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Reclaiming Power and Self-Expression in Heels: Analyzing Yanis Marshall's
Choreography to "Perfect Lover"

As a college student from Pennsylvania, identifying as a white, straight, able-bodied female, dance has dramatically shaped my identity and passion for self-expression. Training in New York and Las Vegas has broadened my understanding of the commercial dance field and deepened my appreciation for inclusivity. Historically, dancing in heels has been viewed negatively, sometimes as "too sexy" or existing for the male gaze. Heels, such as Cavalier boots, were traditionally a symbol of status worn by men. The shoe has evolved, carrying several implications, including allure and restriction. However, heels have taken on different meanings and have become a tool for empowerment and self-expression.

A French choreographer, Yanis Marshall, is known for his famous choreography in heels and for redefining the cultural meaning. His choreography challenges the traditional view of the high heel and conventional gender norms. He offers dancers a way to express themselves in their skin through blending power and sensuality. His movements of fluidity and angularity emphasize certain lines of the body, fueling dancers to find their meaning of sensuality and empowerment and not objects of the male gaze. The paper examines Marshall's choreography of "Perfect Lover" by Britney Spears, where Marshall offers a variety of movements to highlight both masculine and feminine qualities across all genders. Through the intentional articulation of the body, Marshall redefines the role of heels, breaking associations with objectification and

restriction. The dancers find confidence and empowerment through the technical skill required to dance in heels.

It is crucial to examine the history of high heels to see why they may be viewed as controversial. In the 17th century, men originally wore heels in formal settings and horseback riding, serving as markers of male privilege. Only high-ranking men in courts and King Louis XIV were allowed to wear them. By the 18th century, men wearing heels declined. As one source quotes, “In menswear, heeled shoes were no longer universally accepted throughout Europe” (Ferreira 7). Heels then became mainly associated with women, whom men expected to conform to societal norms and wear them to appear to the male gaze as “sexy” or “sensible.” Based on these observations, “It is hard not to despair when one follows this rhetoric to its logical conclusion: ‘sensible’ shoes are unfeminine, and ‘feminine’ shoes are not sensible. Therefore, to be feminine is to be without sense” (Ferreira 7). Compliance with social norms and expectations to wear heels reflects femininity as equal with the ability to endure discomfort while maintaining grace and appearing effortless. Marshall challenges this narrative throughout his choreography, redefining heels as empowerment rather than historical symbols of discomfort. Modern innovations in dance heels prioritize functionality. Companies like Burju offer heels for support and comfort.

Dancing in heels strongly connects to its use in popular music videos. Stars like “Madonna, Janet Jackson, and Britney Spears began featuring energetic dance routines in high heels in their music videos and tours” (Gao 143). Heels dancing in Beyoncé’s *Crazy in Love* and *Single Ladies* helped play a prominent role in heels dancing while challenging its negative perceptions. In *Single Ladies*, the lyrics emphasize self-worth, independence, and empowerment.

These music videos can encourage women to express themselves and inspire choreographers like Marshall to use heels in dancing as a tool for empowerment.

There is also a great emphasis on the physical demands of dancing in heels that go unnoticed. Dancers learn to make everything look effortless, including making the choreography feel and look confident. However, doing various movements while balancing on a tiny heel takes much work. The heel changes a body's postural position “by contouring the ankle and leg, making the foot appear smaller and curved, emphasizing postural changes in the pelvis and buttocks, shortening the stride of one's gait, and adding height to the wearer” (Navarrete-Medina 30). The added height shifts a body's center of gravity, requiring greater core engagement. Getting used to the postural shift and added height while learning new moves takes time. The challenge makes it enjoyable and captivating. Watching dancers do articulate and physically demanding movements in heels is very inspiring. We should acknowledge the technical mastery of dancing in heels. The dancer's deliberate and strong movements project the confidence and self-assurance that is so empowering to watch. Overcoming these physical challenges requires “core strength and leg strength; people have to maintain balance and stability so the core strength could help dancers execute body movements smoothly and stay grounded, preventing falls” (Gao 144). Understanding alignment and strength is crucial for dancing in heels. The dancers executing Marshall's work demonstrate how strength and core stability are essential to mastering technique and expressing confidence. A dancer can project self-confidence and self-assurance through technical mastery and understanding of bodily coordination.

Analyzing Marshall's specific movement details and the intricacy reveals how power and grace combine to enhance self-confidence and empowerment. The dancers capture attention and

express their individuality through dynamic qualities and intentional gestures. The choreography emphasizes the hips and chest, creating rhythmic pulses and smooth undulations. Dancers in Marshall's class perceive these movements as a form of self-expression, reclaiming their bodies. These expressions of confidence and self-assurance are for themselves, not for the pleasure of others or external expectations placed on women in society.

Dancers make bold statements by grabbing their faces or flipping their hair. (0:12-0:17) When dancers grab their faces, they create a personal connection with themselves that shows off their confidence. It is an inward connection with themselves and not for the male gaze. They embrace their identity unapologetically.

The way the dancers step in their heels allows them to execute sways and isolations in the hips. The dancers hit many positions in this style called a bevel. This can be when one foot is slightly in front of the other, focusing on the ankles "kissing" and toes together. The bevel can also be when one leg is straight out to the side, the big toe points into the ground, and the other leg is straight under the dancer. Both types of bevels create a diagonal line that alludes to the feminine look of elegance. This bevel requires the dancer to be pulled up and use their core for balance and control. Doing the bevel requires one to sit deep into the hip, which also gives the accentuated hip movement. Dancers keep the weight in the ball of the foot and not into the actual heel part of the shoe. Keeping their weight forward requires them to use their chest and arms to keep them balanced. They lead the movement with their wrist to keep it structured but create ease at the fingertips. (0:26- 0:28) Their confidence is projected toward the audience since they move with such intention. These dancers are not trying to minimize themselves; instead, they are

dancing with their fullest expression. The chest and hip are accessible to dancers of all genders, which invites inclusivity and gives a stronger sense of empowerment.

This poised look of the upper body pairs nicely with the grounded, quick movements. The lower body may be moving so quickly and articulate that it is enhanced with the free-flowing arms; this creates an effortless appearance. An example of the grounded and quick lower body move is when the dancer utilizes the bend in the knee and in a crouched position. They must keep some bend in their knees to move quickly and stay balanced. If the legs were completely straight, the dancer would look awkward, and it would not project their confidence. The crouch position allows the dancer to relax and sink into the pelvis and use their hands to press against their knees. (0:30-0:32) As the dancer comes up from the crouch position, they press their hands into their knees to push their chest forward and counterbalance by sending their pelvis back. The dancer looks like they are enjoying the move and embracing their identity. The controlled movement that comes up as the pelvis pushes back allows them to insert their confidence.

The intentional placement of the hands as they trace the body enhances storytelling, reinforcing individuality. The dancers claim space and command presence when they use Marshall's choreography to extend their limbs and create clean lines. Touching their body conveys ownership and reclaims self-expression. The intentional placement of their hands on their body shows how they reclaim their body for personal expression and satisfaction rather than the traditional gaze. The intense eye contact creates a powerful narrative that makes dancers feel confident. While Marshall's choreography provides a framework, the dancers perform with individuality and unique expression.

Marshall's choreography also combines movement qualities to dissolve the traditional gender norms. Feminine qualities, such as graceful arm movements, hip and chest movements, and expressions, including flipping the hair and touching the face, are put with powerful, grounded, more masculine moves. High heels in Marshall's choreography function as a tool of expression for all genders. Performers can explore and express several identities through heels. The representation of masculinity and femininity "has become like a shirt that male and female dancers can take on and off like a piece of clothing" (Vincent 41). All genders can explore non-traditional roles and find new ways of expressing themselves. He normalizes men wearing heels, which alters the view that heels are decorative for the female body. The choreography shows technical skill and control and showcases both genders as robust and resilient, staying away from traditional submissive roles. His work creates inclusive spaces where dancers can feel a sense of community regardless of their background, providing work that allows dancers to find empowerment and individuality and discover themselves through dancing in heels.

As one can see, Yanis Marshall has significantly impacted the cultural significance of heels and offered dancers a way to empower and express themselves. Through his choreography, he redefines heels, making them more inclusive and empowering for everyone. Marshall creates a safe space where dancers of all genders can embrace their individuality and dance unapologetically, reclaiming their body and confidence.

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