

T R A N S F

Transgender role models have never been so visible. But what about ballet, with its rigid gender roles? How can you become the dancer you want to be? **Sally Howard** hears about the struggle.



FORMERS

'I couldn't stop dancing'... Sophie Don (also overleaf) Photos: Spiros Politis for *Dance Gazette*. Make-up by Carol Morley

Like many little girls living in the North of England in the 1980s, Sophie dreamt of escape. As the miners' strike raged and riots reached the streets of nearby Leeds, Sophie would ruminate on an episode of the children's television programme *Blue Peter* which staged *The Nutcracker* with the Russian dancers dressed as Liquorice Allsorts: 'I'd look out at the wet Yorkshire skies and in my mind's eye I became the Sugar Plum Fairy: spinning and spinning in a tutu.'

Sophie's parents didn't share her dream. They laughed at her when, aged five, she asked for a tutu for Christmas. When she begged for ballet lessons for her birthday – at the age of seven, ten and again at 12 – her father rolled his eyes. When, they wondered, would their son get over his peculiar fixation? You see Sophie was – is – James: born biologically male, and unhappy about the fact for as long as he can remember. These were the years before *Billy Elliot* gave coalminers' sons tacit permission to dance. There were no boys enrolled to dance male roles at their town ballet school, let alone strapping pre-pubescent boys who identified as girl ballerinas.

Thirty years on, this is a pivotal moment for transgenderism in popular culture. In May 2014 *TIME* magazine featured a cover image of transgender actress Laverne Cox, an Amazon in blue bodycon, and heralded transgenderism as 'America's next civil rights frontier'. In June 2015 retired athlete-turned-American-reality-TV-star Bruce Jenner came out, in a photoshoot by Annie Leibowitz for *Vanity Fair*, as the postoperative Caitlin, provoking a social media storm and gathering a million Twitter followers in a record four hours.

The new transgender figureheads give faces to a debate that's raging across pop-culture and academia. Is gender biological predestiny? Or, as influential theorist Judith Butler would have it, nothing more than a performance: a slash of red lipstick, a wide-legged swagger; the fragile ballerina, en pointe, in a diaphanous tutu? Indeed, few figures distil performed femininity as does the ballerina: whether *Swan Lake* and *La Bayadère*, with their extended meditations on the feminine mystique, or the popular ballerina cult that litters millions of little girls' bedrooms with tinny music boxes and polyester tutus.

'Dance is the last bastion of gender stereotypes in the arts,' says San Francisco-based female-to-male transgender dancer and choreographer Sean Dorsey. 'In theatre, visual arts and multimedia

we've seen a fracturing of gender and sexual identities; but dance remains a space that excludes bodies that don't fit strictly binarised gender stereotypes; so – and I'm singling ballet out as particularly guilty, here – we see few tall women or short men, let alone gender-ambivalent or disabled bodies.'

Yet ballet's cartoonish take on femininity also makes it a promising stage to question and subvert gender norms. Dorsey's company has won two Isadora Duncan Dance Awards for works including *Epilepsy Is Dancing* (2009), a brooding collaboration with Antony and the Johnsons. Currently touring, *Missing Generation* explores the experience of transgender survivors of the 1980s AIDS epidemic.

Dorsey seeks to bring the dance world up to speed with this cultural turn. So too, in various ways, do the all-male Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, performing in tutus and en pointe to spoof gendered clichés in classical ballet; and Chinese choreographer Jin Xing, who danced as a male with the People's Liberation Army state dance troupe and launched her own company shortly after sex reassignment surgery in 1996.

There are signals, too, of a sea-change in ballet pedagogy. The RAD Examination Board's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy now takes the bold stand of permitting candidates to be examined on the gender syllabus with which they identify, and a handful of US women's colleges, including the Massachusetts Academy of Ballet, have extended enrolment to transgender girls.

Sophie Rebecca, né James Don, knew nothing of the early works of Jin Xing when he nervously jumped on a bus to Scarborough to buy his first tutu aged 13. Twenty years later, the IT specialist is 'coming home' to his gender identity, as he embarks on the graded hormone therapy that will lead to a series of operations to render him genitally female. James' decision to fully transition into Sophie is spurred, in part, by the growing cultural acceptance of transgenderism; but as importantly, he explains, by ballet's role as a site within which he could explore his feminine identity.

'I don't do ballet because I'm transgender and I'm not transgender because I do ballet,' he says, 'yet, in my life story, the two are somehow inextricable. Ballet has given me those moments of gender recognition that are so precious and rare to someone born with



gender dysphoria: the moment I found the first teacher, Lynne [RAD Trustee Lynne Reucroft-Croome], who would allow me to learn the female ballet role; or when I first danced en pointe and cried my eyes out because I was so happy.'

Yet ballet has also been a cruel mistress. James' inchoate trans identity led to expulsion from the first group ballet class he joined, at the age of 17; a class he presented in as James, dancing the male role. Occasionally James would experience a jolt of revulsion when he looked in the mirror and saw 'arms turned out in second with those ugly muscles looking back at me,' but relished the opportunity to learn an art form he'd long admired from afar. Then, one day, James' teacher called home to report a class cancellation. The following day, she rescinded the teenager's place in class: James' mother had made a passing reference to his struggles with gender identity and she no longer felt comfortable teaching him.

'It absolutely crushed me,' James recalls, quietly. But, by then, the fire had been lit. 'I couldn't, *wouldn't* stop dancing,' he says. Each time James moved house, with his parents and later to study and work, he would contact local dance schools, coming clean about the situation and asking if he could join a class. 'There was rarely any response.'

'DANCE REMAINS A SPACE THAT EXCLUDES BODIES THAT DON'T FIT'

– Sean Dorsey

James' experience chimes with that of Adrienne Elson, a 44-year-old postoperative transgender woman from Liverpool, now living in Northern Ireland. Ballet, too, became central to Adrienne's transition when she joined a class as an adult to improve her coordination, also dancing in a male role. 'Being in a ballet class intensified the feelings of gender dysphoria that I had worked hard, for years, to suppress,' says Adrienne. 'Eventually these feelings prompted me to visit my GP for a referral to the regional gender clinic and to set in train my transition to living as a woman.'

Adrienne, a railway operations manager now in a long-term relationship with a postoperative transgender man, told the teacher and students about her intention to begin living as a woman. Yet when she arrived at class wearing a leotard and tights, light makeup and a feminine wig she was told to leave; an incident she now recalls as a 'deep humiliation'. Today she, like James, is taught privately. She believes the school's reaction was motivated by a misconception that transgender individuals pose a threat to children. 'There's this damaging idea that transgenderism is a sexualised thing,' Adrienne says. 'That if a transgender woman expresses her identity in close proximity to children – children learning ballet in a neighbouring class, say – we're somehow seeking to groom them.'



Changing realities... Sean Dorsey Photo: Lydia Daniller

What of young transgender individuals who nurture hopes of dancing at a professional level? Online dance forums are rife with rumours that post-transition transgender women dancers are performing professionally, 'in stealth'; yet there are no openly transgender dancers in traditional companies. Valentijn de Hingh, 25 and now a prominent catwalk model, gripped the Dutch nation in the mid-2000s when a TV documentary charted her attempts to undergo gender transition as she trained to become a professional ballerina. She successfully auditioned for the National Ballet Academy of Amsterdam but, despite a swell of public goodwill, was forced to audition, and dance, as a boy.



Ballet in transition... Lynne Reucroft-Croome and (right) Adrienne Elson

The absence of role models is no deterrent to Joe Sandbrook [not his real name], a 14-year-old who was born biologically female but has identified as a boy since the age of 12. Six months ago Joe switched from dancing the girls' to the boys' RAD syllabus and is currently working to build the strength necessary for the allegro section of his Grade Six exam. Joe has high hopes of making it into professional ballet. He's one of the first transgender teenagers in Britain to be prescribed controversial GnRH agonists, drugs which delay the onset of puberty and development of secondary sexual characteristics; he is not yet taking the testosterone which will increase his muscle mass, deepen his voice and broaden his shoulders and chest. 'I'd love to be the first professional transgender ballet dancer in the UK,' Joe says. 'I would never, never, keep my birth gender a secret; but a lot depends on what happens to my body.'

Is architecture of real concern to transgender ballet dancers? Many teachers point to the broader, flexible hips of the female body as being intrinsic to turnout, the hip-to-toe rotation that's the cornerstone of classical ballet; or to the shoulder and arm strength demanded of male dancers in executing lifts. Lynne Reucroft-Croome, who has taught James for almost 18 months, downplays the effect of physical structure on her pupil's progression in the female syllabus. 'We're lucky because, apart from James' height [6 foot 3] he's well-built for ballet,' Reucroft-Croome says, 'He has lots of turnout in his hips and good feet for footwork.' For now, her principal intervention is to soften James' positioning. 'I'd usually encourage a male dancer to act more macho,' she says. 'But I try to bring delicate qualities into James' port de bras.'

James, for his part, can't wait for the moment he feels 'that wonderful feeling you get from the dance of your soul being given wings.' He's also trepidacious. His endocrinologist warns that, as oestrogen takes effect, his body will no longer be able to do some things it used to. 'My hips will start to tilt forward and rotate,' James says, 'but they won't spread to the hip-to-waist ratio of someone born biologically female. And I will lose my strength before I begin to lose bulk.' But he's prepared for the challenge. 'I'll work hard to regain my balance and make my



movements gel. It will all be worth it when I look in the mirror and that person dancing back at me is me.' This year the mid-transition Sophie will take RAD examinations dancing the female syllabus. It's a marker, James says, of how far he's come since his childhood fantasy of being the Sugar Plum Fairy, twirling in her magical world of sweets and snow.

Will ballet witness the same shift that's seen tango de salon fissure into traditional and progressive schools? Dorsey believes that it can't afford not to respond to changing social realities outside the academy. 'Ballet is struggling with diminishing audiences,' he says. 'This should prompt dance institutions to ask themselves whether their work is truly relevant to the world we live in.'

Last year, through application to Northern Ireland's Equality Commission, Adrienne won an out-of-court settlement from the ballet school that rejected her. She resists any hint of triumphalism. 'It saddens me that we have such a long way to go, culturally, until young transgender people can transition without experiencing discrimination at every turn.'

Will trans dancers change how we think about ballet?
Have your say at gazette@rad.org.uk