, only white and Latino. Another example of this is that Beyonce has one white backup dancer and the rest are all black because that is what looks "best" for Beyonce's image. When it comes to paid jobs, the best dancer does not always get the job. [27]

Dance companies are theoretically more diverse than any media dancing because they are not trying to sell anything or tell a story; they are to exhibit the best dancers' technique and style. In this case, talent can absolutely supersede race or ethnicity, but directors can use their discretion to make sure that their companies are as beautiful and appealing as possible. The downfall to this is that not all directors share the same aesthetic vision, and some may be more biased than others. For example, Alvin Ailey features more minority dancers while most other companies feature white dancers. But for the most part, companies maintain a particular "look" or composition because those are the best dancers who audition. For example, The American Ballet Theater does not have one ethnic principle, and the City Ballet has just a few Latino male dancers, but no ethnic women. However a very realistic cause of this is the earlier discussion of class, and being able to afford dance for all the years of training that a company requires. Also, the reason it seems that companies are willing to be more diverse with men is simply that there are fewer male dancers, thus there is less competition among male dancers.[28] When examining these points, it is interesting to see that the shows do a better job of representing the composition and diversity of the companies, while the dancers who participate in these shows are from the other sector within the dance world.

Popular dance has come to be represented by what these television shows are showing America. Through these shows not only is America learning new styles indigenous to America

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

and not, but that a dancer does not have to look a particular way to excel in it. Also, dance is receiving the credit it deserves as an athletic art that takes strength and years of work, and that it does not comment on one's sexuality. Finally, we are also learning that popular dance is being controlled somewhat through producers who want successful ratings, and in that effort are the ones responsible for evolving the look of popular dance. In the end, acknowledging what is going on in the real dance world is important because it can provide a critique of the shows, and the fact that they are not depicting the dance world as is it really is. This is, in turn, is giving false hope to many young dancers and false information to the people who are accepting it. On the other hand, this discussion is a more valuable critique of the real dance world, and how it has not evolved the way the shows should have inspired it to. By contradicting the messages of these shows in many ways, the dance industry is only preventing fans from fully accepting and changing the expectations of dance I have discussed here.