**Being a male dancer means battling many stereotypes. But the rewards of my job are limitless.**

By **Sascha Radetsky** | NEWSWEEK

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My business attire is a pair of tights. All right, there it is. I wear makeup onstage, and some of my colleagues are gay. Can we move on now? Can we leave behind the tired male-ballet-dancer stigma—that ballet is not a masculine pursuit—in order to move toward an appreciation of the athleticism and artistry involved in this line of work?

On an average day at the job, I handle lithe, lovely women, engage in duels and delight in the experience of an exotic locale. I move like a gymnast or martial artist and embody the vilest of pimps or the most chivalrous and passionate of lovers. I constantly expand the borders of my physical capabilities, and I hone my mind to a quick-learning, focused edge. Come 8 p.m., I'll fuse dynamic movement and storytelling with the grandeur of a full live orchestra.

Yes, I'm proud of my profession**.** Yet I find myself slightly guarded when I tell people what I do. Like some sort of incurable blight, the male-dancer stereotype has taken root and metastasized in our cultural consciousness. Pioneers like Baryshnikov or Nureyev might have opened some minds, but their days have long passed, and despite the noble efforts of a handful of current ballet leaders to expose fresh audiences to our art form, a whole new generation looks at male dancing with skewed vision. Some of my peers are foreigners; in many other countries male dancers are held in higher esteem. I studied in Russia for a year and always marveled at the way Russians celebrated their artists, whether their medium was dance, music or the written word. But I'm American, and I want to live in my own country, as a dancer, with some respect.

The most irritating aspect of the male-dancer stereotype is the underlying insinuation that we in some way lack strength of character or a courageous spirit. Male and female, all dancers undergo strenuous training from a very young age, and constantly wrestle with injuries and fatigue. But male dancers must possess a special type of will and fortitude if they are to become professionals, for, like fish swimming upstream, we have to fight through the current of thinly veiled contempt that much of society harbors for our chosen path. In our culture, girls are encouraged to take ballet; boys receive no such endorsement, except of course from ballet teachers or exceptionally supportive parents. The boy who perseveres in dance must have a genuine hunger for it, must be uniquely motivated and dedicated, and must develop a truly thick skin.

I started taking ballet when I was 5. My open-minded parents thought it was a good way to channel my rambunctious behavior. A few years later I was hooked. I loved the physicality and, of course, the girls, but I also learned that not everyone recognized the value of dance the way I did. I don't remember the first fight I got into for being a kid who took ballet, but I remember fighting a lot before I realized that maybe I should keep my extracurricular activities to myself. But ballet was rewarding enough to be worth a fat lip or a black eye, and I emerged from my years of dance training more focused than ever. My background is not unusual among my American colleagues—they share similar stories of discouragement, harassment and even violence. But these experiences served to harden resolve and develop courage, and I know I can always count on several of my dancer buddies for steadfast support—they got my back! Ironically, the stereotype of the sissy male dancer has given rise to a male dancer who is anything but.

It's frustrating that I feel obliged to extol the virtues and describe the rigors of my profession. I'd just like to make it known that the path of the male dancer isn't necessarily easy—as with any truly worthwhile endeavor—but the rewards can be limitless. I feel lucky to have discovered a vocation that has allowed me to glimpse the great depth of human potential, both physical and mental, and has given me the opportunity to bring joy to so many people in so many places. I feel there is honor in the arts, in the world of dance, in the realm of male ballet dancing.

Exposure to ballet is all that is needed to open minds, for the combination of athletic movement, ardent drama and beautiful music can instill a profound appreciation in an audience. But for you out there who still feel compelled to malign male dancers with half-truths and petty stereotypes, well, maybe we need to step outside. I'll leave my tights on.

*Radetsky lives in New York City.*

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