Act 2
Gendered Ageing in Theatrical Dance

Several scholars in performance studies have (quite rightly, I might add) noted the neglect of dance by disciplines such as sociology and cultural and feminist studies (see Desmond 1997a; Thomas 1993, 1995, 1997). For example, Helen Thomas points out that, despite the fact that dance can arguably be linked with processes of gender roles and identification, dance has “not been drawn on as a significant resource in opening up the categories of gender”, even though, for example, women such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and others played a strong part in developing twentieth-century modern dance in America (Thomas 1997, p. 5). So far I have argued that dance presents a unique opportunity for examining the operations of age and gender norms, which I will further develop here.

Dance scholars such as Judith Lynne Hanna (1988) have long argued that Western theatrical dance has been a site of both the subversion of gender stereotypes and their perpetuation within a patriarchal system, as epitomized respectively in modern dance and classical ballet. From the turn of the twentieth century, female dancer–choreographers such as Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and more recently Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp and others have figured strongly as leaders in modern dance, a trend which Hanna (1988, p. 131) sees as “in part a rebellion against male domination in both dance and society”. These pioneers of change subverted the official canon of classical ballet and its vocabulary of movement and established schools and companies in which they were also founders and managers.

However, Hanna (1988) argues that this in turn led male choreographers to react by foregrounding the male dancer in a conventionally accepted, ‘virile’ way, characteristic of what she perceives to be the
'second phase' of modern dance as male-dominated and driven by aspirations to establish a socially valued identity for the male dancer. This culminated in the male ‘superstar’ dancer (for example, Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov), who ostensibly restored dance as a ‘respectable’ profession for men (Burt 1995; Daly 1997). One clearly can see the contested nature of establishing a culturally revered gendered position in dance. Ironically, however, such a gender-based ideology is ultimately self-sabotaging, as Daly (1997, p. 115) notes:

[T]he fervor with which apologists invoked the rhetoric of difference in order to assert male dominance in ballet ironically echoed the very rhetoric – that some activities are ‘masculine’ and others are ‘feminine’ – which had long contributed to the ‘emasculature’ of the art form as a whole. The profession will never be truly destigmatized for men (or women) as long as the masculine-feminine difference is maintained, because it is due to this polarity that dance was dubbed ‘effeminate’ in the first place.

Burt (1995, p. 31) claims that modernist and formalist views of dancing, which traditionally dominated discourses on dance, held that the highest standards in dance are ahistorical and essentialist, being based on valuing the metaphysical transcendence of the “base, physical facts of anatomy and gender”, whereby gender was seen as immutable and therefore irrelevant to analyses of dance. Such views, he maintains, “efface and deny the agency of the body in producing dance, [which] is of course gendered” (ibid.). More recently, however, the way in which cultural concepts such as gender are represented in dance has begun to be explored. For example, Burt (1995, 2001) has highlighted the relational nature of representations of gender in Western dance, arguing that these representations symbolize larger, historically situated cultural norms. He contends that representations of gender are constituted by “discursive and affective symbols which are ideologically produced and historically and socially situated [and that] representation in dance is contingent upon beliefs about the body, and... the gendered body is therefore an area in which the embodiment of socially produced norms is defined and contested” (Burt 1995, p. 32). Similarly, Albright (1997, p. xv) cites the emergence of interdisciplinary research and cultural studies for dance scholars as important for seeing the social situatedness of dance and dancers rather than studying movement for movement’s sake, as earlier researchers had done.