

Boys at Gender-Play inside the Muscular Christian Ideal

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In elite boys' schools there is a level of anxiety about the perceived place of the curricular subject drama and how it might interact or interfere with the ironclad essentialist and homogenous masculinity promoted by elite all-boys' schools. The feminization of the drama and the suspicion of males who "do drama" create a duplicitous tension for boys who take the subject as they walk the gendered tightrope between the expected public display of the "muscular Christian" and the tantalizing "drama faggot." This paper offers some reflections about observations on and interviews with boys who "do drama" inside the male-only worlds of the Great Public School (GPS) of Brisbane, Australia. In these schools I observed masculinities were constantly disrupted (perhaps uniquely) in the drama classroom and explored by male drama teachers who provided a space in which to playfully interrogate the "muscular Christian ideal" of a boys' school.

Keywords: drama, elite boys' schools, colonial masculinity, performativity, masculinized, feminized, school curricula, muscular Christian

In the mid 1990s, I was a drama teacher at a prestigious inner-city Great Public School (GPS) for boys in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Drama is its own curricular subject in secondary schools in Queensland and my classes had larger numbers of boys than those I had taught in state high schools. The dominant masculine hegemony of the school tended to feminize subjects like drama, however, especially for boys in middle school years where they were ready to fight any perceived sleight on their "boyness." I remember clearly the day young Jake entered my Grade Nine drama class late with a make-shift ice-pack on his hand (crushed lemonade ice-block in a plastic bag) while recounting the details of how he had "decked" another ninth-grader who had dared to call him a "drama faggot" in front of his mates. Undoubtedly sore, but not sorry, Jake boasted of his performance as a "manly drama fag" before re-enacting the incident for our pleasure in the classroom.

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This incident sent me headlong into a doctoral research project to study how the palpable hegemonic masculinity found in elite all-boys' schools interfaces with a subject like drama that has a long history in the education of boys yet also a precarious and suspicious existence within its context. I set my research field outside of my own teaching experiences and became particularly interested in the how male drama teachers (still fairly rare in all-boys' schools) might work in this context. I introduced myself as an observer/researcher into the drama classrooms and boy cultures of three GPS for three months in 1998. The research, which combined the methods of critical ethnography with Erickson's interpretivism, allowed me to observe action in the drama classrooms and then interview students and staff about their actions. The research entailed an interpretive ethnography that resulted in my obtaining rich and complex data about attitudes toward gender and drama in a GPS.

The theoretical lenses of masculine gender, class and colonialism in the school institution were used to investigate the potential for drama as disruptive of the hegemonic masculinity of the schools. All participants were given pseudonyms, they and their parents signed consent letters, and I provided signed assurances of confidentiality. The research met the conditions of the ethical clearance policy used by Arizona State University.

Performing the Muscular Christian

Very few schools in Brisbane other than the GPS are boarding schools. The culture of boys sharing every aspect of their lives with each other is a uniquely GPS phenomenon in Brisbane. GPS's in Brisbane are most like the original nine GBS's of England (Eton 1440, Winchester 1387, St. Paul's 1512, Shrewsbury 1551, Westminster 1560, Merchant Taylors' 1561, Rugby 1567, Harrow 1571, and Charterhouse 1611). The collective elitism that emanates from these schools is unmatched in any other capital city in Australia.

The schools were established under Queensland's Grammar School Act of 1860 in response to concerns that the colony had no high schools in which to prepare men for higher education and key positions in the state. The masters who built these schools were well-versed in the pedagogy of Thomas Arnold, Headmaster at the Rugby School during the early 1800s. Arnold himself was a Winchester graduate and an ordained Anglican priest. He was "the man that his boys would try to emulate in their own lives: a muscular Protestant Christian, militaristically Spartan, moral, and a crusader for the molding of men" (Cole, 1986). The game of rugby union football had its origins at this school during Arnold's time and he used it as a pedagogical device to perpetuate his movement of "muscular Christianity," which was dedicated to controlling the sexual impulses of male youths (Fotheringham, 1992).

I use the term "muscular Christian" here to evoke the middle-class, Arnoldian essentialist masculinity represented in the character of Tom Brown created by Thomas Hughes in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). Brown was a "poster-boy" for muscular Christianity, a "manly" Christian who was "not too rough and not too religious" and

whose image was to be “projected by scores of headmasters acting as their own publicist” (Mangan & Walvin, 1987). This performance of essentialist masculinity is part of the cultural literacy and self-esteem of a boy in a GPS. The school uniform, class rolls, assemblies, systematic punishments (not always corporal), as well as the institutionalized ranking and grading of students encourages student “normalization.” Foucault might describe this as a form of “panopticism” that monitors and regulates an “us” and “them” system inside a school. Observations of students become an “efficient means of control by authorities” (Schmelzer, 1993).

Sporting events become performative “texts” that externalize the competitive muscular Christianity and hierarchy of an all-male environment. The GPS’s maintain a powerfully coercive function on young privileged males because they not only combine the institutions of religion and education, but also include sport to maintain a dominant ideology that normalizes essentialist masculine “privilege” through the master-condoned processes of selection or exclusion of particular types of boy behaviors in these schools. Tradition, in this case, is what R. W. Connell (1995) refers to as the “patriarchal dividend” and a school’s historical and cultural traditions are externalized by all boys wearing uniforms as they publicly display the school colors, school values (neatness, privilege, stoicism), and the students’ personal history of achievement, participation and status in school activities (usually embossed onto the pockets of the school blazer). McDonough (1997) states that “what is most desired and most needed is the recognition from other men ... only men can create other men,” and therefore the performance of GPS institutionalized masculinity means nothing without a performance that is accepted by an audience. The spectacle of the “muscular Christian” in Brisbane’s GPS is for public consumption, and private compliance.

Rescuing the Boy from the “Feminine” Charms of Drama

The idea of private (feminine) and public (masculine) domains existing in isolation from and in opposition to each other emerged during the Victorian era (Adams & Coltrane, 231), and despite the ongoing and numerous critiques of this, many societies continue to subscribe to the dichotomy where the private world is dominated by the public. At that time, the public’s perception of children was also changing with a growing collective angst about the potential “moral and physical degeneracy” of boys (Crotty, 2001). This became commonly known as the “boy problem” and heralded an unprecedented time of social engineering of boys toward a singular, hegemonic masculinity that was militaristic, nationalistic, Christian, moral, duty-bound, and defeminized.

Martin Crotty (2001) positions the Boy Scouts, Boys’ Brigade, and the public school system and cadets as “boy rescue movements” and suggests they were the chief workshops of the pre-WWI construction of masculinity for boys of all classes. These movements became “protectors of society” that could “transform” boys into “respectable citizens.” When the Great War began, young men’s masculinity was tested in the laboratory of battle. The creation of the “real boy” as a solution to the “boy prob-

lem” hypermasculinized boys and championed athletic skills, self-control, competitiveness, courage, self-reliance and an adventurous spirit (Swain, 2005). GPS’s still promote this in their advertising. Swain tells us that this form “generally exerts itself as a coercive and defining norm,” which suggests its opposition to anything “different.” It is no surprise to discover that essentialist patriarchs and pedagogues, like Thomas Arnold and Robert Baden-Powell, promoted the social Darwinism of the nineteenth century by perpetuating the separation of masculinity from “the other” (feminine, unmanly behaviors) in order to stave off fears of degeneracy in boys (Beynon, 2002).

Revisiting the literature in the field of the performance of masculinities, I found a rare description of a boy doing drama at a boys’ school in Michael Mangan’s (2003) *Staging Masculinities*. He talks of the “unspoken but clear shared belief” that those students who might perform a masculinity that was contrary to the essentialist one adopted by the school “would probably gravitate towards places like the Drama Society” (pp. 3-4). Doing drama in all-boys’ schools might also involve risk, “since one was aligning oneself publicly with the ambiguous cultural signifiers of a questionable sexual identity” (p. 4). Ironically, the use of dramatic performance as a pedagogical tool in all-male schools dates back to the 1500s in England where it was widely used in teaching Latin and Greek. These schools educated and supplied the boy actors (who played female roles) for the Boy Companies whose popularity rivaled Shakespeare’s own acting company (Goodman, 1968; Watson, 1908). Anxiety about boys doing drama harkens back to Puritan suspicions that “showing-off on stage” is not only a “symptom but also a cause of an imperfectly achieved masculinity” (Mangan, 2003, p. 4). The Puritans were responsible for closing theatres in England from roughly 1640 to 1660.

Academic “others” such as performing artists are often feminized subjects, perhaps because of their potential for disrupting certain pedagogic practices. According to the Queensland Drama Syllabus, the pedagogic methods of the subject “drama” should include dialogic discourse, collaborative group-work, active participation, and sharing and critiquing of creative work. The teacher usually takes on the role of facilitator, rather than an all-knowing, dogmatic instructor (McDonald, 1999). This pedagogy is certainly at the core of the suspicion towards drama as a subject because it promotes rapport-building, and intimate interrelations between teacher and student which are not always for public consumption.

Suspicion about the “contract” (Neelands, 1984; O’Toole, 1992) between boys and their drama teachers is stirred because drama embraces a pedagogy that involves “the renegotiation of the contractual expectations of the [mainstream] classroom” where the boundaries of “acceptable” behavior may be redefined. This may also aid in the feminized perception of drama, which is seen as a complex “other” world which, when it *does* reveal a public face, may promote potentially degenerative practices of fiction and masking, unlike the visceral realism of sport.

. . . I find it false—I find it very false, that they’re “acting” and “out there” and all the rest of it, and it just strikes me as being very untrue to themselves—it’s like they put on this mask or they become some-

thing that they are not. And it's a place to hide—thing I like about football—rugby, is that there's no place to hide. And that's why I like the black and white of football, and the fact that there are no—there's nowhere to hide, and you either do it and you perform and you're legend because you made the tackle . . . whereas kids in the drama kind of things—they can learn their lines and do a good job, but you don't have any real assessment of just how good they're trying for you—and I've had kids spew for me and I know that they're working, but I haven't seen a bloody actor spew.

The virulent view espoused by this English teacher and rugby coach reminded me of the very real tensions between “masculinized” and “feminized” subjects that lurk just below the politically correct surface of the GPS. This teacher had only just told me how important it was to support the arts in an all-boys' school, but the subject drama came in for a particularly vehement assessment by him, and he was not the only male teacher to feel that drama was an agent of lies that could corrupt a boy from the correct and noble “muscular Christian” path.

What the teacher failed to see was that the boys could navigate between the private “drama faggot” and the public “muscular Christian,” and that this might mean they possessed complex gender intelligence. Mangan and Walvin (1987) assert that public school life in Victorian and Edwardian England revealed that the “public image seldom mirrored the private morality. Too frequently there was an ideology for public consumption and an ideology for personal practice” (Morrell, 2001, p. 11). This suggests dynamic tensions among private and public masculine acts especially in all-boys schools. Chris Mclean refers to this as “splitting.” The performance of several masculinities and the contradiction of doing so are truly the hallmarks of masculinity in flux, but not necessarily “in crisis” (McLean, 1995).

On my reading of boys' masculinities, this flux is necessary to the ongoing process of how boys navigate their gender *complexity*, an evolving gender literacy that may involve gender transgression and that makes up a boy's journeys into manhood. Alloway et al. state that this positions boys as “embodied literate subjects both inside and outside of schools” and “the ways in which boys represent themselves in the classroom requires ‘an understanding of the ways in which masculinity is ‘performed’ and ‘enacted’ through the body” (quoted in Martino & Berrill, 2003, pp. 107-108). R. W. Connell (1995) connects this to the body's ability to be both object and agent of social and gendered practice, which he calls body-reflexive practice, where the practice itself forms the “structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined”. Boys, then, are complicit with the “muscular Christian” ideal of the GPS, which they wear and perpetuate on their bodies, but which they disrupt in their drama classrooms.

Haunting the Muscular Christian: Male Drama Teachers

Mangan (2003) states that “masculinity . . . repeatedly defines itself in terms of its opposites, and the history of gender construction is . . . a matter of marking off the

‘other.’ Yet ...the ‘other’ comes back to haunt the dominant order which had dispelled it” (p. 11). This “haunting” suggests an observed phenomenon among the three GPS male drama teachers who opened up their classrooms to my observation in 1998. They “haunted” the essentialist masculinity that pervaded their schools, not to abolish it or demonize it but to contest its power to oppress the young men in their care. Other Australian-based pedagogical and ethnographic research into how boys act in the drama classroom similarly conclude that drama provides a unique space for the deconstruction and contestation of hegemonic masculinity in an all-boys’ school (Sallis, 2004; Saunders, 2003).

The new, young, male drama teachers were ready to disrupt the traditions in favor of a less universal and compulsory masculinity. What I observed in all three drama teachers was an *overwhelming urge* to “play,” most often by contradicting their own performances of masculinity in the school’s public eye. One teacher, who was gay but not “out” at the school, playfully performed the role of the essentialist “muscular Christian,” the meticulous “straight man” who wore what he called the GPS uniform: an ironed blue-chambray shirt, R. M. Williams boots, woven kangaroo leather belts, khaki pants and rugby club tie. He knew the students gossiped about him, but he enjoyed the infamy and played into building mythical narratives about himself at every opportunity:

I was the only new person for a long while, and I was different to everyone else: I was younger by far, I had a different attitude, I was the first trained drama person here, and I did things differently to how they had been done in the past—and I’ve never apologized for that. So they [the boys] created this persona that they wanted me to be, which I thought was very flattering, so you know, I [said I’d] been on *Neighbours* [popular soap opera in Australia and the UK—I’d had my starring TV role on *Neighbours*—and, looking back, I probably should have said “No, I didn’t,” but I was happy to go with that.... I’ve also gone with the Real Estate Agent—had a sign in the classroom that says “Paul Riley’s Real Estate” which another staff member gave me as a joke. And as a joke, I said to the boys that the Headmaster had bought his holiday property off me, and that when he met me he wanted me teaching Drama.... And in saying all that—exactly how I have just recited to you now—the boys have taken bit of that on board and gone with it.

In creating this mythological persona, the teacher deliberately deconstructed and satirized his school’s desire to have “outstanding professionals” on staff. Two other teachers, who were both heterosexual men, played at over-performing their heteronormativity in order to poke fun at non-drama staff suspicions of their ambiguous drama-teacher sexuality. Their overt “muscular Christian” performances were self-referential and satirical as they attempted to demystify the authoritarian singularity of a sports-masculinity at their school. One said:

It's a joke between Richo [another teacher] and myself, which I think came out of us bonding together . . . we had to because we are part of a minority, in a sense—we're both passionate about the subject [drama]—but realize that the profile of it is difficult to raise in the school. So that the constant joke—as any minority does, is joke about itself. . . . I think it's a very Australian thing—it's a very satirical, very dry thing, it's to say, "Yeah, I teach Drama, yep, I'm not a faggot, well, I could be, but [cough] um, but I couldn't be with a voice like this" [said in a comically deep, authoritative voice]. So, yeah, it's a joke on a joke on a joke—and what's funny to us is when we're in a public situation and we start carrying on . . . our joke isn't understood by anybody else—and that's a very comforting thought. We can walk into the dining room and say, "G'day mate, how are ya? See the rugby game on the weekend, oh mate, I was there" [said using the same overtly "Aussie"-male voice].

All three teachers routinely gave heterosexually gendered "performances" that were often "camped-up" and designed to promote ambiguity and complexity about what it meant to be a man and a drama teacher in an all-boys' school. As a gay man in a GPS, the homosexual teacher's sexuality was invisible to most of his students, and yet all three men performed with a metaphoric "wink" to the boys. They "turned it on" for their students and colleagues in a way that contested and confused the essentialist gender position of the schools.

The consistent "urge to gender-play" observed in drama classrooms often re-scripted the serious "sports play" these schools worshipped at the core of their hegemonic masculinity, and in so doing it seemed these male drama teachers had the potential to be agents for provocation inside the essentialist masculine world of the larger GPS performance of traditional masculinity. These teachers exposed their charges to multiple patterns of masculinity which had the potential to be transformational. Indeed, their performances of masculinity were not only in the dramatic mode (fictional, virtual) but also through their "positioning" themselves inside the site of theatrical activity of a boys' school. These multiple performances, in turn, served to contest the serious, Arnoldian, performance of masculinity both internally and externally transmitted by the GPS.

There was no denying the popularity of the male drama teachers in these schools. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) describe "popular masculinity" in terms of what boys think of other boys (and men) that tends to have a hegemonic intent, with attributes such as "hardness, antagonism to school-based learning, sporting prowess, and fashionable style" being important indicators of masculinity. The teachers quoted above seemed to tweak these attributes with the same alacrity that they approached their contestation of the masculine roles defined by the GPS. But they lacked any overt "hardness" in their personalities, their "antagonism" toward the school was always couched as satirical and humorous, and they actively worked against positioning drama as a "victim" in the school's curriculum. One referred to this as a "siege mentality." Their

“sporting prowess” and “fashionable style” blurred together as they coached volleyball and cricket teams (not rugby) and would wear the “right” kind of sporting labels, whilst revealing hairiness and muscularity. Their students found their drama teachers approachable and very much enjoyed suspecting that their teachers were lampooning the compulsory masculine codes within the institution. One boy said:

That’s what I also like—just an easy going teacher, y’know not such a stiff.... He is breezy, easy-going—but there’s still no slacking off in your work – you have to get your work done. He’s just not a prick, whereas a majority of the teachers here are all—even the ladies.

All the boys I interviewed consistently acknowledged that their drama teachers (male and female) offered a very different way of teaching and looking at the world than other teachers at the school. Students consistently referred to the three male drama teachers as “good blokes” and this often brought with it a desire by the student to share very private information with them that other staff were denied. It is as if the drama teacher had a privileged position as a librarian of the students’ risk-stories that other teachers may have felt obliged to reveal to the headmaster or counselors. The drama teachers had access to insights about the complexity of their boys’ emerging masculinities and they put great faith in the abilities of boys to understand and humor the gendered anomalies in their school:

. . . oh yeah, they were the leaders—they were prefects and stuff. Two of them—the two biggest gay guys—hardly any of the school know that they were gay—the two biggest gay guys used to baby-sit the headmaster’s kids—two girls—but this was the calibre of kid they were: and I’ve always enjoyed knowing that. That is completely true—that in the biggest rugby school in Australia, the two biggest poofers in Year 12 used to look after the principal’s kids! They were elected prefects by the students.

The drama teacher is the guardian of these stories in a lot of cases, many of which are handled with much mirth because of how they contest and disrupt the image the school thinks it is projecting into the community. I observed a vast array of students perform and match the obvious ease and playfulness modeled by their teachers. Regardless of the mythology of the drama teacher, these male teachers created “spaces” that gave students license to play with many of the authoritarian, essentialist masculinities of the institution as well as a place to be camp and get away with it.

Author: I notice you use Spice Girls names with the boys—why is that?

Teacher: Because they love them—because they’re forbidden, I think.

Because they’re popular, and they’re sexy, and they’re women—but they’re also “poofy,” and you wouldn’t *really* like the Spice Girls, you wouldn’t *really* know the music—but, you’d shag Ginger! . . .

when they found out I went to the Kylie concert, they couldn't get enough of it. Y'know—that sort of freaked me out a bit—thought, “you boys run this parallel, you jump from one to another” . . . every time they do that sort of thing they take a risk.

This teacher wanted to make his students aware of the constructed adult-male constraints that monitored them in the school. He opted to hit right at the core of “camp” behavior and show his students that the perceived taboo is actually good, irreverential fun. There was also great pleasure—visceral and social—in contesting the essentialism at these schools, and this pleasure came from the building of trust and rapport with the boys over time. In some cases they built their own language that defined their culture within the school. This creativity is driven by “intrinsic rewards, that encourages a style of thinking that promotes diversity and the transformation of given circumstances” (Florida 2005, pp. 68-69).

Drama Trouble: The “Muscular Christian” to the Rescue

Although it seems to me to be sound pedagogical and enlightened practice, it is exactly the “private” realm that maintained drama’s “otherness” as a curricular subject in schools dominated by hegemonic masculinity. While being “camp” or playing in the margins of the “drama faggot” was tantalizing for many boys, being outed as “queer” was still something considered to be predatory, but mostly “inconceivable” (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002). Genuinely homosexual students or staff hid their “queerness” from the greater public eye and chose to “turn it on” and perform the normative masculinity of an outstanding “muscular Christian.” More significantly, no matter how much they loved doing drama as a subject, the boys generally did not desire a career in the theatre or related arts industries.

The Overall Position (OP) is a matriculation score used in Queensland schools to rank senior students in preparation for entrance into tertiary study. It is calculated for individual students based on ongoing assessments throughout Grades 11 and 12 rather than an external examination. Boys in a GPS tend to act upon the myth that arts subjects somehow “drag down” both the individual’s and the collective senior year’s OP scores, even though drama is an OP subject. This myth was the single most motivating factor as to why boys in Grades 11 and 12 did or did not take drama at all three schools. Although boys did generally see it as a “soft” option, they perceived it as less academically rigorous (a “bludge”) than traditional academic pursuits such as mathematics or physics. The middle-to-upper class privilege of GPS boys was never far from their consideration, and so for many students I interviewed, drama was seen as a “utility” subject that offered a “break” from the rigor they associated with other OP subjects:

I think drama’s nice, but I don’t think drama itself can sustain my intentions of life, and I think that if you have a degree in Law or something like that – and you’d be a successful barrister or solicitor. . . . I think there’s more in that than being qualified just in Drama.

The perceived privilege of GPS boys was a great leveler in that the boys really did “buy into” the public performance of stability, especially the stability of a manhood forged, tested and repeated in the schools’ “muscular Christian” tradition. Unfortunately, this mentality was an exogenic force in the drama classroom. The boys’ motivations for doing drama were curtailed to “fit” within the parameters of the conformist methods of measuring achievement adopted with repeated success by the GPS’s.

Conclusions

I observed several drama teachers model a distinct kind of critical pedagogy, a playful, satirical, inclusive and highly engaging contestation of drama’s place as a curricular subject in the GPS that did not simply transmit elite hegemonic masculinity, but transcended and transformed it for consideration by all. The male drama teachers did not “shy away” from suspicions about them in the schools; rather, they met these assumptions and promoted them in a self-referential way, in order to expose the myths of the “muscular Christian” and the “drama faggot.” Their contestation, however, was not a strategic pedagogical method or the deliberate deployment of triggering experiences. Indeed, to formalize their disruptive antics could force drama to claim a place as “the other” in the school curriculum and destroy the value of the experience in the minds of the boys who would be suspicious of any fixed agenda.

The male drama teachers did not expound or reiterate drama’s potential “otherness.” Instead, they embraced it and in doing so contested its “otherness” within the institution. This was the most remarkable aspect of their role as *agents provocateurs*. These men were agents for the building of gender-inclusive classrooms in an all-boys’ school.

Frosh et al. (2002) warn us that it is important to recognize that the difference between “private” and “public” performances of boys might not be dichotomous “by associating the private self with authenticity and stability and the public self, in contrast, with artificiality, peer pressure and external manipulation” (p. 61). In this case, what the boys performed privately in their drama classrooms and also publicly outside the school gates as well as everywhere in between was simultaneously valid, authentic, *yet also* artificial and manipulated in the gendered construction of GPS boys. These boys were at ease with this variety and able to navigate from one extreme to the other, which might position them as more gender-intelligent than their non-drama colleagues.

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