

The Thousand Ways There Are to Move: Camp and Oriental Dance in the Hollywood Musicals of Jack Cole¹

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Jack Cole (1911-1974) is often called “the father of American jazz dance.”² He developed his dance style while working as a choreographer and dancer in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, and “Cole technique” has strongly influenced both film dance and American theatrical dance generally. While he is probably equally famous today as a coach and mentor to female stars such as Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth, and, particularly, Marilyn Monroe, Cole’s most important innovation in dance terms, the one that made his work so influential, was his coupling of “accurately observed” oriental, Indian, and African-American dance movements to jazz music (Delamater 1981: 117). If Cole’s name is not currently well known among film scholars, it is partly because his films do not demonstrate what Jerome Delamater calls the “stylistic unity” of those canonical musicals where the choreographer (e.g., Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly) functions as *auteur*, or where dance is the “controlling feature” of the *mise-en-scène* (as it is in the musicals of Vincente Minnelli). Nevertheless, in his heyday Cole was one of the most powerful choreographers working in Hollywood, with contractual control over the movement design, camerawork, costuming, lighting, and editing of his dance numbers.³

Another reason that Cole’s importance may have been downplayed over the years is that he was gay, a fact well known by his co-workers but not, predictably, alluded to publicly outside of his creative environment. Yet, Cole’s status as an invisible gay man (to use Moe Meyer’s term) is crucial to more than an understanding of the satiric, parodic, or misogynistic—“Camp”—elements of Cole’s film work (Meyer 1994). It is also a necessary precondition for his particular mode of deployment of oriental dance as a practice. Here, I examine the interaction between the irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor of Cole’s discourse of Camp and the Orientalist dance practice he used in his musical numbers.⁴ Meyer defines *Camp discourse* as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility” of erased or displaced (closeted) homosexual identity (Meyer 1994).⁵ Visibility, or invisibility, is the term that links Cole’s Orientalist dance practice and his use of Camp discourse, for Cole’s Orientalism, like his gayness, was often “invisible” as such. That is, because he worked within a dominant, patriarchal, and compulsorily heterosexual system of representation—classical Hollywood cinema—Cole’s gay signifying system, like the Camp discourse of other gay performers and choreographers, became a “hidden transcript” within the “heterosexual frame” of his films (Drewal 1994: 176-177). What made Cole unique among his colleagues, however, was that his hidden transcript *was*, I suggest, oriental dance technique, which he manipulated precisely to reorganize and reconceptualize standard binary gender roles.

Cole did choreograph or direct the movement of several films with ostensibly oriental subject matter—including the two sound versions of *Kismet*

(William Dieterle, 1944; Vincente Minnelli, 1955)—which employed conventionalized costumes, names, musical styles, and desert locales to ensure that audiences would “read” the subject as “exotic” and “foreign.” But Cole’s use of oriental dance was otherwise seldom recognizable through costume or music alone. Unlike his erstwhile mentors Ruth St. Denis (1877-1968) and Ted Shawn (1891-1972), for example, Cole relatively rarely created what film audiences would understand in visual terms to be “oriental dance.” Instead, the dynamics of Cole’s movement styles, his use of the body and the impulses that drive its expressive motions, were the loci of oriental influence on Cole’s work, and the source of power supporting his hidden transcript.

The question is not whether Cole, or any other American, depicts non-Western cultures “authentically” or uses them to more “positive” ends. But, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, forms of oppression are not all congruent; “the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others” (Sedgwick 1990: 32). More important, the supposition that one is *either* oppressed or an oppressor, or that “if one happens to be both, the two are not likely to have much to do with each other,” is, according to Sedgwick, usually wrongheaded (*Ibid*). Orientalism and homophobia are often linked, for example; Orientalism is not only racist but homophobic (Moon 1989: 19-54). Camp historically is also a direct consequence of homophobia; it is a “subterranean” discursive practice that results from living in a world of compulsory heterosexuality. Cole’s Orientalist dance practice, because it was also a *Camp* practice, helped to undermine the homophobia of conventional “Hollywood Orientalism.”

In her essay “Male Bonding, Hollywood Orientalism, and the Repression of the Feminine in Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*,” Susan White uses the term *Hollywood Orientalism* to refer to Hollywood’s tendency “to conflate Eastern culture with corrupt sexuality, a degraded or treacherous femininity and male homoeroticism” (White 1988: 132). Certainly many Hollywood films of many different genres—war films, biblical epics, adventure films, comedies, and musicals—routinely reproduce visually and thematically what Edward Said calls the “imaginative geography” of Orientalism, according to which the Orient is described as feminine and fertile, its main symbols being “the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic—but curiously attractive—ruler” (Said 1985: 90, 103 ; Shohat 1997). Nick Browne also details the invidious and reprehensible ways in which American “dominant popular Orientalism” in early films, film theory, and theater design coexisted with and screened out institutionalized and violent racial repression of Orientals themselves (Browne 1989). I do not intend here to downplay the paranoid racism of Orientalism as a category of thought or expertise or as a liminal dreamscape on which to project displaced Western erotic and political desires. Rather, I argue that *because* Orientalism has, as Said tells us, “less to do with the Orient than it does with our world” (Said 1979: 12), who chooses to practice it, and when, and why, demands further analysis. In other words, studying the basis of American Orientalism as it occurs in specific places and times will tell us nothing about the Orient but may teach us, as Browne’s work so clearly shows, much about American culture itself.

Said, for example, claims that any American “comes up against the Orient” immured in and defined by “the main circumstances of his [sic] actuality”—that being American comes before being an individual, as it were (*Ibid.*, 11). Yet, even as we bear in mind the power differentials between the “unequal halves” of Occident and Orient (*Ibid.*, 12), the term *American* is obviously as overarching and imprecise as *oriental* itself. Orientalist practice in the field of American dance was constructed not by culturally dominant groups but by its structurally more marginalized or “outsider” members, in this case women and gay men.⁶ In fact, Cole’s approach is best understood against the backdrop of the type of Orientalism that pervaded U.S. popular culture during his years of dance training in the early 1930s, specifically the training he received from Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. So before continuing this analysis of Cole’s film work as an Orientalist and a Camp discourse, I will present a rather detailed introduction to Orientalism in American dance and film.

As is well known, from its earliest days the American motion picture was what Margaret Farrand Thorpe calls a “vampire art,” for the film industry often drew from or exploited pre-existing art and entertainment forms (Thorpe 1939: chap. 8). Since the motion picture’s distinguishing feature was its ability to record movement, dance, as an art of movement, was an immediately attractive source of subject matter. By the middle teens the iconography of eroticism and exoticism produced by “dominant popular Orientalism” in theatrical dance—not only burlesque and vaudeville but Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* and its numerous imitators as well—made dance even more appealing to Hollywood.⁷ The lure of lucrative careers and instant fame turned Hollywood into a mecca of sorts for dancers and choreographers, and many well-known dance artists opened schools in Los Angeles. The introduction of sound, of course, only heightened what many perceived to be the “natural affinity” of dance and film (Martin 1945: 60);⁸ by the mid-1930s, the musical was one of Hollywood’s major genres, and remained so through the end of the 1950s.⁹

Perhaps the best known and most influential dance school founded in Los Angeles was Denishawn, which opened in 1915. Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn were, through the audiences they attracted and the students they trained (e.g., Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, as well as Cole), the vanguard of what would eventually become American modern dance. Married in 1914, Shawn and St. Denis became famous for the “oriental” dances they created and performed, dances with titles like *Incense*, *The Cobras*, *Nautch*, *Yogi*, *Radha*—to list but one of Ruth St. Denis’s early programs. Shawn and St. Denis often mixed works from one or another of their oriental “Suites”—Ancient Greek, Japanese, East Indian, Persian, Siamese, Chinese, and Egyptian, for example—so that, in the same evening, an audience of the 1920s might see *Sappho*, *Japanese Spear Dance*, *The Beloved and the Sufi*, *Kwan Yin*, *The Abduction of Sita*, and *Isis and Osiris*. Through the early 1930s, Denishawn supplied dancers and dance pieces for numerous Hollywood movies, including Griffith’s *Intolerance* and several DeMille films; film performers also studied movement and dance at the school.¹⁰ The fashionable Orientalism of Denishawn was never, for the most part, based on much more

than extant popular imagery (St. Denis's initial, revelatory source of dance inspiration was the image of Isis on a poster advertising "Egyptian Dieties" cigarettes—"No better Turkish cigarette can be made") (Jowitt 1988: 130).¹¹ Even after Denishawn toured the Orient and North Africa in 1925-1926—the first American company to do so—its dances continued to rely more on conventions of costume and setting than on faithfully adapted movement for their effectiveness.

Shawn's observations about the dances and dancers he encountered on the oriental tour are collected in a 1929 book entitled *Gods Who Dance* and other of his abundant dance writings. Reading *Gods Who Dance*, one is struck both by its rampant racism toward what he calls "primitive people" and by the often amazingly "interlocutory" sense with which Shawn and St. Denis engaged and learned from their non-Western Others (Shawn 1929).¹² As difficult as it may be to comprehend, there seems to be no doubt that the spurious oriental dances of Shawn and St. Denis actually inspired dance revivals in India and Japan; that the performances of Denishawn, like those of ballet dancer Anna Pavlova in 1922-1923, sparked a renewed interest in indigenous dance forms. Books in classical Sanskrit, for example, report on St. Denis's impact on the ancient dance forms of India (Terry 1976; Hanna 1993: 126).

Here, one comes face-to-face with the ideology of Orientalism itself, as a "fact of [Western] human production" and a projection of Said's "imaginative geography." That is, to describe what Shawn, St. Denis, and Cole "learned from" the Orient, one must in some sense become an Orientalist, with all the dismaying chauvinisms and inequities of power that this entails. Certainly Shawn "found" the Orient he expected to find, that he wanted to find; huge areas were therefore blocked from his field of vision (e.g., "In Algiers and Tunis ... I found almost no dancing worthy of the name") (Shawn 1929: 178).¹³ Yet neither Shawn nor St. Denis ever really claimed that their oriental dance was anything more than pastiche, adaptation, a picking and choosing of the most dazzling theatrical effects.¹⁴ As in the harem dances of nineteenth-century ballet or the frenzied voluptuousness of the Ballets Russes, which embody what Deborah Jowitt calls the pessimistic and secular strain of Orientalism (Jowitt 1988: 145), authenticity was not, *could* not be, the point. The Denishawn strain of Orientalism differed only, but remarkably, in that it was less erotic than optimistic, spiritual, chaste, and, above all, respectable.¹⁵

Even though St. Denis learned to be a goddess by copying an advertisement for cigarettes, and Shawn became "Shiva" by making himself up into a living replica of a bronze statue, their dance had a quasi-religious and genuinely hortatory impulse (Shawn had actually started off in divinity school). Shawn and St. Denis believed that they stood for enlightenment, and created imaginary idealized "other selves" that were meant, as gods and goddesses were, to be beyond human desire (Jowitt 1988: 137). Their oriental personas were, as Jowitt writes, a "distillation of values both temporal and spiritual," their Orient a "storehouse of guises" (*Ibid.*, 138, 147). This aura of transformative power was both the source of the appeal of oriental dance to early feminists as well as its link to more patriarchal values of masculine dominance over sexualized and sometimes passive females.¹⁶ On the one

hand, the notion of idealizing the self through physical activity—of dance “as a vehicle for showing change,” as Jowitt puts it—could be seized upon by eager American students who wanted to move, literally, beyond the status quo. On the other hand, the storehouse of guises that Shawn and St. Denis chose to draw upon, especially in the dances they performed together, were often rigidly gendered and conveyed, in Judith Lynne Hanna’s words, “messages of male freedom and dominance counterposed to female subjugation and deference” (Hanna 1993: 129).

Of course, despite marriage to St. Denis, despite a vigorous public display of heterosexuality, the fact remains that Ted Shawn was himself a closeted gay man for most of his life and also participated in an “invisible” Camp discourse, whether he (or indeed Cole) would have called it that or not. Accounts of the flamboyance and “tastelessness” of Shawn’s dances and dance persona, in particular, bear no small resemblance to Margaret Thompson Drewal’s more recent descriptions of Liberace and his “unmarked transvestism.”¹⁷ Unmarked transvestism is not technically cross-dressing; neither Shawn nor Liberace disguised themselves as women. Nevertheless, because it often takes the form of “outrageous display,” unmarked transvestism has, according to Drewal, “a feminizing effect insofar as it makes the male performer into a glitzy object of the gaze” (Drewal 1994: 173). Shawn biographer Walter Terry mentions the “dilemma” presented to otherwise “sympathetic” music and dance critics when faced with a typical Ted Shawn dance piece:

[Critics] would groan when a primitive dance of fire found the men in silken capes walking along the stage and suddenly pulling open the capes to reveal scarlet linings and bodies bare except for silver jockstraps. Shawn would justify his whole approach with a battery of explanations, sometimes ethnic, sometimes otherwise, but the truth was that he was, and always had been, guilty of bad taste, especially in matters of costume (Terry 1976: 75).

If one looks at Shawn’s “bad taste” as a Camp discourse, as a hidden transcript that, intentionally or otherwise, certainly confounds binary gender codes in a visual sense, it is not difficult to see why Moe Meyer says that Camp can, on the one hand, offer a “transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously [invoke] the specter of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order” (Meyer 1994: 11). Unmarked as transvestites, Liberace and Ted Shawn “evade[d] disclosure,” notes Drewal, and maintained an “overt sexual anonymity” that was not threatening to a heterosexual audience: at the same time, however, it was *through* unmarked transvestism that Liberace and Shawn insinuated “their own voices, albeit in masked form, into official public discourse” (Drewal 1994: 177). Camp, in short, exploits what Meyer calls the most predictable “blind spot” of bourgeois culture: “it *always* appropriates. And it appropriates whatever the agent of Camp chooses to place in its path” (Meyer 1994: 17).

One of the most important things that Ted Shawn placed in the path of American bourgeois culture was the country’s first professional all-men’s dance group, of which Cole was a founding member. Established a couple of

years after Ruth St. Denis left Shawn in 1931, "Ted Shawn's Men Dancers" was part of Shawn's mission to prove that dance was not only a religious activity but a "one-hundred-percent male" one (Sherman and Mumaw 1986: 123).¹⁸ From most accounts, Shawn's mission "worked"; that is, he and his dancers were accepted as "real" men—virile, rugged, athletic, powerful, masculine. Walter Terry finds irony in the effort and time that the Men Dancers put into proving that they were not what Shawn and other members of the company actually "were." Yet the point is that Shawn's hidden transcript succeeded; he "proved" that masculinity and gay identity are hardly antithetical terms. Shawn *was* one-hundred-percent male, and he was also gay.

In the context of American homophobia, of course, particularly during the years when Shawn and his group performed, public reticence is understandable; so is Jack Cole's in Hollywood of the 1940s and 1950s. The marginalization of dancing as a career for "real men" was something both worked within, and yet something which both men used their respective "strains" of Orientalism to counteract. Although Edward Said equates the *object* of Orientalism with the *subject* of "male gender dominance, or patriarchy, in metropolitan cultures," to identify with the Orient as Shawn and Cole did even if the relation was one of *pseudo-mutuality*—to use Eve Sedgwick's term—was to risk *overtly* identifying themselves as feminine or feminized (Said 1985: 103; Sedgwick 1985: 196). Yet the Orient is the fantasy location of the despot in addition to the harem, and Shawn and Cole both emphasized the despotic side of their masculinity in public discourse.¹⁹

The public personas of Shawn and Cole differed markedly, however. Where Shawn's masculinity offstage was fatherly (his nickname was Papa Shawn) or brotherly, patriarchal in a literal sense,²⁰ Cole fostered an aggressive, tough, and sexually dominating "outlaw" image.²¹ The "exaggerated" public masculinities of Shawn and Cole functioned as a defensive mechanism against their homosexuality, representing what Chris Holmlund, adapting Joan Riviere's work on the meaning of femininity, calls the male masquerade (Holmlund 1993: 216). Yet, as with Liberace, Camp enabled Shawn and Cole to have their cake and eat it too, to participate "In a wickedly intelligent and perverse dialectic that alluded to their homosexual identity even as it apparently disavowed it."²² Cole himself described his "savage manner" to one writer explicitly as "a defense": "Male dancers, [Cole] said, already had several strikes against them. Those who wore jewelry and a skirt—or *dhoti*—as Cole did in his Indian dances, "were asking to have tomatoes thrown at them" (Loney 1984: 89). Cole's multiple masquerades were, then, in the end defenses against what was for Cole the biggest masquerade of all: *heterosexual* identity. Here, his roles as oppressor and oppressed interacted; the jewelry and the *dhoti*, in some instances, or the conspicuous lack thereof in others, signified in Cole's film dances both as Orientalist and as Camp practices.

Jack Cole did not remain with Ted Shawn's Men Dancers long, and the group itself was disbanded before World War II. Yet Shawn and St. Denis had obvious and profound effects on Cole's career. Although Cole said his oriental dances were always reacting against what he called the "inauthenticity" of Shawn's and St. Denis's creations (whose primary motif, as he put it, was

"goosing angels") (*Ibid.*, 59),²³ Cole's dances may or may not have been "absolutely authentic," as his student and protégée Gwen Verdon claims they were (*Ibid.*). Cole had studied intensively with Indian dancer Uday Shankar and others; he had hung around the Savoy ballroom in Harlem when he was a boy, where he learned African-American dance styles. Cole made his dancers study with teachers like Shankar as well, and he also amassed one of the largest private collections of dance manuscripts, references, and artworks in the world (*Ibid.*, 310). Yet all of this could easily have resulted in nothing more than the oriental pastiches of Denishawn in its heyday. What distinguished Cole's work from St. Denis's and especially Shawn's was not its greater "authenticity," but Cole's determination to deploy and manipulate the strictly gendered *movements* of oriental dance as a form of unmarked transvestism. Cole displaced gender codes through dance movement itself, as well as through more conventional appurtenances of costume and makeup.

In 1941, "Jack Cole and Company" appeared as a specialty in their first movie, Walter Lang's musical *Moon Over Miami*, with Betty Grable. Among the twenty-seven films that followed were the Rita Hayworth films *Cover Girl* (Charles Vidor, 1944), *Tonight and Every Night* (Victor Saville, 1945), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), and *Down to Earth* (Alexander Hall, 1947, in which Cole staged a satirical Denishawn-style "Greek Ballet"); *The Jolson Story* (Alfred E. Green, 1947); *On the Riviera* (Walter Lang, 1951); *David and Bathsheba* (Henry King, 1951); *The Merry Widow* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1952); *Three for the Show* (H. C. Potter, 1955, which featured a dream sequence about a male harem); the two *Kismets*; *Les Girls* (George Cukor, 1957); and the Marilyn Monroe films *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953), *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954), *There's No Business Like Show Business* (Walter Lang, 1954), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), and *Let's Make Love* (George Cukor, 1960). Even though he did not always receive screen credit, Cole was responsible for virtually all of Marilyn Monroe's film numbers; he worked closely with her on the nonmusical portions of her films as well. Cole himself appeared as a dancer in many of his films, and he had an acting and dancing role in Vincente Minnelli's *Designing Woman* (1957).²⁴

Whether or not a Cole number had any apparent ethnic basis (e.g., Latin American, Spanish, oriental) in musical rhythm or dance style, Cole eschewed elaborate sets and extravagant costumes unless they were called for by either a film's narrative (e.g., the Denishawn parody "Greek Ballet" in *Down to Earth*, the "oriental splendor" of *Kismet*, the outré cabaret excesses of *Les Girls*) or features of a star's image (Grable, Hayworth, or Monroe dressed in skimpy, tight, or flamboyantly decorated dresses). Cole often used bare or sparsely decorated sets—a single tree branch, a couple of raised platforms, a draped curtain—in order to make dance itself the most visually interesting component of the *mise-en-scène*.

When the situation called for it, however, Cole could exceed or at least match Liberace in "outrageous display." In the "Greek Ballet" in *Down to Earth*,²⁵ for example, Cole spotlights the spectacular status of women, but he also insists on the spectacularity of men—in large and oiled numbers, either nearly naked or in jewelry and "skirts." In the Latin American "You Excite

Me" from *Tonight and Every Night*, the women wear fetishistic fur bras and hairpieces and split skirts, the men gigantic ruffled sleeves or cut-off T-shirts and tight pants. Marilyn Monroe's "Heat Wave" number from *There's No Business Like Show Business* surrounds her with near-naked sweat-drenched men in tight Bermuda shorts. In Cole's works, then, there is what Eve Sedgwick calls a "coming to visibility of the normally implicit terms of a coercive double bind": namely, that being a "man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being interested in men" (*Ibid.*, 89). The "coercive double bind" Cole engages is that women *and* men are prisoners of gender roles. Unlike the dances of Shawn or St. Denis, Jack Cole's use the body's physical beauty to stand for more than spiritual power. Cole's dance combines the theatricality and spirituality of Denishawn, the voluptuousness and intensity of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and indigenous American as well as oriental and other ethnic dance styles. Most important, Cole's approach to dance and gender, like that of Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers, had profound effects on dominant or at least hegemonic dance culture. "Cole technique" became the basis of American jazz dance, and his influence can be seen even today in theater and film dance (Loney 1984: 353).²⁶

In the last interview he gave, Cole described his affinity for ethnic and other forms of dance:

I was interested in many things. I was interested in the Oriental theater, Japanese and Indian particularly. I was always interested in the culture of people and how they expressed themselves. I never wanted to *be*—people are always confusing why you are teaching them; they think you want to teach them to *be* an Indian dancer—but I was trying to expose them to a different attitude, to give them the excitement and the discovery of the thousand ways there are to move that are peculiar and different, totally different, that would never enter your head here. It opens up a new vocabulary of movement (Delamater, 1981: 193).

Naturally, any claims about the hidden transcript of Cole's musical numbers would be best supported by a viewing of the numbers themselves. In lieu of that, I will discuss three numbers in detail: the dance to "Not since Ninevah" from the 1955 Arabian Nights musical *Kismet*, which combines visible "oriental" features such as costume and setting with oriental movement; the "Happy Ending" dance sequence from the conventional "show-within-a-show" musical *On the Riviera*, which is not explicitly oriental in costume or setting; and finally, Monroe's and Jane Russell's opening "Little Rock" number from the backstage musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

"Not since Ninevah" is performed by the "three princesses of Ababu" (danced by Reiko Sato, Patricia Dunn, and Wonci Lui) who are joined by two tall male dancers (whose names I was unable to find). The number begins with the three princesses, who are tiny physically, dancing in a martial tempo to beating drums; they each have a sword and a shield. Their costumes are singularly unrevealing—baggy and opaque "harem pants," topped by long-sleeved bodices with high necks. All three of the dancers attack movement with gestures and steps that are precise and strong.

The two male dancers, who wear much more diaphanous "harem pants" and whose chests are oiled, hairless, and bare, begin dancing for the princesses to very syncopated and slow jazz music (one AND two AND three AND four). Their gestures, too, are deliberate and forceful, the movements of the hands and fingers as precisely choreographed as the larger motions of the legs and arms. The dance style as well as the costume signifies "Indian" or "Hindu"—the shapes the body makes in space, the relative importance given to the isolated expressive movements of the upper body over the locomotive powers of the lower, the spirals and curves of the head, torso, and arms counterpoised to the flat frontality of the positions of legs and feet. The princesses react to the men's dancing first by whistling and by making prizefight gestures among themselves (pushing up their sleeves, thumbing their noses); then they join the men and their dance, at which point the tempo of the music picks up.

According to Judith Lynne Hanna, classical Indian dance is "undergirded by many different religious belief systems and sectarian strands, each with doctrinal ... and ritual peculiarities" (Hanna 1993: 121). Despite the fact that specific countries and regions have their own characteristic styles and that the face alone, in the words of one oriental dancer and scholar, can have "a hundred delicate shadings not always obvious to the Western observer," spread knees, in which the legs are bent and opened to the side, are "invariably seen only in masculine types of dance" (La Meri 1967: 689). Certain steps and positions, in other words, must be performed by male dancers, while others belong strictly to females. Jack Cole, however, rarely defines movements as "masculine" or "feminine" or restricts their performance to one or another gender. The three princesses of Ababu perform the same sorts of virtuosic movements as the men—including the knee bends—often in unison with them; they also ride the men like horses, and the dance ends with the men prostrate beneath the standing women.

Observing Cole's use of posture and gesture alone, then, one would have to conclude that physical power, competence, and complete ease with one's body are potentially, indeed demonstrably, feminine as well as masculine traits.²⁷ If the women's bodies are objectified, so are the men's—more so, in this case. Richard Dyer writes that images of the male body in popular culture are almost always of men "doing something"; they must be, in order to produce a "phallic mystique" of muscular potency and strength to counter the "passivity" so often associated with being looked at (Dyer 1992b). Cole instead reminds us continually that "being looked at" is not by definition a *passive activity*, and that images of women can be images of women "doing something" as well.²⁸

In fact, "Not since Ninevah" foregrounds and complicates the very issue of "phallic mystique," through its unmarked transvestism not only of male but of female image. For "what happens to our understanding "of the fetishization of the female body," Margaret Drewal asks, "when the signifier is a gay man? Fetishism or transvestism? Or both?" (Drewal 1994: 176). In her discussion of the Rockettes, whose director and choreographer was Russell Markert (a gay man), Drewal suggests that the signified of the Rockettes is a [gay] "masked

object of desire"—a phallic *woman*. The Rockettes are, in essence, cross-cross-dressing trans-transvestites, who stand for men who are masquerading as women in "perpetual displacements of sexual identity" (*Ibid.*, 176). Drewal's description of the Rockettes applies equally well to the three Princesses of Ababu: they too are "women cast as men—complete with phalluses [swords] and military moves [the male movements of Oriental dance]—yet devoid of any personality in their veiled [trouserred and armored] womanhood" (*Ibid.*). Since they are unmarked transvestites, they "evade disclosure"; but because they represent a gay signifying practice, a queer discourse that "piggy-backs" upon the dominant order, that order's monopoly is nevertheless contaminated and polluted (Meyer 1994: 11; Drewal, 1994: 177, 178). Even as Camp is appropriated and turned into a "tamed expression of the American spirit," its trace lingers on (Drewal 1994: 178).

Given the otherworldliness, the fantasy elements, of a musical like *Kismet*, one could argue that the dancers have more leeway to alter the status quo simply because it is not a status quo that matters in any practical sense; that is, perhaps audiences do not attach the dance's messages to the dancers as *people*, but as fictional characters in an exotic dreamscape. Although I do not believe that this is the case, the issue does demand attention. That is one reason that I chose to examine the "Happy Ending" finale from *On the Riviera*, a modern-day backstage musical set on the French Riviera starring Danny Kaye (in a dual role) and Gene Tierney. (Another reason is that Cole himself happens to perform in the number, along with one of his most important and influential students and devotees, Gwen Verdon.)

"Happy Ending" predates "Not since Ninevah" and is performed on a bare split-level stage in modern dress, yet it exhibits many of the same movement concerns and characteristics as the more conventionally orientalized number. One of the ways in which "Happy Ending" borrows from oriental dance is that each performer's legs and lower body do not serve as the support for movements that radiate outward from the spine, as they do in classical ballet. In ballet, the body is taut but elevated, "pulled up," centered on a plumb line that begins in the crown of the head and extends in a straight line to the floor.²⁹ Even when the knees bend deeply, it is only to propel a movement upward; when the arms "droop" in the motions of a dying swan, for example, the chest remains lifted. Although in oriental dance there can be an equal emphasis on presenting beautiful shapes in space, and on reaching heavenward or extending the body fully, movements "into the ground" are also used. Cole uses the shifting dynamics of oriental dance in his knee drops and slides, in floor work alternated with jumps and extended poses, in the isolated movements of one part of the body against the total stillness of other parts. Again, what Cole does *not* use is the careful gender divisions of classical oriental dance. Here, too, in terms of movement and gesture quality, the women can be said to function as unmarked transvestites.

As in "Not since Ninevah," the female dancers in "Happy Ending" are physically as strong as the males. They do everything the men do; they are never supported by them. The controlled off-kilter stances and extremely stylized shapes—the line of the arms broken at the elbows, the wrists, the

fingers; the legs and feet alternately pointed, flexed, turned in, turned out; the torso curved, hyperextended, flattened to the floor or lifted to the ceiling; the hips quiet, still, or gyrating in circles in isolation to the stillness of the upper body (or vice versa)—belong to all of the dancers. Costume alone (tube dresses for women, tuxedos for men) separates “male” from “female.”

This is not to say that costume is not a very powerful signifier of gender and sexuality; indeed, when the nondancing female star (Corinne Calvet) of the musical's show-within-a-show appears at the end of the number, it is only to stand smiling in a skimpy feathered costume before a final clinch with one of the two Danny Kayes. And when we turn to the performance of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in the opening “Little Rock” number of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, clearly both costume and star image figure in extremely potent ways. Nevertheless, as in *Kismet*—as in most Cole musicals in fact—*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *On the Riviera* exemplify the ways in which dance numbers can offer alternatives to the compulsory heterosexuality of the conventional boy-meets-girl narratives in which they are embedded.³⁰ Maureen Turim, Lucie Arbuthnot, and Gail Seneca also note in their otherwise very dissimilar essays on *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* that the figures of Monroe and Russell in musical numbers signify something other than, something exceeding, their narrative and spectacular status as objects of the male gaze, however difficult the “fascination” of Monroe and Russell dancing is for these scholars to articulate (Turim 1990; Arbuthnot and Seneca 1990).³¹ Cole's contributions to “Little Rock” are obvious; his “stamp” is present in the precise and often complex arm and hand movements, the syncopation of the steps and body movements against the music, the general quirkiness and unexpected shifts of stage direction and figure placement. But surely it is too much to claim that Marilyn Monroe is, because of Cole's training, in any sense an “oriental dancer,” much less a “trans-transvestite” or a “cross-cross-dresser.”

Of course Marilyn Monroe is not visually, recognizably, an oriental dancer, just as the dancers in *On the Riviera* are not. Yet I believe that, in Cole's hands, Orientalism was part of an often transformative and empowering Camp discourse; whether one calls her a phallic woman or not, what would Marilyn Monroe be *without* her musical performances, or the humor, ironic sense, confidence, and authority revealed by them? Even while Jack Cole was, as an Orientalist, as a man, as an American man, an “oppressor” in some senses, he also understood what it was, as a gay man, as an artist, as a dancer, to be oppressed. He had a great deal of sympathy for female stars such as Monroe and Rita Hayworth and the “ordeals” that their celebrity brought to them; this is why he was in such demand as a choreographer and coach by women stars (Loney 1984: 208). Yet he could be brutal and demanding, and had a infamous and occasionally violent temper.³² The scantily clad women tied to chandeliers in “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend” in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, for example, can also be read, like much appropriated Camp discourse, as “straight” misogyny (Loney 1984: 205).³³ In short, Cole's work is most interesting because of its different hidden transcripts and the way that, filtered through the dominant discourse that is classical Hollywood cinema, different forms of oppression intersect in it.

I also suggest that, even when performed by Marilyn Monroe or Jane Russell, American dance is profoundly marked by Cole's Orientalist practices, assumptions, and input, just as it is by African, Latin, Spanish, and other ethnic dance forms. In fact, film scholars may have taken only a limited interest in Jack Cole's work until now precisely *because* it looks so familiar, so similar to that of other choreographers who have acquired the status of film auteurs, such as Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse.³⁴ But it was Cole's work, both through his films and, more crucially, through the dancers and choreographers who worked for him, that was the influential force. Over and over again dancers talk about how important Cole was: Barrie Chase believes that his "combining of modern, Oriental, and jazz movement, his way of digging into the ground, of breaking down dance steps and body movement, of exact counting of every part of every step" made Jack Cole "the innovator of the way we move now" (Delamater 1981: 115). According to Barton Mumaw, Jack Cole "[changed] the shape of nightclub, film, and theater dance in his comparatively brief lifetime" (Sherman and Mumaw 1986: 151). Agnes de Mille admits that other choreographers, including herself, Bob Fosse, and Jerome Robbins, "all stole from Jack Cole" (Gottfried 1991: 81). Although Jack Cole "was the first choreographer working in Hollywood to revolutionize dance in both technique and content," as a Fosse biographer writes, Cole remains unknown by all but the most "concerned" of scholars and fans (Grubb 1989: 57).

Musical numbers, even in Hollywood films, can permit, in ways we have only begun to think about, what Judith Hanna calls the "exploration of dangerous challenges to the status quo without the penalties of the quotidian" (Hanna 1993: 120). She goes on to say that any musical number *potentially* not only "reflects what is but also suggests what might be" in terms of sexual mores and gender roles (*Ibid.*, 132). In the end, as Orientalism, as a product of Said's "imaginative geography" and its racism and homophobia, Jack Cole's Orientalist dance practice enabled him in the context of Eurocentric domination of non-Western cultures, just as the fact that he was a male enabled him in the context of American patriarchy. Cole's Orientalist practice was *disabling* to him too, because through it he identified himself with qualities—femininity, passivity, homoeroticism—that both Orientalism as a department of thought and expertise and American culture itself insisted were incompatible with American masculinity. According to dance scholar Svea Becker, Cole's use of ethnic dance allowed him to observe and comment upon, as well as satirize, American society; but to do this, "he had to go outside of it" (Becker 1989: 11).

Cole's Orientalist dance practice introduces compelling issues into ongoing discussions of Orientalism—not only how American Orientalism "intertwines" with other forms of oppression but also, for example, the question of how we recognize Orientalism as a practice. That is, how do audiences "see" or comprehend oriental influence (as well as gay influence), unless it is conveyed by visible appurtenances of costume and narrative setting? If we are ever to understand other cultures, or to use aspects of our own inherited or chosen cultures, how do we integrate what we learn with what we already "know," without reproducing the expected, the already legible, the stereotypical?

In short, Jack Cole's Orientalist practice, like Camp discourse generally, demonstrates that sometimes very subtle analytical tools are needed to understand a given form of expression and that specific features of identity—such as gender and sexual identity as well as national identity—do affect how Orientalism is constructed at different times and places. Cole's Camp hidden transcript was facilitated and enabled by a hidden or unmarked Orientalism. Cole did not so much “go native,” in what Susan White calls “explicitly masochistic and homosexual terms,” *à la* T. E. Lawrence; he did not put off onto “Arabs, Asians and women, the ‘natural’ masochists of the world,” a desire to “abase himself to the great white father” (White 1988: 137). Cole's Camp discourse instead confronted and satirized the hegemony of great white fathers by emphasizing the physical power and spiritual authority of Arabs, Asians, and women (before whom muscled white American men often abase themselves). While Cole's work was always an “articulation and mechanism” of what Eve Sedgwick calls “the enduring inequality of power between men and women” (Sedgwick 1985: 5), his Orientalist dance practice as a Camp discourse was also, according to Jack Babuscio, a “means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity” (Babuscio 1980: 47).³⁵ What emerges from this study, then, is how important it is, even in Hollywood films, to interrogate, and to untangle the threads of, what are always already multiple discourses not only of oppression but of expression as well.

Endnotes:

¹ Reprinted from *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (Eds. M. Bernstein and G. Studlar). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1997, with permission, pp. 130-157.

² For complete biographical material on Jack Cole, see Glenn Loney 1984.

³ From 1944 to 1947, Cole had the only dance company in the history of Hollywood under permanent contract to a studio, in this case Columbia. He worked at Twentieth Century-Fox and MGM as well, where he also had control over most aspects of his numbers. See Scheuer 1946: 28; Spencer, 1946: 16-19; Loney 1984: chaps. 7-9; Grubb 1989: 30, 57-58; Delamater 1981: 191-199; and Kobal 1985: 592-607.

⁴ For further discussion of the expressive components of camp, see Jack Babuscio's pioneering essay, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” 1980.

⁵ Meyer defines Camp as “a specifically queer cultural critique;” *camp* (with a lowercase c) is what results when “Camp” is appropriated by the “un-queer.”

⁶ For discussions of the importance of art and culture to gay identity, see Hanna 1988; Moon 1989; Dyer 1992a; and Koestenbaum 1993.

⁷ On the impact on art and popular culture of the Orientalism of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, see Wollen 1987; Moon 1989; Studlar 1995; and Bernstein and Studlar (Eds.) 1997.

⁸ For another take on the “natural affinity,” see Lewin 1923.

⁹ For early discussions of dance and film—in many of which, despite his relative obscurity today, Cole’s name is prominently featured—see Knight 1947a and 1947b; Hungerford 1948; Todd 1951; Delamater 1981; and Altman 1987.

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of dance in silent films, see Delamater 1981: 11-26. For more on Hollywood as an early dance center, see Prevots 1987.

¹¹ For more on the meaning and intensity of the lure of the “aura of Egypt” at this time, see Lant 1997.

¹² See also Shawn 1979 which has chapter titles like “No Noh!” “Oriental Swing” and “Out of the East.”

¹³ Or, “In Delhi where still other dancers danced for us, my thoughts turned to Vanda Hoff, who made her debut in the Denishawn company and later starred in vaudeville in an act called ‘The Dancing Girl of Delhi: In loveliness, charm and real ability what infinite worlds above the real dancing girls of Delhi was our Vanda!’” (Shawn 1929: 99).

¹⁴ St. Denis’s *Radha*, she later “happily admitted, was about a Hindu goddess dancing a Buddhist concept in a Jain temple” (Terry 1976: 47).

¹⁵ Cole himself recounts his differences with the Orientalist practices of Denishawn in an anecdote involving Ruth St. Denis’s reaction to a Cab Calloway record that Cole played at Denishawn in the early 1930s. St. Denis was “white with rage” when she heard the music and reprimanded Cole severely, telling him to “shut that damn thing off.” Cole continues: “Later she went by and another boy and I were doing something, a bit of tap dancing and jazz dancing, and she let out a wail ... and went up to her room. All of a sudden the gong rang in the school, which always meant to assemble in the big studio. We were all assembled, and Mr. Shawn came in (he always wore a Japanese kimono). We all sat down on the floor and, looking very serious, he says, ‘The temple has been defiled.’ They were always being very earnest about that kind of thing, but I had a sense of humor that got me into trouble around the school ... I used to talk to Miss Ruth about jazz dance ... and she’d say, ‘But it’s so sexual, dear.’ She was a very dear, bright woman but in certain areas there were great Victorian blanks” (Delamater 1981: 192-193).

¹⁶ Jowitt 1988. (see especially “Sphinxes, Slaves, and Goddesses” and “The Veil of Isis”); Kendall 1979; Hanna 1993; and Studlar 1997.

¹⁷ Drewal borrows the term from Marjorie Garber; cited in Drewal 1994: 173-178.

¹⁸ Mumaw was Shawn’s longtime lover.

¹⁹ Although, as Hanna points out in “Classical Indian Dance and Women’s Status” (1993), female deference to male authority *is* strongly coded in both classical Indian dance and Indian culture.

²⁰ See Studlar 1993 for a discussion, drawn from Radway 1984, of the lure to women of dance as a "safe display" of masculinity, in which masculinity can be "enjoyed" as both brutal and gentle.

²¹ Here is how Cole, the "son of a New Brunswick [New Jersey] pharmacist," was described by a reviewer for the *Chicago Daily News* (27 March 1949): "He dances like a demon from the celestial frying pan of Baal, the sun god. His body wriggles amid almost superhuman strides. His eyes glare menacingly beneath rotating eyebrows from a bronzed hook-nosed face that reeks of brutality with a capital Biff!" ("Dancer-Choreographer Jack Cole," *UCLA Librarian* 38 [February 1985]: 9.)

²² See Drewal 1994: 173-178.

²³ Other Denishawn dancers felt the same way, such as modern dance pioneer Doris Humphrey, for whom Cole also danced: "I just got tired of being Siamese, Burmese, Japanese and all the other 'eses.' I came from Oak Park, Illinois, and I wanted to find out as a dancer who I was, what Oak Park and I had to say in dance" (cited in Loney 1984: 126).

²⁴ In *Designing Woman*, the Cole character, a dancer, actually uses dance moves to win a one-sided fight with a gang of crooks. For a complete list of Cole's film work, credited and uncredited, see the appendix to Loney 1984.

²⁵ *Greek*, of course, was a popular synonym for *homosexual*. For further discussion of "Greek love," see Sedgwick 1985: 4-5.

²⁶ See also Gottfried 1991: 81, 89-94.

²⁷ Hanna recounts how some Indian legends reproduce the inequality of power structures between male and female deities: "Variants of legends say Shiva and his counterpart the goddess Kali compete in dance contests in which Shiva wins. Shiva performed many dances that Kali was able to imitate perfectly. Out of frustration Shiva exploited [Kali's] sense of modesty and raised his right foot to the level of his crown and danced in that pose. Although Kali could have emulated this pose, feminine modesty led her to withdraw from the contest. *Kali lost not because she was an inferior dancer but because she was a woman and affirmed her subservience in this role.*" (Hanna 1993: 123, italics mine.) Cole obviously does not reproduce this inequality in his dances.

²⁸ Steven Cohan makes a similar point in his "'Feminizing' the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical," in Cohan and Hark, 1993: 46-69.

²⁹ For an interesting discussion of the "meaning" of the "taut" and "straight" line of ballet, see Strauss 1978.

³⁰ For a more extensive discussion of musical numbers and classical Hollywood narrative, see McLean 1993.

³¹ Neither essay cited mentions Cole at all, and they barely mention the musical numbers as performances or as choreography, as something other than costume and song lyrics.

³² Bob Fosse, who also had an infamous temper, said that Jack Cole was “the only guy I was ever afraid of” (in Gottfried 1991: 265).

³³ Dance scholar Svea Becker believes that “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” is “truly critical of American values” but that this went unnoticed at the time, and remains unnoticed today, because “film critics didn’t look to dance as a source for serious ideas” and “[today] audiences are too obsessed with the Marilyn Monroe Legend to think about choreography or satire” (Becker 1989: 11).

³⁴ For information on Fosse’s films, see Grubb 1989; and Gottfried 1991. Besides Robbins’s *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, 1959), see “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” in *The King and I* (Walter Lang, 1956), an Orientalist dance adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

³⁵ See also Kleinhans 1994. For a recent examination of gay labor in the Freed Unit at MGM, see Tinkcom 1996.

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