WS 320-4: ST: The Politics of Dance/Musicals

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This course examines the politics of dance/musicals including gender/sexuality, race and class, as well as the sociology of history of dance in modern North America. Beginning with an understanding of Hollywood convention and the musical genre of MGM, we will then progress to contemporary times by examining dance films from other countries: Shall We Dance (Japan), a Bollywood musical, Tango (Argentina), Tango Lessons (UK). Concurrently, we will also study dance as a sociological phenomenon, as products of mass/pop entertainment and bourgeois aspirations in the era of capitalist modernity while interrogating the mind/body dualism through semiotics, feminism, cultural studies and psychoanalysis.

Personally, I have grown up with musicals and enjoyed the gracefulness and art of dance. This course will be fun and pleasurable but in a critical sense, as we interrogate conventions of heterosexual practices, racialized representations and our own ambivalences and viewing pleasures: what do we delight in exactly in these films – the exuberance of movement and manipulation of physicality and space, or the social narrative? How are our pleasures derived – both for language/narrative and visual spectacle? Most dance movies revolve around heterosexual desire and romantic love, catering to youth cultures (Cliff Richard and Elvis Presley made a string of dance musicals) and signifying sexual and social rebellion, liberation and transgression (Westside Story, Dirty Dancing). We will examine various dance musicals of the last five decades, and then venture to theorize about dance as a global phenomenon. Is dance a heterosexual form of courting? Are there dances performed only by men or by women? Here we will watch a documentary about menora, a traditional Malay dance performed by women which has a ritualistic and psychologically healing function. Tango, samba, tap, ballet, all carry class and racial connotations. How can dance be liberatory art form that is self-aware of its context in an ideological work? Analyzing Sally Potter’s film Tango Lessons and contrasting it with Carlos Saura’s Tango might give us a glimpse into this. Other issues to be explored include masculinity and dance (the recent film Billy Elliot, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly), stereotypes, cultural appropriation and assimilation in the multiculturalism dance movie narrative found in Strictly Ballroom and Dance With Me.

The course includes film viewings, short lectures and seminar-style discussions in which students are expected to participate.

Required readings:

Plus articles on reserve at the Belzberg Library.

Course requirements and Grading Structure:
Comment paper (2 pp.) 20% (due week 3)
Presentation 15%
Midterm paper 25% (due week 6)
Participation 20%
Final paper 30% (due last week of class)

Prerequisites: 60 credit hours