

Hey ballet dress code...let's talk about queerness

What if you are a “gender fluid” dancer? Or even just an iconoclast individual artist? Does a conservative “boy-girl” dress code stifle creativity, intimidate dancers, and deny them their freedom of expression?

by Claire Engelmann

When I walk around campus, whether I'm passing by the arts plaza café or getting a book from the library, I can see that students study and attend classes in different variations of clothing. The way students decide to dress is influenced by social norms of class, gender, and many others that society deems important in attaining personhood. And although each individual chooses what they find “appropriate” dress for themselves, there is a certain amount of uniformity across campus. Nevertheless, most students do have a certain freedom; there is no written code for how UCI students as a whole must clothe themselves for classes. They can express themselves with their clothing, showing moods and stress-levels in their daily style choices.

Whether students are conscious of it or not, they also express and perform genders through dynamic and intricate codes of dress, as well as by choosing perfume, voice, gesture, gait, makeup and more. And, though gender is expressed mostly through man and woman interpretations, many students present in “gender queer” and transgender ways—even students who may not identify with these terms. This is partly because gender is performed in such varying ways, clothing is not always definable as being exclusively for a “man” or a “woman.”

The word “queer” is used here as a catch-all phrase for non-binary expression of gender, meaning not definable as “man” or “woman,” sometimes called androgynous. Alice A. Kuzniar quotes Moe Meyer in her book *The Queer German Cinema*, when Meyer poetically analyzes the word “queer”: “What ‘queer’ signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts” (Kuzniar 2000, 6). Queerness is a non-abiding identity and gender performance that transcends readily available labels.

Such expression and performance of gender is not left at the door before entering dance studio for a UCI ballet class. There is something different from a casual walk around campus in this scenario, something that severely limits the expression of gender, especially queer expression. This difference is the simple fact that there is a dress code in the UCI ballet studio. A dress code that clearly indicates that only two gender expressions are and should be present in the ballet class.

The Ballet IV syllabus from 2016 states under the section entitled “Proper Attire for Technique Class”: “Studio clothing attire should be clean and show the body modestly and allow for full range of motion. Women: Solid color leotard, pink or black full-length tights, ballet slippers with elastic, and pointe shoes with elastics and ribbons. Men: Leotard or close fitting T-shirt, full-length tights, dance belt, ballet slippers with elastic.” This gender-specific dress code is unique to the ballet classroom at UCI, as most other dance classes only state general suggestions for “appropriate attire.”

It's not surprising that a dance class might have certain requests for dance student attire, as it would be irksome for many technique teachers if a student were to come to class ready to dance in jeans or a ball gown, yet the gender specifications particular to the ballet dress code are troublesome. I am no stranger to the binary gender expression popular to most conservatory ballet programs, as I come from a fairly conservative ballet studio. Not to mention that the history of ballet is entrenched in the European artistic renditions of the angelic, soft, subservient white woman and the morally righteous, strong white man. But these histories aside, I do not think university dance students, especially in the present day, benefit from such a defined and gendered code of dress or style of dance.

I can say with confidence that only a small number of UCI dance majors who take ballet here want to eventually dance with classical ballet companies. And even so, most ballet companies do not have a dress code for professional class. So, what exactly is the purpose of this conservative, binary gender specific dress code? Who does it benefit and why is it part of the UCI dance department's policy?

The UCI web page for "Official University Policies and Procedures" states in the frequently asked questions that, "There is no stated dress code for the University, however attire should be appropriate and reasonable for a work environment. Departments may have their own dress codes, developed in consultation with Human Resources, that take into account appropriateness for public contact, safety, etc." Reading further, one is directed to reference Sec. 903-10: Environmental Health and Safety Policy, which centers its policy on the importance of a healthy and safe working environment. It is somewhat obvious that this policy is directed at departments such as chemistry and biology, which may require a certain code of dress for laboratory classes for health and safety reasons. I wonder then, if the dance department consulted with Human Resources about their dress code for ballet? And if so, what were Human Resources' thoughts on the syllabus's gender specificity?

It seems to me that the dance department's goal in having this ballet dress code may be to enforce discipline and project conservative respectability norms onto all prospective ballet students. These respectability norms infamously attempt to secure heterosexuality and binary gender expression as the normal and natural ways to be. Such respectability codes are dominant in society as a whole, and queerness has been a strong force of resistance to them throughout time: "As gender theory has extensively rehearsed, 'queer' marks an eccentricity common to gays, lesbians, bi- and transsexuals, a common protest against the hegemony and legitimacy of the normal. It challenges the institution of heteronormativity with its regulatory strictures" (Kuzniar 2000, 6). Queerness echoes the forgoing resistance to respectability norms that brand colonialism and whiteness. Queer is widely thought to reference the LGBT community exclusively, but the word extends itself to all resistances and embodiments that counter the normative and work against conformity.

Embodying queer resistance to the norm is an incredible feeling that can enhance and empower the artistry of dancers. Such passion is crucial in artistic exploration, especially for queer-identifying students. A large part of becoming personally engaged and embodied in ballet class is the process of gaining an intimate relationship with the mind-body in order to fully express and feel passionate in the movements and music. This includes exploring clothing choices that are continuous with the ever-changing personal voice a dancer feels throughout their

study. Such exploration requires dynamic trial and error in varying one's choice of clothing during class.

With a ballet dress code in force, students who break it to engage in creative embodied learning may be perceived as lazy or undisciplined, although this dynamic learning can be a rigorous and intellectual site of personal growth. Inspired by Foucault's theory of care of the self, Emily Beausoleil writes about these explorative and improvisational processes when she says, "It is not by escaping the reach of discipline but by learning to move more fluidly, lightly, and easily within and between disciplines—a capacity itself enhanced by exploring and experimenting with disciplines that are not governed by a logic of normative teleology—that one comes to broaden the range of personal possibility and the capacities needed to navigate it" (Beausoleil 2014, 115). Freedom for students to experiment and explore their clothing choices in ballet class is quite possibly the most important contribution in encouraging full range of passion in a student's dancing. That freedom is curtailed with dress code restriction of queer expression.

So, how can queer students—and others—be expected to reveal their passion and personal expression when official dress codes indicate that it's not "proper" or appropriate in class? Even when a ballet teacher is lenient about the dress code or does not mention it in class, the existence of a syllabus and overall understanding in the dance department of the ballet dress code is enforcement enough to single out or discourage students who wish to express themselves in ways the dress code does not account for. The queer dance student may engage in this power relationship with the institution and individual teachers in resistant or submitting ways, depending on how accepting or aware they are of queerness in themselves. Also, resistance may include singling themselves out and confronting authority figures, so it can cause further stress and social anxiety just to speak up.

The ballet dress code has a large hand in creating the stress and anxiety for students in the ballet studio. Yet, it's unlikely for queer students especially to tell a faculty member that the dress code can contribute to stress, because this could result in the student being pressured into "outing" themselves when a faculty member wants to have specific reasons for such distress. There is also the possibility that faculty members, informed of a student's queerness, will ignore the student in subsequent ballet classes because they are uncomfortable with queerness or are afraid to approach the student because they fear the student is "overly sensitive." Yet another possible consequence of challenging the dress code is to still be held to the normative code of dress—whether consciously or unconsciously—and so be deemed by teachers as lazy or uncommitted to class, despite making explicit the reasons for dressing out of the code.

So, how do we proceed? Struggle is no stranger to the queer embodiment-mentality, but there are some very simple ways the dance department could welcome queer ballet dancers into their classes. First, do not make the dress code gender-specific. It should be known by all faculty members that many people, and, so, many students identify as genderqueer and do not go by "man" or "woman" labels. Second, consider amending the dress code to allow for more clothing exploration in class. This can lead to some surprising results in beautiful expressivity, openness, vulnerability, and passion in ballet students' dancing. Third, think about dropping the dress code altogether. Most of the dance majors are extremely experienced in dance studio attire. They know what works for them, and enforcing a conservative dress code, especially for students who do not come from a conservative studio, is discouraging and unwelcoming.

Speaking to the department ballet faculty: You may lose incredible ballet dancers because of the limitations that this conservative dress code places on personal expression, and you may be elated with the colorful and beautiful identities and expressions that come from explorative clothing allowance.

Bibliography

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