

# UNMASKED

Being a **male** in the female-dominated world of dance

WORDS BY ALEXANDRIA KOBRYN || PHOTOS BY JANA LIFE

It's 11 a.m., and Gregory King's modern class is in session. Seven women are spread across the vinyl floor of studio D122, clad in the traditional black leotard with hair tightly pulled into a bun. In the midst of all the estrogen is a single male dressed in a black tank top and gray sweatpants. His muscles are clearly defined on his back, shoulders and arms.

Austin Coats, a senior majoring in dance, enrolled in his first official dance class three years ago. However, his interest in dance originated as a child after watching Dee Dee from Dexter's Laboratory dance the running-man. He was unable to attend dance classes during his childhood due to financial reasons, but was very involved with gymnastics, which later helped with transitioning into dance.

Coats is the only male dance major in the Kent State dance department, although there are several males majoring in theater who enroll in beginner dance courses and males who are minoring in dance.

Trends show there has been an increase in male dancers, and it's thanks to films like "Billy Elliot," performances by male dancers like Cuban ballet dancer Carlos Acosta and TV shows like "The X Factor."

MaryAnn Black, an assistant professor in the theater department, agrees that the number of males

entering the dance community is growing, along with the opportunities to dance professionally.

"You have your cruise ships, and you have your theme parks, you have television work—I think there's a lot more opportunities for dancers today than there were before," she says.

Dancers are not limited to just dance companies and Broadway, but a whole variety of outlets that some people may never consider needing professional dancers or some sort of dance background. For example, music videos, cheerleaders, some Disney World characters and circus performers typically have dance backgrounds.

Black has an extensive history in dance. Her mother was a dance teacher and owned a dance school in Parma for 52 years, which is where Black first began to dance, taking lessons in tap, jazz, ballet and pointe. She came to a revelation later in life that she didn't necessarily want to be a ballerina, but was more interested in musical theater and Broadway. Regardless of that choice, she has still undergone great dance training. She was a part of an Ohio dance company at the age of 15 for two years, and she studied under the direction of George Balanchine, co-founder of the New York City Ballet, and Geoffrey Holder, a choreographer and dancer.

Black acknowledges that male dancers are stereotyped by society as being homosexual because

of the work they decided to pursue. Her first dance partner was heterosexual, and her second dance partner was homosexual. A majority of males in the dance company she attended were heterosexual as well.

"I think people like to call them fairies, gay, light in the loafers, just because of what they did for a living and it was beyond the norm," Black says. "My mom had the Cleveland Browns come take ballet classes. Big, big guys trying to get light on their feet and stand on the balls of their feet all the time."

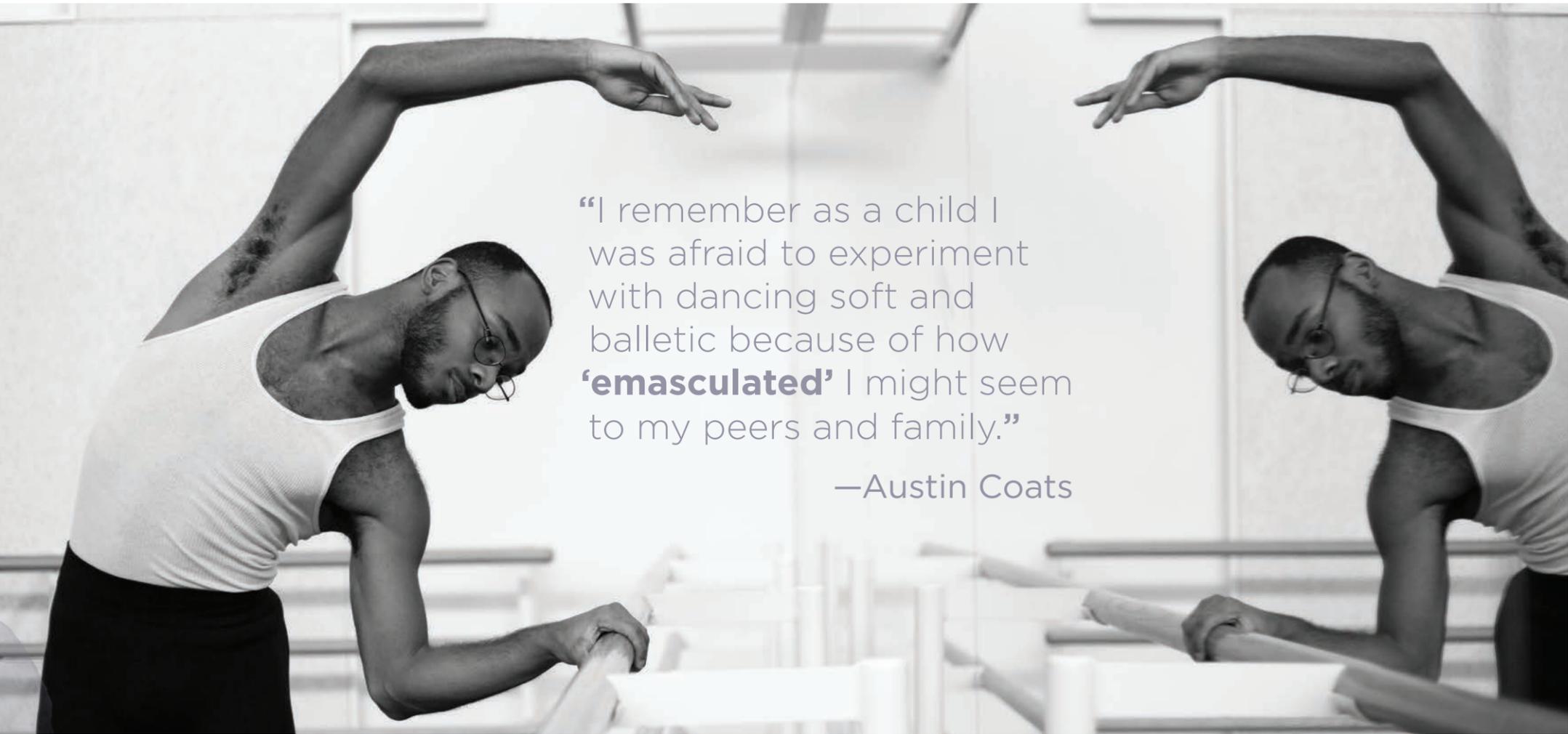
The gay stereotype that many male dancers face has been something that has affected Coats since he was a young boy.

"I remember as a child I was afraid to experiment with dancing soft and balletic because of how 'emasculated' I might seem to my peers and family, so I was really into hip-hop and strayed away from that style until around high school," he says.

Coats' sexuality has been assumed because he is a male pursuing dance, but the assumption doesn't usually occur until after he mentions the type of dancing he enjoys and trains in. For example, he is assumed to be more feminine for practicing ballet versus hip-hop.

Dance Informa Magazine says a ballerina's "instrument is [their] physique." In an article





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Austin Coats practices ballet at the Roe Green Center for the Performing Arts. Coats hopes to pursue dance in a large city once he graduates.

titled “The Ideal Ballet Body,” author Brian Nolan examines the physical expectations of ballerinas since its creation.

“In reality, the ideal physique for a female classical dancer is slim, with a long neck, a shortish to medium length torso, long legs with complimentary long arms and high insteps,” Nolan writes.

Nolan briefly delves into the male counterpart of these female dancers, stating that male dancers need to be strong in order to properly execute lifts during dances. However, he focused on the necessity of females being light in order for these lifts to work.

“As males generally mature at a later stage than girls do, girls need to be ideally slim or light so the demands on the boys’ bodies during lifts aren’t too great,” he writes. “The girls [in general] also need to be shorter than the boys due to their increase in height en pointe.”

Coats, as a male dance student, personally has not felt the pressure of having to conform his body and believes that men don’t have as strict of a body expectation as women, but has noticed trends among males between different dance companies. Males do find themselves having to look a certain way or fit a certain body type, but they have a little more leeway.

“Versatility is one thing all male dancers should have. But [dance companies] all do look for something different,” Coats says. “I believe it depends on what style it is and what the company wants. Like for Complexions Contemporary Ballet, they want their guys as flexible as their girls.”

Black weighs in on what she has observed about men’s body types in the professional dance community.

“Short, stocky men aren’t going to cut it,” she says. “I don’t see a lot of short, stocky men in ballet companies ... or in New York City.”

In college, the pressure for dancers to have a certain body type isn’t as consuming as it is in the professional dance community. Student dancers should be fit enough to be able to accurately execute the required routines and combinations. This is no problem for Coats because of all the walking he does from class to class and the numerous daily dance classes he’s required to take. His history with gymnastics also played a role in muscle memory.

Sometimes there is a direct correlation between body image and eating disorders in female dancers. The Royal Ballet School in London, England has posted an eating disorder policy on its website that states its students are more susceptible to developing eating disorders because of the

tendency “to conform to the stereotype of the ‘perfect dancer.’”

Black says men with eating disorders aren’t discussed often within the dance community. She has encountered a few male dancers with eating disorders over the span of her dance career, although she believes it’s more of a psychological issue than anything else.

Besides being the only male dance major, Coats also experiences some issues due to being black.

“I get tired of movement that you’re not used to as a black person,” Coats says. “I started in hip-hop, so I’m used to being grounded or hunched over. Then you come into ballet which is based on your opinion standards and beauty, so everything’s upright and vertical, when in Africa everything is low or more horizontal ... you have to adapt to that kind of thing.”

Coats says black dancers face the stereotype of not having a body built for ballet, especially women who are built wider, thicker and curvier. But that standard has been broken by dancers like Misty Copeland and Desmond Richardson. Copeland was the first African-American female principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre, and Richardson was the first male African-American principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre.

“Sometimes, when I’m the only black guy in class, they look to me when we’re in jazz or talking about the roots of jazz, which is Africa,” Coats says. “They’re gonna look at me for the voice of the black people when that’s not appropriate at all. You have one black person’s perspective. I don’t speak for all of us.” **B**