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**A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER  
TRANSITION IN GAY MALE DANCERS**

by

**Daniel J. Grady**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
The City University of New York  
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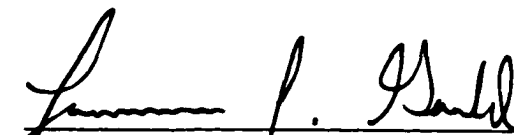
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

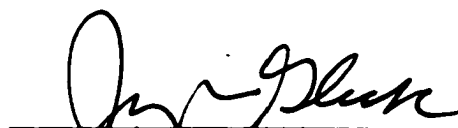
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## **PREFACE**

### **THE PERSONAL ORIGINS OF THE INQUIRY**

In the musical, “A Chorus Line,” Paul, the gay character, is injured during the final dance sequence and the question is raised, ‘what do you do when you can’t dance anymore?’ (Kirkwood, 1976). Paul begins to explain the difficulties he experienced growing up gay and recalls the unconditional acceptance and validation he received in the Broadway dance community. For the first time, he felt that he was worthwhile and had value. He goes to on the wonder if the injury will ruin his professional career and worries where else he could fit in as a gay man.

In 1977, I remember myself as an aspiring sixteen-year-old dancer sitting in a theater watching that show and completely unrelated to the significance of that dilemma. I had recently immersed myself into training as a ballet dancer and was interested in little else. My dance classes were all consuming and the thought of planning for a career other than dance was never under serious consideration. Additionally, several years earlier I consciously realized that I was gay – and probably had been so – long before then. As a young boy I felt different with an inherent attraction to men but sensed that these feelings were wrong. My career choice into the arts seemed somehow related to my sexual awakening but I was unaware precisely how.

Gradually, the notion of a ballet career seemed too restrictive both financially and creatively. I had been the “star” of high school musicals and was encouraged by my teachers to pursue professional musical theater. Much to my parent’s chagrin, at age eighteen with union card in hand, I moved to New York and was hired as a dancer in a national touring musical. Shortly thereafter I found work on Broadway and felt

tremendous satisfaction in achieving my career dream. The show business community was predominately gay and supported my coming out process by allowing me access to a social milieu that was liberal and diverse - removed from my conservative Midwestern roots.

I consider my seventeen-year career as a professional dancer and performer on Broadway successful and, most times, rewarding. While, as mentioned, the profession was mostly gay friendly, with time, I found that my career and the opportunities within the field were more limited than I initially had anticipated. I was told that if I wanted to be considered for leading roles I would need to 'act straight' at auditions and 'butch it up.' Further, age itself, together with the physical toll on the body foreshadowed a different future. Older Broadway dancers I had known were finding themselves unemployable. I recognized that my career as a dancer and performer would not last forever and that physical limitations and the lack of demand for middle-aged 'chorus boys' meant I had choices to make. During this same period, the AIDS crisis had taken a heavy toll on the Broadway community and I had experienced many friends' and colleagues' deaths over a four-year period.

At thirty-one years old, I was dancing in my fourth Broadway show. I had been promoted into a well-paid, managerial position responsible for maintaining the choreography and hiring cast replacements. This position allowed me the experience of seeing the business from the other side of the casting table and witness the desperation in the eyes of those auditioning. Many of those auditioning had flush resumes with solid work experience but were no longer in their prime and, ultimately, passed over. I recognized myself in their attempt to maintain their status at the top. As I looked ahead, I

dreaded the inevitable day when I would no longer be one of those chosen at auditions. As a dancer who had earned my living solely as a dancer since the age of sixteen, I had no knowledge or experience of how to consider and create a professional life outside of dance and musical theater.

During this period, my partner had enrolled in a graduate program in Music Therapy after grappling with his own career as an actor and musician. His newfound enthusiasm and passion for his work inspired me to seek a career consultation with non-profit organizations affiliated with the professional performing arts unions. These organizations allowed me to consider possible interests both inside and outside of the field of dance. With little idea of what I might like to do, I realized I needed a college education. I enrolled as a full time undergraduate while still performing eight times a week on Broadway. It was four years of struggle to balance work and school. I felt I had to hide my unfolding desire to change careers from professional colleagues and bosses.

My experience as an undergraduate allowed me to test various fields and interests along the way. I entered intensive psychodynamic psychotherapy to help me explore and understand what meanings performing, dancing, and show business held for me. I was more than my resume and gradually gained a broader sense of myself beyond dance. I directed my competitiveness from auditions toward my academics and, at thirty-five, graduated first in my class, summa cum laude. By remaining in show business throughout my undergraduate degree, I was never too far from the world that I knew and felt most comfortable in. I found maintaining the delicate balance of stretching my intellectual muscles and preserving my standing in my profession most challenging.



My personal experiences of changing careers from a professional Broadway dancer to the field of clinical psychology have been both challenging and liberating. Each phase of my transition continues to present new challenges to my assumptions of my personal and professional identities. My relationship with my partner, my psychotherapist, friends, and professional organizations provided essential support and guidance as I negotiated my way through the uncharted waters of school and work environments. I hope that organizations that provide career consultation, skills-based training and financial assistance to dancers forced out by deselection as well those dancers, like myself, who saw the inevitable path that lay ahead, may benefit from the experiences of the men in present study.

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone can whistle, that's what they say, easy.  
 Anyone can whistle, any old day, easy.  
 It's all so simple: Relax, let go, let fly!  
 So someone tell me why can't I?

I can dance a tango, I can read Greek, easy.  
 I can slay a dragon any old week, easy!  
 What's hard is simple, what's natural comes hard.  
 Maybe you could show me how to let go, lower my guard,  
 Learn to be free, maybe if you whistle, whistle for me.

Stephen Sondheim, *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964).

As a clinical psychology graduate student, I looked in the professional literature for confirmation and elaboration of my own experiences to better understand my personal and professional transitions. Currently, there is a paucity of literature on career transitions from the performing arts and adult developmental studies in gay men and even less on the impact of this transition on one's sense of self. In an effort to inform professional organizations working with this population, the present qualitative study with gay male dancers is meant to enhance the professional literature and generate hypotheses for further research.

This qualitative inquiry explores life-cycle experience, adaptation and transition among professional gay male dancers. As such, it includes the task of career transition and the potential impact of this transition on a gay man's sense of himself. Life-cycle adaptation for a male dancer may include career transition into another field, while for others, transitions occur while remaining in the performance domain.

The dancers and former dancers participating in this study will serve as my most vital resource and reference. Their reports of their early development, young adulthood

and transition into middle adulthood lie at the heart of this investigation. There are four areas of research literature important to my understanding and interpretation of the clinical data. These four areas are:

1. Adult development: in order to determine the significance of the gay male's life-cycle transitions compared to other populations previously considered in the literature.
2. Gay male development will be reviewed with the focus on (a) the origins and determinants of gay identity; (b) the process of "coming out" to oneself, peers, co-workers and family.
3. Career development theories: with a focus on (a) origins and determinants of career choice; (b) developmental aspects of one's career once it is chosen in order to see how this population experienced their careers as dancers and performers.
4. Transition theories: locating career transitions and retirement in the body of literature on life transitions in order to assess the impact of career change on the individual's experience of the self.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Perspectives on Adult Development

Development, as defined in a contemporary view of adult development (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987, 1979; Jacques, 1965, 1981; Settlage, 1992, 1988; Shane & Shane, 1990) is a process of growth, differentiation, and integration of organizing one's experiences from lower and simpler to higher and more complex ways. The basic model for psychoanalytic developmental processes has chiefly been the mother-child interaction, however, theories of adult development include social and cultural elements to a much greater extent than do psychoanalytic conceptualizations for the early years.

The recent literature on adult development has been influenced by Hartmann's (1939) theory of ego development in which he proposed that certain ego functions developed outside the sphere of conflict. Hartmann (1939) introduced the concept of *adaptation* which recognized the role of the environment on ego development. Adaptation referred to the reciprocal relationship between an organism and its environment. A developing ego relies heavily on its environment and learns to adapt in response to it. Certain perspectives of adult development equate adaptation with development (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987; Settlage, 1992) and stress that the psychic changes in adulthood warrant the designation of *development*.

Adult developmental studies have produced various theories of life-cycle development. These theories can be divided into several orientations: the age-stage developmental model (Erikson, 1980; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1996, 1978), individual non-chronological, developmental model (Maslow, 1962; Valliant, 1977) and

psychoanalytic theory within the study of adult development (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987, 1979; Jacques, 1965, 1981; Settlege, 1992, 1988; Shane & Shane, 1990).

Nearly all the respondents in the major adult developmental studies, however, were reported to be heterosexual. The only overtly gay person studied, Alan Poe, a participant in the thirty-year longitudinal study by Valliant (1977), raised so many questions about what was considered normal in adult development that a separate chapter was devoted to him. Despite some advances in our knowledge of homosexuality and midlife, adulthood is an uncharted time of life for most gay men (Kimmel, 1995). A generation of gay men and lesbians who “came of age” during the inception of the modern gay rights movement are surviving the AIDS crisis may be creating a unique developmental trail through the midlife years (Kertzner & Sved, 1990). For the male dancer, midlife transitions are compounded by inevitable physical limitations of growing older. A central question of this study is to what degree the existing adult developmental patterns described by these theories occur among this sample of gay male dancers?

#### Age-stage theorists

The age-stage theorists link the adult’s development to specific chronological periods which are universal. The age-stage researchers (Erickson, 1980; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1996, 1978) focus on psychological, social and biological changes that occur in the years that stretch from late adolescence to old age. Though Erickson’s developmental stages begin in infancy and extend beyond middle age, his adult stages, unlike the stages of childhood, are more loosely placed chronologically. Erickson designates specific adult stages as “young adult,” “adulthood,” and “mature age.” Erikson describes tasks that must be accomplished for the individual to proceed to the

next stage and places them in broad age groupings. His work is significant to my study because he defines the entry into adulthood in work-related terms and links identity and intimacy, “when childhood and youth come to an end, life begins: by which we mean work or study for a specified career...[only] after a reasonable sense of identity has been established [is] intimacy possible” (Erickson, 1980, p. 100).

Another age-stage researcher, Roger Gould, generated a model from a questionnaire distributed to 524 non-patients and explained in his book, *Transformations*, four phases of young adulthood: ages 16-22, 22-28, 28-34, and 35-45. According to Gould, (1978) development consists primarily of “changes in consciousness.” He says, “the events themselves—love, work, marriage, dealing with our parents and our children—occupy the center stage in everyone’s life. But because of changes in our consciousness, events are experienced differently at different stages” (Gould, 1978, p. 41). Gould argues that the movement toward maturity and development is not as embedded in the domain of work and career. Instead, he conceives of development as a gradual stripping away of childhood assumptions, that shape the way we respond to the world, both personally and professionally. As we transcend various childhood assumptions during these chronological adult stages, we come closer to our own agenda, leaving behind our parent’s expectations.

Daniel Levinson (1978) devised a theory of adulthood using biographical interviews of men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. Levinson posits that adult development is characterized by a universal sequence of five age-linked developmental stages which result in significant changes in self-identity and social roles. These patterns consist of a series of alternating stable and transitional periods. The five

age-linked eras include: Preadulthood (birth to age twenty), Early Adulthood (age twenty to age forty), Middle Adulthood (age forty to age sixty), Late Adulthood (age sixty to age eighty) and Late Late Adulthood (after age eighty). Each era has its own biopsychosocial character and makes a unique contribution to the entire life cycle. For most people, adulthood contains periods of discontinuity and change, but the eras provide relatively stable scaffolding in which adulthood takes shape.

According to Levinson (1978), a stable, structure-building period generally lasts between five and seven years. Within each of these structures-building periods are developmental tasks that ask the individual to make firm choices about the nature of their life structure. Failing to accomplish or meet the requirements of the given period can hamper successful development and lead to a developmental crisis. A structure-building period is followed by a transitional structure changing period. Transitional periods last approximately five years and include the termination of an existing life structure and the building of a new one.

According to Levinson (1978), almost half of the adult life is spent in transition. Transitional periods are often times of moderate to severe crisis in a person's life, as the individual feels caught between a desire to move their life forward and the uncertainty as to the choices and decisions that they will make may leave them unfulfilled. A transitional period ends when the need to re-evaluate no longer has its sense of urgency, and when new commitments have been made or old commitments have been re-affirmed.

The first of these periods is the Early Adult Transition and the formation of the initial life structure. The period of the Early Adult Transition, which takes place between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, marks the beginning of forming an adult identity

and finding a place in the world of adults. A major task in this period is the forming of a Dream that generates excitement and provides the individual with a direction and a purpose in his life. The Dream is the foundation for Levinson's (1978) conceptualizations of early adulthood. It is the internalized vision of what one wants to become and invigorates the individual into working toward obtaining that goal. For Levinson, the conviction that one's life is meaningful stems from having a Dream that can be actively pursued. The Dream enables the individual to direct his energies toward an adult life in which they can be realized.

Following the formation of the initial life structure comes the decade of the thirties divided into two periods: (a) the Age Thirty Transition (ages 28-33), which according to Levinson may entail changing the life structure and generating a crisis of moderate or severe proportions; and (b) Settling Down, a period that begins at the end of the Age Thirty Transition and persists until about age forty.

The Age Thirty Transition takes place between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-three and is a time when the individual re-evaluates and questions his life structure. According to Levinson (1978) this is the time when the individual will either make new choices in regard to occupation, relationship, and life-style or re-affirm the choices that were made until that point. Choices made during this period may be experienced as a "crisis" if the changes profoundly affect the individual's sense of self. It may mean totally revamping the life structure and evaluating the direction of the individual's life. Development during this period, however, does not necessarily involve overt changes but can be done psychologically through changed meanings within the person's current life structure (Newton, 1987).



In describing the Settling Down period, Levinson describes two major tasks for men: (1) to establish one's niche in society by developing competence and mastery in one's chosen field, (2) to advance on his hypothetical "ladder"— advancement being measured as increased social rank, income, power, and quality of family life. Levinson carefully distinguishes this stage from the novice phase in the First Adult Life Structure which is characterized as an exploratory, dream-forming time, with an emphasis on the need to keep one's options open.

The life structure established during the twenties and thirties is called into question during the Mid-Life Transition. During this time the man questions what he has done and/or accomplished during his life, and may seek to address parts of himself that were neglected during earlier periods. Middle age has been described as a time for men when personal limitations are realized and possibilities reassessed (Levinson, 1978), and when an outer directedness concerned with establishing social identity is replaced by an inner reflectiveness attuned to the finiteness of life and the passage of youth (Jung, 1933; Neugarten, 1968). In addition, the adult in midlife becomes increasingly concerned with the gains of others, particularly those of another generation. Erickson described this period as one of generativity, referring mainly to procreation, parenting, productivity in the job and creativity (Erikson, 1980). This transition ends at about the age of 45. The reassessment done during the mid-life transition, as well as the success or failure experienced during earlier periods helps to establish men into a third life structure. To a lesser degree this reassessment continues into late adulthood.

Utilizing the life span developmental framework developed by Levinson, Schiemann (1994) studied the lives of eight gay men between the ages of 41 and 50 who

were engaged in occupations considered to be “risky environments in which to come out” (p.671). This study investigated the role of coming out, that is, making publicly known in the lives of these men one’s membership in the gay “cultural minority” (p. 15). Schiemann’s findings suggest that the choice to come out or “stay in the closet” formed a central component in the life structure, patterned by intrinsic and extrinsic forces in a gay man’s life at any given time. This contradicts much of the gay identity literature which suggests that the coming out process occurs in a linear fashion with little connection to developmental periods or tasks.

Schiemann (1994) found that the Dream formed in early adulthood was split between occupational and relational goals and included negative attributions related to societal messages regarding homosexuality. In Schiemann’s sample, the Dreams of all the participants were found to be compensatory in nature in that they articulated life tasks of repairing presumed flaws in the family or in themselves. All the men in Schiemann’s study formed relational parts of the Dream after coming out of the closet to themselves in early adulthood.

Levinson’s theory raises a number of questions with regard to my sample of dancers and former dancers. First, there is the question of timing. Was there an Age Thirty Transition, and if so, how was it experienced? For Levinson, the individual who attempts career change past the Age Thirty Transition (after age 33) is likely to have much more difficulty adjusting. However, a male dancer’s career and earning potential is usually at its peak between age twenty-five and thirty-five (Hamilton, 1998). Dancers’ careers are physically limited much like an elite athlete’s with regard to performance. One question for the present study is whether individuals in these highly physically

demanding professions fall within Levinson's conceptual timeline. Second, there is the question of the nature of the "Dream" for this population and its formation in late adolescence and early adulthood. Is the Dream a useful construct for this population and what were its origins? How and when did these men experience exploring the world of professional dance?

### Individual and psychoanalytic theorists

The individual developmental theorists do not see adult developmental change limited to a particular age or stage in life but rather as a multi-determined process where key life events propel the individual to grow and change (Maslow, 1962; Valliant, 1977). Recently, efforts have been made to integrate psychoanalytic theory into the study of adult development (Settlage, 1992, 1988; Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987, 1979; Jacques, 1981, 1965; Shane & Shane, 1990).

Abraham Maslow (1962) and George Valliant (1977) both focus on individual, intrapsychic change which occurs over time and not in a prescribed stepwise manner. Maslow (1962) asserts that within each individual there is the need for growth in a direction that he calls "self actualization" or psychological health. Self-actualization is driven by the pressure toward "unity of the individual's personality and spontaneous expressiveness and toward individuality and identity" (Maslow, 1962, p. 147). Individuals who express this tendency toward growth resist enculturation and classification and seek to find and construct their own life structure instead of conforming to expectations of others in the present or past. The role of the future is important in that "self actualization is meaningless without reference to a currently active future" (Maslow, 1962, p. 14). The future, according to Maslow, is dynamically active in the present for

the individual and can be the basis for fearful retreat and defensive concerns with safety or it may hold promise for improvement and adventure. It is likely that both senses reside in all of us and it is precisely this conflict that, according to Maslow, makes self-actualization so heroic.

Life events provide the opportunity for this choice between growth and safety which, according to Maslow, occur in no chronological or predictable order. Adult development occurs in response to key events. He writes: "The most important learning experiences reported to me by my participants were very frequently single life experiences such as tragedies, deaths, traumata, conversions, and sudden insights which forced change in the life outlook of the person and consequently in everything that he did...a peeling away of inhibitions and constraints..." (Maslow, 1962, p. 36).

Valliant (1977) views adult development from an ego psychological perspective. Like Maslow, he tried to define the illusive notion of mental health and what contributed to adult psychological well-being. He considered his participants' ego defenses and posited a hierarchy of defenses, which range from maladaptive and immature to neurotic and mature adaptive defenses. He contends that "with time, defenses evolve in more mature styles" (Valliant, 1977, p.30). Valliant's study involved extensive, in-depth interviews and annual questionnaires with 95 Harvard graduates. He writes: "When the Grant Study was started, the hope was that it would allow prediction and that once all the data were in, college counselors could interview sophomores and tell them what they should do with their lives. This was not to be. The life cycle is more than an invariant sequence of stages with single, predictable outcomes. The men's lives are full of surprises" (Valliant, 1977, p.373).

What precipitates or allows growth to occur in adulthood? Valliant (1977) offers several answers. First, there is the idea that external events force the individual to adapt. Valliant offered the metaphor of the oyster which when confronted with a grain of sand, creates a pearl. A second factor is the availability of suitable models for identification along with opportunities in childhood and adolescence to exhibit autonomy and initiative. Valliant argued a key factor in adult development was the ability of the individual to shift to higher order defenses in an interpersonal environment. By this he included utilizing friends, partners, therapists, or mentors, who at the crucial time of transition, offer emotional support.

Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987, 1979; Jacques, 1981, 1965; Settlege, 1992, 1988; Shane & Shane, 1990) built upon earlier concepts of development and argue that development is an ongoing dynamic process that continues throughout adulthood. In keeping with Hartmann (1939), Colarusso and Nemiroff (1987, 1979) contend that development in childhood centers on the formation of psychic structures through the processes of identification and internalization. However, unlike Hartmann (1939), their conception of adult development argued that identification and internalization continue during adulthood.

Colarusso and Nemiroff (1987, 1979) expand on Kohut's (1981, 1978, 1977, 1971) notion of selfobjects and Loewald's (1960) theory of development in the analytic relationship and argued that developmental relationships which promote adaptation and change continue to take place in adulthood. The developmental tasks and key life events of adulthood can leave the individual feeling as dependent as the child. In adulthood,

spouse, partner and friends replace parents, and the child's play environment is replaced by the adult's work place and career.

Settlage's (1992, 1988) *process model* of development proposed that development in adulthood involves 'growth, differentiation and integration" (1988, p. 353) from lower and simpler levels to higher and more complex levels of functioning and adaptation. Development takes place when previous levels of functioning no longer serve the person. This process can be ego-syntonic (when the growth is self-initiated) and it can be ego-dystonic (when the change is thrust upon the individual as a trauma).

Jacques (1981, 1965) developed a theory of developmental positions in adulthood rather than stages or periods. He argues that the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions that Klein (1935) proposed in her theory of childhood development are re-enacted in adulthood. According to Jacques, an individual gradually moves from the paranoid-schizoid position in early adulthood to a more mature, integrated depressive position in mid-life. Early adulthood is a time of intense ambition in which the individual must focus his energies on making it in the world – meaning increasing status, power and authority. Paranoid-schizoid mechanisms such as splitting, projective identification, psychotic anxiety, and the inability to experience integrated whole objects operate while the individual is in this position. As the individual moves toward mid-life, he begins to integrate ambivalent feelings into his sense of self. According to Jacques (1965), the shift from early adulthood to mid-life entails relinquishing the paranoid-schizoid position and conceding to the depressive position. In mid-life an individual is able to accept the fact that "good" and "bad" are both aspects of the human experience.

Theories of adult development suggest that middle-aged men experience significant challenges to their social identity for the first time in their adult lives. Gay men, like their heterosexual counterparts, are likely to experience important changes in self-identity and social roles in their adult years. In the past 25 years the concept of “gay identity” has become established as part of the Western mental health practitioner’s vocabulary (Cass; 1996, 1979). The post-Stonewall gay men who “came of age” during the modern gay rights movement and survived the impact of the AIDS crisis may be experiencing a unique developmental trail through their adult years (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). Psychological adaptation to midlife may be shaped by gay identity development and self-acceptance, proximity to the HIV epidemic, physical health, social support, and ego strengths. Given these variables, what concerns might be common to these gay male dancers in midlife? A review of the pertinent research on gay male development and gay identity development is required to understand the participants’ individual and collective experiences.

### Gay Male Development

Isay (1996) defines homosexual men as individuals whose “predominant erotic preference is for others of the same sex. Their sexual fantasies are either almost entirely or are exclusively directed toward other men and have been so since childhood” (p.451). Because Freud wrote no paper that dealt solely with the subject of homosexuality, Lewes (1988) presented a composite view of Freud’s major theories on homosexual object choice. Freud believed in constitutional bisexuality which rested on the assumption that sexual object and aim are separable. Libido is equally capable of attaching itself to

members of the same sex as it is to those of the opposite sex. Libidinal pleasures obtained orally or anally were more “primitive” or less developed than genital ones. As a result, homosexuality was believed to be caused by either libidinal arrest - a person had failed to reach the final psychosexual stage of genitality and because of trauma had reverted to an earlier stage. Genital sexuality had to ultimately lead to the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the foundation of psychoanalysis (Lewes, 1988).

Freud’s major theory on homosexuality (Lewes, 1988) presumes the absence or unavailability of the boy’s father. The mother-son relationship was overly close and overly stimulating, leading to an overvaluing of the penis. Because of the maternal over-involvement, the boy refused to give up his erotic tie to her, as Freud proposed the heterosexual child would do. The heterosexual child, in giving up the tie with mother, identified with father and sought an object like his mother. According to Freud, to preserve his relationship with his mother, the future homosexual boy identified with her and selected sexual objects that resembled himself. This was Freud’s (1919) explanation of da Vinci’s homosexuality. In doing so, Freud linked homosexuality to narcissism:

We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model not their mothers but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as love objects, and are exhibiting a type of object choice which much be termed “*narcissistic*.” (Freud’s italics)

Analytic writers have often linked pathology, homosexuality and narcissism (Bieber, 1976; Socarides, 1976). As mentioned, much of this stemmed from the view that homosexuality is considered a more primitive point in development than heterosexuality. Homosexuality has not traditionally been viewed as truly object related,



but rather involving impoverished object relations and a general organization on a preoedipal level (Lewes, 1988).

Over the past twenty years, the “illness model” has been challenged and criticized from both outside and inside the psychoanalytic community. Analytic writers have attempted to incorporate normal variant themes into psychoanalytic theory. Much of the contemporary literature (Drescher, 1998; Horrocks, 1998; Isay, 1989, 1996; Izzard, 1999) points to the confusion in traditional literature between correlation and causality of homosexuality. A theory of causality developed from reports of a distant father and over-involved mother in the development of gay men and has become part of the social narrative of the culture. O'Connor and Ryan (1993) make the point that according to mainstream psychoanalysis, homosexuality is based solely on “repudiation” and that homosexual object choice is seen as a reaction to something rather than a choice for something. Domenici and Lesser (1995) assert that in most theories of male and female homosexuality there is a split between identification and desire. These writers criticize establishing identification and desire as binary opposites – the belief that one cannot have and be the same sex at the same time.

Gender researchers believe that children can assign themselves to a gender by about 2 ½ years of age (Kohlberg, 1966; Coates, 1992). Children make this distinction not simply out of awareness of anatomical difference between the sexes but on the basis of superficial appearances such as clothing or hair length. Horrocks (1998) criticizes the link in the traditional theory between gender identity and sexual orientation. The gay man is traditionally seen as having an excess of femininity and, just as identification and desire have been set up as binary opposites, gender identity and sexual orientation are set

up as intertwined. While some hypothesize a causal relationship between gender confusion and biological homosexuality (Dorner, 1986; Friedman, 1988), others posit that same-sex feelings do not originate from an already formed, gendered self (Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1989, 1996). A boy does not have to grow up to be gay because he was confused about his gender identity. Instead, growing up with feelings other than those reinforced by the heterosexual majority may lead pre-gay boys to question the veracity of their masculine identity.

Self-awareness of a homosexual sexual orientation, which does not generally occur until adolescence, may be preceded by an early sense of difference in some pre-gay boys (Isay, 1989; Troiden, 1988). In a society that promotes and supports heterosexuality, the sense of difference in these boys may be alienating (Stein & Cabaja, 1996). For those boys who are also effeminate or less masculine, profound deficits in self-esteem and in other aspects of the personality may result from being shunned and humiliated by peers.

Isay (1996, 1989) attributes homosexuality's cause to constitutional factors and described the dilemma of normative homosexual adaptation in a heterosexual world. Therefore, homosexuality is no more or less normal than heterosexuality and requires no explanation. In his clinical practice Isay (1989) described the nature of very early and powerful erotic attachment between gay males and their fathers. Many gay men reported that their fathers were distant during their childhood and that close attachment with them was lacking. Isay suggested that gay men's distant and vague memories of their fathers, like those that heterosexual men have of their mothers, are often caused by the defensive distortion arising from the anxiety the adult feels about the early erotic attachment to the

parent. Pre-gay boys may incorporate those gender behaviors typically associated with their mothers as a way of attracting the fathers (Isay, 1989).

Isay (1996, 1989) suggests that the father might perceive such a child as being different, perhaps more sensitive, or wanting more attention than boys. This perception, according to Isay, may lead to both the father's withdrawal, (consciously and unconsciously), and recognition that his son has both a special need for closeness and an erotic attachment to him. This withdrawal is experienced by the pre-homosexual boy as a rejection and may contribute to poor self-esteem and the sense of inadequacy felt by some gay men.

Kohut's self psychological theory (1971, 1977) argues that compromised self-esteem results from defects in the structure of the self, distortions of the self, or weaknesses of the self caused by repeated, unresponsive parenting. The parent's inability to adequately empathize with the child coupled with the child's responses, are seen as the roots of narcissistic disturbances. Under normal circumstances, at first, the child needs a great deal of positive confirmation for his behaviors from the mother – which Kohut refers to as a “mirroring response.” These mirroring responses are thought to be connected with the development and maintenance of self-esteem and ambition. Initially, everything the infant does is reflected back by the mother as perfect and the infant experiences himself as omnipotent – reinforcing the grandiose self. Inevitably, the child meets obstacles that challenge his sense of omnipotence and grandiosity. These developmentally normal experiences enable his “grandiose self” to gradually become aware that at some level the parents are meeting these needs. Arrested development can result when a child's “archaic grandiosity” remains unchallenged.

According to Kohut (1977), with an awareness of his limitations the infant then comes to develop an “idealized parent imago.” He sees the father as all-powerful and omnipotent (and, by association, maintains a sense of worth and power). This idealization meets the child’s need to be close to someone who he believes will make him safe, comfortable and calm. This early mirroring and later idealization are thought to facilitate the smooth movement through the normal, necessary narcissistic phase of grandiosity and exhibitionism. The external objects (the mother and father) serve internal functions – calming and comforting – and function as selfobjects for the child. According to Kohut, these early experiences are the kernels of healthy narcissism and self-esteem and should be allowed to slowly transform the self without jolting the child into adult “reality.”

This exposure to reality allows the child a gradual appreciation of his unrealistic views of himself and his parents. Kohut (1971) refers to the process of gradually alternating empathic gratification with frustration by the parents as “optimal frustration.” These optimal failures, injuries, and frustrations allow the child to develop internal means to maintain self-esteem and tolerate unavoidable failures. Disappointments allow the child to internalize aspects of the idealized parents into the self – what Kohut (1971) refers to as “transmuting internalization.”

When parents fail to provide empathic mirroring and conditions for idealization, Kohut asserts, the child develops a non-cohesive self, vulnerable to narcissistic injuries. When parents are indifferent, hostile or excessively critical, they reflect back a sense of low-worth to the child and arrest his development of self. Narcissistically impaired adults have not developed sufficient internal structures to regulate their infantile

grandiosity when confronted with reality. As a result, they rely on external structures, selfobjects, to help regulate their injury and rage as they butt heads with the world.

As Goldberg (1985) stated, “selfobjects are universal, ubiquitous, and enduring. Selfobject transferences, in turn, are the fundamental features of the clinical theory” (p. 76). The selfobject transferences in psychoanalysis were described by Kohut (1971) as corresponding to the preoedipal developmental stages of grandiosity and idealization. These were labeled as *mirror transferences* which are derived from the grandiose self, and *idealizing transferences*, which stem from the idealized parental imago. Later Kohut (1977) added a third selfobject transference, the *twinsip* or *alter ego transference*.

In a similar way, Winnicott (1948) sees psychoanalysis as providing a setting to compensate for parental failures and “to provide a certain type of environment” (p.168). The analyst and the therapeutic setting “hold” the patient with reliability, attentiveness, responsiveness, and in the durability of the analyst to survive the patient’s demands (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Winnicott sees the therapeutic process in terms of mutual play between the analyst and the patient. The real or true self that was constricted by early parental failures is accessed and allowed to grow and become more a part of the patient’s experience.

Winnicott’s (1960) notion of the true and false self organization may be useful in thinking about the men in this study. Winnicott envisioned the infant as born with the potential for a unique, individual personality (the true self personality organization) which develops in the context of a “responsive holding environment”(p.47) provided by “a good-enough mother”(p.145). This optimal environment requires a state of “primary maternal preoccupation” whereby the mother senses and consistently meets his needs. In

this holding environment the infant is protected without knowing he is protected. It is in this unknowing protected place that spontaneous experiences can occur for the infant and the true self allowed to flourish.

Winnicott (1960) asserts that when a mother substitutes something of herself for the infant's spontaneous gesture (e.g., her own anxiety over separateness), the infant experiences a trauma which disrupts his developing true self. When these "impingements" become overwhelming and are primary in the infant's development, he will defend himself by developing a false self organization (p.86). The false self monitors and adapts to the needs of the mother and protects the true self from the intrusiveness of the mother's demands. The dread of annihilation of the true self results in a dependence on the false self. Ogden (1986) states that functioning in this false self mode can lead to success in academic, vocational and social spheres, but over time the person will increasingly experience himself as bored, detached, and lacking spontaneity.

In recent years there has been attention given to gay male self-esteem (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993). Clearly, growing up in a society where homosexuality is ridiculed condemned and stereotyped increases an internal struggle for a healthy sense of self. Without sufficient internal and external validation of worth, developing stable self-esteem can be difficult for narcissistically prone boys to attain (Alexander & Nunno, 1993).

Maylon (1982a) describes how pre-gay boys internalize "the mythology and opprobrium which characterize current social attitudes toward homosexuality" (p.60), which results in an internalized homophobia that shapes the ego through unconscious introjects and conscious negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and the self.

Maylon (1982b) further describes a biphasic development for gay men that consists of an initial phase with incomplete identity formation and ego development due to the need to adapt to cultural expectations to be heterosexual during adolescence, followed by a second phase in which identity formation can be completed in conjunction with “coming out” as a gay man.

Stein and Cabaj (1996) note in their clinical experiences that gay men as children learn to disconnect and dissociate from their true selves and sexual orientation and adapt to parental expectations by creating and presenting a false self or behaviors that are not genuine reflections of the true self. When parents and other significant people in their lives recognize and affirm this false self, these children massively suppress their more natural feelings. In latency, they may begin to fear other children or feel even more different and become socially isolated. In adolescence, their sexual feelings emerge, but there is rarely permission to express same-sex feelings.

Recent studies find many serious dilemmas faced by gay youth. Some stresses are related to concealment of sexual orientation as gay youth learn the need to hide, and this long-standing manner of coping contributes to their psychological well-being (Martin, 1982). Martin suggests that compromised identity development among young gay males, including the absence of positive gay role models and the development of a “negative self,” results from the relentless heterosexism and homophobia of adolescent peer culture. Martin (1982) notes that adolescents often reject those who are different and encourage conformity, which further supports denial and suppression of emerging gay feelings. As a result, the gay adolescent who may split-off even further any awareness of affect and behavior related to his homosexuality.

Hanely-Hackenbruck (1989) suggests that therapeutic exploration with many gay men will reveal internalized homophobia, which has served to cause the individual “severe anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, relationship failures, or a feeling of being an imposter” (p. 35). Resolution of internalized homophobia (or superego modification as she terms it) is an in-depth process that includes further individuating the person from parental domination, defining one’s own values, and developing a new social peer group that is more accepting of the person. Through that process, the homosexual man is presented with various paths toward establishing a positive gay identity.

During the mid-life years, many gay men experience an increasing awareness of being older and interpret the passage of time within the context of both the dominant heterosexual culture and gay subculture. This awareness may entail redefining self-identity as no longer being young, despite prevailing norms that greatly value youthfulness in the gay culture (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). Additionally, dance is a young person’s profession where agility and speed are highly valued. How does the passage of time and change in ability impact these men’s sense of themselves?

Kimmel (1995) describes a gay man’s “crisis competence” forged by the coming out process and argued that this may buffer gay men from crises in later life. This study will explore whether this holds true for these gay male dancers who have chosen a predominately gay, highly competitive, time-restricted occupation. Additionally, whereas greater integration of masculine and feminine qualities is described as a key midlife transition by Levinson (1978) and Jung (1933), many gay men experience a wider range of gender roles throughout their lives (Corbett, 1993). It remains to be seen



whether these dancers report more fluid gender roles and if so, does it facilitate adaptation in transition?

The HIV epidemic has made the presumption of good health in midlife no longer possible for many gay men. HIV infection has profoundly touched the lives of many gay men, particularly those residing in large metropolitan areas. Hopcke (1992) describes an early, "AIDS-induced midlife crisis" for some gay men in their twenties which includes a confrontation with mortality resembling a classic, midlife psychological transformation. The HIV epidemic may have moved a generation of gay men concerned with consolidating personal identity into a period of heightened generativity as reflected in widespread care-partnering and increased community involvement (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). Second, the experience of AIDS-related bereavement is a key determinant of mental health in gay men (Martin & Dean, 1993) and may profoundly influence their perceptions of midlife. Although HIV has affected all gay men, those in the performing arts have been particularly impacted. This qualitative exploration of gay male dancers' will provide narrative data including the impact that HIV and AIDS has had in their lives and the decisions they have made.

### Gay Identity Development

There is a considerable body of literature that has focused on the process by which individuals acquire a lesbian or gay identity (Cass 1979, 1984, 1996; Coleman 1981-2; Ponse 1978; Raphael 1974; Schippers; 1989; Troiden 1979; Weinberg 1983). The concept of a gay identity has been supported by theoretical formulations that have attempted to explain the process by which the identity has come to be acquired. Loicano

(1989) explains this process as socially and intrapsychically bringing the individual from presumed heterosexuality to acknowledged homosexuality. These formulations have been useful not only to explain developmental sequences, but clinically useful in understanding unique difficulties encountered by gay men (Colgan, 1987).

Coleman (1982) proposes a five part developmental model of identity acquisition. This model did not assume that an individual proceeds through all stages or that the progression is linear in nature. Instead, individuals might become fixed at any one level or jump between levels. The first stage, *Pre-Coming Out*, occurs in childhood and is characterized by the individual feeling different. The second stage, *Coming Out*, first required self-acknowledgement of homosexual feelings and then telling others of these feelings. *Exploration*, the third stage, involved sexual experimentation with same sex partners and social involvement with other individuals who identified as gay. These actions result in a movement toward the fourth stage called *First Relationships* in which the man appreciates and accepts the inherent goodness of his same-sex relationships. The final stage, *Integration*, involved an incorporation of the individual's "public and private identities into one self-image" (p.39). In this fifth stage, the individual finds cohesion between his personal life and his public life with few disconnects.

Troiden (1989) presents a sociological model of identity acquisition. This model differentiated between self-concept and identity. According to Troiden (1989), self-concept consists of the individual's image of himself while identity is based upon a specific context. The homosexual identity was one of several that may comprise an individual's self-concept. The homosexual identity was further broken down into three

parts: presented identity, self-identity, and perceived identity. Troiden concluded that homosexual identities were

“most fully realized, that is, brought into concrete existence, in situations where self-identity, perceived identity, and presented identity coincide – where an agreement exists between who people think we are, who they claim to be, and how other view them” (p. 46-47)

Troiden’s model (1989) consists of four stages, *sensitization*, *identity confusion*, *identity assumption*, and *commitment*. These stages were not necessarily seen as linear or progressive. Instead, individuals might utilize different stages at various points in their lives. The fourth stage, *commitment*, consisted of both internal and external components. It is indicated internally by: (a) the fusion of sexuality and the emotionality into a significant whole; (b) a shift in the meanings attached to homosexual identities; (c) a perception of the homosexual identity as a valid self-identity; (d) expressed satisfaction with the homosexual identity; and (e) increased happiness after self-identifying as homosexual.

Cass’s (1996, 1979) model, regularly cited in empirical studies, consists of six stages of gay identity development: *identity confusion*, *identity comparison*, *identity tolerance*, *identity acceptance*, *identity pride*, and *identity synthesis*. According to Cass (1979), the process of gay and lesbian identity development begins with conscious awareness of same-sex feelings. The first two stages involve confusion, turmoil, denial (*identity confusion*), and increased feelings of alienation and self-perceptions of being different from heterosexuals (*identity comparison*). By the third stage, *identity tolerance*, the individual tolerates homosexual behaviors but does not yet accept the possibility of being gay or lesbian and starts to feel more isolated from heterosexuals. The public and

private aspects of self that concern sexuality are quite disparate or split. Stage four, *identity acceptance*, at least privately, occurs even though many individuals will attempt to pass as heterosexual in some aspects of their lives. During this stage, the individual engages in homosexual behaviors and can acknowledge to him and some close friends that he identifies as gay. Stage five, *identity pride*, is typified by immersion in the lesbian or gay community with the tendency to dichotomize heterosexuals and gay people. There is general-pride in being gay and anger with being oppressed based on sexual orientation. The public and private aspects of self begin to merge, as the individual grows less concerned with concealing a gay or lesbian identity. The final stage, *identity synthesis*, involves the complete integration of one's gay or lesbian aspect of self. Feelings of anger and pride are less intense or extreme, and there is less of a need to isolate oneself from the heterosexual world.

“Coming out” may be the most commonly shared cultural experience defining the modern gay identity. It marks the beginning of openly transgressing heterosexually constructed categories of gender and sexuality. In its everyday usage, coming out means telling another person that one is gay. In describing the coming out process, Drescher (1998) suggested disclosure works against dissociative splits that gay men are forced to develop early on. Although multiple presentations of the self can be adaptive in childhood or adolescence, they can also impact one's ability to develop intimacy and maintain self-esteem. Anthropologists and social scientists such as Herdt and Boxer (1993) classify coming out as a ritual process of passage that requires a gay man to unlearn the principles and stereotypes of essentialist heterosexuality and learn the ways of the lesbian and gay culture. Key questions in this study will be whether “stages” are

reflected in this sample's narrative and, if so, what are these men's experiences of coming out as professional dancers?

### Career development

The literature on career development falls into two general classes: that which sees career development and personal development as interlocking (Super, 1990), and that which focuses more narrowly on the stage of development within a chosen career (Dalton, Thompson & Price, 1977). Career consolidation comprised of a clear career identity and measured by occupational satisfaction, commitment and skill, is thought to be a normative process for men in young adulthood (Super, 1990). This development and consolidation may apply to gay men, as well, with some gay men in professional or managerial positions who experience occupational satisfaction and commitment. On the other hand, certain careers that rely on refined physical performance, such as professional dance and athletics, also present the inevitable problem of career finiteness and early retirement.

According to Super (1990), the career development process begins very early in life during the growth stage (birth to 14 years) when children are developing interests, values, and beliefs. The *exploration* stage, between the ages of 14 and 25, entails developing vocational maturity. The individual researches and defines the necessary skills and training needed for an intended career. The individual develops a readiness to complete the various tasks of the work environment and a career choice is crystallized. As individuals progress into the *establishment* stage (26-44 years), they develop a greater commitment to a career choice, firm skills, and mastery and seniority on the job. The

self-concept, according to Super, becomes increasingly stable as one matures during this period. Movement into the *maintenance* stage of career development (around ages 45 to 65 years) involves completing such stage-related tasks such as continuing to attain achievements and seniority, competing with younger people beginning their careers, and developing innovative ways of dealing with the changes in the workplace role. Finally, the *disengagement* stage at the age of 65 years entails a reduction in work hours and preparation for retirement (Super, 1990). An obvious question is to what degree do dancers experience this linear process of career development proposed by Super (1990)?

Typically, a male dancer's training begins between the ages of twelve to sixteen (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997). Depending on the training he pursues (ballet, modern, jazz) he may begin performing professionally in his late teens or early twenties. By the time the male reaches his mid-thirties, his strength and agility diminishes significantly (Hamilton, 1998). Stereotypes of gay men and lesbians include occupational components. At least one comparative study between gay and straight male dancers (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997) suggested that the dance world is particularly tolerant of homosexuality and estimated that well over 50% of professional male dancers are gay. The gay male dancers in that study recalled more feminine behaviors and interests as children which significantly differed from heterosexual dancers. Heterosexual male dancers also began dancing somewhat earlier than gay men and received more parental encouragement from an earlier age (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997).

Levinson's (1978) adult developmental model, Cass's (1979) model of gay and lesbian identity development and Super's (1990) Life-Span Approach share many theoretical assumptions (Dunkle, 1996). All are developmental and involve progressing

through a series of life stages. These theories also emphasize that career identity and gay identities are multidetermined and affected by intrapsychic and environmental factors. Additionally, these models maintain that, for many reasons, individuals can recycle through stages or become foreclosed at any stage. For gay men with development described above, the progression through the career process may be complicated because of difficulties integrating their gay identity into their overall self-concept in early adulthood (Belz, 1993). Elliott (1993) suggests the coming out process and the related stressors can occur at any age, not just adolescence and early adulthood and, as such, may have an impact on career decisions across the life span. Additionally, this raises questions with regard to this sample of dancers. Most successful dancers begin their professional lives in late adolescence and early adulthood (Hamilton, 1998).

### Theories of Transition

While many theorists emphasize different facets of the nature of transitions, all tend to define it as an event or decision which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and therefore, demands a change in one's behavior and relationships. Marris (1975) sees all change as emanating from an oscillating tension between the desire to innovate and the psychologically adaptive need to conserve. This oscillation allows the individual to assimilate to existing beliefs rather than to adapt and change. The psychological task of mourning, according to Marris, mediates this back and forth shift between change and conservation. He divides transitions into two types. In the first type, the continuity of life is unbroken, and in the second there is discontinuity and irretrievable loss. He characterizes career change as a form of personal growth and,

therefore, as a continuous aspect of the individual. Marris concedes that even self-initiated change may instigate feelings of loss and mourning.

In trying to understand the “mournful” aspects of change with regard to self-initiated change, Marris postulates the phenomenon of the “conservation principle,” the impulse to preserve and keep life even, continuous and predictable. He suggests that some self-initiated career changers may paradoxically appear to “repudiate habitual assumptions, overturning expectations and questioning relationships in ways which are disruptive to ourselves as well as others” (Marris, 1975, p.111). In fact, it may be understood as an attempt to maintain and/or restore the continuity of one’s expectations for oneself. That is, it is possible for the dancers who change careers, that even in changing, they are maintaining continuity in an effort to restore hope, status, financial security and self-esteem.

The link between career transition and its impact on one’s sense of identity receives support from systematic research done in transitions. Marris (1975) and Osherson (1980) both describe the experience of self in career transition as being one of reclaiming a lost aspect of the self. Marris states that the person “accepts the strain of change only to escape a more fundamental threat of loss” (p. 2). The loss refers to the person’s long-held assumptions, expectations, and ambitions about the future – resulting in a loss of identity. So, according to Marris, the experience of self in career transition is one of holding firm to an enduring, authentic, fundamental sense-of-self while experiencing the difficulties of transitioning.

Pine (1982) offers what has been called the “expansionist” perspective on transformation of sense-of-self. The self-concept gradually evolves and changes by new



experiences in a cumulative way. In transition the individual does not experience a disruption at his core as he moves into the new career. Bit by bit the new job is “metabolized” into the ongoing and somewhat boundaried self-concept. In this way, Pine emphasizes expansion instead of a return to an earlier, more authentic sense-of-self.

There have been numerous studies on retirement and career transition in elite athletes that have helped create models for understanding the career transition process. Like dancers, most elite athletes have a limited amount of time in the profession. In order to begin to understand the career transition of gay male dancers, it might be useful to review conceptual models from the related field of professional athletics. Although retirement can take place without psychological disturbance (Kasl, 1980), retirement is often a crisis for adults. Retirement is more likely to be experienced as a crisis if the occupation was central to one’s sense of identity (Palmore, 1984). Elite athletes also begin their professional careers somewhat earlier than in other occupations and between the ages of 30 and 40 are faced with major readjustments in their professional careers (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994).

Rosenberg (1982) suggests that retirement from sports is akin to social death, which is characterized as social isolation and rejection from the former in-group. This explanation has received support from anecdotal accounts of athletes who have experienced these reactions upon retirement (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994). However, the concept of social death has also been criticized and has little empirical support (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

Greendorfer and Blinde (1985) suggests that the focus of retirement should be on the continuation rather than the cessation of behaviors, the gradual alteration rather than

relinquishment of goals and interests. Data collected from former collegiate athletes support their view of retirement as a transition (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Ogilvie and Taylor (1994) developed a conceptual model that attempted to integrate the theoretical and empirical investigation to date by incorporating aspects of their applied work with athletes in career transition. Their model may prove useful for allowing the present study to identify factors which contribute to the quality of the career transition for the dancers in my study. The causes for termination of an athletic career were found to be a function of four factors: age, deselection, injury, and free choice (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994). These factors influence a variety of psychological, social, and physical issues that contribute to the likelihood of distress due to career transition. Athletes experiencing career transition may face a wide range of psychological, social, and financial changes. The often single-minded pursuit of excellence that accompanies elite sports participation has potential psychological and social dangers, and this quest, according to this model, is rooted in the earliest experiences athletes have in their sport.

The most fundamental of the psychological issues that influence adaptation to career transition is the degree to which athletes define their self-worth in terms of their participation and achievement in sports (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994). Athletes who have been immersed in their sport to the exclusion of other activities will have an identity exclusively tied to their involvement in sport (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994). Without input from their sport, retired athletes with an exclusive athletic identity have little support for their self-worth (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). This study will explore whether the extent to which one exclusively identifies as a dancer effects the individual's career decisions and transitions.

In summary, there are many lenses through which to view these dancers' personal, professional and social development. While the domains were reviewed as if they were discrete, there are multiple areas of overlap within each area. It is hoped that by investigating these men's lives with a focus on these domains, a more complete descriptive understanding of their experiences may be gleaned and from which hypotheses for future research may be generated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study of adult development in gay male dancers is an attempt to capture and describe significant experiences and pivotal moments throughout the life span. In order to explore the process of personal and professional development, an open and flexible methodological approach is needed which will use existing theory to inform the inquiry. Qualitative research is the most appropriate method for this study because it will enable first person descriptions of the participants' experiences over the course of their lives.

Psychobiographical interviewing enables an individual to tell his own story as he wishes from beginning to end. Rather than verifying or validating specific research questions, this methodology utilizes an exploratory approach for generating data in an area that is clearly under-researched (Furst, 1982). According to Newton (1995), this methodology allows for a first person account to identify patterns that characterize important moments in a person's life.

### **Rationale for the Design and Method**

Psychobiography is a specific method of biographical research. The basic goal of psychobiography is to gain an understanding of an individual's life as it evolves over time. According to McAdams (1988), the primary task of psychobiography is to gain as broad and comprehensive a picture of the individual as possible. As McAdams explains, "to the extent that the psychologist systematically and self consciously employs psychological theory to aid in this process of discerning the story, he or she is doing psychobiography. Psychobiography is, thus, the systematic use of theory to transform a life into a coherent and illuminating story" (p.2).

To obtain information about gay male dancer's adaptations and transitions, this study uses the methodology similar to the Intensive Biographical Interviewing designed by Levinson (1996, 1978). In understanding the life course of an individual, Levinson found that only a limited amount could be learned using questionnaires, surveys, tests, and structured interviews. Levinson argues that Intensive Biographical Interviewing allows an individual to reveal his life to another and open new areas for research and inquiry. This method facilitates the collection of data without prematurely reducing the phenomenon being studied into quantifiable variables. It also provides a chronological basis for organizing the data on these men's development.

In a study of male career development, Ochberg (1988) found that biographical narratives enabled the researcher to gain a true sense of "who people know themselves to be" (p.174). While he concedes that this method has limitations because it relies on memory and reconstruction, he found that "the stories people tell are important not only because they offer an unmatched window into subjective experience, but because they are part of the image people have of themselves" (p.173). As Ochberg explains,

These narrative self-representations exert enormous power. They shape how we conduct our lives, how we come to terms with pain, what we are able to appropriate of our own experience, and what we disown – at the familiar price of neurosis. From this perspective a life story is considerably more than a method of investigation. It is a crucial feature of psychological and social life in its own right (p. 173-174).

Once the participant relates his own life story in his own words, the researcher examines the underlying patterns, themes, and symbols "in order to discern, discover, or even formulate the central, organizing, animating story of that person's life" (McAdams, 1988, p.2). In recent years psychobiography has become a widely used methodological

approach to understanding the individual's life. Using an unstructured life history interview, Levinson (1996, 1978) constructed narratives to develop a theory regarding male and female development over the life cycle. His studies of adult development influenced further research in this area (Newton, 1995, 1984) and sparked a variety of dissertations on topics relating to both male and female adult development (Brewster, 1998; Gooden, 1989; Schiemann, 1994; Srebnick, 2000).

The study's purpose is to explore the changes and transitions in the lives of professional gay male dancers. It is conducted with the intention of gaining an understanding of how they experience change and make choices in their lives. By using a psychobiographical approach, the strategy is to generate ideas, raise and answer questions, and formulate hypotheses about a particular group of men. The design of the this study is organic in nature and requires openness and flexibility. Newton (1995) proposes a set of guidelines for conducting psychobiographical research which will be followed in this study:

1. Use biographical methods for exploratory, hypothesis generating, rather than hypothesis testing purposes (p. 149).
2. Study individuals about whom there exists, or can be elicited, sufficient empirical data to allow a detailed reconstruction of the life (p. 150).
3. Present sufficient empirical data to allow the reader to come to his or her own view of the individual's life (p. 151).
4. In analyzing data, empirical patterns should be identified before proceeding to higher levels of theoretical abstraction (p. 153).
5. The analysis should be connected explicitly to existing theory and evidence (p. 156).

## Participants

The participants chosen for this study are gay men between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five who currently make or have made a professional living as a dancer or performer under a recognized union (Actor's Equity Association, Screen Actor's Guild, American Guild for Musical Artists, American Guild for Variety Artists) for at least 100 weeks during their professional careers. The sample will consist of ten men to be divided into two pools. Five of the participants will be men who have transitioned or are in the process of transitioning into a career unrelated to dance and performing. Another five participants will be interviewed who are currently performing or actively pursuing careers within the performing world.

The goal is to gain an understanding of their adult developmental experiences. Additionally, the researcher hopes to compare and contrast the experiences of the two groups of highly successful men and to ascertain the impact of the transitions in gay male dancers who continue to perform with those who have left the dance world. In an attempt to keep matters of culture constant with this sample, the men chose for this study are self-identified as gay men, Caucasian, of similar middle and upper middle class socioeconomic status, and born in the United States.

The time demands for doing this type of research are substantial so the sample will be kept at ten participants. Each completed interview will likely take between four and six hours to be conducted over two meetings. In the time between meetings, the researcher will review the data for the areas that need further exploration and to formulate new questions from that material. While the sample size is too small to make generalization and interpretations regarding the experiences of all gay men in adulthood,

it will be large enough to generate hypotheses about this particular group of men. Furthermore, it is considered large enough for inter-individual comparisons (Ruffin, 1985).

### Research Materials

The primary instrument for this study is the semi-structured interview (see Appendix A). The interview is based on the interviews devised by Levinson (1978) and Brewster (1998) and Furst (1982) in their studies of adult development. Like these studies, the present study attempts to cover the entire life span from childhood to the present. However, some of the areas of focus of these previous studies are not relevant to this study, while other areas such as childhood, adolescence and leaving home were deemed more important. As a result the structure of the interview was modified to fit the needs of this study. More emphasis is placed on the pre-adult years and specific questions about career choice and sexual orientation were included.

In exploratory research it is important that the participant's production be spontaneous so that unexpected material emerges. However, a framework is necessary for both the participant and the investigator in order to gather information efficiently. As a result, certain relevant areas were identified prior to data collection. The interview is structured as a research interview to insure topics are covered, but the sequence in which the material unfolds is variable because of the ongoing transactional nature of the research. This process of obtaining information for this study is biographical in approach and method. The primary task of these interviews is to construct the story of a man's life. The goals are: 1) to elicit life stories from a number of gay men adulthood; 2) to construct a biography of each man in his own words; and 3) to learn something from this



material about the nature of a dancer's development in adulthood and identify the specific tasks and adaptations faced by this sample.

### Procedures

Volunteers are recruited through the personal and professional contacts of the researcher. Prospective participants will be informed that the investigator is a doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology program at the City University of New York. They will be told that the purpose of the study is to explore the lives of gay male dancers in adulthood with the objective of gaining a better understanding of the adaptations and transitions in their lives.

The participants are not paid a fee but will be given a chance to examine and share their life experiences in-depth. Each participant is told that the interviews will take between four and six hours and will be audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews will take place in either the participant's home, the researcher's home, or the participant's place of business. Each participant will sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B) before the initial interview allowing the researcher to audiotape record the interview and transcribe the contents. The participants are told that all information is kept confidential and any identifying information will be altered when the material is presented in written form. The study has met the criteria of the Institutional Review Board of the City University of New York.

### Data Analysis, Coding and Presentation

Qualitative data analysis requires a thorough examination of all raw data of the participants' interviews in an effort to establish patterns and elicit meanings. "The product of analysis is a creation that speaks to the heart of what was learned" (Ely et al.

1991, p. 140). The analysis of the data is a process that begins with the first interview, and goes hand in hand with gathering the data.

This process of analysis guides the researcher to focus and refocus observational and/or interview lenses, to phrase and rephrase research questions, to establish and check emergent hunches, trends, insights, ideas, to face oneself as research instrument (Ely et al. 1991, p. 140).

The data analysis of the data has two aims. The first is to present the findings on the developmental course of these men's lives whose voices are noticeably absent from the current literature. The data are compared with the current concepts and theories described above to assess the suitability of those models for this sample. The second is to identify and explore original themes and patterns from the narrative data in the spirit of the grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiries (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

All data will be collected on audiotape. In addition, the researcher will take notes before, during and after the interviews. The interviews will be transcribed verbatim for presentation and preliminary data analysis. Several copies of each interview transcript will be made and portions of each will be presented in their original form. Each taped interview will be listened to and then transcribed material will be read and re-read several times in order to create an initial organization of data into major themes. As part of the data analysis, the participants' narratives are constructed by the researcher and presented in the following section. Narratives will be presented in first person to give the reader a sense of how each participant constructs his life story. Although the narratives are constructed for presentation, an attempt will be made to maintain the integrity of each participant's voice. The first person profile narratives for each participant will include

basic identifying information and the participant's life history as told through the semi-structured interview.

Once the first person narratives have been constructed, all data will again be reviewed and coded by the researcher and at least one other clinically-trained member of the on-going research group of which the investigator is a member. The data will be organized and coded for each participant and will serve as the basis of the first level of analysis, the participant's individual themes ("I-themes"). Where original themes and patterns are identified, additional references to the literature not reviewed in the previous section will be cited and discussed. The individual themes for each participant will be used for broader analyses to be presented and summarized as second-order themes and to identify pivotal moments of transition among the sample. Finally, the meta-themes generated from the analyses will be discussed with the hope of expanding existing theory, and perhaps constructing a model of transition for this sample.

The following questions will guide the analysis of the data:

- 1) Does the narrative give evidence of an evolution of developmental periods in adulthood?
- 2) To what extent do adult developmental models describe these men's experiences?
- 3) Does the narrative give evidence of an alteration between stable and transitional periods, and if so, what were the qualities of these periods?
- 4) What were the origins of their interests in dance and theater? Based on Levinson's (1978) model, did these men develop a Dream during young adulthood?

- 5) What differences, if any, are evident in the narratives of those men who transitioned from performing and those who have not?
- 6) Does the narrative illustrate current behaviors or experiences that repeat significant events of childhood?
- 7) What are the similarities and differences in the narratives regarding development and their process of “coming out”? How has that impacted their career development?
- 8) Does the narrative reflect the developmental themes posited in the gay development and identity theories (Cass, 1996, 1979; Isay, 1996, 1989)?
- 9) How have these men’s careers as professional dancers served in their developmental progression? How do they understand their decision to remain in or transition from that social milieu?
- 10) What were the experiences of those men who transitioned from professional dance into other professions?

## **PRESENTATION OF THE DATA**

### **SECTION 1: THE NARRATIVES OF NON-TRANSITIONERS**

In this section the constructed first person narratives of the first five participants who have not made a career transition are presented and analyzed. Each narrative begins with the researcher's observations and field notes from the interviews and covers the life course of each participant. Each narrative is followed by preliminary analyses of the data, with individual themes ("I-themes") and patterns identified and related to existing literature. Additional references to the literature not reviewed in the previous section will be cited and discussed when relevant.

## THE LIFE OF STAN

*Stan was the first interview I conducted for this study. I have known Stan since high school and we worked together on an ill-fated Broadway flop. I met with him in his ornately decorated apartment in a newly gentrified neighborhood of Manhattan. Throughout the interview, Stan asked me questions about my experience transitioning from dance and included me in his generalizations about the profession. The two interviews lasted nearly three hours each. Stan is in noticeably good shape and works out every day for several hours. The first interview came directly on the heels of his parent's visit while his partner was out of town. Stan was quite defensive in his justification for not coming out to his family. He was very invested in my knowing how well he is doing and the bright future that lies ahead for him.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm forty-one years old and am quite proud that I've danced in eight Broadway shows and twelve national tours during my 20 years in show business. While I consider myself a performer and I'm sure I always will, I'm in a very transitional place in my life career-wise. I continue to audition for projects that I'm interested in but it's been very frustrating lately. I can dance circles around people at auditions but that's not what's rewarded anymore. I'm catering part-time for the first time but have been developing some creative projects for cruise ships and night club venues. I'm considering becoming certified as a personal trainer at a gym. I have a lot of experience and I have so many options for my future. I've invested very well financially and I own this apartment with my partner, Victor.

My relationship has been my focus lately. It's comfortable and secure in the face of so many other changes in my life. We've been together for six years and I can't imagine our lives apart. Victor's nine years younger than me and still dances on Broadway. Sometimes it's lonely at night when he's at the theater and I'm home. We have similar experiences but he's not aware of the changes that happen as we get older. Most of my friends are still in the business and we rely on each other to keep our spirits up.

You expect your career to be  $A + B = C$ , but it doesn't work out that way. Nowadays, it's all about who you know in the business and being invited to private auditions. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm stalled in my career right now – most of the people I worked with are dead from AIDS. Victor is still on the Broadway dancer "A- list" and he doesn't know that the phone stops ringing eventually and the casting directors stop calling. Victor and I haven't talked about it and I'm worried that he'll be caught off guard.

Certain aspects of being a dancer fit me. I'm a workaholic – I'd rather be busy than sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. I liked the structure of dance class – there is a right way and a wrong way. This business is difficult because you never know what they're looking for. I can blend into be whatever it is you're looking for and that's something that I'm proud of. I don't take dance class much anymore because I've got my own way of warming up and keeping the body together. I enjoy working-out and like the look that I've developed – having a good body and solid technique has served me well. My body hasn't given out and I look the same as I did 10 years ago. I see myself in the mirror and nothing has really changed. I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse. I

certainly never come off as a swishy chorus boy. My role models coming up in the business were Barishnikov, Fosse and Michael Bennett but younger dancers don't seem to value talent and technique in that way.

The business has really changed over the past few years. They don't appreciate solid technique and discipline anymore. I worked my way up from a peon chorus boy into assistant choreographer and dance captain on many shows. I'm reliable and I retain information. Directors and choreographers know they can count on me. The problem is once a show closes, you're back to square one again. After all these years, it's frustrating to still audition for jobs. Each time it feels like starting over. They don't take into consideration the body of work that I've put together and how hard I've worked to hone my craft. Your life can change with a phone call and you're off to a Broadway rehearsal or whisked out on the road. That becomes frustrating because the power is held by the producers, directors, and choreographers.

My parents recently visited and asked me when I was going to get my career going again. I thought, 'get it going again? What do you think I've been doing for the past 20 years?' Sometimes, I think my parents got more out of it than I did –being able to say that I was in New York and on Broadway. My parents and I don't discuss the whole gay thing – it's not necessary. They come to visit when Victor is out of town because it's easier on them. They're content with the arrangement we have and I'm not going to subject them to something that might hurt them. Occasionally, they'll ask me about women friends– hoping that I might be dating them. At this point and at their age there's no point in me subjecting them to my private sex life. I think that "coming out" is something that you should do when you're 18 or 19.



### **Becoming a Dancer**

I was born and raised in the Midwest in what I'd consider a normal, healthy, upper middle class family. My mom is Italian and I was very close to her as a kid – I still am. I don't know if that's a gay thing or an Italian thing. My dad was around a lot as a kid and was the quiet disciplinarian. It wasn't one of those cold relationships with an absent father but my mother *was* domineering. I have three siblings: my older sister and brother and my younger brother. My parents were strict and we went to private Catholic schools. We were more involved with my mother's Italian side of the family. My grandmother's four brothers– some of whom were widowers and one of whom was probably gay– lived with her in a big mansion. We spent our holidays there and I have nice memories of being in that house. I remember feeling that they were rich and had this incredible lifestyle that was very appealing to me. I still drive by that house when I go back home.

My dad was an executive in the heating and air-conditioning business and my mom was a substitute teacher. When I was very young I liked to do things that my sister liked to do - like sew and cook – which no one seemed to mind at first. I also put on shows for the neighborhood. I was different from my brothers but I felt like it was OK then. I was teased and called names in school which I ignored and didn't let bother me. In grade school I tried to play sports but I was too self-conscious. I wanted to be better at it – especially because my dad was an athlete. I wanted a closer relationship with him but there was just something that was a little off between us. I felt like I disappointed him. I know he respects me now and we're closer than when I was a kid.

I sang from an early age with my mom and learned to read music and play piano. My mom was a singer and pianist which is where I get my musical ability. By age eight I knew I loved musical theater and its heightened reality. I imitated records and remember knowing from an early age that I had a good voice. My parents took us to see shows and touring musicals at a professional 12,000-seat amphitheater during the summers. As I got older I babysat and had a paper route which gave me money to buy show albums and see movies. My brothers and I started a local band later in high school. We were successful on the local level and I loved the spot light.

We moved to a more upscale neighborhood and I became more self-conscious about being a sissy at school. I decided to start over – to re-invent myself. I joined the soccer team which I didn't particularly enjoy but had some talent in. I transformed myself into this soccer stud and suddenly became popular at school. I became aware I was good looking which helped after having been made fun of for so long.

I first had the inkling that I might like boys when I was about ten. There was an older guy in our neighborhood who washed his car in the summer in his driveway in jean shorts and no shirt. I would visit his sister so I could sneak a peek at him. At that point it was just about seeing skin. I never told anyone at the time and I didn't know what "gay" meant.

I went to an all-boys, Catholic high school. It was an unique school because while academics and athletic were central, there was a strong music and theater department. Two very important teachers were instrumental in my theater training. My drama teacher also taught calculus which took some of the theater-fag stigma out of it. He instilled the notion that my talent could be developed whether it was my singing,

acting or dancing. He was incredibly supportive and chose shows that were tailored to my abilities. I was the lead in most of the school plays and felt fortunate to have someone in my corner. The vocal coach at school helped me develop my voice into a more polished, musical theater sound. It was great training and between the two teachers I focused on pursuing professional musical theater.

When I was seventeen I got a job at a local theme park singing and performing. It was an incredible experience and gave me a taste of the professional world. I knew some of the guys in the cast were gay but it wasn't discussed. I was interested but confused because sex was so taboo in my family. I fooled around with one guy a little that summer but also had my girlfriend. On some level I knew that I was gay but wasn't sure if it was just a phase. I had girlfriends through college and it was never completely clear to me that I was gay until I moved to New York. Being gay didn't fit in with the rest of my good-boy life while I was living at home and didn't fit with the Catholic, Midwestern image of my family.

Up to that point, I had no formal dance training although I had danced in high school shows. At eighteen, I started taking dance class after I saw a touring production of "A Chorus Line." I appreciated the discipline and technique required of the dancers and was determined to do that show on Broadway - many years later I did. I immersed myself in dance classes and improved my technique quickly. My focus shifted almost entirely to dancing and I was concentrated on it completely.

My parents insisted that I go to college which didn't interest me in the least. I agreed to go to a local Catholic university where I got a theater scholarship. Throughout college my only aim was to be done with it and move to New York. I lived at home,

commuted to school and studied at a ballet academy every evening. I had a great ballet teacher who demonstrated the steps in a way that inspired me. I watched him in mirror and kept at it until I looked like him. He was masculine and went against the stereotype of the male dancer. I became more aware of my body and of not being too swishy or affected. I saw my body change into a masculine athlete. At nineteen, my first professional job was in the 12,000-seat amphitheater that I went to as a child. It got me into the professional union and I worked with dancers from New York. I held my own with them and I knew I would go to New York after graduation. I was hitting my stride and thought I could accomplish whatever I wanted if I worked hard enough. I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater and Performing and left my hometown two weeks later for New York.

### **Life as a Dancer**

I was ready to move to New York and start my life! It felt good to leave home but I felt hurled onto this incredible roller coaster of show business. No one tells you that there is a beginning, middle and an end to the ride. It was the early 1980s and lots of dance shows were running on Broadway. Anything seemed possible. I played by all the rules; I went to dance class, took voice lessons and networked. Getting the job was the best part – that rush that you were chosen out of the 400 guys. It's also the hardest part because you don't know what they're looking for. I always did well at auditions, although I never liked them.

From the very beginning being gay wasn't a big deal here. Whether I was in an audition or a dance class, it was just never an issue. I never had to "come out" because there was no reason to – everybody knew about everybody else. I treated the business

seriously and it paid off when I got my first Broadway show at twenty-two. I had only been in New York for three months and I was naïve enough to think that was how it was going to be – just play by the rules and you're rewarded. I poured my heart and soul into that show but the critics hated it and we closed in one day. I was in shock. I had to develop a thick skin - move on to survive. I got another show quickly but I never let myself get sucked into hoping it would be a hit again. I built up my resume over the years and always anticipated new shows coming to Broadway the following season. I toured occasionally between Broadway jobs and I always made a good living. I felt very much a part of the elite set of working, Broadway, A-list dancers. It was the total gypsy life.

When I was twenty-five, I became involved in a six year relationship with Robert, a singer who I had met on tour. It was nice to have someone and begin to create a semblance of normalcy and stability. We bought an apartment together, set up house and I thought that was it. We both worked all the time which made it hard to be together. When I was twenty-nine, I considered going to get my license to do massage therapy so I could spend less time on the road. I never followed through because it seemed premature to consider another career. I was working on Broadway and I was going to leave the business to make \$35,000 as a masseur? No. There were problems in the relationship and I finally ended it when I was thirty-one. I think being out on the road and Robert's selfishness in the relationship just got to be too much.

In the late 1980s AIDS really became part of the picture. I lost a lot of great friends in the business in a very short period of time. It totally decimated Broadway but no one was talking about it. One day you'd see someone on the street looking thin and

two weeks later you'd see their name in the union obituary column. It was surreal and changed the landscape of the Broadway community. Eventually, there were AIDS fund raisers but it made people more homophobic too. Broadway lost its innocence during that time and has never fully recovered.

Over the years I took acting and commercial workshops in the hopes of doing movies and television. I always worked on myself to improve my craft. I kept my body in shape, went to the gym regularly, had my nose fixed, and my teeth bleached at the suggestion of a casting director. Nothing materialized for me. To work on a soap opera or television show you need to pass for straight at the auditions. I've never been a flaming queen but I didn't want to lie about who I was. Besides, acting is no more stable than musical theater, just a day-to-day, job-to-job existence – just like dancing.

### **Changes in Career:**

I've realized that straight dancers had an advantage over us. They were able to move into leading parts and out of the chorus in ways I couldn't. There's a confidence and bravado for them at auditions even though they might not have talent. Being a straight man in musical theater is a novelty and they work that for all it's worth. It's easier not to have to monitor yourself at auditions, 'am I too gay?, how would a straight guy read these lines?' I think gay men in the business are more humble and that puts them in a vulnerable position. It's odd because on one level it's acceptable to be gay in theater but only up to being in the chorus. It's hypocritical because all the directors and choreographers sitting behind the casting table are neller than any of us.

Work-wise, things changed for me about 3 years ago and it surprised me. One day I was on the A-list and the next day I wasn't. I had worked for almost twenty years

without a break and hadn't anticipated a change. My focus had always been to improve myself and my talents and I thought that would protect me. I was tired of being the faceless, voiceless chorus member who's treated like a piece of scenery or a prop. To make ends meet, I worked a part-time temp for Clinique. I was there for almost a year and I got experience in the business world. I liked the suit and tie, corporate culture and the regularity of the 9 to 5 paycheck. I went through some corporate training and seriously considered taking a full-time job there. I learned a lot, but I wasn't ready to direct all my energies outside of show business. I was hired for a show in Atlantic City at the same time I was offered a full-time corporate job. I felt pulled back in and took the dance job - even though it was a step down professionally. I've gotten jobs on and off over the past couple of years but there's definitely been a change. It's frustrating and humiliating to take jobs that I would have turned down five years ago.

Having more control over my own destiny is one of the reasons I started writing my own shows to produce, direct and choreograph. I have experience and I want to put it to use. I've been working with a producer who packages shows for cruise ships and Atlantic City. I don't like to use the term "left the business" because I haven't and don't think we ever do. My dream would be to use my business knowledge and my creative, show business knowledge to produce, choreograph and direct. I want to do it right, though, and not jump in too quickly and make mistakes like I've seen some people make. It needs to be the right project and the right venue. I feel like that would bring together both my business side and my creative side.

I've had a great career and there's nothing for me to apologize for. I've gotten the Broadway Gypsy Robe presented to me for being the most accomplished chorus person

in a new Broadway show and proved myself again and again. Dancers who hit 40 and suddenly get fat and bald and become character men are the lucky ones. It's harder when you can still dance and are basically in the same shape as you ever were. On the other hand, it might be that in a few years I'll be more of an older character type and might start working more again. In ten years I don't know where I'll be. I plan on being with Victor that much is for sure. I'll be in a different phase as a performer and hopefully will have found a new niche. I might open a gym for actors and performers but I can't see myself teaching dance. I want to be in control of when it's time to stop – I don't want to hear it from someone else. I've seen that before and when people don't know when to quit – it's pathetic.



## **THEMES GENERATED AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS**

After reviewing Stan's narrative, several themes emerged from the constructed, first person narratives which related to existing adult developmental, gay identity, career, and transitional theories. In the following section, "I" themes with raw data quotes from the interviews are presented in conjunction with references to existing literature which informed the analysis.

### **Current Life Situation:**

**THEME 1:** *I'm frustrated and disappointed at how theater has changed and lost its integrity while I've remained virtually unchanged.*

At forty-one, Stan's description of his current life was characterized by resentment and disappointment toward the theatrical world and what he experienced as its compromised values.

I'm in a very transitional place....the business has really changed for the worse, I think, because it's not about quality anymore. It's not like the old days with you and me – remember? We'd fight off 400 other really talented, well-rounded guys for spots in a show. The business just isn't interested in qualified people – it's just about who you know and getting invited to those private calls now.

Stan appears to be at a professional crossroads and is clearly dissatisfied with his career. His career has slowed down and, while he acknowledges he is "in a very transitional place," there is resistance to consider alternative careers with any seriousness. Stan seems in the midst of a mid life transition which is presented as more of a crisis. According to Levinson (1978), transitional periods are often times of moderate to severe crisis in a person's life. Stan seems caught between a desire to move his life forward and the uncertainty that the choices and decisions he makes will leave him unfulfilled. At

least part of Stan's frustration seems related to a sense of powerlessness and career stagnation that developed over a period of time.

It's frustrating as I get older because the power is all in other people's hands - the producers, directors, choreographers, who usually have much less experience and on-the-ball than most of us. They don't take into consideration the body of work that you've put together and how hard you've worked to hone your craft. So every audition is like starting over each time and that pisses me off - it's just not fair.

Stan depicted himself as virtually unchanged and still as capable of the physical demands of dance as when he was younger. This is inconsistent with Hamilton's (1998) research that agility and overall physical abilities diminished for most dancers by their mid-thirties. While he may be an exception, there is little consideration given to the possibility of declining physical ability. The proof for him is represented in the mirror.

It's a shame because there's still so much in all of us. My body hasn't given out and I look exactly the same as I did 10 years ago. I can see my proof in the mirror at auditions or in class - I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse - no injuries at all. I still dance circles around the kids at auditions....um like I went up for an audition and this ridiculous street-dancer kid who looked like he'd never stepped foot in ballet class and didn't have a dime to his name ended up getting the gig. I danced circles around him - but he had the right look or knew somebody or whatever.

He described the added pressure he recently experienced from his parents to regain his former Broadway status which seemed to contribute to his frustration and resentment.

My mom and dad asked me when I was going to get my career going again - what?! I was like you've got be kidding me - what do you think I'm trying to do here? Not much pressure there! I've had a huge career and now I've got to justify it? It's like they get more out of my career than I do, like it's important to them that I'm still marketable. I can't expect them to understand - they only want the best in the end.

**THEME 2:** *In contrast to my career, I'm settled and satisfied in my relationship with my partner but worry that his career will begin to falter.*

Stan described his current relationship as being a significant focus for him as he enters midlife. His stagnating professional life seems somehow offset by his relationship

which is mostly experienced as stable and rewarding. The couple's shared experience as professional dancers is seen as a strength and something to build upon. This is consistent with McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) model of male couple development when the couple is able to build upon their experiences and envision life together in the future.

All I can say is God bless Victor! We come from the same place – we know what it takes to get to this place. We're there for each other in a thousand ways and I've learned from him and vice versa. Sure there's an age difference but it's good because we go together, you know? I love that we can make this place our home and really be creative in what we want. It feels more secure and different from my other relationships because it feels closer...we're connected....with everything else in flux it's so important to have the stability here at home.

However, Stan did not look to Victor for support as he began to consider alternative careers. Stan is concerned that Victor will go through the same professional stagnation and disillusionment as he did. This may have implications for the couple's ability to trust one another through the inevitable life transitions (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). While Stan clearly established a connection with Victor and values the importance of the relationship, he cannot fully allow himself to be seen by his partner.

I don't think he's tuned into the changes that happen as you get older....I don't talk with him about it so much – I usually talk it over with friends closer to my own age. Victor can't because he's not there yet and not ready to hear the truth about it....there's a reality to this business that nobody tells you when you're on top and I don't want to break it to him....he just won't understand me and where I am....I'm not ready for him to see the truth of his future – you know - in me and what I might say.

THEME 3: *I consider myself "out" in my real life but I don't make a big deal of it with everyone – I'm not militant about it.*

Stan did not report a "coming out" process per se, but considers himself out in his life. He minimized its importance which may reflect internal conflict and unresolved issues about his homosexuality.

Obviously - I'm totally out with everyone in my real life here. I don't know why I didn't come out when I was 18 or 19 – but I didn't. God knows you don't have to in this business. It's given that you're gay and you don't go announcing it to the world like some militant. I can't stand those people who shove it down your throat all the time....it's just not a big deal.

When asked about his openness with his parents about being gay and his relationship he became more guarded and defensive.

....but my parents and I don't have that kind of a relationship. I don't know if they know if I'm gay or not, but if they want to know they'll ask me. I'm not gonna shove it down their throats - it's easier on them. I'm not going to put them through something that would only hurt them, you know? At this point and at their age there's no point in spilling my sex life - it would be selfish. Are you out to your family? I mean it's an individual decision and it doesn't get in the way of our relationship so why bother, right?

Stan's current gay identity seems to fall within Cass's (1979) fourth and fifth stages of *identity acceptance* and *identity pride*, depending on the context. It is important for him to continue to pass as heterosexual in various settings in his life (with his parents and auditions). Stan remains almost exclusively immersed in the gay theater community, and tends to dichotomize heterosexuals and homosexuals. There is a sense of pride in being gay but anger at feeling oppressed and held back based on his sexual orientation. His characterization of straight men is imbued with resentment and indicates an on-going sense of feeling marginalized.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

During Pre-Adulthood, Stan was raised in what he considered a supportive environment, however his narrative indicates difficulty establishing a Pre-adult self (Levinson, 1978). Apparent in the narrative is Stan's overwhelming sense of shame and inadequacy around feeling "different" during childhood which is consistent with much of the gay developmental literature (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993 Bell, 1981; Green, 1987; Isay, 1989).

**THEME 1:** *As a child I had a sense that I was different and I became keenly aware of myself and my surroundings.*

Stan described various ways in which he felt different in several ways as a young boy. De Monteflores (1986) described how the gay boy may feel like a minority in his own family which contribute to an inherent sense of alienation and feeling defective.

I was very much into being the good boy, mama's boy. I liked to sew and cook – which no one seemed to mind at first. I knew I was somehow different from my brothers – even before I knew I was gay - but it was OK then. I got teased in grade school and started to sort of monitor what I said and how I said it, you know to not be too girly. I started to hide stuff more – I got more secretive about things I liked or whatever.

Stan received signals from both his family and society which communicated that parts of himself should be hidden. One of the ways that he experienced difference was his close relationship with his mother and his enjoyment of atypical gender activities. He also described his conscious attraction to boys that began by the age of ten.

By ten, I mean, I had an inkling that I liked boys. This teenage guy would wash his car in his driveway in little jean shorts and no shirt- amazing! I used to sneak around and play with his sister so I could see him - just to see skin. I don't know how, but I got that it was different and I better not talk to anyone about it.

Stan connected his sense of difference to the distance between him and his father. Isay's model (1996, 1989) posits that the father's withdrawal is experienced by the pre-homosexual boy as a rejection. In Stan's case, this may have contributed to his poor self-esteem. Stan wanted to be closer to his father as a boy but sensed that something was "off" between them. Stan longed for closeness but experienced his father as distant and withdrawing from him.

My dad was much warmer than my mom....I always wanted to have a closer relationship with my father but there was just something that was a little off between us....I felt that I really disappointed him.

When his family moved to a new school, Stan described a conscious transformation when he adopted more socially accepted gender activities. Despite not being interested in soccer, his transformation brought him from the outside to the inside of peer and social groups.

I knew what being a sissy did and decided to start over – to re-invent myself. I joined the soccer team - I didn't enjoy it but I was pretty good. I totally transformed myself into this soccer stud and suddenly was this popular cute guy at school. It really helped not to be such an outsider.

In doing so, Stan may have split off his sense of difference by becoming more involved in sports and disavowing his less-acceptable aspects of himself (Martin, 1982). As a result, he seemed to develop a "false self" with separate personal and public identities. The maintenance of these two selves remains situationally operative for him.

In high school, Stan struggled with his same-sex attractions, sensing from family and peers that he needed to hide his homosexual feelings. His narrative reflects his early tendency to second guess his impulses and protect his parents from them.

I thought that I was gay but I wasn't sure it wasn't just a phase. I had girlfriends in school right up through college and it was never totally clear to me that I was gay until I moved to New York. It didn't fit in with the rest of my good boy life with my parents and the whole Catholic thing.

**THEME 2:** *My interest in theater, singing and dance began at a young age and was nurtured by significant people and experiences throughout childhood and adolescence.*

Stan's narrative traces his interest in theater and music from early experiences in latency to early adolescence. Stan described early exposure to theater and the arts as having a profoundly positive impact on him. Consistent with Levinson's (1978) concept

of the Dream and Super's (1990) career development process, Stan described a clear attraction to music and theater prior to adolescence.

I always sang around the house and around the piano with my mom....she was a great musician and I got my talent from her....they took us to see shows and musicals at this 12,000-seat theater where summer stock shows would come. I was nine years old and I loved the heightened reality of it, the music, the costumes. I totally pictured myself up there singing like Gordon McCrea. At home, I'd imitate records and pretend I was on stage....putting on shows in the neighborhood was a weekly event for me.

In high school and college Stan further developed his musical theater skills and made lasting friendships and mentoring relationships. He described a period when his focus intensified after being identified by the drama teacher as having "potential."

Two teachers there were responsible for me getting the training I did and I guess going into theater for real....[the drama teacher] was also the Calculus teacher which took away the theater fag thing. He was great – he saw that I had potential and really helped me ....he picked shows that were right for me and my voice....and cast me as the lead in most of the school plays. [the voice coach] helped me get a more polished, show sound....I was only focused on theater and singing and my friends became more and more the theater people. It was great training and between the two of them, and I felt I was actually possible to do it professionally.

Stan researched and defined his skills and training that were needed to move toward his professional career goals in musical theater. His readiness and drive to complete the various tasks necessary to become a dancer were clear. Super (1990) described similar processes during the *exploration stage*, between the ages of 14 and 25.

At seventeen, Stan's first semi-professional job as a performer exposed him to other dancers and performers. Stan's emerging dream of becoming a professional dancer was united with his exploration of his sexuality. His Early Adult Transition (Levinson, 1978) was made difficult by what he experienced as religious and familial constraints related to sexuality. Stan had difficulty separating from his parents and was unable to integrate his homosexual feelings until he could physically relocate to New York.

It was an awesome experience – I actually got paid - and those people became my new family. I was aware that other guys there were gay but not really talked about. It was confusing me because sexuality had been so squelched in my family....but I fooled around with one guy a little that summer but also had my girlfriend....I felt freer to be myself with people in the show because they weren't connected to high school or my family.

Stan's first dance classes followed as he pursued and developed his aspirations to become a professional singer, dancer and actor in musical theater.

I had to catch-up on my dancing....I had never taken any formal classes....I pushed myself to catch-up to the others who had grown up in a dance studio. My senior year of high school I was always in dance class and loved it. That in-depth training and the theme park discipline of 10 shows a day really rounded me out.

Stan's ballet teacher served as a role model and source of masculine identification.

I had an incredible male ballet teacher who taught me the value of clean lines and good technique. He was masculine and went against the stereotype of the male dancer. I was aware – and still am – of not being too swishy.

### **Life as a Dancer**

Entering the Adult World (Levinson, 1978) for Stan was a liberating and exciting period both personally and professionally. By moving to New York to pursue his professional Dream, he individuated from his nuclear family and established a life structure in the context of a satisfying and successful career on Broadway.

**THEME 1:** *In moving to New York and away from my family, I felt I was launched into a new and exciting adult life as both a dancer and gay man.*

After college Stan moved to New York with the focused intention of pursuing his professional aspirations in musical theater. He experienced the move as a liberation from his family and hometown constraints on his sexuality.



I was so ready to get out of there and it obviously felt fantastic to get out and actually have an adult life in New York....I was scared and I was hurled into this intense life here but it was so needed because I had had it with the whole Midwest thing. I couldn't do what I wanted to do there –either dance-wise or for me – you know being gay and all that – I just knew I had to get out to grow up. It was intense but exciting.

Away from his parents, Stan was able to begin to integrate and make sense of his homosexuality and establish his gay identity as part of normal, social interactions (Cass, 1979). Within a matter of months Stan went from negative to positive attributions about being gay and feeling free to express his same-sex desires in personal and professional settings. These experiences coincide with moving from the third stage, *identity tolerance* to the fourth stage of stage Cass's (1979) model, *identity acceptance*.

Just being in New York helped me get over the hiding my being gay. I mean I didn't have to tell anyone because it was assumed. I started to go to gay bars with guys from dance class and really felt all the nonsense from Catholic schools go away. It was a huge shift. There was no more big secret because we were all gay boys.

**THEME 2**     *I played by all the rules and honed my craft – constantly improving myself to achieve success and was brought into the show business family.*

Stan established himself into the New York world of musical theater and dance quickly and felt accepted by a new type of family. As a result of his disciplined training and work ethic, he was cast in a Broadway show within three months of arriving in the city.

I knew what I had to do and I did it. I mean I was used to hard work and constantly challenged myself to be better and have better technique so that's what I did. I played by the rules and it really paid off for me. I knew some people here and just took to the Broadway scene in a natural way – like I was brought into the show business family. It wasn't like having to force my way in but it just happened as I got more acclimated to the city and how to be a real pro....

According to Super (1990) as individuals progress into the *establishment stage* in their careers, they develop a greater commitment to a career choice and develop and

master their skills. The professional self-concept, according to Super, becomes increasingly stable as one matures during this period. For Stan this included an increased sense of self-confidence and belonging to a community.

It felt like I was totally in my element – I got it, you know? I was into the whole thing-classes, going out after the show, being part of the Broadway thing. My friends were just as involved – I was living out some great dream of mine and I wasn't pretending anymore. I was part of the bigger picture and loving every minute of it....no one blinked about me being gay – or even asked – it was just assumed, right?

The Broadway community was felt to be both professionally validating and personally accepting of his homosexuality. In that sense, the initial life structure seemed to allow Stan to identify and internalize positive and accepting aspects of himself as reflected in the community in a reparative way (Colarusso & Nemiroff 1987, 1979). Initially, membership in both the profession and the community seemed to instill a sense of being “seen” and being “a part of” something special.

**THEME 3**     *I developed a thick skin in order to survive the disappointments and rejections.*

After several disappointing personal and professional experiences Stan described developing a “thick skin” in order to protect himself. This seems to have served to partially buffer him from personal disappointments and rejections of daily auditions.

I almost grew a thicker skin to keep it from really effecting me - I mean you have to because otherwise the rejection just eats you alive.....If you let every audition devastate you, you might as well kill yourself now. You can't do it that way – it's just too personal to let them get to you.

Stan's narrative is consistent with much of Jacques' (1981, 1965) theory of developmental positions in adulthood which argues that an individual's single-mindedness and drive in early adulthood is necessary in order to succeed. This *paranoid-*

*schizoid position* in early adulthood is adaptive during the time of intense ambition. Stan focused his energies and developed a “thick skin” which helped him survive the competitive world of professional dance.

For years I kept working from one show to the next and never thought about where I was going career-wise other than just keep on getting better at what I do. I was just into making it to the next job – finding the next gig. It’s all about that drive and it feeds you. You have to have that hunger for it – otherwise you get lost in the crowd.

Stan experienced a variation of the Age Thirty Transition (Levinson, 1978) when he faced relationship stressors he had not anticipated. In an effort to spend more time with his partner, at age twenty-nine Stan briefly considered returning to school to become a massage therapist. However, he felt it was premature and, instead, re-invested in performing.

Stan described the impact the AIDS crisis had on the Broadway community and its “loss of innocence.” The impact of the AIDS crisis seemed to have had a changing effect on Stan in some of the ways described by Kertzner & Sved (1996) and Hopcke (1992).

I lost a lot of great friends in the business - it totally decimated Broadway but no one was talking about it. One day you’d see someone on the street looking really thin and two weeks later you’d see their name on the obit board at Equity. It was surreal and it totally has changed the landscape of the Broadway community. People got more homophobic too. It’s almost like Broadway lost its innocence during that time and has never fully recovered.

The loss of friends and colleagues seemed to put things in perspective for Stan in certain ways. It seemed to encourage his need for stability and connection in a relationship.

I still was doing what I always did – you know auditioning, class whatever, but it was different....it might have been part of wanting to make my life with Vinnie, sure. I mean, who wants to be old and alone? I mean we’ll be lucky to even get old.

## **Changes in Career**

**THEME 1**     *When things began to slow down for me in my late thirties it was a complete surprise so I began to explore other options outside the business.*

At age thirty-seven, Stan experienced an abrupt shift in his career viability. The sudden lack of job offers caught him completely off guard. He felt he had adequately prepared for a long career in musical theater.

Things really changed for me about 3 years ago and it was a complete surprise – I really had thought I had done everything right. Like one day I was on everyone's A-list and the next day they didn't return my phone call. It was out of the blue which was the worst part because here I had put together a solid resume and it just didn't matter. I thought that mattered but I guess not.

As the job possibilities declined, Stan grappled to understand what he had done to deserve what he perceived as a rejection. He began to explore his options and took a temporary job at a cosmetics firm for eight months. He described the satisfaction he felt when promoted, recognized and encouraged by his bosses. He "tested the waters" and even received additional training through the firm. Stan was not "out" at the office and stated he missed the socialization of the backstage setting. Eventually, he left that job and took a less prestigious dance job in Atlantic City.

I worked a part-time temp at Clinique for almost a year and I got experience in the business world. I liked the suit and tie, corporate culture and the regularity of the 9 to 5 paycheck. I even did corporate training and seriously thought about a full-time job there. I wasn't ready to direct all my energies outside of show business. I was hired for a show in Atlantic City at the same time I was offered a full-time corporate job. I felt pulled back in and took the dance job - even though it was a step down professionally.

**THEME 2**     *I still leave open the possibility of performing because it's an important part of me.*

Stan's sense of himself as a dancer and performer remains a salient part of who he knows himself to be. Closely connected to that is his social affiliation with the friends and colleagues in the business. He wants more control over the direction of his as he considers alternatives to performing. It seems difficult to commit to a vision of a single, revamped professional Dream that he can pursue. There is a deep sense of hurt and betrayal evident in this once idealized professional world.

I'm tired of being the faceless, voiceless piece of the puzzle of any show where you're treated like a piece of scenery or a prop. I definitely want to control.... I'm also looking into maybe becoming a trainer or opening a gym for performers. Who knows – maybe I'll go back to performing again?

A fundamental psychological issue that may influence Stan's career considerations is the degree to which he defines his self-worth in terms of his association to the Broadway community.

I am still a dancer and always will be. Who knows, in a few years I could be still up on the boards dancing like always. It's a huge part of me and I'll never leave the business, I mean would you? I've worked too hard to throw it all away and I don't think I should have to. My friends too – I mean it's all part of my life. They're too important to me – it's too important to just walk away from it all. I'm can still dance circles around people at auditions – I mean, I'm not injured.

Despite his professional dissatisfaction, Stan is unable at this time to make a decision to move forward. Stan's social and professional identity are clearly being challenged in difficult ways consistent to those Valliant (1977) described in middle-aged men. Valliant proposed that external events usually force the individual to adapt but Stan's inability to find work as a dancer has not been experienced in that way. Instead, Stan cites that "injuries" have failed to bring him down or force him out. He perceives himself as virtually physically unchanged and capable of dancing as well as ever.

**THEME 3**     *Straight men definitely have an easier time in musical theater even though they usually aren't as talented.*

Stan described a “double message” that gay men receive in musical theater. His perceived dichotomy between gay and straight may be more attributed to the level of his gay identity integration. In one way he described feeling a freedom to be himself but in others he remains feeling on the outside of heterosexual opportunities.

I'm lucky because I'm not queeny, but the business is accepting of all these gay boys but then don't be too queeny. Act butch in auditions but it's OK to be a big girl backstage. It's such a double message...you can't be out as gay if you want to be an actor.

Stan also described what he considered the unfair advantage that straight male dancers have over gay dancers in getting roles.

Straight boys definitely have the advantage because they're such a novelty and they work it for all it's worth. They also get speaking parts and leading men much easier because of it – and usually lack the talent. That's why they can move on in the business when they might not really deserve it.

As noted, Stan's experience of himself falls within Cass's (1979) fourth and fifth stages of *identity acceptance* and *identity pride*. Stan's tendency to dichotomize heterosexuals and gay people in an unintegrated, somewhat paranoid way, leaves him feeling marginalized and disillusioned. Valliant (1977) identified a key factor in adult development as the ability of the individual to shift to higher order defenses. Stan's use of externalization suggests a deep level of denial of the realities of his changing job viability.

In sum, Stan's childhood development reflect many contemporary ideas in the gay developmental literature (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993 Bell, 1981; Green, 1987; Isay, 1989). He felt an inherent sense of difference related to gender non-conforming behaviors that became linked with later same-sex attractions and may have contributed to

underlying narcissistic tendencies. He hid core aspects of himself which others might criticize and found validation and recognition of his “potential” in high school plays and music which were actively supported by important teachers and mentors. This seemed to be the beginnings of the formation of his Dream to be “seen and free to express” himself.

Stan established an initial life structure in the New York theater community which allowed him to individuate and become part of the “show business family” and begin to accept his homosexuality. Professionally, he realized his Dream of success on Broadway, of “being seen,” and finding performance gratifying and rewarding. He felt there were few opportunities for career development and he briefly considered changing careers in his early thirties (Levinson, 1978) for relationship reasons.

Stan’s current relationship with another dancer is described as a primary focus of his current life structure. The importance of stability and normalcy in his relationship were related to the impact of AIDS and the many losses he experienced over the course of his adult life (Hopcke, 1992). In his late thirties, Stan experienced an abrupt shift in his professional marketability. His Dream has taken on a noticeable relational quality built upon stability and deep commitment. He explored moving into the business world and enjoyed some stability but was drawn back into performing once again. As he enters midlife, there is little acknowledgement of personal limitations or serious reassessment for the future (Levinson, 1978). His defensive style supports his tendency toward outer directedness and a longing to reclaim past glories. His narrative lacks inner reflectiveness or attunement to the finiteness of dance or the passage of time (Jung, 1933; Neugarten, 1968). Stan minimized the emotional impact of the recent changes in his

professional status, implying an inability to work through this professional developmental crisis at this time.



## **THE LIFE OF JONAS**

*Jonas and I had worked briefly together in 1989 in a Broadway show. He was interested and agreed to participate in the current study when I contacted him on the phone. We met for two three-hour interviews in his small, studio apartment in the heart of the New York theater district. His apartment was overcrowded with deco furnishings and filled show business memorabilia, including photos of him with celebrities. The walls were painted black and the trim was metallic silver and resembled the set of a show rather than a home. As it turned out, many of his furnishings were from shows he had worked on previously. Jonas has two dogs, both of which were all over me at various points in the interviews. Jonas showed me many photo albums and show programs during the interviews. He was very funny and used his humor to describe difficult experiences in his past. In the end, he seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss his experiences and stated that he found the interviews helpful.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm turning forty next week and I'm taking myself to London as my gift. I feel fortunate that I'm even reaching this age because so many of my friends have died of HIV and AIDS. I think of myself as an artist. On my epitaph I want it to say "Loved and Respected as an Artist" and want my ashes spread across Times Square. I danced professionally on Broadway but I'm trying to survive as a director and choreographer for the past five years. I'm not especially satisfied with where I am as a director and choreographer. People still assume that I'm dancing because I still look like I'm ready to step back on stage at any time. It's tempting to go back to it all but, at forty, I don't want

to do other people's steps anymore. I want to be involved in creating and not be the puppet of someone else's creation.

I'm completely out in my life as a gay man. I came out to my parents in college but it's not something we discuss much now. I'm not in a relationship right now and I haven't been for the past four years. I've lived alone in my apartment for eighteen years. I'd like to have someone in my life and move to a larger place with my dogs. I work occasionally as a choreographer but not enough to survive on. To make ends meet and pay the rent, I do some computer consulting and cater during the holidays. Recently, I've done more catering than anything else to pay for this trip to London which feels demeaning.

My professional career as a dancer only spanned about 10 or 11 years. I miss the community and feeling a part of creating something special. I miss hanging around the Equity Lounge talking with show people – they're my family and always will be. I feel more isolated and cut out of the community. I've been trying to build my resume as a director and choreographer by branching out to regional theaters and summer stock venues. There are fewer jobs in directing and choreography than in the chorus of a show so the competition is incredible.

I still read the trades for possible auditions but they aren't creating shows with the dancer in mind anymore. When we first started, there were four or five shows that we could audition and potentially get hired for. It was an exciting time in theater. That is just not the case anymore and it's sad. They're not building shows around dancers anymore – we're not a premium like we were and that's compromising musical theater overall.

I offer a fresh, sexy perspective in my choreography but if you're not on the "A-list," you don't get the opportunity to demonstrate your creative ideas. I think the most difficult part of a career transition is going from being wanted by choreographers and directors to feeling like I'm on the outside again and starting over. I'm not going to go through the same crap as I did with dancing and performing. I'm still exploring my options so if things don't improve financially for me soon, I'll consider auditioning again.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I was born in Manhattan on the Upper East side. We're Italian- American, second generation, Roman Catholics – which speaks volumes. I'm the youngest and the only boy. I have a fraternal twin sister and an older sister. My parents were strict with all three of us and we went to Catholic schools. By the time I was six or seven years-old I knew that I was gay. I watched my father shave in the bathroom and thought he was the greatest thing. He was a very handsome man and I was attuned to his body from an early age.

I was very close to my sisters growing up and still am. I liked doing the things that they did like cooking, playing house, dressing up in mom's clothes. There wasn't anyone around to say that I should be doing otherwise. I was a pretty unusual kid – and played with girls mostly. It's not that I didn't want to be around boys and men – I just didn't know how to fit in with them and like the things that they did. It wasn't a big deal until I got a little older and started to feel the brunt of the teasing and ridicule from classmates.

My mom enrolled my sister and I in dance classes when I was three. I performed in recitals and I liked people clapping for me. I was told I was cute. I stopped taking tap

classes in second grade when I was called 'sissy' and 'faggot' on my way to the dance studio. I didn't go back into a dance studio until I was eighteen. I became interested in show business when I was at a friend's birthday party when I was 6 years-old. They had a marionette puppet show. I was curious who was controlling those puppets? Who's pulling the strings? I remember sneaking around the back to see what was happening backstage and my mother pulling me back. It wasn't until high school that I put it together that the director and choreographer made it all happen. The actors and performers were the vehicles to that end – in creating an experience for the audience.

I wasn't a strong student academically which was a problem in my family. I recently learned that I'm numerically dyslexic which explains why I did so poorly in math and sciences throughout school. No one picked up on that when I was a kid. Luckily, I only had to count to eight to be a dancer! It's ironic because my mom was a teacher for the learning disabled and my father has his Ph.D. in Chemistry and is a professor of Biology at an Ivy League school. He is much more analytical than I am – my twin sister has those genes. She went to an Ivy League school and works at IBM now.

My father was embarrassed by me and disappointed that I wasn't following in his footsteps as an academic or doctor. He told me I was a 'softy' and used physical means to punish me for small things - it bordered on child abuse. He never touched my older sister who got away with murder in high school.

I'm much more like my mother – emotional, expressive, creative. Her side of the family is into the Italian lineage and that was important growing up. A few years ago, my grandmother showed me this old family album which has love letters from Guiseppe Verdi written for my great-great-great aunt. (*brings out scrap book*) She was an

accomplished opera star at La Scala and Verdi fell madly in love with her. They had a very public affair and the newspaper clippings were in this scrap book as well. It's very exciting to think that our creative lineage goes that far back. My musical and creative interests and abilities were always a mystery to me. My mother was very supportive of my aspirations for theater and dance, but who knew we came from opera royalty?!

I had tons of show albums as a kid and listened to them until I practically wore them out. The first Broadway show I saw was "Man of La Mancha" at the Vivian Beaumont Theater when I was 8 years old. (*takes out the Playbill*) I remember it like it was yesterday because when Richard Kiley sang "The Impossible Dream" I looked over to my father and tears were streaming down his face. It was the first and only time I've seen him cry and I thought, 'can what those people do up there have that much of an impact on him?' The theater and show albums really became my sanctuary, a place that I felt comfortable in and desperately wanted to be a part of.

When I was twelve years old I remember finding a stock motion picture book of naked musclemen. I was becoming aware of my body and puberty and that book was incredibly exciting. Later that summer I was swimming with my friend Joey in a public pool. He told me to put the goggles on and go underwater. He had pulled his bathing suit down and showed me his erection. It was as if the photos I'd been admiring in that book had come to life for me. Joey and I fooled around but he was on the football team so it was very secretive. Even our friendship had to be secretive because he couldn't be seen as associating with someone like me. It's sort of humiliating.

My family moved to the suburbs and I was in a private, Catholic high school. At first, I didn't have a lot friends in high school and was lonely. I kept people at a distance

because I didn't want to be noticed. The spring semester of my freshman year the drama teacher asked me to audition for the musical, "Man of La Mancha." It was cast as the comic and it truly changed my life. I started making friends with the theater folks and that became my haven. My confidence grew as I discovered that I had talent. It was a change for me to be good at something. My father even seemed to enjoy that show and came to all my high school productions.

I dated girls in high school because that's what you were expected to do but they were just friends from theater. I took my best friend to the high school prom and I color coordinated my tux to her gown which should've been a clue for everyone! By senior year I was president of the Drama Society and I was a mini-celebrity at school. I knew that I wanted out of that town and needed to move into Manhattan.

There was never a question that I was going to college – it was simply expected of a professor's child. I was accepted into a small, liberal arts college with a good reputation in theater and music. At the audition, the director of the program told me to take dance classes before September because he felt I had tremendous potential. That was a big turning point for me. I was suddenly immersed in an intensive theater program with dozens of gay guys just like me. It was great to be around other gay men who were interested in me sexually and also had clear aspirations and goals. It was stimulating in every sense of the word.

I went back to dance class and worked to catch up and improve as a dancer. I always had very long legs and good flexibility. I was familiar with dance studios and used the mirror each morning to monitor my progress. I was determined not to be sissy dancer. I was learning a new, gay way of being masculine. I picked up the culture fast at

school and set myself apart as a serious, motivated student. I picked up combinations quickly and demonstrated steps in class. I was hungry for it all and took advantage of everything that school had to offer: dance, music and acting. I still had my childhood dream of being behind the scenes pulling the strings but I wanted to perform.

I did summer stock shows my first two summers of college and learned how much work musical theater truly is. Rehearsing all day in scorching sun for one show, and performing a completely different show that night. That's when I really came out as a gay man. I fell madly in love that first summer with Thomas. I remember him coming up behind me in a rehearsal and putting his arms around me. It was a terrific feeling to be able to be so open about it and no one flinched. We were like nymphs and cherubs sexually romping around in the wilderness. I didn't have to be secretive – it was like what summer camp should have been for gay boys!

At twenty, when my parents visited me in summer stock, I came right out and told them that that I was gay and that I hoped it didn't hurt their feelings. My mom was crying and upset but said that she already knew. She didn't understand how I could be gay and have come from her womb, though. My father didn't say anything. He simply put his arms around me and hugged me – no confrontation, no argument, no humiliation. It changed the relationship with both of them - but especially with my father. The big secret was out. We haven't discussed since but there is an understanding that was never there before.

During my third year in college, I was invited to a summer scholarship program with a major ballet company in New York. I got great training and my body really changed into a more masculine, cut, dancer's body. I really liked the discipline of the

ballet world . I was asked to be part of a 12 week tour with the junior company so I took a semester off from college. I did well and could have continued on but my parents insisted I finish my degree. While I enjoyed the touring experience and had friends in the company, ballet was too limiting. I liked to dance and loved the training but my goal was to get to Broadway. Continuing with ballet didn't fit that dream.

### **Life as a Dancer**

I finished college and got my BFA in Directing and Choreography. My parents supported me when I came back to New York to seek fame and fortune on the Great White Way. I began working in a theatrical general manger's office when I was twenty-two. It wasn't how I'd envisioned my entree into New York theater but I needed the money. I worked as an office assistant– answering phones, ordering the dry cleaning for the costumes. I learned about the business end of show business but it felt pretty flat.

I was still non-Equity which made it hard to get auditions for the prized union jobs. It was very frustrating and I made a lot of mistakes early on. With all my training at school I still was very inexperienced and uncomfortable at auditions. In one audition I had a shot at this great union job but I had forgotten my music and had to sing "God Bless America." It was totally humiliating. I felt like I was an inch tall and dripping a pool of sweat. The casting director told me that I had lost the job because of that.

From that moment on I knew that if I was going up for something I had to be totally professional and have a total, marketable package looking like 24-carat gold. I began focusing on presenting a polishing myself as a "triple threat" – dancer/singer/actor. I've never been confident about my looks but I was determined to make the most of what I had. Your body's your calling card and it better present as gold lame. I had to walk in



that room as if I didn't give a shit and have the attitude that I'm the best in the room. Get yourself to that center spot and stay there, baby. I had to get pretty aggressive about it because that's what would get me the jobs. I started getting better paying stock jobs and my confidence in myself improved after I got my Equity card.

When I was twenty-six I went to an audition that really changed my life. It was for a mega-hit Broadway show that was going on tour. Getting my first big job was thrilling –nothing like it before or since. To know that from all the top notch dancers in New York they chose me was incredible. I spent the next two and a half years on the road and got experience in lots of ways. It changed my life financially and I was able to afford to have the things I'd always wanted: clothes, trips, restaurants. My parents were so impressed with me when they came to Washington, D.C. The road culture was built upon becoming part of this intense family. I still have good friends who I met during those rehearsals. Theater is basically one huge family but without all the bullshit. I wore my show jacket everywhere as proof that I had finally made it. It felt great to walk into a restaurant in a city and get a table immediately simply because I was wearing the show jacket.

It wasn't all roses though because I started to use a lot of drugs – cocaine mainly. That was part of the backstage culture and becoming part of that invincible, jaded, "I'm in [show's name]" mentality. I was staying up until 6AM doing cocaine and then doing a bump to get me through the matinees. One time I was so high I lost my balance during the opening number and fell from the ledge of the set. I wasn't hurt that badly but I knew I couldn't finish the show. I took off my costume and came back to New York to get

some professional help. I went back to the show for a few weeks but felt so out of place. I gave my notice and moved back to New York.

I had a lot of unsafe sex during the 1980s without a thought of getting HIV. This awakening about my drugs coincided with the death of my closest friend to AIDS. Here I was abusing my body and he was struggling just to stay alive. It was especially ironic after I had worked so hard to make my body this calling card. I was afraid to be tested for HIV. It wasn't this abstract thing. I saw my friends die one after the other and I was finally tested and am HIV negative. I haven't gotten high in 10 years.

I came back into New York scene with new dedication and felt an obligation to my friends to keep the Broadway gypsy tradition alive. When I was twenty-nine I was hired for a Broadway show and that was my dream. I assumed my career would just continue on this upward trajectory. At the audition, I remember the star of the show, a well-know gay performer, looked at me after I sang and gave me big smile. It felt like I was being initiated into the gay New York theater club. I had always used my sexuality with gay choreographers and directors to flirt and be funny. It had always worked for me and served me well. It wasn't a very good show and it only lasted a few months on Broadway. That show was a big disappointment and my only Broadway show to date.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

In my early thirties I began to have a more difficult time at auditions. I was told I was too flamboyant and that I was wearing my sexuality on my sleeve. I lost one part as a male supporting lead because the assistant director thought I was too queer. It was particularly upsetting because she was gay too. It was a huge blow because it felt like a rejection of me as a person and not based on my talents. I was just trying to be myself

more at auditions. Being gay has nothing to do with my ability to act or portray a straight character. I also started to lose my hair. It felt as if I was losing my manhood so I got a hair weave. I managed to work on and off and kept my finger on the pulse but something was changing. I hit a very low point and became depressed. I felt the glamour of the business die.

When I was thirty-five, I had the opportunity to choreograph a small show off-off Broadway. I saw it as an opportunity to get my feet wet as a choreographer. I really loved creating that show – I felt my passion for the business come back. Being the one calling the shots and not the puppet was great. A major choreographer saw my work and asked me to be her assistant on her next project. I assisted her on several other big projects and gradually did some smaller, regional projects on my own.

It's been a period of struggling to stay alive in this business. I've gotten support along the way but it feels like I've been thrown out of the club. The first thing that comes to mind when I think about how I've made it this far is the line from "A Chorus Line", 'give me a place to fit in.' And I finally did. I felt that the world was my oyster and it would go like that for eternity – show after show. I was blessed to have a place to fit into and work with the people I have. I only hope I have the opportunity to remain a part of the community in a different way.

These interviews have been great but also difficult. It's been hard to listen and look at myself and how my life has unfolded. It reminds me how terrific this business is and how honored I am to be part of but that it can also turn its back on you when you really need a professional break.

## THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE

After reviewing Jonas's narrative, themes emerged which related to and contradicted existing adult developmental, gay identity, career, and transitional theories. In the following section, "I" themes are presented with raw data quotes and references to existing literature which informed the analysis.

### **Current Life Situation:**

THEME 1: *I think of myself as an artist who survived - on my epitaph I want it to say "Loved and Respected as an Artist".*

Jonas described himself as an "artist" who has survived in the face of many challenges as he struggles to find work as a director/choreographer. Part of his sense of survival is establishing himself as his own man and not being the "puppet" for other artists.

I've been trying to survive as a director and choreographer for the past few years. People still assume that I'm dancing because I still look like I'm ready to step back on stage at any time. It's tempting to go back to it all but, at forty, I don't want to do other people's steps anymore. I want to be involved in creating and not be the puppet of someone else's creation.

Again, in similar ways that Stan described, Jonas finds himself "tempted" to return to performing but does not want to relinquish "control." By all appearances, he suggests, he could still be performing, however that entails becoming another choreographer's puppet.

Throughout his narrative he referred to the impact AIDS has had on him and the Broadway community.

I'm an artist really, and I love to create – but we survived it all really. Surviving paying your dues all those years but also going through the 80's with AIDS was like living through the plague. Even though I completely frustrated with myself as a director and

choreographer, I'm grateful to be alive – I don't lose sight of that. I'm grateful I'm even reaching this age because so many have died of HIV and AIDS.

Like Stan, having survived “paying his dues” as a dancer and the AIDS crisis has contributed to Jonas's sense of himself as an artist. Jonas's adult developmental path aligns with Kertzner and Sved's (1996) concept in how his ability to adapt seems to have been shaped by his proximity to the HIV/AIDS epidemic

**THEME 2:**     *I'm on the outside again as a struggling choreographer and director and miss feeling like a part of the show business family.*

Like Stan, Jonas also experienced the Broadway dance community as a “family.” Not having as much contact with those friends and colleagues has left him feeling on the outside. Rosenberg (1982) suggested that retirement from sports is akin to social death, which is characterized as social isolation and rejection from the former in-group.

I miss the community and feeling a part of something special. I feel more isolated than when I was dancing in shows because I do it all myself – marketing, promoting, interviews. I miss hanging around the Equity Lounge talking with show folk – they're my family and always will be.

Jonas feels more isolated with the loss of his status in the family. Without contact within his community, Jonas, like the rigidly identified retired athletes researched by Pearson and Petitpas (1990), feels abandoned and rejected by the community he once felt a part of

I've never had great self-esteem but now it's really bad. Not bad, but you know I just feel like shit, what did I do wrong? I was OK and part of the in crowd, but now I'm not wanted and that hurts. Just when you need a break to get going the business turns its back on you.

Like Stan, Jonas describes aspects of himself consistent with underlying narcissistic difficulties. His current professional struggles are experienced as narcissistic injuries and rejections.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

THEME 1: *I felt myself as different from other boys in school but, over time, theater seemed both a way to reach my father and eventually become part of something special.*

As in Stan's narrative, Jonas characterized his childhood experiences as dominated by feeling different and unusual both in school and in his family (de Monteflores, 1986). His sense of difference is laden with critical evaluations similar to Stan's experiences in relation to his gender non-conforming activities.

It wasn't a picnic – growing up. I was a pretty unusual kid - different from other little boys in school. I liked to sing and dance and by six or seven years old I knew that I was gay. My dad told me that I cried too much and was a softy. It's not that I didn't want to be around boys and men – I just didn't know how to fit in with them and like the things that they did....I was called faggot and sissy at school all the time – it really hurt my feelings.

In this case as well, the literature on gay male self-esteem (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993) describes Jonas's experiences of having difficulty establishing a healthy sense of self and being ridiculed and stereotyped. Maylon's (1982a) description of how pre-gay boys internalize negative social attitudes toward homosexuality is consistent throughout both narratives. Jonas felt little internal and external validation as a child which affected his developing self-esteem (Alexander & Nunno, 1993).

Jonas pointed to his desire to reach his father as a significant factor in his initial attraction to theater. Again, Isay's (1989) theory of the pre-gay son's need for special closeness and erotic attachment toward the father seems to be evident.

I watched my father shave in the bathroom and thinking he was the greatest thing. He was a very handsome man and I was very tuned into his body.

Jonas described a significant moment in which his father was reachable and vulnerable as a hallmark in drawing him to theater. This appears to be related to his professional Dream (Levinson, 1978) to perform in order to have an impact on another's emotional world.

Richard Kiley sang "The Impossible Dream" I looked over to my father and tears were streaming down his face. It was the first and only time I'd seen him cry and I thought, 'can what those people do up there have that much of an impact on him?'

Super's (1990) theory states that the career development process begins very early in life, during the *growth stage* (birth to 14 years). It was during this time that Jonas was developing interests, values, and beliefs in theater. Jonas found his "haven" in the theater crowd as well as the social recognition and sense of competence that he was seeking.

I got in and [theater] changed my life – it was like the heavens opened up for me. I was finally good at something . It helped my confidence - I mean. I was suddenly somebody and I got congratulated me in the halls for my performances...my parents came to all the high school productions. I was in my haven and that felt good. It was a change – and my father enjoyed seeing me up there. By senior year I was president of the Drama Society.

It seems that Jonas's academic challenges played into his attraction to theater. In theater, he reported feeling accepted and appreciated by his parents, teachers and peers in an almost religious-like conversion. In this sense, his Dream was rooted in being "seen" and "recognized" as well as in creating connections with others. These positive experiences helped crystallize dance and musical theater as *the* career choice for him.

**THEME 2:** *Becoming increasingly involved in musical theater became my venue for my coming out process.*

Jonas described his increasing involvement in theater and his greater exposure to other gay youth as allowing him to initiate integrating his same-sex desires and establish a positive gay identity (Cass, 1979).

I hurled into this intensive theater program with dozens of young gay guys just like me. It was so great to suddenly be around other gay men who understood me and were interested in musical theater. [Summer stock] is where I really came out after I fell madly in love ....it was a terrific feeling to be open about it and no one flinched. I didn't have to be secretive– it was like summer camp for gay boys! When my parents visited that summer I came right out and told them that that I was gay and I hoped it didn't hurt their feelings.

Jonas experienced the same-sex relationship as neither secretive nor shameful and eventually came out to his parents when they came to visit. He described coming out to his parents as changing his relationship with both of them in meaningful ways and allowing them to “see” him for the first time, as Cass (1979) postulates.

My mom was crying and upset but said that she already knew on some level. She didn't understand how I could be gay and have come from her womb, though. Not exactly what I needed to hear at that moment. My father didn't say anything. He simply put his arms around me and hugged me – no confrontation, no argument, no humiliation. It changed the relationship with both of them - but especially with my father. The big secret was out and I didn't have to keep things from them. They could see me for real and that was never there before.

Jonas's coming out experiences were similar to Hanely-Hackenbruck's (1989) description of the initial work toward resolution of internalized self-hate. This involved further individuating from the parental domination, defining his own values, and developing a new social peer group he found more accepting. His experiences differed from Stan's with regard to his openness with his parents about his sexual orientation.

### **Life as a Dancer**

THEME 1: *Early professional disappointments and challenges drove me to perfect my self-presentation as a marketable commodity.*



After completing college, Jonas moved to New York and faced unexpected professional challenges. Unlike Stan, Jonas did not find immediate success on Broadway. After disappointments and humiliating experiences he developed a perception of himself as a product to be marketed.

I had to be totally professional – make myself total, marketable package looking like 24-carat gold. I had to present a polishing myself as a triple threat – dancer/singer/actor. Your body's your calling card and it better present as gold lame. I had to walk in that room as if I didn't give a shit and have the attitude that I'm the best in the room. Get yourself to that center spot and stay there, baby....

Like Stan, as a dancer, Jonas developed a thick skin and worked to improve his body and looks to the point of objectifying himself. This was significantly challenged later when Jonas experienced his hair loss as detrimental to his career viability.

In my early thirties I started to lose my hair. It felt as if I was losing my manhood and it tainted the product so I got a hair weave. I couldn't look older than I felt – it didn't fit the image. I mean who was going to hire a balding chorus boy? I really focused on being the best I could be always. I had to be on it all the time.

Similar to Stan, Jonas was actively pursuing his dream of performing on Broadway. His drive and determination throughout early adulthood is similar to what Jacques' (1965) argued as re-enactment of the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position in establishing one's self in a career.

**THEME 2**     *Being chosen as part of the elite show business family was a personal and professional turning point.*

At twenty-six, being hired to join a hit touring company was considered a turning point. It was the affirmation he needed to finally feel that he belonged to the elite set of

professional dancers. Becoming part of the family was instrumental in his strong identification with the show via jackets and dance bags.

Being chose at that audition really changed my life in every way. It was for a mega-hit show and it was thrilling –nothing like it before or since. Out of all the top-notch dancers and performers in that room they chose me. I went to another level. I wore my show jacket and dance bag everywhere as proof that I had finally made it. The road culture was about becoming part of this close-knit family.

Jonas's drug use led to a decline in his ability to perform consistently and he eventually resigned from that job.

I started to use a lot of drugs – cocaine mainly. I was staying up until 6AM doing cocaine and then doing a bump to get me through the matinees. I was using during the show and started missing shows. I lost my balance during the opening number and fell from off the ledge of the set. I wasn't hurt that badly but I knew I couldn't finish the show.

Jonas's returned to New York to address his drug use. It was during this period that he reported an "awakening" to the realization of death after a friend died from AIDS.

During rehab I found out Keith was in the hospital. Here I was abusing my body and he was struggling just to stay alive. I had worked so hard to make my body this calling card and totally abused it. It was an awakening. So many of my friends died one after the other.... I stopped doing drugs and haven't gotten high in 10 years.

Jonas awakening to the loss of friends describes aspects of the Kleinian depressive position that are re-enacted in adulthood (Jacques, 1965). Jonas took time to reflect upon his life structure and what was important to him. This, however, did not translate into his career choices.

Jonas seemed to have experienced what Hopcke (1992) describes as an early, "AIDS-induced midlife crisis" for some gay men in their twenties which included a confrontation with mortality. Confronting his behaviors helped Jonas undergo a significant psychological transformation about his drug use. Afterwards, Jonas felt more invested in show business out of an obligation to his lost friends.

It's for them that I kept on the gypsy tradition. I had an obligation to get back out there and keep up the tradition for everyone who died. If not, they died for nothing. That's when I got my Broadway gig and that was a tribute to my friends.

### **Changes in Career and Transition**

**THEME 1**     *In my mid-thirties my calling card seemed no longer in demand or valued.*

Jonas experienced a noticeable shift in his career as a professional dancer in his early thirties - coinciding with Levinson's (1978) Age Thirty Transition. However, experienced as an external impingement on his career, there was neither evidence of inward reflection on the state his career nor any consideration of options for the future.

The auditions were drying up and work was scarce. My bag of tricks wasn't working – that calling card. I still had the body and everything and I worked on and off and kept my finger on the pulse. Something changed but I didn't see it coming. It got really bad and I was very depressed – the glamour of the business died.

Like Stan, Jonas was genuinely perplexed about why his career marketability had changed so dramatically. Jonas found himself out of work and confused by a range of psychological, social, and financial adjustments. In addition, he found the feedback from auditions was negatively focused on characteristic traits he had dared to reveal. He felt particularly criticized by a lesbian director who questioned his ability to play a straight role on stage.

I'm too flamboyant and wearing my sexuality on my sleeve! That director thought I was too queer. I was so pissed because she was gay too. It was a huge blow because it felt like a rejection of me as a person and not based on my talents. I was just trying to be myself more at auditions. Being gay has nothing to do with my ability to act or portray a straight character. What happened to that gay club?

**THEME 2**     *In the midst of feeling undervalued, I was discovered again – sustaining my hope for opportunities as a choreographer.*

Despite feeling disappointed and rejected by the decline of his career, Jonas experienced the opportunity to choreograph as a way back into the community.

It was a Godsend because I had no idea where to go or what to do. I hadn't worked in months and the money had run out. I choreographed the show and the reviews were good and it felt like I was back.... Pat approached me about being her assistant. It was an honor to be with her and I thought that my worries were over. I felt discovered again but it's been a tough time and hasn't gone that way I hoped. It feels like a part of me has died.

Jonas initially felt as though he was on the road to success once again, but his experiences of trying to make it as a choreographer have been challenging. His self experience seems consistent with Marris's (1975) proposal that career change may instigate feelings of loss and mourning. Jonas's pull toward choreography may be understood as an attempt to maintain and/or restore the continuity of his previous status in show business. Jonas has only be able to work occasionally in that capacity and has growing resentment about being on the "outside" again. This may make it difficult for him to fully commit to a career as a choreographer.

In sum, while there were clear differences from the first narrative, Jonas seems to be struggling with many of the same salient career issues that emerged from Stan's narrative. Most evident is the notion of being "seen" and "recognized" as part of the Broadway community whether as a member of a hit show or as a choreographer. Themes from the early developmental period are similar in both narratives and suggest that narcissistic injuries experienced from both within the family and among peers may have contributed to the formation of the professional Dream (Levinson, 1978) and subsequent career choices. Jonas supported the notion of the use of the mirror in dance class as having potential to experience both his body and his masculinity in new ways.

Jonas described a more difficult Early Adult Transition in a professional sense than Stan, however he reported an important sense of belonging to the gay-friendly dance milieu. After several disappointing auditions, Jonas began to conceptualize himself as a “gold lame” product to be marketed and kept in top condition. Differences between the narratives included the process of “coming out,” with Jonas disclosing to his parents and Stan coming out only within the theater community. The AIDS crisis and the loss of many friends and colleagues served as an awakening for Jonas to stop using drugs and prioritize his life. This did not entail re-evaluating his career options or goals in a way that would fit neatly into Levinson’s model (1978).

In his mid-thirties his career began to change and he experienced professional rejections which he attributed to his openness about being gay. While he described disliking the evaluative process in auditions, this marked the first time he felt judged negatively about being gay in theater. Jonas’s current gay identity falls within Cass’s (1979) fifth stage of *identity pride*. He is primarily immersed in a gay-friendly community in which he feels the need to dichotomize between gays and straights. While not secretive about being gay, he remains somewhat self-righteous and angry at feeling oppressed as a sexual minority. Both Stan and Jonas expressed a strong desire to remain connected to show business despite not having much success in transitioning into directing or choreography. There was a strong sense of loss of self, abandonment and resentment for being left behind by the business that both had previously felt such a part of.

## **THE LIFE OF CHRIS**

*The two interviews with this participant were conducted in his one bedroom apartment in upper Manhattan. Chris and I had met years before at auditions and we had many mutual friends in common. I ran into him on the street and he expressed his interest in this study after informing me how “unhappy” he was in his Broadway show. At that time he mentioned he was in psychotherapy and thought that talking about his experiences might be valuable. Both interviews were conducted on Saturday mornings before his matinee performance. Chris received phone calls during the interviews to inform him that he would be filling in for a cast member who was out ill. Chris was open and forthcoming about his experiences and seemed to use the interviews to further his thinking and understanding about his career choices.*

### **Current Life Situation;**

I’m forty years old and I’m an employed actor, dancer, singer on Broadway. As the dance captain and understudy I’m not onstage every night which is fine. I’ve been with the same show for three years and, while it’s not artistically fulfilling, it pays the bills. This is my first Broadway show and, after waiting and paying my dues for fifteen years, it’s given me status. “Broadway” says you’ve reached a certain place in your career and you’re treated with respect. Maintaining this level becomes another pressure. My career has been a slow progression and I’m at a plateau now. I may have become complacent in my career and I’m not pushing myself like I should. Maintaining a career on Broadway is about anticipating the next wave of shows. Broadway jobs are hard to come by and I haven’t figured out how to build on where I am professionally. Of course,

surviving the trials and tribulations of not working is the most difficult part about this profession.

I've been in therapy for two years and I take dance class almost daily. Thankfully, I haven't had any injuries. I stay with jobs a long time and I'm known as a hard worker. I began acting classes three years ago and that's been very fulfilling. I'm interested in acting and directing someday but it seems even harder than getting a dancing job on Broadway.

Performing is the way that I connect with people and share the joy that I feel when I'm onstage. The most fulfilling part of being a dancer is sharing my "insides" with an audience. Great music and dance can be a spiritual experience but only if it comes from you. I'm getting older and I should cultivate broader skills if I want to remain a working actor/singer/dancer. As I'm getting older my passion for the business part of this profession is waning. That burning need to network and be "in-the-know" has gotten old. I need to get into acting and singing roles and move up in the ranks but can't seem to catch a break.

The business demands that you market yourself aggressively which is challenging for me. Am I willing to take small, low paying jobs and start all over again as an actor? It's not fair that with my work experience I'm perceived as just a chorus boy. I don't want to be fifty-five and auditioning next to twenty-two year olds. I'm unsure what lies ahead for me and that makes me nervous.

I feel stuck and if I could get out of this job right now and get into another show, I would. I sometimes wonder why I got into a business where there is no security and the constant pressure to prove yourself. I was drawn to theater because I'm gay and wanted

to be around creative, interesting people who can express themselves. I like being part of a business in which there's no judgement or shame about being who I am.

I'm single and have been for the last ten years. I would like to be in a relationship but I don't go out to bars much – that's not where I'll meet a boyfriend. I was never into dating or the club scene which is why I think I'm alive today. I'm completely out as being gay. It's not an issue around the theater because most of the guys in the show are gay, and the straight guys and stagehands couldn't care less. I'm not interested in being in uptight environments where I feel weird about being gay again.

I spend a lot of time with my friends in the business and most of them are fortunately working now in shows. My friends are very important to me and are my major source of support. They are really my family – if not more so. I rarely go home to my parents for holidays because I'd rather spend them with friends here in New York.

### **Becoming A Dancer**

I grew up in Michigan and I'm the youngest of four siblings. My family still lives in that area and my brother and sisters are all married with children. I'm half Italian on my mother's side and Croatian on my father's side. My parents were married very young and I was aware of the financial strains and the fights between my parents on payday. My father worked as an assembly worker and my mom stayed at home until I was ten. My father had a drinking problem and we never knew if dinner would be fun and entertaining or a nightmare.

I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else and it was safe for kids to play. I was closer to my three sisters growing up than to my brother. He was into the things my father enjoyed like football and working on cars. My



brother and I still aren't close – probably because I'm gay. He respects what I've accomplished but he doesn't ask me about my life.

I was the funny, entertaining one in the family. I used to dress up with my sisters as Diana Ross and the Supremes. I didn't feel it was wrong and it was only later that I sensed that people thought it was weird. I was very open and loving as a little boy and I trusted people. I liked to hang out with girls, which wasn't a problem until I got older. I was imaginative and created a whole fantasy world. My first exposure to theater was when my first grade teacher took our class to see "Cinderella." I loved the fantasy and beauty of it all. I used to love to tell stories and put on puppet shows for the neighborhood. I was teased because I wet the bed until I was 10, which pissed my father off.

My dad and I never got along and I was afraid of his anger as a kid. He'd provoke me to see if I'd respond by teasing me or punching me - but I just withdrew. My dad played jokes and was funny but his unpredictability when he drank scared me. My father was sensitive, though, and I remember he cried watching Nureyev dance on a PBS special. The only other time I saw him cry was when I graduated from college.

In grade school I was encouraged by teachers to play with boys more. My dad would try to throw the ball with me but I didn't enjoy it. It felt more critical than supportive because he'd roll his eyes or sigh every time I dropped the ball. I began swimming in third grade. I was a good swimmer and that took the heat off the sports thing for a while. I continued my clarinet lessons and became interested in musical theater.

I was closer to my mom growing up – what a shock! In grade school I got involved in the band and she bought me a clarinet with a new leather case. My father freaked about it and said it was a waste of money. She went to beauty school and opened her own shop, which helped financially. It was her way of giving us advantages that she hadn't had as a child.

I was never an outstanding student but I wasn't stupid either. I suddenly was singled out and called 'faggot.' The name-calling was torturous and I was baffled. I didn't know how I needed to act or what I was doing wrong. I became very self-critical and monitored my every move down to the way I walked through the lunchroom.

By age ten, I questioned my sexuality and thought that I was completely screwed up about being a boy. I felt an attraction to older boys at school but was careful not to stare. I consciously spoke in a lower pitched voice and monitored myself for anything that was slightly effeminate. Those were horrible years and I isolated and stayed home after school. I started stuttering and I used food to comfort myself. I gained weight and quit the swimming team. I was so ashamed of being called "faggot" and "queer" and I couldn't tell my parents how horrible school was.

In high school I made some friends in marching band. The clarinet finally paid off and things improved for me socially. The music teacher encouraged me to audition for the school musical. I knew I could sing and make people laugh so I thought I had nothing to lose. To my surprise I actually got in. It gave me somewhere to be after school. There were guys in the theater crowd who I now realize were gay. I did shows all through senior high school and my stuttering improved. I lost weight and paid more attention to my appearance. Gym class was a nightmare. I wasn't a bad athlete but I

anticipated being made fun of or humiliated. I dreaded taking showers and was afraid I'd get an erection and be found out for sure.

During my senior year, an alumna who had been a Rockette in New York, directed the spring musical. I wasn't cast in the show and I couldn't figure out why. Later I found her audition notes in the trash and under my name it said, 'Good voice. Too gay.' All my fears were realized and I was totally devastated. I started to cry and just kept saying out loud 'Why? Why?' I remember feeling that despite all my hard work, I was still too effeminate.

At eighteen, I took dance class for the first time and found out I had some natural agility. I remember seeing myself in the mirror in dance class and thinking how far I'd come from the fat kid in grade school. It helped me get over the idea that I was more girl than boy and I could be athletic and still be gay. I continued to work hard on improving my body and dance technique. I didn't feel like such a sissy anymore and I began to feel more masculine. Dance became more and more my focus and I felt myself competing with other people in class for attention.

I went away to a state college to study theater and music. I wasn't going to end up on the assembly line like my father. I was thrilled to be away from my family and hometown and I moved into the dorms the first possible day. I kept to myself about being gay and I didn't date or have sex. I was aware of the Gay Student Union but was too afraid to attend. I exercised and lost more weight in college and became more aware of men's bodies – mine and others. I didn't have a firm career plan after graduation; I was developing a drive to succeed as a dancer. I performed throughout college and worked with directors who encouraged me to go to New York to study.

After graduation, I moved back to my parents while I decided how to get to New York. I started doing small, local semi-professional shows and kept up my dance classes. When I was twenty-three, I apprenticed in a three-week opera and ballet production which featured a major New York ballet company. That's where I first saw gay dancers who were out and open about it. Backstage, these men were funny and free to do and say whatever they wanted. It was a group of people who seemed cultured and sophisticated. I finally had sex with somebody other than myself. He was a guy in the cast and I thought he was the person I'd be with the rest of my life. I worked hard to stand out from the other locals and was invited to join company ballet class each morning. The ballet master saw my potential and invited me to New York to study on scholarship in September.

### **Life as a Dancer**

I moved to New York and began intensive ballet training. It was so exciting to be in New York, but that first year it was just about survival. I worked at a grocery and cleaned apartments for money. I tried to fit into the ballet mold of that school and improved over the course of the next eight months. I was strong and could partner girls, but I realized I had started ballet too late to be hired into a major company. Ballet began to feel too restrictive and I shifted my focus back to musical theater.

I began auditioning for summer stock and regional theaters. I started working out in a gym, which gave me more confidence about my looks. I was non-union which meant I waited outside in the rain trying to be seen for auditions for Broadway shows. I met other dancers at auditions and built enduring friendships. It was an exciting time when I was paying my dues and learning more about the business everyday. I took out-

of-town regional shows and at twenty-five I finally got my Equity card in summer stock which opened doors for me.

That summer I met James, a singer, who came from a very wealthy Midwestern family and whose talent and sophistication seduced me. We began a six-year relationship and moved in together. I worked mainly in regional shows and touring productions and Broadway eluded me. James also spent most of that time on the road moving into leading roles. I had a fantasy of this solid relationship but learned that he had been cheating on me. I felt my whole world feel apart. We had pooled our money and owned an apartment together. I felt trapped by the things we had together and the money his family made available to us. My trust in him was crushed but we stayed together for another three years. I was in it for the long haul but we had problems that couldn't be helped unless we both decided to commit to staying in one place. Neither one of us were willing to risk not working at that point in our lives.

I went into therapy for a few years, which helped me get out of that unsatisfying relationship. I hope I learned from that experience. Therapy also helped me to accept being gay and not being ashamed of wanting intimacy and closeness. The fact that we both were still hiding our relationship from our families had an impact on the relationship. Also, there is something about being afraid of publicly displaying affection that takes its toll on a relationship.

When I was thirty years old, I was finally hired for a touring company of a big musical. I was working as a waiter when I got the call that I had been hired. That job changed my life and gave me the opportunity to travel the country. My parents came to see me on the road with our relatives. I felt like I had finally made them proud of me. I

spent the next seven years on the road with two different shows. I've played forty-seven states and racked up over 300,000 frequent flyer miles. I was promoted within the companies and gained self-confidence and experience. The road became my lover and my family. I was caught up in the glamour of five-star hotels and limos to the theater that I began to believe I was invincible.

When I was thirty-three, I came out to my sister that I was gay and told her about my relationship with James. A week later I got a call from my mom crying hysterically about my being gay. I asked her if it made a difference to her that I was gay and she said 'no' and that she already knew. She was afraid I'd get AIDS or die alone in my old age. While I was mad at my sister for "outing me" I did feel much lighter afterwards. My mom eventually told my dad. My father and I have never talked about it. I think he's OK with it but I'd like to talk about it with him someday.

Life on the road became less appealing as the years rolled on. It's a false life because there's a maid to clean your room and you eat out for every meal. I had no real responsibilities beyond the show and I felt directionless. Three years ago I quit and decided to come back to New York and see what would happen career-wise. The most difficult aspect of leaving was saying good-bye to that family. It's where I grew up and learned about myself. I spent holidays and birthdays with those people. When I came back to New York, I was hired for the Broadway show I'm in now. It's afforded me the luxury of buying my apartment and staying in New York. I expected Broadway to feel differently – it was exciting at first and I loved wearing the show jackets and walking down Broadway getting recognized. But three years into it now, it's lost some of that shine.

### **Career Changes and Transitions**

I'm lucky because I'm injury free. I'd like to dance in one more dance show and I think I still have it in me. I'll never be the leading man on Broadway but I'd love to try acting on TV – maybe as the funny, gay sidekick? There seems to be a shift recently in television with “Will and Grace” so maybe the world is becoming less homophobic. Being gay or straight shouldn't affect whether you get hired on Broadway or not – but it does. There's no difference between your professional and private lives. You know everything about everyone and to play straight they think you have to be straight. I'm afraid that being openly gay has held me back as an actor. The gay men I know who are actors can't really be out - even on Broadway. I'm at a fork in the road and I have to make some choices soon.

I think that being gay has also helped me in the business where it might have hurt me in other careers. Auditioning for gay choreographers and directors sometimes feels flirtatious and I've use my sexuality to get jobs. Let's face it, dance is a sexual art form and our bodies are used to lure and entice an audience. It makes sense that showing your body off and performing in an audition would be sexual. I think it can work the other way around though. I have felt that my being out in the business prejudices certain casting directors and choreographers that I can only be a dancer and not act or speak.

As I get older, I see more and more people questioning the business and dropping out. It's hard to think that I wouldn't be in the business but I don't want to be old and insecure in the profession. Will I be happy doing what I'm doing in 20 years? I get a sense of security in a long running show, but it starts to feel like a Las Vegas floor show.

It's sad because it feels more corporate on Broadway than artistic these days. It's not as daring or cutting edge as when I first moved here.

I really want a relationship in my life but I have to make room for one. If I had a partner I'd love to raise a child, but the financial insecurity of the business keeps me from doing it alone. In this business you have to be ready to pick up and go at anytime. I'd need to be with someone who was financially and professionally secure. I just hope I'm happy and healthy.



## THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE

After reviewing Chris's narrative, themes emerged which were also present in those previously presented. Once again these related to existing adult developmental, gay identity, career, and transitional theories but also presented new material for consideration. Unlike the previous two participants, Chris was working in a Broadway show at the time of the interviews. In the following section, "I" themes are presented with raw data quotes and references to existing literature which informed the analysis.

### **Current Life Situation:**

THEME 1: *I feel the pressure of maintaining my status and fear that I've become complacent in my life.*

In achieving his Broadway "dream" at thirty-seven, Chris experienced increased professional status and security which he had been working toward for many years. Unlike Stan and Jonas who had success somewhat earlier, Chris is struggling with the threat of losing his newfound status with a different perspective. He described the professional challenges and a hierarchy that fed his drive to achieve and wondered how to re-ignite his drive.

The hard part is that you have to be selected to stay on the inside of the circle. It's scary because being on Broadway is everyone's dream, I mean, it comes with a certain status and it's taken me fifteen long years. It's the top of the heap and you're finally respected, treated differently...."Broadway" means you've made it but staying up here is a huge pressure - another pressure. I've plateaued and afraid I've gotten complacent - I'm not as driven to find the next gig....I'm not sure what's going on with me but I want that fire again.

While chronologically out of step with Levinson's (1978) developmental course, as a dancer he is faced with a gnawing sense of finiteness to his career. Chris's main concern at this point is maintaining his "Dream" status but it seems less important which

job actually materializes for him. Again, this raises the issue of what function the professional identity serves for him, and Colarusso and Nemiroff's (1987) notion of selfobjects. It may characterize Chris's use of his Broadway status as a way of bolstering his sense of self.

**THEME 2:** *I feel stuck in a stagnant, unfulfilling job and I'm aware of my need to expand myself beyond where I am.*

Chris reported feeling increasingly stagnant and unfulfilled. The repetition and monotony of the show is balanced by competing needs and desires, which seem to derail his drive to develop and grow.

It's stagnant – the same show night after night. I would love to quit but that would be impossible, I mean I have bills to pay and all. It's gotten harder the longer I stay in the show but I shouldn't complain. People would kill to be my place....I feel stuck because staying in it keeps me from moving on, too. It's weird because it's great but it's a double-edged sword and I do want to expand beyond this. I mean to risk leaving without knowing what's out there isn't worth it.

Elements of Chris's desire for change are consistent with Pine's (1982) "expansionist" perspective on transformation of sense-of-self. However, a future vision for himself seems to be constricted and not able to be fully considered at this time.

**THEME 3:** *My colleagues are like my family and a gay-friendly environment is definitely part of my desire to remain in musical theater.*

Chris described feeling more comfortable and at ease in settings where he felt his homosexuality was accepted. Throughout his narrative he also describes the show business community as feeling like his "family" much like the previous two participants.

Remaining part of a community that he perceived as non-judgmental was directly related to staying on the inside of a homo-friendly circle and keeping the other out.

Of course being gay I want to stay in theater in some way –or show business at least. It's definitely connected to being part of this world where there's no judgement about it – it's just not an issue. I couldn't be part of some homophobic corporate culture, no way.....so staying inside this circle is also keeping the homophobes outside of my life.

In Cass's (1979) model, Chris's narrative suggests he is within stage five, *identity pride*, in which he remains immersed in a primarily gay-friendly community. His narrative reflected his pride in being gay but with an underlying feeling of oppression. However, data presented in the following sections may suggest a more complex understanding of his current experience of his gay identity.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

Once again, consistent with certain gay developmental literature, (Cornett, 1993; Voeller, 1980) and the previous narratives, Chris also seemed narcissistically vulnerable to criticism as a young boy. His description of growing up feeling ridiculed and stereotyped seemed to increase his self-awareness and criticism. Once again, without sufficient on-going validation of worth, developing stable self-esteem was difficult for him to attain (Alexander & Nunno, 1993).

**THEME 1:** *I used my humor and musical ability to entertain and engage my family and to manage the chaos of our household.*

Chris described himself as the one to smooth things over in the family. These ways of coping with a stressful home environment seemed to foster a sense of himself as the entertainer.

It was hard because my folks fought all the time either because of my dad's drinking or money or whatever. I was the comic relief. My sisters and I dressed up like the

Supremes and that could make my parents laugh. It was my job to make things right or at least that's what I did....I still use humor to get around tough spots – I hate confrontation so if I make a joke it diffuses the situation.

It seems that Chris's use of humor and musical talent served to ameliorate a troubled household. His initial impulse toward performing and entertaining had its roots in trying to control what he perceived as an unstable early environment. There was little mention of feeling special or supported in his early years. This may have had implications for later narcissistic difficulties (Kohut, 1971). Chris's use of himself as comic relief in his family was at least part of his developing sense of himself as a performer.

**THEME 2:** *I was teased and humiliated in school, which eventually led me to monitor and critique my every move so as not to be perceived as feminine.*

Like Stan and Jonas, Chris reported being interested in gender-atypical games and activities (Isay, 1989). Initially, Chris's friendships with girls and shared interests were not met with disapproval in his family and neighborhood. However, increased name-calling and humiliation as he got older, led him to monitor his mannerisms and inhibited his social interactions. These seemed to contribute to further social isolation and later adolescent depression (Martin, 1982).

It was fine for a while nobody cared. I mean, I was teased but it wasn't constant. Something changed in school and I got singled out and called 'faggot' and 'pussy' – I hate those words. The name-calling was torture and I was so confused because I always had friends who accepted me. I didn't want to embarrass my parents so I didn't tell them about it.

Stein and Cabaj (1996) posited that gay men might, as children, learn to disconnect and dissociate from their true self and sexual orientation. In part, this is in response to family expectations and creates a false self, which does not genuinely reflect the child's true inclinations. This seems consistent with Chris's hypersensitivity to environmental threats and criticism. His use of food to manage these painful feelings compounded his sense of isolation and self-disdain.

I didn't know how I needed to act or what I was doing wrong. I was so self-critical – I still am – I made sure I wasn't too femmy as I walked through the lunch room ..... I started stuttering....it got so bad that I stopped doing things with people – I shut down and started to eat a lot. I ended up getting pretty fat and depressed and had to drop out of swimming. I didn't come out of it until I got into the band.

**THEME 3;**    *I slowly gained self-confidence and competence through my experiences in theater and dance and began to accept my emerging gay identity.*

Like the other participants, Chris experienced the theater and music environment as supportive and non-threatening in high school (Kohut, 1971). He felt comfortable and had access to support he had not previously experienced. He began to feel less anxious and his depression lifted. In this way, Chris seemed to find a supportive, playful, nurturing environment in which he could begin to let himself be seen in less controlled circumstances (Winnicott, 1960).

My music teacher was great and the drama coach got me involved in school musicals. She was my biggest fan. I did shows all through senior high school and my stuttering pretty much stopped. I actually had fun again and got great feedback from my parents and everyone in school....it was like I found the reason I was in that stupid school.

Chris's training at college improved his dance skills and he was exposed to other gay people. Again, Pine's (1982) position that the self-concept expands and evolves by new experiences in a cumulative way seems to be reflected in his narrative. During his

Early Adult Transition, he moved into his professional gay identities in ways that bolstered his esteem and self-concept. A new sense of his masculinity and connection to his body also was emerging as a result of his dance experiences.

Dance became more and more my focus and I that got noticed from teachers in school. I worked my ass off and my dancing got stronger. I liked what I saw in the mirror and I kept on improving my body and technique. I didn't feel like such a sissy anymore – for the first time I saw that I was masculine – I was treated that way. I knew that if I kept it up I could really get somewhere.

Chris was hired as an apprentice for a ballet company and had positive interactions with other gay men which allowed for his first sexual experience.

I met Travis and got know guys who were completely fine with [being gay]. They were hilariously funny and said whatever they wanted. They seemed cultured, sophisticated – it was exciting. That's when I first slept with a guy. I thought he was the person I'd be with the rest of my life – it didn't.

As Schiemann (1994) found in his research on gay men, pursuing a certain career can serve a compensatory factor in the life of a gay man. For Chris, it was as if he found a professional affiliation which allowed for some integration of his sexuality and challenging his negative assumptions about his compromised masculinity.

### **Life as a Dancer**

THEME 1: *I struggled in New York to find my place as a professional performer and often felt discouraged by the competition.*

At twenty-three, Chris found the ballet world too constricting and focused again on musical theater and Broadway. The transition into musical theater was daunting and it took Chris several years to establish a professional identity.

I worked hard to fit into the ballet mold of that school but it began to feel so uptight. I wanted musicals and Broadway. It was hard, though, hard to break in because I was non-union. I took lots of jazz and tap classes and picked up tips on what to wear at auditions

and everything from friends. I really paid my dues. I took out-of-town jobs and after a couple of years I finally got my Equity card in stock.

It was clear from the narrative that Chris was developing an occupational Dream by this point (Levinson, 1978). It seems, though, that his goals were more in response to feeling a part of a validating environment than a clear passion for dance or performing. Over time, it seems that Chris developed a more specific passion for making it to Broadway which became the organizing source of his Dream. Super's (1990) career development perspective captures part of Chris's experience of crystallizing his career focus and developing his dance skills toward that goal.

I was going to make it work for myself – you know? I just had to hang in there longer than most people. I really wanted to be part of it all – the magic of it. I don't know if it was the dancing really but performing was the main thing feeding me.

**THEME 2**    *My relationship failed because neither of us was willing to forgo professional opportunities to focus on building a life together.*

Chris's six-year relationship was taxed by their extended time separated on the road for months at time in shows. The allure of James's professional status and family wealth enticed Chris. Ultimately, however, after an affair, the two could not commit to remaining in one place long enough to work on their problems.

James and I were together for six years but he was too much for me. Tons of experience, his family was loaded – I think I just wanted to be associated with all that. We both spent so much time out on the road though, I mean, how can you do it? The road ruins more relationships. Neither one of us could say no to a job – it came down to me maintaining my career – never mind the money part. We finally just broke up because neither one of us were at that point in our lives to try to stay in New York more.

Again, McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) research suggests that the gay couple is challenged by social norms which heterosexual couples may not experience in the same

way. Like Stan, Chris's relationship was unable to survive the travails of road life. The expectation that men in this culture be independent, autonomous and financially stable may have played a factor the couple's inability to consider working on the relationship more.

**THEME 3**     *My first big touring show renewed my hope and confidence and helped me come out to my family.*

At age thirty, Chris was hired for a major national tour. He felt an increased sense of competence and an acceptance into the world he longed to be a part of.

I was finally hired for the tour of "CATs". My big break at thirty! That job totally changed my life for seven years I was out there—it really gave me my career. I got to travel and had money for the first time. My parents came to see me on the road and I finally made them proud of me....I'm sure that had something to do it ....I had the guts to come back and got the Broadway show I wanted.

In a tangible way Chris felt his life change and confidence increase through his association to "CATs". This, in turn, allowed him to reveal previously shameful parts of his self to some of his family. However, his unresolved relationship with his father has made it difficult for him to come out completely. At age thirty-three, Chris finally disclosed to his sister that he was gay. This led to his mother finding out and, eventually, his father. Chris found "relief" in his family knowing but continues to find it a difficult subject to discuss with his parents (Cass, 1979).

My sister and her husband came to visit me on the road so I finally came out to her and told her about all the shit with James. She was pretty great about but then went back and told my mom! I got a call from my mom crying hysterically crying that I'd get AIDS or die alone. I was mad at my sister for "outing me" but it did feel much lighter afterwards. My mom told my dad but we've never talked about it. I think he's OK with it but I'd like to talk more about it. It's not a subject that comes up a lot.



Chris could be described as being in Cass's (1979) fourth stage, *identity acceptance*, with his family and the fifth stage, *identity pride*, among his peers and colleagues. This, again, suggests that gay identity development and coming to terms with it are nonlinear and context specific for some men.

### **Changes in Career and Transition**

**THEME 1**     *I'm at a fork in the career road but haven't had to choose any particular direction.*

Chris has not yet been compelled to consider alternate directions and acknowledged his wish to dance in one more Broadway show. He admitted there would be a fork in the road with choices to make. His description is consistent with those self-reflective aspects of Levinson's (1978) Mid-Life Transition but he is not prepared to initiate change for himself.

I've been lucky because I'm injury-free really. I'd like to dance in at least one more show and I think I still have it in me. I am at a fork in the road but don't know where to go. I'll have to make some choices soon. Either get off my ass and get an agent and go for it or consider doing something else. I don't know what I could do at this point in my life.

As Ogilvie & Taylor (1994) suggested, athletes may not elect to transition on their own, but rather, wait until an external force pushes them out. In this way, while Chris recognized the possibility of an eventual transition, he is not forced to decide or move in any direction now. It is as if Chris cannot consider beginning to work toward a new career or revise his Dream (Levinson, 1978) until he can no longer perform.

**THEME 2**     *I feel like my openness about my sexual orientation has provided opportunities and placed limitations on my career.*

Like the previous participants, Chris also recently experienced a shift in how open about his homosexuality he can be professionally. Up to a certain point in his career he felt accepted and supported, but over time, mixed reactions to his homosexuality in the business have left him confused and contributed to his growing disappointment.

I think that being gay helped me at first in the business and auditioning for gay choreographers and directors sometimes was flirtatious. I used my sexuality to get jobs. But now it's frustrating - being open has held me back as an actor. Being gay or straight shouldn't effect whether you get hired or not – but it does. The business is murky about what's professional and what's private.

In some ways, Chris is limited in his career choices as a result of where he is in his gay development (Cass, 1979). Remaining part of the “gay-friendly” is important to him but realizing its limitations has left him confused about what is professional and what is private for him. While his initial inclusion in the theater world seemed to facilitate his coming out process and greater self-acceptance, it now seems to be inhibiting alternative possibilities.

In sum, Chris's narrative presents many of similar themes already commented upon in the previous narratives. While aspects of his childhood experiences included being feeling marginalized and different, he developed an early sense of himself as the performer in the family in response to family conflicts. He had little sense of competence or academic success throughout much of his childhood. He described experiences in music and theater as validating and giving him recognition. He responded to encouragement from others which gradually became an organizing vision for himself. Like Jonas, Chris described an emerging sense of himself as masculine through the physicality of the rigorous dance training he received. He made reference to the mirror in

dance class as reflecting how far he had come both physically witnessing his masculine form ,and emotionally, in meeting the challenge of the training demands.

In his early twenties, he became more focused on dance and was able to establish an initial life structure (Levinson, 1978) once he moved to New York. Like the others, the individuation process inherent in that move allowed for further identity development. Making accommodations in his career expectations led him to pursue musical theater and find a community he eventually felt a part of in a meaningful way. The formation of a clear passion for dance was less evident than in other narratives with regard to his occupational Dream and seemed more a function of his finding a place where he felt comfortable and accepted for who he was. His current job on Broadway provides both security and newfound professional status. Chris experienced his increased professional status and respect relatively later than the previous two participants did, and while his job lacks inspiration or professional challenges he does not have a specific plan to change or move on. It is as if until he is forced out of his position he will not think purposefully about change. His stagnation and limited ability to develop ideas for a future career beyond performing is consistent with both previous narratives.

## THE LIFE OF DWAYNE

*I was referred to Dwayne through a mutual friend who described him to me as "one angry gay chorus boy." Over the phone I described the study and was clear that the participants were gay male dancers who were approaching or in mid-life. I met with Dwayne in his small, stark studio apartment on Manhattan's Upper Westside. The apartment contained a single chair, a platform bed that served as the couch, a round marble table and a single, abstract painting hanging on the wall. There were no work-related, personal or family photos on display. Initially, Dwayne seemed guarded about discussing his personal life despite our preliminary phone conversation. He immediately asked why I assumed he was gay. I told him that by agreeing to participate I assumed that he identified as such, but that I remained interested in his experiences if he wanted to continue the interview. He agreed to participate.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm 46 years old and have been dancing on Broadway for the past twenty-three years. I've been in the same Broadway show for the past four years, which is the longest I've stayed with one show. I was part of the original company and we won the Tony Award for Best Musical. It's sad to be part of something that was so incredible and was created out of pure love that has now gone so wrong. I'm not satisfied with where I am in my career and feel stuck. The heart of the show has been lost over the various incarnations of untalented leading ladies. The black and white of our show is gone – the life or death of it has been so watered down. There's nothing to hold onto creatively. There are very few of us original cast members left and no connection to the core of the show. I feel like a whore because I'm just riding this sucker out until it dies. What I love

most about good theater is its ability to challenge people while they think they're only being entertained. I love working with smart choreographers because they fuck with people's minds and challenge their thinking by revealing the dark side in all of us. We all have our demons – but I love the darker side of the shows I've been part of.

I consider myself an artist in every sense of the word. I express it on stage as an actor and dancer, and on canvas in my painting. That's my most recent painting there (*points to painting*). It speaks to where I am right now – confused and waiting to begin the real work. Theater and painting are two areas that have always fed my soul. The two worlds don't go together. I love to stay up until 6 am to finish a painting but that conflicts with getting up for a matinee. In that way the show also keeps me from expressing my creativity on canvas as well. Physically, I don't feel any different than I did 20 years ago. I have aches and pains but they go away. I haven't had any major injuries but it's a constant struggle and it takes everything I have emotionally to perform eight times a week. I don't do much else except the show because I don't have the energy to socialize. I see a few friends but stay to myself mostly.

I'm not in a primary sexual relationship but I do have sex – mainly with men. Sex usually happens spontaneously and it doesn't develop into some relationship. It's a thing I do and not who I am. I don't think of myself as a gay man because labels are so confining. I don't like labels and calling oneself "gay" is pigeonholing. Who cares who puts what where? I've had sex with women and men and never found a label helpful. I'm more than what a label can describe. I don't hold it against people who do call themselves "gay" but it seems too confining and pat to me. I need the freedom to be with whomever I want, whenever I want.

I don't consider myself a "chorus boy." I always find a character and my reason for dancing that step which I learned from my mentor many years ago. I would like to direct but there's so much pressure now to come up with a blockbuster hit that there's no room to create. It's intimidating so I move away from the whole idea and withdraw from the challenges. I'm not feeling particularly fulfilled in any area right now.

I'm very close with my mother and speak to her regularly but don't stay in touch with my family otherwise. My father died eight years ago and my mother has since remarried. Much of my creativity comes from my mother who was a ballerina but I got my brains and my affinity for the darker side of life from my father. I'm glad my mother has someone in her life and has someone to go out dancing and to entertain. She's something – even now at age 74 she teaches dance five nights a week.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I grew up in the upper Midwest in a typical, American neighborhood. It was a small family - just me, my older brother and my parents. My parent's story of how they met and fell in love is like a fairy tale. My mother was born in Germany and was a stunning ballerina before the war. She was famous over there but wanted to leave because of Hitler and the Nazis. My dad was a life insurance salesman and they met when he went over during the war on business. He watched a ballet performance of hers and asked to meet her afterwards. He spoke no German and she spoke no English but they fell in love and he brought her back to the states. She began teaching dance at a local dance studio but never really became 'American-ized.'

I never made a conscious decision to become a dancer, it was just meant to be. By age four I was already dancing around with my mom in our living room. My creativity comes from her and we were tied through our mutual love for dance and the

arts. Imagine dancing with this star ballerina in your living room – how great is that? I loved dancing with her as a young boy. We also spent time drawing and painting together. I felt different as a child but I think that goes with being an artist and creative. As I got older I got into acrobatics because my dad and brother would make fun of me for dancing around the house.

My father was quiet and sedate - just a dream father. He was very handsome and masculine and was a very calming presence to all of us. He knew everything about everything and was a voracious reader. I could go to him with any question and he'd know the answer. My mom was the extrovert. She was the life of every party and he used to love to watch her hold court and entertain at parties. I loved watching him watch her. My mom turned every situation into a good time. She dressed great, danced great and people loved her – they still do.

I don't have many memories of my childhood but I didn't have many friends. In school, I was only an average student. I never loved it and wasn't particularly committed to learning. I'm not stupid but I was afraid of standing out or drawing attention to myself, so I did the bare minimum. I was always a nervous little kid – afraid of being beaten up or made fun of. I went with my mom to the dance studio where she taught class each day. It felt safe there. I like the studio setting and I learned from her demonstrations for the class. She also bought a paint set and a blank canvas for me and told me I could create whatever I wanted. I began painting and have continued ever since.

My older brother and I didn't get along very well. I was different and he picked up on that. I wasn't good at team sports – I'm more individualistic. As artists we're

more sensitive as kids and I got teased about wanting to dance or being creative – especially by him. He used to beat me up and called me a ‘fag’ – what a horrible word. He told me he was ashamed to be my brother. He was interested in planes and more typically American boy activities. That’s so American - as if to be creative and artistic is feminine or homosexual. As a kid, I was just trying to cope with being here on earth – I didn’t think I fit in anywhere. Few artists do.

Once I hit adolescence things sort of fell apart. I had girlfriends but I was confused about my sexuality. I thought I was the only twelve year-old in the world who was attracted to other boys. I started to hang around city parks and gay pick-up spots. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for but older guys started giving me blow jobs and playing with me. It culminated when I was raped at age thirteen. I thought it was completely my fault and I carried that around for years. I don’t remember much except that he was much older and I didn’t know him. It was a violent and awful experience and I’ve patterned my relationships with men after that experience. I’ve gravitated toward older men who in some way abused me. I started doing drugs in high school. I couldn’t cope with those feelings and felt too ashamed to discuss it with anyone. I used drugs on and off for the next 20 years.

When I was fourteen my mother brought me to take ballet classes with a Russian instructor she knew. I channeled my energies into using my body in a creative way. I remember seeing myself in the mirror in class and feeling disconnected to myself – not believing it was really me. I didn’t look like the faggot my brother thought I was. I had a masculine shape and I could move with grace and like a man. I had natural ability and my teacher encouraged me to push myself. He was strict but I needed that to get solid



technique. I was accepted into a summer program at a major ballet company here in New York. For the next two summers I shuttled back and forth between New York to Texas. It was the first time I was in New York and I absolutely loved it. My mother loved it because she came with me and it got her out of Texas. I was singled out by the teachers which planted the seeds of doing it professionally.

My mother was proud of me – I'm not so sure about my dad because he never came to visit. It felt very empowering to be in New York and I grew up quickly during those summers. I fooled around with a couple of boys in the class and became very close with one in particular. Now, I would consider it a crush, but at the time I just wanted to hang around him and be close to him. He wasn't into boys and told me, 'just cause we're dancers doesn't mean we're faggots!' That stuck with me. I struggled through high school just waiting for the summers when I could go back to New York.

My father wanted me to attend college. I reluctantly agreed and enrolled in a small private college in the middle of Nowhere, TX. I went back to doing drugs and kept to myself. I choreographed small, local shows and saw touring productions that came through town. I was eagerly anticipating leaving Texas. I became involved in a two-year relationship with an older man who was abusive toward me. I think I stayed in that relationship because I always confuse sex and love. The sex was great but it was not a loving relationship. I think there's a real difference between them. Between my brother always beating me up and the childhood rape, I was always drawn to abusive, older men. I didn't know how to love – I still don't.

### **Life as a Dancer**

At twenty-two, I moved to New York having not graduated college– just 3 credits short of finishing my degree. I have no idea why but I had to get out Texas. I moved to New York and absolutely loved it. I had seen the original productions of “Chorus Line” and “Chicago” and wanted to be part of that world! My first month in New York I auditioned for a well-known choreographer, who later became a mentor, and he hired me for his new show. I didn’t understand the importance of that audition until I was in the business much longer. From that show on, I had a wonderful relationship with him. I became associated and identified with his style of dance. I was driven, driven, driven to be the best and achieve the most I could for him. He was a workaholic and I admired his ability to shut out all distractions when he was working. He understood me and identified with me because he had been a blonde haired boy-dancer at one time too. He also saw the potential in me to do more.

I went crazy in New York those first couple of years. I was among the top dancers in New York in a hit show. The show was a trip – 16 dance divas – a very intense group of people. We did a lot of drugs during that show just to get the energy to get through the grueling schedule grind. Drug use was never recreational for me but a way of coping with life. I tried to squeeze two days out of one. I finally had free reign to be whoever I wanted to be with whomever I wanted. It was 1978 and anything was OK. I had sex with men, women – it was a blast and no one was keeping tabs on me. I felt free and didn’t have to account to anyone about who I chose to be with. At that point I probably would have described myself as gay and people knew me in that way. Backstage was exciting and crazy and personalities were sometimes out of control.

I left that show after two years and joined a small ballet company here in New York. It was something I had always dreamed of and didn't want to pass up the opportunity. I met John, the ballet master for the company, and we were involved in a primary relationship for the next six years. He was amazing and worked with me to craft my ballet technique. John was the best dancer I've ever known. It was a love relationship where the creative and the sexual were fused for me. John and I moved in together and, while it wasn't completely known to everyone, most of my friends knew about our relationship. We had friends together and I even introduced him to my father. I never told my parents the extent of our relationship. For the first time I felt like my insides matched my outsides - meaning I didn't have anything to hide. I left the company after the first year because the pay was so terrible and went back to auditioning for shows but John and I remained connected.

I did other Broadway shows and remained close with my mentor and his wife. By this point my mentor was at the top of his career and world-famous for his innovative vision in theater and movies. Throughout my late twenties, he continued to cast me in shows and I always had plenty of work. I toured the world and was his "golden boy." People envied me and wanted to tear me down my whole life for the way I looked or the professional relationships I had.

By the time I was thirty, my relationship with John had become more of a friendship. We were both busy with our careers and we grew apart sexually. He told me he wanted a 'normal life' with a wife and kids and saw no future in a relationship with a man. It hurt me because I thought we had a normal life. He married a woman in his

ballet company and had two kids. We never lost touch but in retrospect it broke my heart.

When I was thirty-four, John was murdered in a random act of violence – a street robbery and he was shot and killed. It was completely devastating and my world shattered. I just shut down. At the time I was doing a revival of a Broadway show for my mentor when he suffered a massive coronary and also died. The two most important men in my life were gone within 6 months of each other and I was blown away. At the funeral my mentor's widow told me that he had recently been disappointed in me. I had not carried on the torch for him like he had hoped. He had wanted me to carry on his choreography but I hadn't. I was crushed. I never had much confidence in myself and I'd disappointed him, too. I stayed with the show for a while but made a decision to leave New York and show business altogether.

### **Changes in Career**

At thirty-five, I moved to Los Angeles with the intention of leaving the business to focus on my painting. I couldn't paint and became a recluse. I was still dealing with the loss of John and my mentor when I met Gretchen, a wonderful woman from Germany. I agreed to marry her so she could stay in the U.S. We became good friends and eventually lovers. I hadn't been with a woman since my early twenties but found her open and warm. Sex is a funny thing, though. I could never be exclusive in any one relationship. Gretchen couldn't understand that I needed my sexual freedom. We also had financial problems so I began working as a dancer in television and videos in Los Angeles. Over the next few years I worked in LA but was increasingly dissatisfied with the business.

My father died suddenly when I was thirty-nine and that was very difficult. My mother was devastated so I went to stay with her in Texas for a few months. I never had as close of a relationship with my father or spent as much time with him as I would have liked. When I returned to LA, I woke up one morning and said 'this marriage isn't for me and I can't do this.' I took off for Hawaii and went through the rest of my savings. I divorced Gretchen. I called my agent and moved back to my New York apartment. It felt surprisingly good to be back in New York. It was great to see old friends and be back home.

Eventually, I got a call for a new Broadway show and took it for the money. I felt like I got sucked back into nine months of a pre-Broadway tour. I was hired to dance in the ensemble and to understudy the lead in a show scheduled to come into Broadway. The star of the show and I worked closely together and we became friends. We had similar backgrounds and we became involved sexually. As fate had it, he broke his ankle a week before we were scheduled to come into New York and the show was cancelled. The producers couldn't chance coming into New York with *me* as the lead. I'm still very close with him and his sister – my newly adopted family.

At forty-two, I assisted a friend on a revival of our mentor's shows. The creative process of putting that together was invigorating and helped me to work out having disappointed him. That was four years ago and I've been with the show ever since. Unfortunately, it's sad to see what has happened with the show. The show has turned into this revolving door of leading ladies who get the job as long as they fit into the costumes. Broadway is primarily for women, anyway – men are only up there to support them.

I don't feel like I ever came into my own or fulfilled my potential. Eventually, I'd like to direct. You put all this work into a creative project which comes from a loving place and WHAM! You get knocked down. The papers slaughter you and you're left without anything. I feel like I'm hiding in the business now and afraid to put myself out there. I have an obligation to my mentor and the Broadway community to try to get out there as a director. I'm not willing to compromise my artistic integrity whether it's on canvas or onstage and that's a problem in America. I can't go back to being optimistic and naïve again. I have become more cynical but that's been a result of so many attacks and disappointments.

I don't know where I'll be in the future. As far as relationships go, who knows who I'll end up with? I might still be performing unless I can push myself to start directing. There are all of these parts of myself that aren't being used. They're inside of me afraid of being decimated by the critics.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

As with previous narratives, Dwayne illustrates how an early investment in dance and the arts became an important part of his self-experience, however, there is little recognition or insight into his choice of career or relationship patterns. It seems that Dwayne's difficulties in childhood and adolescence affected his development in ways that were difficult to remedy during adulthood. In the following section, "I" themes are presented with raw data quotes and references to existing literature which informed the analysis.

### **Current Life Situation:**

THEME 1: *I consider myself an artist in every sense of the word but I'm stuck feeling like a whore and unable to realize my full potential.*

At forty-six, Dwayne described himself as an artist at his core but finds himself feeling like a "whore" and "stuck" in his job. Dwayne's artistry and creativity are expressed both in his dancing and his painting.

I really consider myself an artist in every sense of the word. I'm an actor, dancer, and painter....that's my painting there (points out painting). It's the stuck feeling I have of being or waiting to go out and begin the real work – directing. Theater and painting are two ways of feeding my soul and really keep me going even when everything goes to shit.

Dwayne's narrative represented his life as dominated by profound dissatisfaction and paranoia. At least part of Dwayne's frustration seems related to a sense of feeling like an outsider: persecuted, powerlessness and stagnant. There is a sense that what was good and fulfilling has been lost and destroyed and he is held back from realizing his potential.

I would like to direct but I feel there's too much pressure now to come up with a blockbuster hit that there's no room to create. It's intimidating so I move away from the whole idea and withdraw.

It sucks to be part of a show that was so incredible and created out of pure love....the best part of the show is lost...the black and white of our show is gone – the life or death of it is watered down. There's nothing to hold on to creatively and only a few of us left from the original company so there's almost no core to the show. The producers are really to blame. I mean they just stick any woman up there on that stage and most of them don't have what it takes. That holds me back and brings creativity to a stand still. It's just not the same and I feel like a whore because I'm just going to ride this sucker out until it dies.

Compounding his current frustrations is his sense that he remains as capable of the physical demands of a professional dancer as he ever was. There is a disconnect between his dance abilities and his growing out of his 'all-American' good looks and his desire to be taken seriously as an artist.

I feel stuck – I'm doing the same type of work as I did 20 years ago. It's infuriating to be in the ensemble because my dancing is still as good as ever, I mean, I get aches and pains but they go away. I'll know when I can't do it anymore – believe me I've seen it happen. I haven't had any injuries.

Dwayne's frustration is important in understanding what is dynamically active in the present for him. His inability to move forward as a director suggests that his fear of criticism and failure outweigh his desire for growth and challenge. Maslow (1962) and Valliant (1977) proposed that life events provide the individual opportunities for choice between growth and safety and that healthy development occurs in response to these key events. Rather than dealing with possible physical or emotional limitations, it seems less deflating to project his self-doubt and criticism outwards (Jacques, 1965).

**THEME 2:** *I don't identify as 'gay' because I reject all one-dimensional labels that pigeonhole me.*



Dwayne admitted to primarily having same-sex relations for the majority of his adult life, his aversion to being labeled “gay” was evident. According to conventional authors, (Cass, 1979, Isay, 1989) Dwayne’s impulsive, anonymous sexual behaviors indicate an inability to integrate his homosexuality. Maylon’s (1982a) notion of internalized negative social attitudes and internalized homophobia seems particularly evident in Dwayne’s narrative. Dwayne’s inability to integrate his homosexuality seems to be an obvious theme throughout his adult life. These descriptions seem consistent with Dwayne’s narrative and part of his ongoing rigid defensive structure.

That’s funny because I never said I was gay. I mean. I do have sex with men but I don’t think of myself as a gay. Labels are so confining. I don’t like labels because it’s pigeonholing me. Who cares who puts what where? I’ve had sex with women and men. I’m more than what a label is. I need the freedom to be with whoever I want, whenever I want.

Dwayne also shuns the labels of “chorus” or “ensemble” performers which evoke similar reactions in him.

I hate that phrase ‘chorus boy’ - I don’t consider myself a “chorus boy” or in the “ensemble” and never did. I’ve *danced* in the ensemble but I always find a character and my reason for dancing that step. Being a chorus boy implies being stupid and malleable and that’s totally insulting.

One could posit that by rejecting identity labels, Dwayne may be resisting enculturation much like Maslow’s (1962) notion that self-actualizing individuals resist classification and refuse to conform to expectations of others. Maslow’s definition, however, includes a unity in the personality, which fosters expressiveness and integration of the person’s identity. Throughout Dwayne’s narrative, disintegration between what is personal and what is professional was evident. His need to keep love and sex, good and bad, painting and dance separated are indicative of his overall tendency to split. This

raises the question of the Dwayne's overall identity formation and how rejecting labels may serve his narcissistic investment of remaining on the outside.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

THEME 1: *As a child I had a sense that I was different and was teased because I was a creative artist.*

Consistent with previous narratives, Dwayne described various ways in which he felt "different" as a young boy. One of ways that he experienced difference was his inclination toward activities his mother enjoyed.

I felt different but I think that goes with being an artist and creative. As artists we're more sensitive and I got teased about dancing and painting....I danced with my mom in our living room and my creativity comes from her....I was closer to her because of our mutual love for the arts. I went to the studio when she taught dance classes – it felt safe there.

It seems that the ridicule he received for his creative interests from his brother and father contributed to an underlying sense of shame. Again, many of the themes in his narrative are consistent with previous narratives and the research in the gay developmental literature (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993 Bell, 1981; Green, 1987; Isay, 1989).

I was just trying to cope with being here on earth – I didn't think I fit in anywhere. Few artists do....I finally got into acrobatics because my dad and brother would make fun of me for dancing around the house. I don't have a lot of memories about my childhood.... My older brother used to beat me up a lot and called me a 'fag' – what a horrible word. He told me he was ashamed to be my brother. He was interested in planes and that's so American - as if to be creative and artistic is the same as being feminine or homosexual.

The notion of Dwayne feeling like a minority in his own family (de Monteflores, 1986) seems particularly important as we examine his self-experiences.

**THEME 2:** *I secretly longed for closeness and was sexually attracted to men as a child.*

Dwayne recalled early same-sex attractions by age twelve and his feelings about his father. His idealizing description of his father had romantic qualities and seems consistent with Isay's model (1996, 1989). Dwayne later felt teased and rejected by his father which may contribute to poor self-esteem. Dwayne wanted to be closer to his father and seemed to identify and, perhaps, envy his mother's ability to capture his attention.

My father was quiet and sedate - just a dream father. He was very handsome and masculine and was very calming and reassuring....I wish we had been closer but I don't know how much he really liked being around me. Mom was an extrovert. She dressed great, danced great and people loved her - the life of every party and he used to love to watch her hold court and entertain at parties. I loved watching him watch her.

In adolescence, Dwayne was raped by an older man which confirmed feelings of shame and guilt for same-sex desires he had struggled with until that point.

It was a violent awful experience and I thought it was completely my fault because in some way I secretly longed for it. I didn't know what was going on with me but it all became too much for me. I was confused about my sexuality. Being attracted to boys felt unnatural. I carried that shame around for years.

Dwayne attributed his later patterns of drug abuse and becoming involved with older abusive men to that rape.

I was devastated by [the rape] but I put it out of my mind and I started taking amphetamines and downers. I didn't like all the feelings I was having and felt too ashamed to discuss it with anyone. I used drugs on and off for the next 20 years but it's how I got through all of that shit. All my relationships with men were like that and I gravitated toward older men who in some way or another abused me.

**THEME 3:** *I was exposed to ballet and dance early on but formal training helped me gain control during a difficult period.*

Dwayne's narrative traces his enjoyment of his mother's ballet classes back to early childhood as described above. In high school Dwayne formally developed his dance skills which helped him feel more self-assured and gain a greater sense of control. He also described how the use of the mirror in dance class altered his sense of himself as a man.

I started taking ballet classes from a Russian teacher my mother knew. I liked the structure of ballet –the beauty of the lines, knowing that if I worked at it I could master the technique. I couldn't believe what I saw in the mirror – I didn't really think it was me. I wasn't the faggot my brother said I was. I could be an artist and a man. I saw myself in that mirror everyday and it did change how I thought about my body. I loved being able to use my body and felt so free to jump and turn and leap – I think I got a lot of feelings out in that studio. I had natural ability and it felt good to have some recognition finally.

Dwayne continued to feel encouraged and empowered by his experiences in dance. His acceptance into a scholarship program in New York fulfilled both his and his mother's ambitions. It also served to sew the seeds of becoming a professional dancer.

At 15 I was accepted into a summer program at [a major ballet company] and that felt amazing. It was the first time I was in New York and I absolutely loved it. My mother loved it because it got her out of Texas. I was encouraged by the teachers to continue my ballet training and probably the seeds of doing this professionally were planted.

The dance scholarships during high school which brought him to New York were tied to his mother's investment in his talent in dance. These experiences could be seen as Dwayne establishing an early occupational Dream (Levinson, 1978), however, he failed to establish an autonomous, viable internal vision of himself as dancer. He described it more as just "meant to be" and not of his conscious doing. Part of his inclination toward dance, then, seems to have been driven more by his mother's needs and less from his inherent desire.

## **Life as a Dancer**

**THEME 1:**     *Shortly after moving to New York I was adopted into my mentor's group of dancers and launched into a new, exciting life.*

Dwayne's Early Adult Transition (Levinson, 1978) and initial life structure consisted of becoming closely identified with powerful male figures. Dropping out of college just three credits short of a BA, Dwayne moved to New York to pursue his professional aspirations in dance. Within one month, he was hired by a world-renowned director/choreographer for a new show. Like the other participants, he experienced the move as a liberation from his family and hometown constraints around sexuality. At that point, then, Dwayne did identify himself as gay and was establishing some type of positive gay identity consistent with Cass's (1979) stage of *identity acceptance*.

I needed to get away from home and I felt free and didn't have to answer to anyone. I went crazy in New York after being hired for that show. I was with all these top dancers in it. We did a lot of drugs just to get the energy to get through it....I finally had free reign to be whoever I wanted to be with whoever I wanted. I was with men, women – it was a blast and no one was keeping tabs on me. I probably would have called myself gay then but that changed.

The mentoring relationship continued for many years and Dwayne was provided some stability, job opportunities and possible career development. In this way, Dwayne had a mentor in the way that Levinson (1978) described, which is unique to his narrative thus far in the data presentation.

He continued to use me in all of his other shows over the years. He and his wife were amazing to me. He was such a class act – I really learned a lot from him. He had his demons and that's what I liked about him – he didn't sugar coat things. They really took me under their wings and gave me every opportunity in almost every show they were involved in. I regret not pursuing some of what he offered as far as following in his footsteps – and guilty because that's what he wanted too.

**THEME 2**     *The loss of both my ex-lover and my mentor turned my personal and professional worlds upside down.*

During his early twenties, Dwayne was involved in an emotional and sexual relationship that allowed him access to explore his same-sex desires in a more intimate manner. Dwayne's ballet career was brief but the six-year relationship had a significant impact on him.

I met John he was the ballet master and we were in a primary relationship for the next six years. I would say it was the only time I had it all in one person – love and sex. It was a love relationship where the creative and the sexual were fused for me. John and I were connected.

Dwayne accepted the inherent goodness of the same-sex relationship. It was a relationship that allowed him to accept and integrate his loving feelings toward another man. John's abrupt decision to marry a woman, however, hurt Dwayne and may have precluded him from further integrating a positive gay identity.

When both his ex-lover was murdered and his mentor died, within months of each other, Dwayne was left without any of the warm, male support he had come to rely upon.

John was murdered in this freakish act of violence – a street robbery where he was shot and killed. It shattered my world and I just shut down. I checked out and started using drugs again. A few months later, I was doing a revival of a Broadway show with my mentor when he suffered a massive coronary and died in the midst rehearsals.

After the funeral, Dwayne was shocked to learn that he had disappointed his mentor. He was unable to cope with remaining in the business and moved to Los Angeles.

At the funeral [his widow] told me that he had been disappointed in me. I had not carried on the torch for him and he had wanted me to apprentice him and carry on his choreography. I was crushed. I'd disappointed him, too. The two most important men in my life were gone with 6 months of each other and I was blown away.

## **Changes in Career**

**THEME 1**     *I distanced myself from the sadness of losing my mentor and lover.*

At thirty-five, after losing both his ex-lover and his mentor, Dwayne moved to Los Angeles and intended to make a living as a painter. His profound sadness and depression prevented Dwayne from working through the conflicted relationships with each of them.

I had definitely had enough of the Broadway scene and needed a break. I really thought I could leave once and for all but it wasn't meant to be. I moved to LA and intended on leaving the business to paint. I couldn't paint no matter how hard I tried and became a recluse. There were days when I couldn't get out of bed never mind painting.

His marriage to a German woman became yet another escape from the painful losses of his former lover and mentor. In this way he split off both show business and his relationship history for a time. The relationship was also significant for its tie to his German-born mother marrying his father and moving to America.

I met and married this amazing woman from Germany. We met through a friend and she needed to get married to stay here. We became good friends and so I said OK - eventually we even became lovers. I hadn't been with a woman for a long time but she was open and warm really funny and the life of the party. I really tried to make it work too.

During the marriage, Dwayne felt a need to have sex with men outside the marriage. When Dwayne's father died he decided to end the marriage and return to New York.

Sex is a funny thing, though, I could never be exclusive in any one relationship. She couldn't understand that I needed sexual freedom. My father died suddenly when I was thirty-nine and that was hard. I never had the relationship with him as I wanted....I woke up one morning and said 'this marriage isn't for me and I can't do this.' I called my New York agent and moved back to my New York apartment and my real life.

**THEME 2:**     *Returning to the business was reassuring but I was quickly thrust back into a series of frustrating work environments.*

At age forty, Dwayne felt that he was pulled back into performing. Upon his return to New York, he found the familiarity warm and reassuring. He once again became involved with a powerful male director/choreographer and became part of another 'family.'

I got sucked back into it. It was great to see old friends and be back home but I had to go out on tour for nine months, when I was hired to dance in the ensemble and to understudy [the lead] in a show coming to Broadway. [The star] and I worked closely together and became involved in a primary sexual relationship. It was fantastic and frustrating. I'm really part of his family and still close with him and his sister. We still see each other a lot and I still consider them my adopted family.

The producers were small-minded and didn't understand our creative process. He broke his ankle and the show was cancelled. The producers weren't coming into New York with *me* as the lead.

In sum, Dwayne's narrative is similar to the others in his early sense of difference and narcissistic vulnerabilities. The fact that he was raped at thirteen while cruising gay pick-up spots certainly contributed to his on-going sexual difficulties. His connection to dance and artistic expression is intimately connected to his relationship with his mother. Ballet and dance seemed to provide a safe place for him to begin to "channel" his confusing feelings where he experienced himself as both "graceful" and "masculine." He used the mirror in dance class to see for himself that he was not a "faggot" which for him meant feminine. His occupational Dream was not clearly focused on dance or performing, though, and seemed more related to "getting out" of Texas.

Upon moving to New York, Dwayne explored his sexuality with a renewed sense of freedom in the context of his burgeoning career as a dancer. These events are consistent with Coleman's (1982) *exploration* stage and Cass's (1979) *identity comparison* which both involve sexual experimentation and increased social involvement with other gay people. At different times over the course of his life he has fluctuated in



his ability to accept his primary sexual attraction toward men. In his mid-thirties, the loss of both his ex-lover and his mentor within six months, initiated a crisis. He “left the business” and moved to Los Angeles in an attempt to cut himself off from the pain of the loss, however was “sucked back in” due to financial reasons.

In similar ways to the previous participants, Dwayne seems unable to transition despite voicing his profound disappointment and dissatisfaction with his career. His sense of feeling stagnate seems to be related to the degree to which he is invested in remaining hidden in the business and protected from critics. According to Jacques’s (1981, 1965) theory of developmental positions, paranoid-schizoid mechanisms such as splitting, paranoia, and the inability to experience integrated whole objects operate while the individual is in early adulthood. Dwayne reported feeling persecuted and envied by others throughout his career. In this way, his early adulthood defenses which may have contributed to his professional success have not given way to a more integrated, mature experience of himself or the world. It also allows him to maintain his unique status as a tortured “artist.” Consistent with the other narratives, with no physical injuries and an ongoing sense that he will continue to dance, it seems unlikely that Dwayne will consider an alternative with real conviction at this point.

## THE LIFE OF JEFFREY

*I interviewed Jeffrey on two occasions, both of which had to be rescheduled more than once. I had met Jeffrey through mutual friends and he had the reputation of being a very talented dancer but undisciplined and erratic. When I contacted him by phone to explain the study, he was open and receptive to being interviewed but was unsure whether he would have anything significant to contribute to the study. From the beginning I had a sense I was sitting with a much younger, less experienced individual than the other participants. He was somewhat overweight and dressed in clingy "club attire." While the interviews were conducted in the spring, there were Christmas decorations scattered around the apartment.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'll only say that I'm in my late thirties. I'm in show business and I don't have to tell my age. I'm completely satisfied with my life in almost every way. I have a great job – I'm in a hit Broadway show which I've been in for the past four years. It's an honor to be able to do what I love and have a passion for. My body was born to dance and I can't imagine a time that I won't dance. I've done many Broadway shows and never get tired of it. I get positive feedback from the theater management about my work and I'm lucky to be in such a great show. It's where I want to be. I'm well liked at the theater and would describe myself as optimistic and friendly. I avoid fights or arguments at any expense – I just can't deal with conflict. I'm lucky because I haven't ever had any injuries. I'm not very ambitious and hate to audition, so I just ignore the business side of the business. I resent having to make something I love into a business.

Relationships between the cast members at the theater can become stressful after four years together. The people are jaded and resent my optimism. I'm one of the youngest in the cast which tells you how old everyone else is! I don't want to be around people who are mean or difficult so I avoid that energy. For the most part, I feel lucky to have this opportunity and feel I'm in a great place in my life right now. I'm happy and content with where I am both personally and professionally.

I've had a boyfriend, Ray, for the past three years and it's great to have a buddy to hang out with and who knows me the way others don't. He's an actor and really a beautiful guy. We don't live together because he's Catholic and comes from a religious family. Our sex life isn't as lively as it was when we were first going out but that's not the end of the world. Also, being gay, you never know how long a relationship is going to last – but I try not to think about that. In some ways I'm truly a loner.

My parents recently celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. My oldest brother brought his boyfriend and they danced together at the party. I was proud of my family for being able to handle it. Ray wasn't there because of work so I brought a girl friend of mine. I found out later my dad hoped that I was having sex with her and that maybe I wasn't gay after all. It hurt my feelings because it said to me that he still *hoped* that I was straight and not gay.

I don't like to look at the negative side of the business because I don't think there is one. The directors and choreographers have been patient and I've learned from each show. Even though doing eight shows a week is demanding, I compare it to a baseball player who doesn't feel like playing a game but does it anyway. The hard part is losing friends after a show closes and lining up work afterwards.

I'm a late bloomer in that I work more now in my late thirties than I did in my twenties. It's not supposed to work that way but my life has never been normal. My life has changed for the better over the past six years. I'm liked and respected and thought of as a hard worker. The biggest obstacle I've had to overcome is that I'm very shy and lack confidence. I struggle with my weight and still sometimes "party" too much. Overall, my life right now is how I want it to be in every way. The only other thing would be to have an acting career – maybe with time. If that doesn't work out I can always become a gardener.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I was raised on Long Island as Catholic and my parents are both German and Slavic. We were a popular family and lived in a neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else. There are four kids in my family and I'm the youngest. I always felt the love and support of my family when I was growing up. My two brothers were star athletes and my sister was the smart one. Being the youngest, my teachers expected me to be like my siblings but I wasn't.

I felt different as a kid and was made fun of because I loved to dance around and listen to the "West Side Story" album. I was a colorful kid and my straight buddies got a kick out of that fact that I had Anne Reinking's poster from "Dancin'" over my bed. I was very much into creating and making the neighborhood a fun place. I taught myself how to dance by watching movies and television as a kid. I practiced and memorized "West Side Story" in my bedroom for hours. Of course, I was made fun of and called names but it never bothered me.

My dad was a Vice President at a bank and my mom stayed at home. We were upper-middle class and never wanted for anything: trips, cars, clothes. My dad always

had time for us and was more like the traditional idea of a mom – very nurturing and loving to all of us. He's very out-going and my mother was quieter and less of an extrovert. My dad was into Broadway shows and always had albums playing when I was a kid – he's probably gay (*laughs*).

I have no clear memory of when I realized I was gay. It's something I always knew but didn't feel particularly bad about. I knew that being attracted to boys wasn't normal and I kept it to myself. When I was eight years old I remember looking at my camp counselor in the shower and thinking he was absolutely beautiful. I fooled around with a neighborhood friend when I was in grade school. I went to Catholic schools and just made average grades. I don't think I'm stupid but I was just not motivated. My siblings had clear careers goal from an early age and I didn't. I never thought about what I wanted to do or where I wanted my life to end up. I was involved in the moment and sensitive about what was going on around me. I was always aware of how I was coming across to others. I still fall into that as an adult.

I never chose to become a dancer - it chose me. I saw my first Broadway show, "Grease," when I was eleven but never dreamed that I'd be up there on a Broadway stage. I started to smoke pot in junior high school and fell in with the burn-outs. I didn't really know where I fit in but at least I felt cool for few years. I became involved in theater in high school but it was more social than anything else. I had high school teachers encouraging me but I basically fell into theater. It gave me a place to show off and not be made fun of. I also smoked pot in high school and went back and forth between the theater group and the burn-outs. My family saw that I had talent as a dancer but it was

never considered a serious career choice. Maybe because I was the youngest and not academically a star, any career guidance fell through the cracks.

When I was sixteen, my sister made me audition for a local summer theater camp. I loved dancing, singing and acting – I just ate it up! I loved becoming somebody else. I was known as the “party guy” and I was always good for a one line joke - usually putting myself down. When I was seventeen I met George at camp and we had a clandestine, secret affair. We never discussed being “gay” exactly but it felt good to let down my guard with him. We had met the summer of our senior year and he was going off to college. It was a great summer and I enjoyed having sex and lots of laughs with him.

I didn’t know from the SATs or college, so after high school I worked in a factory and on construction sites. I smoked a lot of pot and drifted in a state of non-reality for the two years. My parents weren’t strict and I lived at home for free. I had no idea where I was going. When I was twenty years old, I auditioned for a ballet summer school scholarship even though I didn’t think I was talented enough. I received a full scholarship which shocked me and my family.

### **Life as a Dancer**

I finally got intensive ballet and jazz training and realized that my body is suited for all styles of dance. I’m flexible, I can jump and turn - all the things that would have allowed me access to a major ballet or modern company. Unfortunately, I’m a horrible student and I hated the repetition of class exercises. I lacked discipline and got by on my humor and natural ability. I didn’t have to work as hard as the other guys. I was closeted about be gay. Even though I knew there were other gay guys.

Despite my lack of discipline I was offered a job in a small ballet company in New England. It gave me a glimpse of how little I knew about the real world. I had no

idea how to care for myself without my parent's help. I couldn't do laundry or clean my apartment. My ballet technique improved during that year but I fooled around a lot. I started going to gay bars and having sex with guys in the company. I was too interested in making friends, having fun and partying. I was perpetually late, fooled around in rehearsals, and would stay out all night drinking in bars. Eventually, I was fired and moved back to live with my parents.

Around this time, my oldest brother who had been married for 10 years, "came out" to my family. He'd fallen in love with this 20 year old boy which made my family *very* uncomfortable. My father called him 'faggot' behind his back and I felt horrible about it. I felt more of a pressure to be the normal, straight one in my family. It also gave me a glimpse into how my father really felt about gays.

For the next couple of years I bounced around from concert dancing (modern and ballet companies) to small musical theater productions. I lived two lives – one at home and the other in the city. My parents thought I was this "ladies man" and I kept that façade up into my early thirties. Little did my parents know the women were only dance partners. We'd get high and go out disco dancing all night.

When I was twenty-five, the dance captain from Broadway asked me to come in for a replacement spot. It was a fluke! There were two of us invited to the call and we had to perform the dance sequences in "West Side Story." I had known the choreography since childhood and just let go. I was hired on the spot and was completely overwhelmed, intimidated and didn't speak to anyone in the cast for the first month.

My parents were incredibly proud of me and came to see the show with their friends. I think my dad really got a kick out me making it to Broadway. I should have

been happier but I was paralyzed by the pressure to dance each number perfectly. Cast members would ask me to go out with them after the show and I wouldn't because I didn't know what I would say to them. Inside, I was a mess. I would go home and just lie wondering how I was at the theater? Was I funny? Was it a good day? Do they like me?

I didn't have to come out because I guess people just assumed I was gay. I moved up and got featured dance spots in the show. Towards the end of the first year I was written up by management for being late to the theater. I began drinking and had some run-ins with management about my absences. I also struggled with my weight which became a major insecurity of mine. I moved into Manhattan when I was twenty-seven and got this apartment. I began a relationship with a dancer from the show, and we were together for two years. I made a lot of mistakes in that relationship but we're still good friends. He was much more organized and on-the-ball about his career path and didn't like how laid back I was.

When a show closes and you feel like you're losing your adopted family. When that show closed, I wasn't prepared to begin auditioning and hadn't thought about my next job. Luckily, I was offered the revival of a Broadway show by a choreographer without having to audition. Eventually, the choreographer fired me for coming in drunk to rehearsals but explained that if I cleaned up my act and stayed on my diet, he'd hire me in the future. The most difficult part was having to tell my parents that I had been fired again. I felt like I'd disappointed my entire family.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

Getting fired was a wake-up call to me that things couldn't continue the way they had. I had to pull it together once and for all. I needed money for rent and the thought of



having to go to my parents at my age was sickening. I lost weight and got my life together with the help of friends and my boyfriend at the time. I did workshops just for exposure and made sure I was on my best behavior. It was a major turning point in my life - I had to shit or get off the pot.

A year later I was hired for an acting and dancing role in the touring company of the show that I'd been fired from. I was on the road for almost two years and needed to be away from New York and my family to grow up. The star of the show took me under his wing. It was the first time a guy wanted to help me and not expect sexual favors in return. He coached me on my lines and my reviews were amazing. I let myself hang out and expose more of myself. It helped me get over the humiliation of being fired. I had no formal acting training but the role tapped into my creativity and let me shine.

When I came back to New York, I enrolled in an acting class and got small acting workshops around the city. Acting class helped me find out what was going on inside of me and was my therapy. I used my insecurities and fears in class and eventually on stage. By the time I was thirty-four, I'd managed to undo the career damage I had done. I was invited to be in a workshop production and it turned out to be this mega-hit Broadway show for the past four years. That's luck! I never actually plan on these great things happening to me but I leave the possibility open for them to appear. It's as if my career has happened in spite of myself. I know other dancers who plan out their careers and are much more aggressive about the business.

I finally came out to my parents when I was thirty-four because I wanted to bring my boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner. I burst into tears and told them I was gay. My mom took the news very well – she hugged me and told me she knew anyway. My dad

complained jokingly, 'Jesus, I have all these gay sons.' He was OK about it but he knew I'd heard all the nasty comments he's made about my oldest brother. My brothers and sisters found out and were great about it but it's not something we talk about now.

Being gay attracted me to dancing and acting and gave me freedom from the mundane and allowed me to be more creative. Straight men have a harder time feeling and expressing emotions in the outside world. Truthfully, I have lots of straight friends but I can't relate to them. I think we're gentler and allow our emotions to come through. It's like when I was a kid, I hated math and science but I loved the excitement of creating a haunted house for Halloween in the backyard or organizing carnivals. I don't think I'd ever make a good accountant or businessman. I think that's for people who are more grounded than me.

In the future, who knows? I can't even think about it! It's not happening now so why bother stressing over it? Maybe I'll still be dancing or maybe acting. Something will turn up for me because it always has. I don't know where this relationship with Ray will end up. I hope we stay together but gay relationships are kind of doomed so it's hard to know for sure. I have a lot of rich friends, maybe one of them will support me.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

The overall tone of Jeffrey's narrative is clearly different from the previous ones. It does illustrate, as did the others, how difficulties in during childhood and adolescence can arrest identity developmental and career course until key events and figures intervene. In the following section, "I" themes are presented with raw data quotes and references to existing literature which informed the analysis.

### **Current Life Situation:**

THEME 1: *I love where I am in my life and am completely satisfied.*

At thirty-eight, Jeffrey's description of his current work life was characterized almost entirely by positive, idealizing feelings about his job and career. He seemed unable to recognize or integrate conflict or negative aspects of his professional life.

I have a great job...in a hit Broadway show and I get nice feedback from management about my work. I love being in such a great show....I try not to focus on the negative stuff because there isn't any, it's where I want to be. I totally avoid fights or arguments at any expense – I just can't deal with conflict....there is no downside to the business really – it's all good.

On the other hand, Jeffrey was less optimistic about his current relationship and he doubted the longevity of a male-male relationship.

My relationship is a mixed bag. We don't live together because he's Catholic and comes from a religious family. Our sex life isn't as hot as it was when we were first going out but that's not the end of the world. Also, with two men, you never know how long a relationship is going to last. I don't know where this relationship with Ray will end up. I hope we stay together but gay relationships have so many pressures, it's hard to know for sure.

As McWhirter and Mattison (1984) suggested, while gay couples confront similar day-to-day issues as heterosexuals, they do not have social, legal or moral sanctions that

may sustain opposite-sex couples. This combined with many destructive internal and external forces contributed to Jeffrey's problems committing to his relationship.

**THEME 2:** *I was born to dance and resent having to make it into a competitive business.*

Jeffrey's narrative indicated that he remains strongly identified as a dancer and is experiencing the career that he had hoped for during his twenties. Despite his age, his passion for dance and performing remains a driving presence for him (Hamilton, 1998).

I was truly born to dance, really, I never chose to become a dancer - it chose me.. If anything, I'm having the career now that I should have had in my twenties. I mean I just see steps and I can pick them up and do them. It's great. I can't see that my love for dance and performing would ever change.

However, Jeffrey's narrative illustrated his ongoing struggle to transform his childhood and adolescent interests into a professional career. It was as if his love and creativity for dance would be spoiled if he took a more serious approach to his career. In certain ways, Levinson's (1978) notion of the occupational Dream is present in his description, however his inability to assume a more mature role as a professional dancer speaks to his naiveté and adolescent attitude.

I'm terrible at the business side of it – but it hasn't held me back I don't think. I resent having to make dance - something I love so much - into a business. I hate to audition so I just ignore the business side of the business. I probably should be more out there hustling for jobs but it spoils it and takes all the fun out of it. I see other people doing it but I just can't maybe I'd have another job by now....but things always happen for me whether I seek it out or not.

Jeffrey's narrative is consistent with aspects of other participant's tendency to split-off parts of themselves that seemed threatening. Jeffrey is unable to integrate his aggression and drive to succeed in a way that feels safe and part of himself. Instead, he

seemed to project it onto others so as to avoid having to deal with competition or working towards specific goals (Valliant, 1977).

### **Becoming a Dancer**

Jeffrey clearly traced his interest in dance back to early childhood but his narrative presented no sense of accumulated competencies over the years. While the joy and freedom of dancing in the backyard was instrumental in his developing sense of himself, he failed to develop an internal sense of hope and possibility about his potential.

**THEME 1:** *As a child I felt loved by my family but had a sense that I was different and only good for a laugh.*

As in the other narratives, Jeffrey basically felt loved in childhood but also described various ways in which he felt different as a young boy (de Monteflores, 1986). One of the ways that he experienced difference was connected to creating and putting on shows for the neighborhood. Jeffrey's early interest in dance and creativity may have been a way of distinguishing himself from his family but felt little direct support from his family. Jeffrey failed to establish a stable sense of competencies that he could access and draw upon later.

I always felt the love and support of my family but I was sort of odd man out. I'm not the most confident person as you can tell – so I told jokes. My two brothers were star athletes and my sister was brainy but I didn't really have a niche....I got my attention by putting up carnivals and putting on shows in our neighborhood – that's what I was good at. I was very much into creating making the neighborhood into a fun place – nothing serious.

Jeffrey acknowledged feeling different from a very early age, but messages he received from his family and church instilled a sense of shame. Apparent in the narrative is Jeffrey's overwhelming sense of inadequacy during childhood and adolescence which he covered over with humor. This is consistent with the previous narratives and much of

the gay developmental literature. (Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993 Bell, 1981; Green, 1987; Isay, 1989).

I was teased because all I wanted to do was dance around and listen to the “West Side.” My dad loved musicals and was warmer than my mom – he was probably gay (*laughs*). I was a colorful kid – different from my straight buddies – but they got a kick out of Anne Reinking’s poster from “Dancin” over my bed. I was the jokester in my family and with my friends.

The narrative also supports aspects of Isay’s model (1996, 1989) which suggested that gay men recall few childhood memories (much like the Oedipal Complex) as a result of sexual desires felt toward the father. Jeffrey recalled very little of his childhood but longed for closeness with his father. Jeffrey’s account of his father as “probably being gay” may be his way of making sense of his father’s initial warmth as a child and his eventual distance and homophobic comments about the older brother. Another way of feeling different was Jeffrey’s same-sex attraction toward his camp counselor at age eight.

I was eight or nine years old and I remember looking at the camp counselor in the shower and thinking he was absolutely beautiful. It really stuck with me because I was totally into this guy. I think it was my first crush on a guy. I didn’t talk about it with anyone because I knew it wasn’t normal.

**THEME 2:** *I was encouraged by teachers and mentors but I failed to believe that I could be a professional dancer.*

Jeffrey had some success and felt encouraged by his teachers but he failed to internalize his accomplishments in a meaningful way. Unlike the other narratives presented, Jeffrey was unable incorporate his talents as part of himself and identify talents others could recognize.

I loved dancing, singing and acting – I just ate it up!....but I didn’t think I could do it professionally. That’s a major problem for me still – my low self-confidence. I saw

shows on Broadway but never thought it could be for me. I did some shows in high school and people liked me and told me I was good but I had no clue how to focus on something I wanted.

Jeffrey failed to develop an early occupational Dream consistent with Levinson's (1978) model. He showed little initiative in pursuing dance or performance beyond where others led him. Super (1990) sees career development and personal development as interlocking. The self-concept, according to Super, becomes increasingly stable and identified with these interests as one matures.. Even after later gaining acceptance into a competitive ballet company, Jeffrey failed to internalize his sense of possible future success.

**THEME 3:** *I lived a double life: my private life where I was gay and my family life where I wasn't.*

At age eighteen, Jeffrey had his first sexual affair with a man which was positive and meaningful. Jeffrey felt he could be himself with someone on an intimate level and accepted the possibility that he may not be heterosexual (Cass, 1979).

That summer I met George we had a fantastic, secret affair. He was an actor and my first true love. It was the summer of our senior year and he was going off to college. We never discussed being gay but it felt good to be myself with him sexually - everything. It was a great summer – great sex and lots of laughs. I was sad when it ended.

Jeffrey returned to his parent's home and became depressed and isolated. He felt that he had to again retreat into secrecy about his homosexuality. This resulted in him turning to marijuana further stalling his career development.

Afterwards he went off to college but I just started construction work back at home at my parents. It was hard to have to be secretive about my sex life again. I was probably depressed. I started smoking marijuana more and was drifting in a state of non-reality for the next two years. I had no sense of the future or where I was going.

His family's negative reaction to his older brother coming out also inhibited his ability to develop a positive, integrated gay identity. This is consistent with other participant's experiences and Stein and Cabaj's (1996) suggestion that young gay men form a "false self" to satisfy parental expectations. When parents and other significant people recognize and affirm this false self, the gay child suppresses his inherent inclinations.

My oldest brother told us he'd fallen in love with this 20 year old boy. My father would call him 'faggot' behind his back. Being Catholic didn't help, I'm sure. That made me feel more a pressure to be normal and straight for my family. It also showed me how my father really felt about gays. I lived two lives – one at home and the other in the city. My parents thought I was this "ladies man" and I kept that façade up into my twenties. Little did my parents know these women were dance partners and not sex partners.

Consistent with Stein and Cabaj's (1996) research, Jeffrey may have used marijuana and alcohol (and later food) to disconnect and dissociate from his true self and sexual orientation, and to compensate for his damaged sense of self. This was also evident in Dwayne's use of drugs and Chris's use of food in childhood and adolescence. Despite teacher's and potential mentor's encouragement, Jeffrey was unable to seriously consider a career as a dancer. In his words, Jeffrey managed to have a career "in spite of" himself.

### **Life as a Dancer**

Jeffrey's Entry into the Adult World was not marked by establishing a stable life structure as Levinson (1978) posited. He was not clearly focused on transforming dance into a viable career for himself. Instead, the career was left mostly to chance and others' initiatives.

**THEME 1**     *My lack of self-confidence and struggles with my sexuality contributed to on-going problems professionally.*



At age twenty Jeffrey was accepted into a summer dance program, and later was invited to dance with a small company. These experiences served to separate from his family for a time but he had difficulty developing an internalized sense responsibility and professional commitment.

I was more interested in making friends. I got intensive ballet training and could have gotten into a major ballet or modern company - but I was a horrible student....I hated the repetition of class exercises and I started to cut class. I completely lacked discipline and got by on my humor ....I just didn't have to work as hard as the other guys there.

In the ballet company, a similar scenario unfolded and he eventually was fired from the job.

I was always late, fooled around in rehearsals, and would stay out all night drinking in bars. Eventually, he fired me but I had no clue how unprofessional and irresponsible I was. I moved back in with my parents which, at twenty-one, felt like a set-back.

Even after Jeffrey was hired on Broadway he had difficulty integrating and establishing himself as a professional. Eventually, he began to miss performances and sabotage his career opportunities.

I was completely overwhelmed, intimidated and I couldn't speak to anyone in the cast for the first month. I was just this kid from Long Island and the responsibility was paralyzing and I kind of shut down. I was drinking a lot then,.....Finally I was written up for being late and missing shows. I also began to get fat another major insecurity of mine.

His second Broadway job ended when Jeffrey was fired for drinking and unprofessional behavior. The most difficult part for Jeffrey was feeling that he'd disappointed his family.

I was eventually fired from the production for drinking backstage. It hit me hard and damaged my reputation in New York for a few years. The most difficult part was having to tell my parents that I had been fired again. I felt like I'd disappointed my entire family.

**THEME 2** *I've been lucky, jobs always appeared for me rather than me actively pursuing them.*

Jeffrey's ongoing difficulty experiencing himself as an agent, capable of pursuing professional aspirations, inhibited his professional development. A pattern of being "chosen" or invited, or pursued rather than initiating change was established early on.

I never chose to become a dancer, it chose me....The choreographer told me about an audition in New York for a dance scholarship summer school. She insisted that I go despite my protesting that I was too old and not talented enough.

My heart was on Broadway but I lacked the self confidence to pursue it - I felt I didn't deserve it. I didn't have anybody to show me how to get pictures and resumes done. I bounced around from concert dancing to small theater productions until someone would offer another job.

After several years of straddling professional and amateur venues, Jeffrey was spotted in a local production and hired for his first professional show. This reinforced his pattern of dismissing his accomplishments or attributing them entirely to luck.

This guy from Broadway saw me in this show and invited me to a private call. It was a fluke! There were only two of us and we had to perform everything from "West Side." I knew them already and just let it rip. That was total luck! I was hired on the spot and measured for costumes.

After that job ended, Jeffrey still felt unprepared to begin pursuing and developing a professional career in New York. He was invited to join a show rather than having to put himself on the line in an audition.

Even with real experience I wasn't prepared to begin auditioning and hadn't thought about my next job. Luckily, I didn't have to. I was offered the revival of a Broadway show by a choreographer without having to audition.

Even in getting his current job, Jeffrey's narrative indicated his pattern of being sought rather than seeking.

My job now happened because I was invited to be in a workshop and it turned out to be this mega-hit Broadway show. That's luck! I never actually plan on these great things

happening to me but they seem to appear. My career has happened in spite of myself. I know other dancers who plan out there careers and are much more aggressive about the business. I should probably have more of that but it's not me.

### **Changes in Career**

Jeffrey's main adult developmental crisis occurred at age twenty-eight when he was fired from his job. It provided the catalyst for his Age Thirty Transition and re-assessment of his fragmented and unstable life structure. Rather than returning to his parent's home, Jeffrey was able to mobilize his resources (boyfriend and friends) to curtail his drinking and clean up his act.

THEME 1     *After being fired, I decided that I had to turn things around if I wanted to continue in this profession.*

Upon being fired from a Broadway job, Jeffrey experienced an abrupt shift in his career. Faced with the prospect and humiliation of having to return to his parents, Jeffrey concentrated on turning his career around.

I stopped getting calls from agents and casting directors almost immediately. It was a wake-up call to me because I needed money. The thought of having to go to my parents was sickening. I lost weight and with the help of friends and [my boyfriend] I got my shit together. I did free workshops just for exposure and made sure I was on my best behavior. It was a major point in my life - I had to shit or get off the pot

Valliant's (1977) proposal that external events usually force the individual to adapt seem particularly relevant to Jeffrey's personal and professional dilemmas. Valliant identified a key factor in adult development as the ability of the individual to shift to higher order defenses in an interpersonal environment. It seemed that Jeffrey was forced to come to terms with his maladaptive coping strategies in a significant way.

**THEME 2**     *Being hired as an actor/dancer moved me in a new direction that has given me greater independence and opportunity but my future remains a mystery.*

In certain ways Jeffrey's being hired as an actor in the months following his termination helped him experience the profession in a new way. The star of the show served as a non-sexual mentor and helped him establish new professional interests.

I had never acted but [the star of the show] took me under his wing and gave pointers on delivering lines. It was the first time any man helped me and didn't expect to fuck me afterwards. I was away for almost two years and needed to be away from my family to grow up.

Acting class served as Jeffrey's therapy in gaining some acceptance and perspective on his emotional world and may have contributed to an authentic experience for him. Learning about himself as an actor seemed to provide Jeffrey some space to internalize a positive male mentor (Loewald, 1960).

Being able to use my humor and sensitivity in acting class helped me with what was going on inside my head. It was my therapy. I used my insecurities and fears in class and eventually on stage. My insecurities didn't overwhelm me as much.

By separating and gaining some acceptance of himself, Jeffrey was able to finally come out to his parents about being gay. His emotional reaction to disclosing to his parents belies his claim to have never felt badly about his homosexuality. It also marked the only occasion he came out to another person.

That's when I came out to my parents. I never felt badly about it but I wanted to bring my boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner and I couldn't unless I told them. I was a wreck. I sat down and burst into tears and told them I was gay. My mom hugged me and told me she knew but my dad joked, 'Jesus, I have all these gay sons.' He was OK about it he was embarrassed about all the mean things he'd said about my brother....That's the only time I ever had to actually tell people that I was gay.

Jeffrey's sense of his future is somewhat vague and unformed at present. At his current job there are many aging dancers but there is little recognition or consideration on his part of where his career is headed.

It's an old show – I'm the youngest guy so that's telling. I don't think I'd ever make a good accountant or businessman so I don't know what else I would do. I think that's for people who are more grounded than me. In the future, who knows? I can't stand to even think about it because it's right now –so why stress over it? It's kind of a mystery maybe I'll still be dancing, maybe acting. Look at Anne Reinking. Something will turn up for me because it always has. I have a lot of rich friends, maybe one of them will support me.

In sum, while Jeffrey's narrative reflects several themes previously noted, it also establishes new ones. His early development included feeling different and less than, but his interest in dance and performing did not coalesce into an organized Dream that he felt able to achieve. It literally took others pushing him and initiating opportunities for him to take up the task, and even then his drive was tepid and he lacked a true sense of agency. While the Broadway dance community was felt to be accepting of his homosexuality and allowed some integration of his same-sex desires, his compromised self-esteem failed to allow him to fully become part of that community until closer to mid-life.

Being fired initiated the Age Thirty Transition (Levinson, 1978) and he established a life structure and career interest. This new life allowed him to internalize and identify positive, accepting aspects of the community and his acting mentor in a reparative way (Colarusso & Nemiroff 1987, 1979, Loewald, 1960). With his re-gained professional status, no physical injuries, and an ongoing sense that jobs will "continue to come [his] way," it seems unlikely that Jeffrey will consider career alternatives anytime soon. There are few outside pressures that he experiences (as there were with his drinking) that would impel him to consider long terms goals.

In terms of his current gay identity development, Jeffrey's experience of himself seems to fall within Cass's (1979) fourth and fifth stages of *identity acceptance* and *identity pride*. As evident in other narratives, Jeffrey remains almost exclusively immersed in the gay theater community and contends that gay men are more creative than straight and inherently more sensitive to their emotional lives. There are also moments, however, when he deeply experiences his father's shame and disappointment as confirmation of his internalized homophobia.

Jeffrey's social and professional identities are not currently being challenged and he, therefore, finds it unnecessary to consider a decision to move forward (Valliant, 1977). Jeffrey's characterization of himself as virtually unchanged in his physical abilities is consistent with the previous four narratives. It could also be that his burgeoning acting career may enable him to stay viable within the Broadway community. As a working dancer, Jeffrey is similar to Chris and Dwayne, neither of whom have considered alternative careers in the midst of a viable work situation. The three working dancers can be distinguished from the first two (Stan, Jonas) and will likely resist transition unless there is substantial pressure from either within or without. As such, Jeffrey's use of his initial life structure which may have served to decrease isolation and sense of difference may be a defense against anxiety in considering change or deep contemplation about his future.

## **SUMMARY OF THE NARRATIVES – NOT TRANSITIONED**

The narratives of the first five participants who have not transitioned from performing demonstrated both similarities and differences in their experiences. This summary will begin by comparing and contrasting salient themes and several developmental theories. It will conclude with a summary of the findings, thus far, and theoretical ideas generated by this group.

### **Current Life Situation**

The five participants in this group remain closely aligned and connected to the Broadway musical theater community in unique ways from one another. They range in age between thirty-eight and forty-six years old, approximately the time during which Levinson (1978) predicted the Mid-life Transition. According to Levinson the three primary tasks of this period are: (1) re-appraising the past; (2) modifying the life structure; and (3) further individuation process.

Overall, four of the narratives (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne) had a re-appraising quality to them, however, it was negatively valenced and externally focused. Most participants (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne) perceived a negative change in “the business” as the major source of their discontent. Jeffrey, on the other hand, was notably non-reflective and focused on current positive elements of his life. He reported feeling lucky to be working and satisfied with his current position with little or no ambition to find other work. Stan intimated his disappointment and resentment at what he felt was professional abandonment by those who have the control over hiring and firing. Jonas also stated he felt he was on the outside of a business he once felt a part of and was “trying to survive as an artist.” Dancers were “no longer a premium” and Dwayne felt like “a whore” of the business. Further, the three who were employed at the time of the

interviews (Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey) had each been with the same show for over three years. Chris and Dwayne felt stuck, unfulfilled and depressed in their jobs. Interestingly, Dwayne and Jeffrey were performing the same show at the time of these interviews and, obviously, had quite different experiences. Both felt that the financial security and stability of a long-running show were the major factors in remaining in the show.

There was some evidence of a modification to the participants' life structures, however, it seemed not of their own choosing. The narratives reflected a sense of responding to outside impingement rather than creating a life structure that might be more satisfying. Stan was waiting to make his move into directing and choreography but cited his six-year relationship and creating a home as an important focus now. He described feeling more isolated and less connected to friends and colleagues as a result of not working. Jonas experienced financial difficulties and felt demeaned and degraded in having to take a survival job. Chris had recently bought an apartment and hoped to again establish a relationship someday. Dwayne felt "unfulfilled in all areas" while waiting with confusion as to when he should initiate a move toward directing. His fear seemed to be connected to feeling attacked by the business and critics. Finally, Jeffrey was content with his current life situation and felt certain that "something will turn up – it always does." In this sense, he was the least likely in this group to initiate change or modification to his life at this point.

Finally, Stan and Jonas both made references to HIV/AIDS and the impact it had on their personal and professional life. Stan described AIDS as having changed the landscape of the Broadway community and attributed being stalled in his career to those directors and choreographers with whom he worked had died of AIDS. Jonas described



his fortieth birthday as a significant marker of his survival of the business and of the AIDS epidemic. The other participants in this group did not explicitly mention HIV or AIDS as necessarily impacting them. This seems significant because these participants are of an age when they would have lost many peers and colleagues in the arts.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

The Pre-Adult development of the five participants contained many similarities with respect to existing developmental literature. Each of the men began life dependent upon their families for protection and support (Levinson, 1978). However, the participants in this study also became aware that they were somehow different from those around them, including their families. For all five participants, feeling different was conflated with a realization of gender non-conforming activities. Stan, Jonas, Chris and Dwayne each reported feeling closer to their mother as a young boy and Jeffrey described his father as “more of a mother” and “probably gay.” Jonas, Chris and Dwayne described being teased, disliked or physically hit by their father.

Initially Stan, Jonas, and Chris accepted difference as something that was a part of themselves, then as they became the subject of peer and sibling ridicule, difference became a liability. Jeffrey and Dwayne experienced difference as less of a liability and more connected to being creative or an artist. Nonetheless, they both experienced teasing and gradually feeling ostracized. For these men there developed an internalized part of themselves that was kept hidden - representing a form of intrapsychic separation process that preceded the physical separation from their families.

Each of the participants reported a strong affective connection to performance, theater or the arts by an early age. Jonas, Dwayne and Jeffrey were involved in dance,

formally or informally, by grade school age. Their experiences differed from Jonas's: Jonas discontinued his training because of peer ridicule, while Dwayne feeling safe in accompanying his mother to the dance studio, and Jeffrey felt free to in teach himself the dance from "West Side Story." Chris was encouraged by his mother to take clarinet lessons which led to his involvement in high school theater later. Jonas, Chris and Jeffrey had associations or recalled significant moments with their fathers connected to musical theater or dance. Stan was drawn to and enjoyed singing and the musical theater productions he saw as a child.

By early adolescence all of the participants had begun to make associations between sex and their feelings of difference. They became aware of same-sex attractions, and for Jonas, Dwayne and Jeffrey there had been sexual experimentation with other boys. There was a conscious decision made by some of the participants during this period to try to fit into peer groups: Stan "transformed" himself into a soccer player, Chris joined swim team and Jeffrey began smoking pot with the "burn-out" group. By the time they reached high school all of the men had been teased by their peers for being a 'fag', and a 'sissy,' and felt the need to monitor themselves for obvious feminine behaviors that might give them away as gay.

Their individual connection to music, theater or dance intensified during adolescence. Stan, Jonas, Chris and Jeffrey found themselves deeply involved in their school theater and music programs where they fit in more readily. For Jonas, Chris and Jeffrey their talents in musical theater and dance marked the first time they felt competent or recognized for their achievements. Each of them reported the importance of specific teachers in encouraging their participation in school theater and increased peer

socialization. In addition, there was repeated mention of the use of the mirror in dance classes which suggested it was important in “seeing” themselves in new ways. For Jonas, Chris and Dwayne this included feeling themselves as more masculine and finding unique ways of expressing themselves as men.

Dwayne was the only one of this group who did not participate in theater up to that point. After being raped, Dwayne’s formal dance training became an essential way of expressing his anger and depression. His Russian teacher provided male support and structure as well as a forum for tapping into otherwise unexpressed emotions. Dwayne and Jeffrey also became involved in some drug use during junior high school and high school. In general, the high school years were difficult for all five of the participants, however, theater, music and dance clearly became ways of feeling connected to others and breaking their isolation. It also became a chief source of recognition and validation which seemed was noticeably absent from the narratives up to that point in their development.

In terms of formation of an occupational Dream, the participants in this group showed variations in their vision and commitment to theater and dance. For Stan, Jonas, and Chris, theater and dance became an increasingly important and singular focus during high school and college. However, Dwayne and Jeffrey did not describe this type of developing focus or passion. Jeffrey “drifted in a state of non-reality” following high school without a plan or goal for himself. It is unclear for those who had formed an early occupation Dream whether the primary motivation to pursue it was the participant’s internal vision for himself or some aspect of a parental wish or expectation. One factor,

however, could be that Stan, Jonas and Chris felt they were agents working towards a goal, while Dwayne and Jeffrey ascribed their career to fate or simply “meant to be.”

As they entered the Early Adult Transition in their late teens and early twenties, (Levinson, 1978), the prevailing theme in the first four narratives was wanting to establish themselves as dancers and performers and create a distance from their families. This is consistent with that of Levinson (1978) who viewed separation from the family of origin as a principle component of the task of leaving the pre-adult world. However, for these first four men, the desire to create distance from family was especially driven and motivated by their career aspirations. Stan, Jonas, and Chris completed college where they studied theater and/or dance. Dwayne went away to college but struggled to find a group with whom he could identify and failed to graduate just three credits short of his B.A. Stan and Chris attended college close to or while living at home which inhibited their separation in some ways. Each of these first four participants, however, reported an increased passion for dance during this period and a central vision of moving to New York to dance.

After high school, Jeffrey worked in construction prior to leaving to study ballet in upstate New York. Even after separating from his family, his Early Adult Transition proved a difficult task. He reported inconsistent performance and a lack of discipline as the main reasons for his dismissal from the ballet company and having to return home again. His Early Adult Transition was delayed until age twenty-seven when he finally moved out of his parent’s home and to New York.

Regarding gay identity, the men in this group did not report multiple experiences of coming out. In fact, Jonas was the only participant who initiated coming out to his

parents prior to establishing a long-term relationship. This coincides with Cass's (1979) stage four, *identity acceptance* in which Jonas had experienced increased interactions with other gay men in summer stock which served to strengthen his self-concept. By coming out, Jonas reported a sense of relief and 'being seen' for the first time by his parents as the gay man he was becoming. However, the other participants remained mostly hidden from their families about their sexual desires. In Cass's model (1979), they were more in stages two and three, *identity comparison* and *identity tolerance*. While Stan, Chris, Dwayne and Jeffrey were aware of their sexual attraction toward men, they fluctuated between holding a negative view of the possibility of a stable gay identity and tolerating that possibility.

### **Life as a Dancer**

Levinson (1978) predicted that Entering the Adult World meant facing two primary and conflicting tasks: exploration and creating a stable life structure. In Levinson's study the men focused on occupational and marriage choices. Mainly, the men in this group did not explore other career options but singularly focused on establishing themselves professionally and creating a stable life structure. The initial life structure as elite professional dancers validated and bolstered their sense of themselves as unique and special.

All of the participant's initiated Entering the Adult World and identifying themselves as a professional dancer was in unique ways. Stan, Chris, Jonas, and Dwayne moved to New York around the age of twenty-two. Jeffrey was already living in the New York area and after a brief position in ballet company returned to his parents' home. After being hired for his first Broadway show at twenty-five, he continued to live in his

parents' home for two more years. He was neither motivated nor driven in any direction and "drifted" for several years even within the business.

A major theme in the individual narratives was the sense of freedom and belonging to the Broadway "family." Their social experiences tended to overlap with their occupational aspirations. Even Jeffrey, who did not experience feeling a part of the community until somewhat later, reported finding the non-judgmental gay-friendly social milieu a critical part of his professional experience. These men described feeling chosen to be part of a life structure in which they were identified as special, unique, elite and on the "A-list." There was variability as to when each participant felt this inclusion, but it generally correlated with prestigious, higher-paying Broadway or national touring productions. At the same time, elements of striving for perfection and "presenting a package" at auditions were equally as prevalent in the narratives.

At twenty-two, Stan and Dwayne were hired for Broadway shows and, as a result, immediately identified with the Broadway community. By twenty-five, both seemed firmly committed to and entrenched in the musical theater community. Their attention gradually shifted to maintaining their status as professionals and looking for the next potential job opportunity. In that sense, Stan and Dwayne achieved their Dream of making it to Broadway by their mid-twenties. Jonas reported his dream was fulfilled at twenty-nine when he was hired for his first Broadway show, and likewise Chris at thirty when he was hired for a national tour. Chris performed in his first Broadway show at thirty-seven, the latest in the group.

For all of the men the professional world included a life structure that allowed them to explore their sexuality. For Stan, Chris and Dwayne this meant establishing

significant same-sex relationships in their mid-twenties. For Dwayne, however, the end of the relationship in his early thirties initiated a retreat from accepting or valuing same-sex relationships. Not until their late twenties and early thirties did Chris and Jonas achieve their professional dreams as dancers. Their twenties consisted of minimal career exploration, and mainly of trying to negotiate entrance into the profession at a higher level. Once they had gained entrance into the profession, they experienced increased self-esteem and searched for additional career opportunities.

These men, like those in Levinson's (1978) study, established an occupation as a primary component of their initial life structure as well as one that supported coming to terms with their sexuality. For this group it did not necessitate coming out to other dancers or colleagues because it was assumed that they were gay. Dwayne felt free to explore his sexuality with both men and women. It is unclear whether he ever experienced a time when he identified himself as gay even within the Broadway community. The perception of his colleague who referred him to the study was that he was gay. Chris and Jeffrey only found it necessary to come out to their families in their early to mid-thirties once they were involved in a relationship, while Stan still has not disclosed to his family.

Levinson (1978) described the Age Thirty Transition as the period between twenty-eight and thirty-two that connects two structure-building periods (Entering the Adult World and Settling Down). It is a time for reappraisal and reflection of the man's occupational direction and relationship situation which may be experienced smoothly or as a serious "crisis" (p.84). Four of the men in this group had, in many ways, achieved their initial goal and dream of making it to Broadway by this time. There was little

serious re-consideration of their careers during this period with the focus remaining on continued employment.

Stan briefly considered becoming a massage therapist at twenty-nine in order to decrease time away from his partner but could not reconcile lower pay and status. There was, however, evidence of reappraisal of relationships (Stan, Chris, Dwayne) consistent with Levinson's position. Their relationships ended during this period primarily as a result of their partners' conflicting career schedules. Jeffrey underwent a developmental crisis at twenty-eight, however it was in response to being fired from a show for his alcohol and substance abuse. The "awakening" he experienced was more a realization of the possibility of having to move back in with his parents. This propelled him to "clean up" his act and begin to take his career responsibilities a bit more seriously. It did not provide a significant period of personal reflection about his career path but seemed more in line with the tasks involved in the Early Adult Transition and Entering the Adult World.

Levinson (1978) indicated that men in the Settling Down and Becoming One's Own Man periods (ages 32-40) undertake the tasks of settling "for a few key choices,...[creating] a broader structure around them, ...[investing] oneself as fully as possible in the various components of the structure...and to pursue long-range plans and goals within it" (p.140). The men in this group have undertaken some of these tasks and experienced their late thirties and early forties in a variety of ways. All of the men maintained their careers at a satisfactory level through their mid-thirties. Jeffrey considers himself "a late bloomer" and is now having the career he feels he should have had in his twenties if he hadn't been "such a mess."



### **Changes in Career and Transition**

What was most striking in the narratives of these five men was the absence of change they perceived in themselves, or the sense of growing older and physically aging. None of the men in this group recounted any significant physical injuries to date and felt they “dance as well as ever.” There was a marked investment in maintaining their youthful mindset and appearance. Stan noted that he “danced circles around” a much younger dancer at a recent audition but that the trained dancer was no longer appreciated anymore. Jonas and Dwayne noted some physical changes (balding and stiffness) but not in a way that significantly impacted their professional abilities.

While most in this group (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne) reported a growing pressure and professional dissatisfaction over the years, each was content to remain working either on Broadway or on tour. There were frustrations in having to repeatedly prove oneself at auditions after years as a professional dancer. Dwayne experienced a change in himself following two major losses in his mid-thirties (death of ex-partner and his mentor) which initiated a personal and professional crisis. He withdrew from friends and family, moved to Los Angeles, and married a woman. He planned on leaving theater to pursue life as an artist and painter but was “sucked back in” at forty when he returned to New York. In the end, the experience of loss appears to have left him embittered and angry, compromising his artistic integrity.

Stan and Jonas experienced a dramatic shift in their marketability between 35-37 that surprised them. Both attributed the change to an aspect of being gay to an unexplained drop in their professional viability. Jonas sensed he was too flamboyant to be considered for roles and Stan also felt straight men have an advantage in trying to

secure speaking roles. When Stan was forced to decide between performing and a part-time position in the corporate world he decided the timing for change was premature. Jonas was hired as an assistant to a choreographer and has since choreographed shows himself. Both Stan and Jonas saw the potential to perform in the future and felt abandoned by the profession they previously felt a part of.

Given their determination and drive described above in the early career development, one might expect explicit ambitions or more concrete plans for the seemingly inevitable day when they could no longer dance. Stan, Jonas and Dwayne described only vague goals and ideas about choreographing, writing or directing with little idea of how to actualize them. These three men described wanting control over their futures as central to their attraction to directing and choreographing. Chris and Jeffrey touched upon possibly acting as a career but without a specific course of action. In this way, these men may be using the life structures in defensive ways to avoid the anxiety and tension in questioning their personal and professional assumptions.

Overall, the men in this group described the future as a mystery conveying a sense of relinquishing their future career direction or responsibility. In that sense, the competencies and skills they acquired over the course of their professional lives were not seen as providing viable options beyond what they had already achieved. Surprisingly, many of the men in this group described relatively few, if any, circumstances where they felt the need to disclose their gay identity to another. Only three of the five in this group came out to their families, two of which occurred when the men were in their mid-thirties and in long-term relationships. This suggests that while these men sought out and established an initial life structure that supported their gay identities, it did not require

them to integrate themselves into the broader society and experience coming out experiences. Their individual life structures in show business were clearly helpful in feeling a part of a unique community in which they were recognized as talented and special. However, negotiating and coming to terms with the realities of the limitations both personally and professionally remains a challenge for the men in this group.

## **PRESENTATION OF THE DATA**

### **SECTION 2: THE NARRATIVES OF TRANSITIONERS**

In this section the constructed first person narratives of the next five participants who have made a career transition are presented and analyzed. Each narrative begins with the researcher's observations and field notes from the interviews and covers the life course of each participant. Each narrative is followed by preliminary analyses of the data, with individual themes ("I-themes") and patterns identified and related to existing literature. Additional references to the literature not reviewed in the previous sections will be cited and discussed when relevant.

## THE LIFE OF MARTIN

*During the initial phone contact with Martin, he wanted assurance that his story would not end up in the national actors' newsletter. Martin had been interviewed for a local newspaper on his transition from dance to physical therapy and was teased by friends about it. I met with Martin in the small apartment that he was subletting from a friend in a West Village neighborhood. Both interviews were conducted in a living room filled with photographs of celebrities and musical theater show posters. Overall, Martin was fairly forthcoming about his experiences, however, he was often defensively self-mocking and minimized the importance of his experiences. Early on, I sensed what he later described as his "mourning the loss" of his relationship to dance and theater.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm forty-three years old and have been working as a physical therapist in New York City for the past eighteen months. I moved back to New York from the Midwest to complete my internship training in physical therapy. Coming from a career as a Broadway dancer, I planned on specializing with injured dancers but I split my time between an inpatient neurology trauma unit and a sports medicine clinic. One site is geared toward lower-functioning, severe stroke and head trauma cases and the other serves sports-injured patients and dancers. I wanted to be back in New York among old friends I'd known from theater for almost twenty years. I feel connected to the world again.

Overall, I'm satisfied with the choices I've made in changing careers. I wish I made more money because I have \$50,000 in student loans from graduate school. I enjoy my job and feel respected as a competent professional with an real expertise. I have

some control over the direction of my career and don't feel like my whole world revolves around my work anymore. In physical therapy I work hard and am rewarded for it. There's an opportunity for growth and my potential is recognized by peers and my boss. I miss musical theater, the Broadway family and everything that it was for me, though. On many levels I'll be a dancer my whole life. I still think of going back into it sometimes but I don't know if there's a need for a forty-three year old tap dancer.

I'm a hard-working, Type-A, overachiever like every dancer I know. I've been that way my whole life - nothing is done as a hobby or for fun. I'm insecure - especially about my looks. I still put a lot of work into how I look and go to the gym five times a week. I live alone in a sublet but I plan on getting a place of my own as soon as I can afford it. I'm single and have just started dating again for the first time since my ex-partner, Carl and I split up before I moved back for my internship. I still feel very tied to Carl but I wanted to live and work in New York and he didn't. He was instrumental in my career transition and I probably wouldn't have had the courage or opportunity to try something new without his support.

I'm "out" at my job so I feel that I can be myself at work with patients and co-workers. I'm very professional and it doesn't get as crazy as backstage. I realized that I couldn't section parts of life off and had to "come out" in ways I hadn't before. In theater you really don't need to, but being in school and at work brought up feelings from high school and college. As if the transition from theater wasn't hard enough, I had to deal with coming out at my age! I hadn't anticipated all that.

I'm close with my mother and we talk a few times a week. My dad died four years ago and that was very difficult. My relationship with my dad improved as I got

older but I never fully appreciated him until after he died. Maybe the expectations I had on myself to be the perfect son kept me from seeing him for who he really was - and him me. As I get older, I'm more like my father and everything doesn't have to be so perfect anymore. I didn't come out to my family until Carl and I were in the process of breaking up. I regret never coming out to my father. Telling my mother was liberating for me - after that, who cares what anyone else thinks?

I'm good at what I do partly because I connect with people. I work creatively with each patient and build on the individual's strengths. In that way, physical therapy is like an art form and uses the creative aspects of the performer in me. My spirituality is part of that creative process and is a very important part of my life. It's not the rigid religion that I was raised with but gives me some support and guidance in my life. It helps me to find different ways of working with patients. I try to incorporate it into my daily life and that's been a definite part of accepting the transition.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I grew up in Baltimore in a typical, middle class WASP family. I have a younger brother, but we weren't particularly close growing up. My dad worked a blue-collar job for the railroad and my mother owned three dance studios with my grandmother and aunt. She was an incredible singer/dancer but gave it up to be a mother and wife. I've known I was gay for as long as I can remember but it took until I was twenty-two for me to quit fighting it. When I was four or five, I felt different because I had crushes on older boys in the neighborhood or at the dance studio. Our family was very religious and I knew that my feelings weren't normal. It was a secret that I couldn't let out and a part of me

that I considered sinful. By third grade I knew my crushes were obviously different from what I heard other boys talk about.

There was a lot tension between my parents growing up and it became my job to make things right between them. I became my mother's confidant and marriage counselor. I think my parents had a loving relationship but money was constantly a topic around the house. For many years my mom was making more money than my dad and that was hard on him. When I was a teenager, my dad went back to school and for a draftsman degree and got a better job at the railroad. I have a lot of respect for my dad – he put up with a lot of crap from my mom and never complained.

My dad was out of the picture in my early years because he worked overtime, evening shifts and holidays. I remember getting up in the morning just as he was getting home from work. I'd quietly play outside until he woke up in the afternoon. He wasn't around a lot to do the dad-son things, but I always felt that he loved me. He was more connected to my younger brother who was more into sports - like baseball and soccer. I think he picked up that I was different and from an early age.

I was closer to my mother as a child, probably because I was with her so much more. My mother was central in everything that went on at home and at the studio. She was moody and very dramatic. She'd let you know exactly how she felt about things and when she was mad everyone knew it. I think I'm like my mother in her energy and wanting to control everything - and especially her perfectionism. It's got to be tied up in being a performer in some way because neither my dad nor my brother were nearly as caught up in the need to please and be perfect all the time.



I was three years old when I took my first tap class and had my first recital. I wasn't noticeably effeminate so I was spared the brunt of the teasing. I was keyed into everything around me and I watched myself and everyone around me. The potential for being teased or humiliated was always there so I avoided situations that I couldn't control. Gym class was always a major source of anxiety where I could potentially be humiliated – especially in the showers. I was the least nervous when I was dancing and performing. It was the only place that I felt any joy whatsoever.

I would describe myself as a child that had to please – no matter what. It was unbearable at times. I was a natural in dance and music but it became the focus of my whole childhood. My mom used to humiliate me by parading me around the neighborhood in my recital costumes. I don't think it was her intention, but it felt like her love for me was conditional on how I looked or how well I did. I was completely wrapped up in how well I was doing, how I looked, and how I stacked up against the competition. I was labeled a talent - "the golden child" which put a tremendous amount of pressure to be perfect at everything. Throughout grade school and high school I always made straight A's. I also played piano very well and my parents got it into my head that I was a prodigy. I watched my mother play and memorized her fingering. I could play anything that I heard and saw but I couldn't read music.

I started piano competitions when I was six years old which I absolutely hated. The more competitions I won, the more pressure I felt to win and the greater chance I'd fall off the pedestal. That's what finally happened. I was nine years old and was invited to perform in the main recital hall of a major performing arts conservatory. The auditorium was hot and overcrowded. It was the first time I realized that if I fucked-up

people would laugh at me. I was so distracted during the performance by the crowd that I became so nervous and self-conscious that my fingers froze. The muse left me! *(laughing)* Because it was all from memory, I couldn't pick it up in the middle of the piece. I burst into tears and ran off stage. I felt like such a fraud. My parents rushed backstage to comfort me but I knew my mom wanted to tell me go back out there and finish the goddamn piece! After that, I stopped piano altogether and focused on dancing for the next couple of years.

In seventh grade I stopped dancing because I was sick of being teased and wanted to fit in. This was partly to throw people off the trail and partly to piss-off my mother. I went through a phase in high school when fitting in feeling normal were priorities. I excelled at diving and swimming and quickly got all the benefits of being in the "A-crowd." It was a huge boost for my self-esteem to be popular and my body changed into a swimmer's build. I had a cheerleader girlfriend but I never had sex with her. I was much more comfortable in large groups than alone with her. In retrospect I was playing a part during those years but it beat the alternative of being called a sissy and harassed.

My parents expected me to go to college and my mother hoped I would major in music and dance. She encouraged me to get out of Baltimore and 'not make the same mistake' she did in giving up her career aspirations. My grandfather was a doctor so initially I went into a pre-med program in college. I was miserable so after one semester I changed my major to piano performance – don't ask me why. I was still too anxious to sit and play for juries and recitals so I changed to a voice major. I was cast as the lead in my first musical. It was a wonderful experience because I got to use my dance and music training. I distinctly remember hearing the thunderous applause from the audience. I was

suddenly hooked on musical theater! I returned to dancing again with a new enthusiasm. Having that early training and knowing how to move in space never leaves you. I became the dancer/singer “star” of that school and studied there for two years.

My senior year I transferred to a more rigorous dance program in a college farther away from my parents. That’s where I learned a breadth of dance styles, honed my technique and began to seriously focus on a career as a professional dancer. My body changed and I became aware of looking and feeling like a grown man. Being in tune with your body is a basic part of dance. Because I was so driven, I got an accelerated BA in Dance and went back for a semester to finish my BFA in Vocal Performance. There were no significant relationships in college because I was so focused on my dancing and voice. I was still totally closeted. I knew some gay guys but the department was mostly made up of women. I knew I was attracted to men but couldn’t bring myself to do anything about it. I needed to please my parents and stay “the golden child.”

### **Life as a Dancer**

By the time I moved to New York, I felt professionally prepared and hadn’t considered the idea of not making it on Broadway. At twenty-two, I moved here with two girl friends from college and we shared an apartment in the theater district. The city was energetic and there was such a feeling of freedom - the possibilities seemed endless. I always hated auditioning, though, and I never got used to the scrutiny of being evaluated. Ultimately, that’s one of the things that made me consider leaving dance – the constant feeling of having to prove myself.

I got a job my second day in New York in a dinner theater production outside of New York. It was a great experience and I met my best friend, Jessie, who took me to

my first gay bar. I hadn't told him that I was gay because I was still struggling with it. It wasn't until one of the wardrobe ladies in the show teasingly asked me if I was going out to the bars with the other "queens" that I realized that people assumed I was gay. I asked her what made her think I was gay and she just laughed and said 'oh please – who are you trying to kid? It's OK sweetheart.' I almost cried right there. It was at that moment that I realized that it might be OK for me to be gay. When that show closed I returned to New York and began to build a network of people in show business through auditions and dance classes. I'm still close with most of them – they're family.

At twenty-three I got my first production contract in a national tour of a Broadway revival. I sensed immediately that this was a step up from dinner theater. I was still relatively naïve to the backstage culture but I learned the ups and downs of tour life. The money was incredible and backstage felt like a party instead of work. The people were clever and funny. I felt like I was in the world that I belonged in. I finally had sex for the first time with a guy in the cast and it was fantastic. It didn't turn into anything more than a road romance but it was perfect for me then. He was warm and understanding – never pressuring me beyond where I was. When I came off tour I told my roommates that I was gay. As it turned out they already knew. One of the blessings of being in theater is that I didn't have to come out to everyone in some dramatic way!

At twenty five I was hired for my first Broadway show. I felt that I was finally at the top. The show didn't last long but I had the credit and my resume was stacking up nicely. Over the next few years I went from show to show without a real plan about where I wanted to end up. Once I had achieved my dream of getting on Broadway, I just wanted to stay on the top of the heap. I never wanted to be a star, I just wanted to keep

working. I was marketable because I was a dancer and singer and worked hard on maintaining my body. I began working out to develop more of a “pumped up” look which was the new rave at auditions. I was introduced to a non-denominational church at Lincoln Center by a friend when I was in my twenties. It was very homo-friendly and didn’t preach fire and brimstone that I was raised on. By that time, AIDS was taking its toll on the community and we were all searching for some answers. It was a very gay-friendly church and addressed the AIDS crisis head on. I was never sexually promiscuous but my judgmental attitude about sex lessened. I was around people who thought it was perfectly normal and that really helped. By accepting it, I eventually incorporated my spirituality and religious beliefs with being gay. It’s something I still work on and think about because my spirituality and being gay are both so essential to me.

When I was thirty-one I was hired for a long-running show and camped out there for five years. Backstage was like the quintessential dysfunctional family. We knew everything about each other and there were no limits on what people said to each other. It was fun and exciting – like a gay man’s locker room. I also loved not having to audition and the financial and professional rewards of being in a stable hit show.

When I was thirty-four I met Carl and we started dating. We had many friends in common and went to the same church. Carl was in the midst of transitioning from dancing to social work. It was my first long-term relationship so I was initially hesitant. I wanted to maintain my independence so we didn’t move in together for two years.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

By the time I was thirty-five, I had developed a serious knee injury and was constantly in rehab physical therapy. It crossed my mind to consider other careers during that time – maybe because of Carl's transition - but I didn't think I *had* to stop. I went in and out of the show, rehabbing the knee and then re-injuring it. I felt out of control and finally left the show and took a summer stock job as a singer. It was devastating going from Broadway to stock. I felt like I was back at square one again. I was pretty depressed.

Carl was very supportive during that time and strongly encouraged me to go back to school. I went for some career counseling during that time but didn't want to commit to a program. I was afraid of leaving show business prematurely and before I knew that I had to. I focused on developing career as an actor/singer but it was difficult to be taken seriously at auditions. It was as if my credits as a dancer suddenly meant nothing.

I had spent so much time with physical therapists that I knew a lot about rehab and was interested in how the body works. A dancer friend was considering applying to medical school so I decided to take some college courses – knowing that I could always go back to auditioning. I began to focus my energy into fulfilling the prerequisites for physical therapy school. Carl was very involved and, though he was supportive, at times it felt like he was pushing me. My show business friends were freaked out by my shift in focus from dance to school. It was as if I was betraying them. My mother was also mixed about my schooling because she had put a lot of time and energy into my career and loved that I was on Broadway. I could tell she wanted me to hang in there. My dad was more supportive because he had transitioned into engineering in his thirties.. He

liked that I was going into something more stable. Unfortunately, he died during my second year of graduate school and never saw the end result of the hard work and schooling.

Carl wanted to move back to his hometown in the Midwest after getting a sizeable inheritance. Things began to snowball and I began to move too quickly. I wasn't ready to leave New York and the possibility of another show. I wanted to stay with Carl, though so we moved to the Midwest. I planned to finish my prerequisites and enroll in physical therapy school there. Moving was a huge change and, suddenly, I had no friends or support network which put a tremendous pressure on our relationship. Financially, I had to rely almost entirely on Carl and that was very difficult, because I prized myself in my independence. I never asked anyone for anything – money or support and here I was dependent on Carl. I went from a successful career on Broadway to feeling like a kept person. I was depressed and started seeing a psychiatrist. I also began antidepressants which lowered my anxiety.

I was accepted into a top physical therapy school. I felt the pressure of making this career change work. It was a structured, three-year master's degree which helped the transition feel more gradual. There were academic challenges and successes as well prestige of becoming a physical therapist that appealed to me. It was very competitive which kept me motivated and on track. My own issues around having to be perfect made school harder than it needed to be and, ultimately, less enjoyable. I put so much pressure on myself to get straight A's that I was a nervous wreck. In the midst of it, I just kept on semester by semester – taking it a little at a time.

Carl and I began to have problems during graduate school. Sexually, things had cooled off and the financial discrepancy had really taken its toll. We went to couple's counseling but that didn't really help. The bottom line was I felt manipulated into moving away from New York and I missed my friends and my independence. I applied for an internship in New York and we broke up after almost eight years together. It was very sad and no one was at fault.

I still miss theater and performing. A career in the arts is such a part of my soul and my dance career was so validating and personal. If I have particularly difficult day with demanding patients or colleagues, show business looks pretty good. What I got back from performing was more connected to me as a person and my self-worth. My work is personal now, but it doesn't hit me in the gut the way performing did – both positively and negatively. I like working with injured dancers but it reminds me of what I once had. It's like a divorce from a relationship or mourning the death of a friend. I think spending almost my entire life performing, it's part of my personality. Dancing is at the core of who I am and always will be.

It's very traumatic to leave a career that's so much part of your soul. The intrigue about being associated with show business feeds and drives you and makes you feel like you're not just an ordinary person. On the other hand, performing doesn't allow for career growth or a permanent sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. I felt like my whole self was on the line in such a raw way at each audition. The body eventually gives out and is less and less able to bounce back from the abuse of dancing eight shows a week. The reality of the business and your body takes something away some of what was so special. The downside of leaving the business is feeling ordinary. Whereas, before I



felt that I was doing something others couldn't, I'm not different from other people anymore. I feel more like I'm run-of-the-mill. Talking about all of this does make me stop and realize that I've been through a lot and it all comes with me. These interviews helped me see the shit I went through to get through school. Who knows? In five years I may want to do something else.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

After reviewing Martin's narrative, several themes have emerged in relation to existing theories. In the following section they are presented as "I themes" with raw data from the interviews.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME 1:**    *I feel an important sense of competence, stability, and control in my life.*

Martin described overall satisfaction in his work as a physical therapist and a balance between his personal and professional interests. The recognition he receives at work fosters a sense of professional competence, security and stability. In addition, it allows him a sense of control over his career.

It's a nice balance. I split my time between a neuro-trauma unit with stroke and severe head trauma cases and sports injuries and dancers.....I'm respected as a competent adult. I'm pretty satisfied – I have time to start dating and having a personal life outside of work which is so different from show business.

Martin's career development is not consistent with Super's (1990) age-related time frames, though his current experiences at work are consistent with certain aspects of Super's theory. Martin seems to be experiencing vocational maturity and greater commitment, mastery and competence on the job.

I'm respected at work and there's' not the same bullshit as in theater. I mean I can really feel like I'm making a difference in these patient's lives, you know. Not that theater doesn't – it's just that it feels more adult or something – not like you're a child- which goes with the whole chorus boy thing.

Martin cited his desire for control over his future and security as central to his experience of his transition. His current job allows him the stability and security that he

did not experience as a dancer. He also noted that the recognition he receives from colleagues and supervisors fosters competence and self-esteem.

I like the control over the direction of my clinical career that I can actually be promoted because of the good job I do. In PT I work hard and am rewarded for it. There's a different kind of recognition by my peers and my bosses....but it does make me feel good about myself and the work I do in a different way from theater. I don't feel like I'm at the mercy of some crazy casting lady!

**THEME 2:** *It is important for me to live and work in New York in order to feel a connection to my past.*

Martin expressed his clear desire to be back “home” in New York among friends from his years as a professional dancer. Aspects of the previous participant's theme of family connections in show business may be implied. While he received an advanced degree in physical therapy with the support of his partner in the Midwest, he felt disconnected from his professional roots and Broadway identity.

I moved back home to New York for my internship training – Carl wasn't willing to come back. I wanted to be back among my theater friends – to work with dancers too. I'd known them for twenty years and I felt too isolated out there – it was too much change for me. I think you have to stay connected to who you were too – not just pretend it never was....I feel connected to the world again.

Marris (1975) and Osherson (1980) describe the experience of self in career transition as being one of reclaiming a lost aspect of the self. Martin's experience of self in career transition meant holding on to an enduring sense of self himself as a part of the theater family. Working toward a professional goal as a physical therapist who worked with injured dancers was less alien and more connected to his experiences.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

**THEME 1:** *I felt a sense of shame and struggled with my early attraction to men. I tried to protect those I loved from my being gay.*

Like the other participants, Martin struggled with feeling different because of early same-sex attractions, and with the need to protect others from his emerging feelings (de Monteflores, 1986). This was compounded by the negative messages of his strict religious upbringing that impacted his self-esteem (Maylon, 1982b).

I felt that if I gave into it I'd be letting my parents down – the golden child....I've known I was gay for as long as I can remember. I was twenty-two when I quit fighting it. When I was four or five, I had crushes on boys. Our family was very religious and I thought my feelings for boys were weird and I was careful about what I told anyone. It was a secret that I couldn't let out and sinful. By third grade I knew I felt different – not in a good way -from my dad and uncles.

Again, Martin's narrative is consistent with Isay's theory (1989, 1996) that young homosexual boys sense themselves as different from other men fostering isolation and secrecy. Coupled with the religious condemnation from the church this instilled both shame and a sense of being defective on a core level.

**THEME 2:** *I was identified as the golden child, was eager to please, and driven to try to achieve perfection.*

Building on the previous theme of protecting others from parts of himself, Martin developed the need to please others early on. He began dancing at age three and felt a pressure to push himself throughout most of his childhood. He described the attention he received as fueling his need to maintain his status as the "golden child."

I was a child that had to please – no matter what. I was labeled a talent - "the golden child" - which put pressure on to be perfect at everything. It was unbearable at time. I

had natural ability in dance and music but it overwhelmed my whole childhood – I had to be better and better at everything. My mom used to parade me around the neighborhood in recital costumes – totally humiliating. I don't think she meant it, but it felt like conditional love – you know, how I looked or how well I did at whatever. I was completely wrapped up in being the best, looking the best. I always made straight A's.

Again, Stein and Cabaj's (1996) notion of the creation of a false self seems evident in Martin's early experiences. His parents recognized and affirmed his successes which seemed to feed his need for perfection. This drive to succeed and be perfect was challenged at age nine when he "froze up" at the piano recital.

The auditorium was hot and overcrowded. That's when I realized that if I fucked up people would laugh at me. I was distracted and nervous and so self-conscious and my fingers froze. The muse left me! *(laughing)* I burst into tears and ran off stage. My parents rushed backstage but I knew my mom wanted to tell me go back out there and finish the goddamn piece! After that, I stopped piano and focused on dancing only.

Martin was humiliated and sensed his mother's disappointment. As a result he stopped playing piano and immersed himself in dance. In junior high school, fed up with being teased, Martin stopped dancing altogether. He became one of the "A-crowd" and enjoyed the esteem this brought him.

I went through a phase when I could fit in and feel like I was normal. I became a good diver and swimmer and loved being in "A crowd." It was a huge boost for my self-esteem - to be popular. My body changed and I was suddenly somebody. I was playing a part during those years but it beat the alternative of being called a sissy and harassed.

In college, Martin seemed to find a place for himself in the musical theater and dance departments. Even so, his drive for approval was consuming and he describes getting "hooked" and enjoying thunderous applause.

I finally changed to a voice major and I was the lead in my first musical. It was a great because I got to use my dance and musical sides. Hearing the thunderous applause after my number was incredible – that's when I was hooked on musical theater! I went back dancing again. The early training and knowing how to move in space never leaves you. I

was “star” of that school for two years....that’s where I began to seriously focus on a career as a professional dancer. I was so driven, I got an accelerated BA in Dance and went back for to finish my BFA in vocal performance.

### **Life as a Dancer**

THEME 1: *Validating professional experiences allowed me to accept both my sexuality and find a place for my spiritual beliefs.*

Martin described a series of jobs and experiences that allowed him to begin to bring together split-off aspects of himself. His increased sense of competency was clear from his first show.

My first production contract was in a revival and it was clearly a step-up from dinner theater. I learned the ups and downs of tour life -the money, the party atmosphere backstage. It was non-judgmental and that was the world that I belonged in.

He experienced profound relief by simply allowing space for his sexuality to emerge after a wardrobe woman acknowledged his homosexuality without judgment.

She saw right through me and still liked me. It was such a relief - I almost cried right there. That’s when I realized that it might be OK for me to be gay....I finally went to tell my roommates and they knew too. I think my big fear was everyone would call me a ‘faggot’ and no one did.

Martin’s exposure to social and professional settings that accepted homosexuality continued to foster an integration of his homosexuality (Cass, 1979).

I finally had sex for the first time with a guy in the cast and it was fantastic. I was never promiscuous but I became much less judgmental being around theater people. Everyone I was around thought it was perfectly normal and that really helped.

Additionally, joining a non-denominational church in New York geared toward performers in response to the AIDS crisis gave him a forum to express his spirituality.

I went to that actor’s church at Lincoln Center when I was in my twenties. That’s where I merged my spirituality with being gay. AIDS was taking its toll and we were all

searching for answers. Friends were dying and it was terrifying. It's totally gay-friendly took the AIDS crisis head on and we did volunteer work and whatever we could.

Similar ideas were expressed by Hopcke (1992), who described an early, "AIDS-induced midlife crisis" for some gay men in their twenties that includes a confrontation with mortality resembling a classic, midlife psychological transformation. In this way, Martin was faced with finding a community of performers who were dealing with the AIDS crisis at that time.

**THEME 2:** *Despite professional successes and achieving important goals, I felt critically evaluated and constantly under the microscope which threatened my status at the top.*

Martin described achieving his dream of making it to Broadway when he was in his mid-twenties. He illustrated his ascent in the Broadway ranks as the culmination of hard work and determination.

All my hard work paid off. Being hired for my first Broadway show felt like I'd made it to the top....I went from show to show without any plan about where I wanted to end up. Once I'd achieved getting on Broadway, I just wanted to maintain that. I constantly felt like I was under a microscope. I never wanted to be a star, I just wanted to keep working.

Despite his on going ability to find employment and secure better jobs, there were aspects of show business that seemed to undermine his self-esteem and threaten his professional status. Martin's dissatisfaction and professional frustrations are similar to previous narratives of those who have not transitioned.

I got into a long-running Broadway show and camped out there for five years. I loved not having to audition. The financial and professional rewards were stable – that's the best part of being in a hit show. I always hated auditioning, never got use to them. It's one of the things that made me consider leaving dance – the constant feeling of having to prove myself over and over again. You're really treated like a nobody, a child even with tons of experience.

It seems that despite his professional successes, Martin constantly felt scrutinized and infantilized, which likely inhibited the formation of a stable professional self-concept. As Super (1990) suggests that over time individuals progress into the *establishment stage* developing a greater commitment to a career as they experience mastery and seniority on the job. Despite feeling dissatisfied, Martin had no intention or motivation to change careers at that time.

I was fed up but lots of people feel that way and never do anything. Look at [male name], he's been in "Les Miz" forever and hates it. Truthfully, I probably would still be out there pounding the pavement if I hadn't gotten injured. Also Carl, he was such a big part of me leaving the business.

### **Career Changes and Transitions**

THEME 1: *I felt out of control when physical injuries prematurely ended my career as a dancer.*

As already noted, Martin had not considered transitioning prior to his serious on going physical injuries. He experienced his body as betraying him after years of being relatively injury free for most of his career.

I had a serious knee injury and was constantly in rehab therapy. I wasn't use to my body giving out on me. It's only then that other careers crossed my mind – maybe because of Carl - but I didn't think I had to stop yet. I kept missing shows because of it. I totally felt out of control and finally had to leave the show and took a summer stock job as a singer. It was devastating going from Broadway to stock. I felt like I was back at square one again. It was pretty depressing.

Martin's experience of losing control and being betrayed by his body is consistent with aspects of Ogilvie and Taylor's (1994) research findings. They found the causes for termination of an athletic career to be a function of certain factors which included unexpected physical injury. Injuries negatively influenced a variety of psychological and social issues that contributed to the likelihood of increased stress during a career



transition. They also found that athletes experienced frustration from a loss of control of their most marketable commodity, their physicality.

**THEME 2:** *My transition has been very difficult and I feel as though the special part of me is lost or died.*

While Martin described feeling supported by his ex-partner, Carl, he resented what he perceived as Carl pushing him to leave dancing and move to the Midwest. In addition, his financial dependence on Carl and social isolation stressed their relationship to the point of dissolution (McWhirter & Mattison, 1993).

Carl was really supportive all along. He's the one who encouraged me to go back to school but it felt like he was pushing me too fast. I wasn't ready to leave New York or the possibility of getting in another show but I wanted to stay with Carl....Suddenly, I had no friends or no support network and financially, I had to rely on him. I always prized myself in my independence - I never asked anyone for anything - money or support and here I was dependent on Carl. I went from a successful career on Broadway to feeling like a kept person.

Martin characterized his transition as very difficult which appears to also be a function of his long-time identification as a dancer and his childhood experiences. As noted previously, Ogilvie & Taylor's research (1994) found that the often single-minded pursuit of excellence in elite athletes is potentially quite limiting and can inhibit adjusting to the realities of aging and retirement. According to this model, Martin's problems are rooted in his earliest experiences in dance.

I think spending almost my entire life performing, it's part of my personality. Dancing is at the core of who I am and probably always will be. I'd have to say my transition was really hard - I'm still not really over it. I still miss theater and performing. It's very traumatic to leave behind part of your soul. It's such a part of my soul and my dance career was so personal. What I got back from performing was more connected to me as a person and my self-worth. My work is personal now, but it doesn't hit me in the gut the

way performing did. It's like a divorce from a relationship or mourning the death of a friend.

As in the previous narratives, Martin's talents seem to have served an early function for him in regulating his self-esteem and instilled a sense that he was special and unique. Despite his recent success in school and at work, he seems to have difficulty relinquishing his identification as a dancer and the associations that the performing community provided.

Being in show business feeds and drives you and makes you feel like you're not just an ordinary person. The realities of the business and your body take something away some from what was so special before. The hardest part is feeling ordinary. I felt special and was doing what other's couldn't. I'm not different from other people anymore. I feel more like I'm run-of-the-mill.

In sum, Martin's early developmental experiences share many similar themes to those narratives previously presented. Early on, Martin felt the need to please others and strive for perfection. Several humiliating experiences related to his early dance and music performances left him hypersensitive to criticism and feeling harshly judged by others. While he felt same-sex attraction from an early age, religious conflicts and managing perceptions made forming a positive gay identity particularly difficult. As a result he made a conscious choice to turn his back on dance and music (and his mother) throughout high school. He admitted that his sense of belonging to the "A group" in high school was based solely upon a false presentation of himself to the world.

Negotiating the Early Adult Transition and Entry into the Adult World (Levinson, 1978) was complicated by his relentless expectations that he be the best at every endeavor. There was also a palpable sense of his mother's presence in his development as a performer which seemed to influence the formation of his occupational Dream. Like

Dwayne, Martin's mother did not have the dance career she had wanted and, perhaps, pushed him toward fulfilling her dream. Once he moved to New York, however, Martin experienced the professional community as family and accepting of his homosexuality even before he could. Although open about his sexuality among peers, he did not come out to his family until his late thirties when he and his partner were breaking up. As a result of the loss of many friends to AIDS, Martin joined a non-denominational, gay-friendly church where he met his partner of nine years. This seemed to allow him to integrate his religious and spiritual beliefs with his homosexuality.

Martin's physical injury in his mid-thirties clearly initiated his career transition. His ex-partner, Carl, was instrumental in Martin's transition but, ultimately, was experienced as controlling and overbearing. While Martin reported feeling satisfied with his professional accomplishments and new found security, he experienced a significant loss of his "special" status as a Broadway performer.

## **THE LIFE OF TOM**

*I met with Tom in his apartment/photography studio where he lives and works. The space was sleekly decorated to resemble a Soho-style loft with exposed brick and high tech lighting. Tom showed me several of his photography projects which included pro bono work for an upcoming AIDS fund raiser in the Broadway community. Tom was forthcoming with his life story throughout both interviews. Tom is currently in twice weekly psychotherapy and devoted much of the initial interview to addressing traumatic events of this childhood. Efforts were made in the second interview to focus on the adult developmental issues of this study. Several weeks later I ran into Tom on the street and he thanked me for the interview and said it was "very helpful" to think and talk about his experiences.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm thirty-six years old and I work at an advertising agency as a graphic designer for Broadway shows. It's not where I see myself ultimately settling but it's been a good experience for the past couple of years. I also have a small photography business which is more stimulating and I do pro-bono graphic design work for some AIDS organizations. I've lost a lot of friends over the years and it's my way of remembering them. I transitioned from dancing and musical theater four years ago after an on going injury. It's been a process of trying to find something as rewarding and exciting as being on Broadway. I fear that I'll never have that kind of unbridled passion for my career as I did for dance and theater. Performing was fun and didn't feel like work. There's nothing as gratifying to me as being up on stage and knowing that you made it to the top – Broadway. The downside of it was the insecurity of not knowing how long a show

would run. Overall, I'm satisfied with the direction I'm heading in my career, I'm just tired of being in a transition.

I've been in my current relationship for over a year with Francisco, but I don't know for how much longer we'll stay together. He's HIV positive and that's hard on the relationship. It complicates our sex life and it's been difficult to develop intimacy in the relationship. We're in couple's therapy now and I'm in individual therapy as well. He's a fairly well-known photographer and much further along in his career which can add to the competition between us. At times, he's critical and offers unsolicited career advice. I also have a professional career coach and meet with him twice a month. I've never lived with anyone and doubt I ever will. Being in a relationship with another man is challenging and that competition always comes up. As a gay man I never learned how to develop an open, honest, comfortable relationship.

I've always been someone who set high goals. I set out for the top, put blinders on and go for it. Once I reach those goals, though, I set even higher ones. Much of what motivated me in the past was fear of not being good enough. Ultimately, I've had to look at that pattern and realize that I've always gotten validation from the outside. That's how I distinguished myself from other people throughout my life – striving and expecting to be the best at everything. I've run into problems maintaining that kind of drive to succeed. I'm trying to find other ways of creating the life I want beyond whipping myself into it.

Leaving dance and theater was very hard. I still think about performing but I knew that I couldn't dance forever - that was never my hope. My hope was to perform on Broadway and enjoy the ride. It's been a gradual process of moving on for me. When

I meet someone today I say I'm in advertising and photography. I use to explain my whole story about getting injured and changing careers – God forbid they didn't know my accomplishments. It was important that I let people know my Broadway lineage even though I was working in another field. I thought that by going into theater advertising I'd still feel that special connection to Broadway. Until I felt proud of my work in advertising, I hung onto those Broadway successes. Now, I'm even ready to branch out from there to non-theater photography and graphics.

I consider myself “out” as a gay man with everyone I know. My family is supportive and they've known since I was thirty. I'm completely out at work because it's a creative field and most people there are gay. In my private work I've been hired by a corporate law firm to photograph some executives. It's interesting to go into that world which is mostly straight, white males. It doesn't bother me because I *can* be gay, I'm the photographer! *(laughs)* I don't think it's necessary to hide or lie about my sexuality with anyone no matter what situation I find myself in.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I was born and raised in the Midwest in a middle class suburban neighborhood. We were Presbyterian and education was always a priority in our family. I have an identical twin brother, Chris, an older brother, and a younger sister. I was a good student and my parents always encouraged us to strive for academic success. My father is an engineer and my mother is a school teacher. My dad worked long hours and I don't remember him around very much as a child. I did get a good academic foundation from my parents, though, which helped me in college and when I returned to school four years ago.

I was a shy kid and always was considered more sensitive than my other two brothers. I wasn't necessarily a sissy but I liked creative things. By the time I was five or six, my sister and I regularly put on shows for the neighborhood. For this I was teased and called 'faggot' by my older brother and his friends. People use to comment that even though I was an identical twin I was different from Chris. Chris and I were close until junior high school when I got totally immersed in theater and dance. I was very energetic and studied gymnastics in grade school. I was naturally flexible and my coach singled me out. He was very encouraging and I began to feel I had a talent and something unique that my twin brother didn't. What I loved about gymnastics, and later dance, was that I could throw myself into a trick or tumble with complete abandon once I had the move down. Gymnastics was a key to me becoming a dancer and gave me a sense of my body.

When I was eight years old, I was raped by my older brother and his friend. It was traumatic and is one of the reasons I have such a tough time trusting men sexually. It was complicated because I already felt attracted to older boys by that time. I felt like I had brought the rape on myself. I knew I shouldn't tell anyone and felt ashamed. It wasn't until years later that I confronted my brother and recognized that it was, indeed, a rape. It's much of what I deal with in psychotherapy now.

When I was nine, I was chosen for a community theater program for "talented" kids that took two students from each local school. I got the lead in "Oliver" and that started the whole "theater bug." I felt special. I was teased about being into musicals but it didn't dampen my enthusiasm. My parents weren't opposed to my participation in theater but they weren't encouraging either. I wanted to take dance classes but my parents wouldn't let me. I traveled and competed for gymnastics around the state but my

parents rarely came to meets. For much of my childhood it felt like they weren't very interested in whatever I was involved in.

In junior high school I joined the choir and became involved in the theater program. I traveled to New York in eighth grade with the theater group and saw my first Broadway show. It was incredibly exciting and fed that theater bug. It was on that trip that I first fooled around with another boy. We had been friends in shows and I knew that we liked each other. It was scary and we were afraid of getting caught. It was like this secret club we didn't talk about.

I had crushes on guys in high school and there was never a doubt that I was gay. I didn't date much in high school other than the required prom dates. I had lots of friends in theater and gymnastics but still felt very isolated. The school I attended had a strong theater program which gave me a solid foundation. I was the lead in most of the school shows and picked up dance steps wherever I could. I'm sure I needed the validation I got from the other students and teachers. My high school drama teacher told my parents that I was talented and should consider majoring in theater or dance in college but my parents disagreed. In private, though, I was set on musical theater and moving to New York.

I went away to college and majored in Graphic Design. My parents felt I should get my degree in something useful. In retrospect, I'm glad I did. I was very angry at the time. I continued to compete in gymnastics in college which kept me limber and in-shape. I joined a jock fraternity with my twin brother. It wasn't a complete disaster but it did keep me in the closet for four years too long. Only theater majors could perform in the college productions so I began choreographing and performing in local community



musicals. I took a few dance classes in college but was more of a natural dancer than a trained one.

The summer after my freshman year I was hired to perform at a local theme park. That was the first time my parents ever sat up and took notice that I might have a real future in show business. It felt so professional at the time – the costumes, the music, and the routine of it. I met an older guy that summer who I really liked. He was a warm, caring man who was completely out to his family. It was the first time I ever had sex and felt that I could let myself go and relax. I worked at other theme parks and semi-professional venues each summer in college and continued to get more experience. I was just waiting to do what I wanted.

### **Life as a Dancer**

The day after graduation I put my graphic design portfolio under the bed and headed to Chicago where I knew I'd get solid dance training. I think leaving home meant leaving all the shame and guilt and secretiveness about being gay and finding a place that I could be myself. It was important to find my own life away from my family's expectations. Part of that meant finding a family that would accept me as I was. I found a better, more supportive family in the dance and theater world.

At twenty-one, I had a lot of catching up to do but I was up for the challenge. I got a scholarship to a good dance school in Chicago and dove in – taking 6 or 7 classes per day. I lived in the city with four roommates and met other people my age who were seriously training to be dancers and working in musical theater. It was an exciting time for me because I felt like I'd finally come to know people I could relate to. It was competitive and the talent was at a much higher level. I had been the “star” in my high school and college shows but being with other “stars” was challenging and motivating.

Also, being gay suddenly wasn't an issue. Of course, not everyone was gay but no one was freaked out by it and I rarely had to "out" myself at all. I could let down the guard and be as queeny or outrageous as I wanted and no one flinched. It was around this time that I first heard about AIDS and people started talking about it around the studio. It scared me but at that age you feel invincible.

It was intoxicating to be in the dance studio and work that intensely every day. My ballet and jazz technique improved quickly and I got great encouragement from teachers who told me to move to New York. I worked my ass off and progressed quickly. When I was twenty-two, I auditioned for a national touring company of a long-running Broadway show that auditioned in Chicago. I was non-union but they called me a few days later and invited me to join them for the remainder of the tour.

When I joined the tour, I was welcomed with open arms. I had a nice part in the show that used my dance and gymnastics. It felt like I'd joined a family of twenty instead of just starting a job. I learned a lot about the business and met friends that I'm still close with. Backstage was a blast – always a major drama and personality conflicts. I think I was shocked and thrilled by all that went on. I had a brief relationship with a guy in the show but nothing serious. I tended to have anonymous sex on the road – sometimes protected, often not. Everyone was talking about AIDS in the cast and people we knew in New York were beginning to die. One cast member was diagnosed with HIV and that was a wake up call. It became real when he couldn't continue and had to leave the show and moved back to his parents to die. I continued to have a lot of sex but made sure it was as safe as possible. The show was out for one year and when it closed I finally moved to New York.

New York wasn't the welcoming place that the road had been. I had friends who let me stay with them for a few months. For the first year, I was hired primarily for summer stock productions and regional theater and moved from sublet to sublet. I was paying my dues which was all part of the life of a dancer. I dated here and there but was never in town long enough to develop anything beyond the second date. I auditioned for Broadway shows but had a harder time landing a job. I had friends who were on Broadway and I couldn't understand why it was so hard to break in. Broadway started to feel very "clique-ish" and, by not being on Broadway, I felt like an outsider. I enjoyed the jobs I got, though, and worked for over two years at a well-known New England repertory company. I still longed to be part of the Broadway community and that remained my main focus.

At twenty-six, I was cast in a European touring production of "West Side Story." I didn't want to be away from New York for that long, but I needed the money. I was in Europe for over a year and saved enough money to get my own apartment when I returned. It was a great tour and I got to see parts of the world I wouldn't have otherwise. I gained confidence in my singing and acting which helped my overall self-esteem. I was the first in my family to leave the U.S. and my parents came to visit me in Paris. They finally told me how proud they were of me and all that I had accomplished. I was more determined than ever to return to New York and get on Broadway.

Within a month of returning to New York, I was hired for a pre-Broadway tour. It was a nice tour but, by that time, I was all "toured" out. It's a hard life on the road - different hotels, restaurants, buses each day. At twenty-nine I finally had my opening night on Broadway that I had dreamed of for so long. I was finally on the "inside" of the

business. It's interesting now to look back because as exciting as it was, it wasn't the be-all and end-all I had thought it would be. As fate would have it, during opening night I injured my knee doing a tumbling pass. I remained in the show for three months trying to rehab my knee. Finally the pain was too much and I had to have surgery. I was out of the show for another three months recovering which was difficult and frustrating.

During my time off, I met my first partner, David. He's a director/choreographer and was having some success on Broadway. I had time on my hands during my recovery so we spent a lot of time together. He was seasoned and well-respected in the business and I was attracted to that. We enjoyed each other's sense of humor and were together for two years. The relationship was problematic from the start because of the power differential between us. He was a well-known, fairly powerful Broadway choreographer and I was a dancer. I thought, however, I had found the person of my dreams and that's when I decided to tell my parents I was gay.

I flew home and sat in our living room and broke down. I told them that I was gay and that I was sorry if it hurt them. For years, I felt I needed a relationship to hang being gay on. I thought I'd spare my parents the grief of my sexuality if there wasn't someone special in my life. My father was great and said that he knew all along and was just waiting until I was ready. It's ironic because I never thought my father ever paid much attention to me. We're not particularly close but it was an important moment for both of us. My mother who I had been closer to my whole life was completely caught off guard. It took her some time to adjust. I guess that's pretty typical, huh? The gay son closer to his mother? Sounds like everyone else you've interviewed I'm sure.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

I finally returned to the show on Broadway after three months of rehab but I couldn't dance as fully as before. The show ran another year on Broadway and I was in and out of rehab therapy. I enjoyed working on Broadway but recognized that it was only a job like many others I'd had. My major fear was that when the show closed I'd be back at square one, again. I sought some career counseling as a preliminary conversation to explore what my options were. I didn't tell anyone in the theater I was going because it would look like I was giving up. It set the stage for me to make some decisions about what I would do when I couldn't dance anymore. Advertising seemed interesting, as did photography.

The show closed and I went on the road for six more months to make enough money to go back to school. I finally gave my notice and within a week was in school for graphic design. It was an abrupt change but I liked the challenge. At age thirty-one I was in a top New York program for the next year learning about advertising and graphic art. I did very well and was recognized by my professors and peers which felt good. It was very hard, though, because David was still very involved in show business and didn't support me leaving the business. In the end, we split up partly because he felt so threatened by my transition. Other friends were also questioning what I was doing. They encouraged me to go to acting class or improve my voice so I could stay in theater. Dance had been my passion and the other venues didn't appeal to me in the same way. In truth, I wanted out before the business didn't want me anymore. I wanted to leave on my own terms and not because I wasn't employable anymore.

After I finished school I hit the ground running like when I first started dancing. I again felt like I had to make up for time lost. I marketed myself and researched potential

advertising agencies. I was hired for a Broadway ad agency where I work currently – that was four years ago. The agency liked that I came from the Broadway world and appreciated my insider's view of advertising. I was very insecure about the job and worked crazy hours to prove that I was worthy. I would tell everyone at work that I was a "recovering dancer" so they shouldn't expect too much from me. Gradually, I felt more competent in what I was doing and I was appreciated as a professional at work. I also saw that I had skills as a dancer that were useful in graphic design – especially hard work and dedication.

In theater there was no difference between my personal life and my work life – it all became one thing. I seemed like everyone in show business was my friend and I was a person who needed friends. I needed that validation. Performing gave me the instant validation that said 'we think you're terrific.' I don't miss the insecurity of show business. I hated it when the theater would be half empty and rumors would start about the show closing. The older I got – the less I wanted to move on to another show and the less confident I felt that I could find another job. You'd think that with each addition to my resume I'd feel more confident. I actually became less sure of myself. I like the stability of my paycheck now and the regularity of weekends and holidays off.

There's a lot of shit to deal with and sort out as a grown gay man. Being so hidden for my entire childhood and playing the role of the "good son" has left me searching. Of course being raped was devastating and it's affected my sex life as an adult. There's a heaviness about my life that I didn't expect to find as a result of my transition. The weight of my childhood keeps me stuck in patterns I don't want to be a part of anymore. I was career-oriented when I first left the business but somewhere in

there I lost the drive and have harder time staying on track. I had a harder time as I moved into my mid-thirties taking risks or going for what I wanted.

Starting therapy and working with a career counselor who coaches me on establishing my photography business has been helpful. Each week I try to do one simple thing to move me in a direction that feels like me. Before, I would just keep moving and not feel the disappointment of meeting up against my limitations as a graphic designer, or dancer or whatever I was doing. I could just blame my career on the casting person or the choreographer, but now it's me and my own set of limits that are in my face.

I don't regret one bit of my career as a performer. As it turns out, Broadway was just another show but I had to get there to realize it. I don't know where I'll be in the future. I hope to have a thriving photography and art direction business. It's funny because I still think about performing and dancing – it still stings sometimes. It was great but hopefully I've moved beyond being fixed or validated by some choreographer's approval.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

After reviewing Tom's narrative, several themes have emerged in relation to the previous narratives and existing theories. In the following section they are presented as "I themes" with raw data from the interviews.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME 1:**    *I enjoy what I do but fear I might never have the passion that I had for dance and theater.*

Tom is currently working as a graphic designer for a company that works on Broadway show advertising campaigns. Like Martin, he stated that this initially bridged his past and current careers, but struggles with the loss of passion that he felt for dance and theater.

I enjoy what I do – but it's different. Performing was fun and never felt like work. This job started out as feeling really good – a nice bridge between the being on Broadway and working for Broadway. It feels a little stagnant now – that's why I'm starting to do things outside that I think are more creative. I'm just afraid I'll never have the kind of passion as I did for dance and theater - I miss the excitement....There's nothing as gratifying to me as being up on stage and sharing that experience with an audience. Part of it also was knowing that you made it to the top – Broadway.

Tom experienced some continuity of his performing self while establishing a new professional identity (Marris, 1977) by working for a Broadway advertising agency. He enjoyed the continued association with the Broadway community. He now seems to be less interested in remaining in that field and is struggling to establish his photography business. As he moves further from working within the Broadway circle, he is experiencing increased anxiety and aspects of the loss which he may have initially avoided. In trying to understand the "mournful" aspects of change in regard to self-



initiated change, Marris (1977) postulates the phenomenon of the “conservation principle,” the impulse to preserve and keep life even and predictable. He suggested that some self-initiated career changers may titrate the loss by slowly relinquishing the tie to the previous career. So, despite initiating the career change, Tom may question and struggle with the process as a way of working through the loss. He may be understood as having attempted to maintain and/or restore his professional status but is now mourning the loss of his career as a dancer.

**THEME 2:** *Problems in my relationships center around competition, control and difficulties developing intimacy.*

Tom feels that his current relationship is complicated both by his boyfriend's HIV positive status and the competition as photographers/artists. Tom's status as a relative novice compared to his boyfriend, leaves him feeling criticized and controlled by Francisco's comments and advice.

I don't know for how much longer Francisco and I will stay together. He's HIV positive and it complicates our sex life We're in couple's therapy but I'm not sure. I never learned how to be open and honest – or just comfortable in a relationship. He's pretty well-known and in a completely different place in his career. He can be critical and offers unsolicited advice....I think being in a relationship with another man is really challenging - competition always comes up.

Tom admitted to problems with intimacy as a result of his childhood traumas. As noted previously, McWhirter and Mattison (1984) recognize the difficulties male couples may have with intimacy, particularly if either or both are struggling with early developmental conflicts or arrests. Francisco's health status combined with the critical comments inhibit their ability to move forward in their relationship.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

THEME 1: *As a child I never felt my parents were interested in my talents or achievements.*

Tom stated that he felt his parents rarely seemed interested in his interests during his childhood. Tom distinguished himself early on as having talents and abilities in gymnastics and theater and found the coaches encouraging and supportive of his abilities. This allowed him to distinguish himself from his twin.

My parents weren't particularly encouraging. I wanted to take dance classes but they didn't think it was a good idea. I was energetic and studied gymnastics - I was naturally flexible. That got me recognized by my coach. He was great – really great and I felt I had a talent – or something unique that my twin didn't. My parents rarely came to gymnastic meets. It felt like they weren't really interested in anything I was.

As in other narratives, Tom described many of the supportive parental functions (Kohut 1981) as being supplied by his coaches and teachers. Tom's self-esteem seemed to suffer but he found recognition and a sense of being unique and talented from these nurturing relationships. This seems to have impacted his emerging dream of feeling "chosen" to dance and perform.

I was chosen for this theater program that took 2 people from each school. I got the lead was in "Oliver" and that started the whole theater bug, talented thing. I felt special. I was teased about being into musicals but it didn't damper my enthusiasm. I wanted to take dance classes but my parents wouldn't let me. They weren't very interested in whatever I did.

His experiences in junior high school and high school furthered his developing sense of himself as a dancer and performer.

In junior high school I was in choir and theater. I went to New York in 8<sup>th</sup> grade to see my first Broadway show. It was incredibly exciting and ingrained that theater bug. I knew that I'd be up there someday.

THEME 2: *I felt responsible for being raped as a child because it coincided with my becoming aware of my same-sex attractions.*

Tom linked the trauma of being raped by his older brother as having contributed to his sense of guilt and shame about his same-sex desires. It is from that point that he traced his shame and a disconnection from himself that he later found through music and dance (Stein & Cabaj, 1996).

I guess I should say that I was raped by my older brother and his friend when I was eight. It was traumatic and has fucked up me sexually....in some ways it's kept me from trusting men. It's complicated, I think, because I was feeling attracted to older boys by then. I know I didn't-but I felt like I had brought [the rape] on myself. I felt totally ashamed....that's when I kind of went inside and cut off from my family. I showed them what they wanted – a disconnection to anything real in me - but it felt like shit.

Psychoanalysis has long recognized that early traumatic experiences heighten dissociative operations and anxiety and lower an individual's self-esteem (Drescher, 1998).

I was so anxious as a kid because I didn't know what people wanted me to be. It's a lot of pressure for a kid. I was involved in theater and shows and that's what really saved me but until I got away and got to know myself more I was stuck in being seen as the perfect little boy.

As in Martin's narrative, Tom felt the need to be perceived as a "perfect" boy in order to remain loveable in the eyes of those who were important to him.

### **Life as a Dancer**

THEME 1: *I left home and immersed myself in dance and experienced a sense of belongingness in a new kind of family.*

Once Tom graduated from college and felt he had fulfilled his parent's expectations for college, he moved to Chicago and immersed himself into the culture of dance and musical theater. It is through these experiences that he felt a sense of

belongingness to another family. The notion of “family” has been a theme in most of the previous narratives presented.

Leaving home meant good-bye to all the shame and secretiveness about being gay. I’d done my part for my parents and wanted to do what I wanted to do. I got a scholarship in Chicago and dove in – taking 6 or 7 classes a day – they really became like a family. It felt intoxicating to be in the dance studio and working that intensely every day. I worked my ass off and take pride in how much progress I made in that short amount of time.

It is during this time, it seems, that Tom was able to “try on” belonging to a group with a minimum of conflict. This is consistent with Cass’s (1979) *identity acceptance* in which the individual can consider the possibility of a positive gay identity in the context of increased positive exposure to the gay community.

Being gay just wasn’t an issue there – it was the norm. I mean not everyone was gay but no one was freaked out by it and I rarely had to out myself at all. It’s so great to not have to hide or explain or cover up. I could let down the guard and be as queeny or outrageous as I wanted and no one ridiculed me.

Tom felt he did not have to “out” himself in many instances. It was assumed that he was gay simply by his involvement in dance. While this may have lessened his anxiety and facilitated his social interactions with gay dancers, it may have temporarily stunted the coming out process (Kimmel, 1995).

**THEME 2:** *Through professional successes and becoming involved in a relationship, I gained confidence and allowed myself to form more authentic relationships with my family.*

Tom described a gradual process of gaining competence as a professional performer which eventually allowed him to include his family in his professional adult world. In this way, while he remained driven and single-minded in his professional

pursuits Jacques (1981, 1965) he was able to begin to reveal and integrate split-off aspects of himself in an authentic way (Winnicott, 1960).

I gained confidence in my singing and acting and that really helped overall self-confidence. I was the first in my family to leave the U.S. I even let my parents visit me in Paris. It was the beginning of a new kind of relationship with them – they weren't perfect and neither was I. They told me how proud they were of me and all that I had accomplished.

Tom's relationship with David seemed to foster further integration of his sexuality which allowed him to come out to his parents when he was thirty. Tom's assumption that his homosexuality was destructive or hurtful toward his parents has been a theme in the previous narratives as well. His profound shame and internalized homophobia about allowing himself to be "seen" seemed to be attenuated in his process of coming out (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982).

Once David and I were together, I thought I'd found the person of my dreams. That's when I decided to tell my parents I was gay. I flew home and sat in our living room couch and broke down crying. I told them that I was gay and that I was sorry if it hurt them. For years, I think I needed a relationship to hang being gay on. I thought I'd spare my parents the grief of it all if there wasn't someone in my life.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

THEME 1: *I never thought I'd dance forever but it was important for me to leave on my own terms while I was still employable.*

There seems to be a significant difference in Tom's sense of longevity as a dancer and many of the previous participants' career expectations. From the very beginning he did not feel that he would dance for the rest of his life. During the opening night of his Broadway premiere, Tom injured his knee and despite intensive physical therapy, it became clear to him that he might never dance with the abandon that he once enjoyed. This allowed him to initially consider an alternative careers to dance and performing.

I never expected to dance forever. I was in and out of rehab therapy and I wanted out before the business didn't want me anymore. I wanted to leave on my own terms—even though it was earlier than I thought it would be. I went for career counseling at Career Transition for Dancers. I was just testing the waters to see what my options were. I didn't tell anyone in the theater I was going because it would look like I was giving up. It set the stage for me to make some decisions about what I would do when I couldn't dance anymore.

His relationship with David, however did not survive the transition. David did not support Tom's decision to leave the business. (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Tom felt he needed to cut himself off from the show business culture for a time until he had some distance from it.

It was very hard, though, because David was still very involved in show business and didn't support me leaving. We split up partly because he felt so threatened by me and school. I had to kind of cut off from friends too. They couldn't understand what I was doing. I needed to focus on my school and get into it the same way I did my dancing.

**THEME 2:** *I struggle to find a new way of maintaining motivation and drive beyond the fear of not measuring up to someone else's expectations.*

Tom's current struggles include learning to internally regulate his career pursuits and essentially, stabilize his self-esteem. He reported that the outside validation he received as a performer and the self-critical comparisons are no longer useful for him. Kohut (1971) identifies the mirroring transference in psychotherapy as a developmentally reparative way the individual with narcissistic tendencies eventually achieves stable self-regard. Tom has used his individual psychotherapy to re-examine his motivation for his performing career and his transition thus far.

It's kind of sad because those were the people who felt like family. I don't have the family thing happening at work now – I'm not sure I need it. When I first started I needed support from people that I felt understood me. Everyone was my friend and I was a guy who needed friends. I needed that validation. Performing gave me the instant validation that said "we think you're terrific"....but it was never enough.

Initially, Tom utilized those skills he developed as a dancer to get through the process of returning to school. His high grades and recognition from the professors were motivating, however, he continues to struggle to find his own career path.

I did very well in school - which felt good. I was career-oriented when I first left the business but somewhere in there I lost the drive and have a harder time staying on track. By thirty-four or so taking risks or going for what I wanted was harder. I guess I felt that I didn't deserve it or it wouldn't happen for me. I started therapy and I'm working with a career counselor to set up my photography business – both have been really helpful. Each week I try to do one simple thing to move me in a direction that feels like me.

Tom describes what Jacques (1961) explained as the move into mid-life and toward the depressive position. In this way, Tom has rejected the external constraints on his career and has had to find his own motivation and passion. It seems that he is externalizing less and focusing more on his own hopes and desires rather than on his family's, partner's or mentor's.

Before, I would just keep moving and not feel the disappointment of meeting up against my fears as a graphic designer, or dancer or whatever I was doing. I mean we are getting older and time doesn't last forever so I better make sure I like what I'm doing and who I'm doing it with. Before, I'd just blame it on the casting person or the choreographer, but now it's me and my own set of limits that are in my face.

In sum, Tom's early development is consistent with those narratives already presented. His early experiences of feeling different from his twin brother and being attracted to theater and dance coincided with being teased by peers. His experiences in gymnastics and the recognition he received by coaches and mentors seem central to understanding his career aspirations in dance and theater. Tom experienced his family as indifferent to his dreams of dance and performance but subsequently found support in theater programs. Interestingly, Tom stated that he never planned on remaining in theater or dance and knew that he would transition someday. It was after his injury at twenty-

nine during his Broadway opening night that he began his career transition. Like Martin, Tom described himself as striving for perfection in every endeavor which consistently fueled his competitive drive. In that sense, he had achieved his goal of performing on Broadway and was ready for his next challenge. In similar ways, both Martin and Tom felt forced into the career transition somewhat prematurely and in turn, both reported feeling a loss of status.

Certainly, the trauma of being raped by his older brother seemed to significantly impact his ability to trust in profound ways. He came out to his parents at twenty-nine while he was in a relationship with David. While the relationship did not survive Tom's transition, it did provide him the opportunity to reveal to his parents aspects of himself he had not previously. Tom's current partner's HIV positive status and his current professional struggles make individual and couple's psychotherapies essential in his exploration and understanding of himself and his patterns of relating. Therapy seems to have provided another space for him to integrate his past into his current understanding of himself. In this way, he seems to be moving forward on a developmental path with an evolving ability for self-reflection and a sense of himself as an agent in the world.



## THE LIFE OF RICHARD

*I met with Richard for both interviews in his small, well-organized apartment. I was struck by the many photographs and posters covering the walls of the living room and bathroom from his thirty plus years in show business. Throughout both interviews, Richard brought out other photos and memorabilia which seemed particularly meaningful to him. Richard was forthright in the interviews about his childhood and young adult struggles with his sexuality and relationships. It was apparent from the interviews that he was well-acquainted with his narrative and had thought about the complex issues both privately and in his on going psychotherapy.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm fifty-five years old and I transitioned from show business five years ago. I had a terrific thirty-year career as a dancer and singer but I'm enjoying my new life. I currently work at a major financial firm as their archivist and museum manager. I'm a full-time employee and make a nice living with the consistency of the benefits and paycheck. I've been concentrating on my retirement fund and will be fully vested in three more years. It's the first time in my life I've had financial goals for myself and have been able to plan ahead for anything. I enjoy putting on a suit and tie each day and traveling down to the financial center like a normal, everyday businessman. I'm detail-oriented and enjoy the details of my job. My boss is very supportive and appreciates the experience I bring to the firm from my former career as a dancer and singer.

I've lived alone in this apartment for the past twenty-five years. It has my entire life up on its walls. I was in two short-lived relationships but they never work out for me. Sexually, I find it impossible to be faithful to one person and that's been a struggle my

entire adult life. I remain in close contact with many friends from show business but it's difficult to hear them hang on to the dream of stardom at our age.

I'm "out" at my job but not in a flamboyant way. My boss knows but I don't talk about it with co-workers. I don't think it's what I was hired for and, therefore, isn't a subject that comes up at work. In other settings with friends, I'm completely open about being gay. My parents are both dead but I've told my nieces and step-mother but not my step-siblings – we're not very close.

I'm very satisfied with my life right now and I can't say I was ever really satisfied as a performer. It was always about getting the next job or audition. It's nice to be at this point in my life where I don't have to prove myself anymore. I hope I don't look my age but I finally feel my age - in a good way. My body is still very important to me and I work out every morning at 6 AM before going to work. I don't think I'll ever retire because I enjoy getting involved and doing things. After transitioning from show business anything's possible! I can even see myself transitioning into another career once I hit sixty-five.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I was born and raised in a small town in Oklahoma in a lower-middle class neighborhood. I grew up in the heart of the Bible Belt and was raised Methodist. My parents were strict and reserved about their feelings but I always felt that they loved me. I know they did the best they could with the cards they were dealt, too. I'm an only child and my parents worked very hard to provide me everything they never had as children. My father worked as a water-proofing engineer and mason and traveled up north each

spring and summer because of the weather which meant that I changed schools each year half way through the spring semester.

I was a precocious child and craved attention from a very early age. I was a goody-two-shoes and did everything to maintain the perception of being a good boy. I learned to play the accordion by the time I was five and started dance classes around that same time. My mother drove me twenty-five miles three times a week to the dance studio. Being a boy, I was a novelty at the small dance studio which brought extra attention. I always liked that. I was a quick study and enjoyed showing off for the rest of the class. My mom became the “mother of the boy who dances” in our hometown. My mother and father were good looking people – especially my father - and she probably had show business aspirations herself. My mom lived vicariously through my dance, baton, music classes, and recitals. They never verbalized their love or pride in me but I felt that they enjoyed my performances. I interpreted the looks on their faces when I was on stage as love and did whatever I could to hang on to that feeling.

I was a driven child from the very beginning, an over-achiever, which was exhausting. Academically, I was a straight A student in grade school, high school and college. I skipped fourth grade which wasn't a good idea because I was developmentally behind the other boys in my class – especially when adolescence and puberty arrived. I played piano, saxophone, and drums, twirled the baton, tap danced, and sang. I was involved in every extra-circular activity I could manage to squeeze into my busy schedule, including 4 H Club, church choir, and volunteer work. I never liked team sports because that meant working together and relying on others. I never trusted that other kids took the game as seriously as I did so I concentrated on solo sports.

My dance and voice training were the most consistent classes for me and I never grew tired of the repetition of the exercises. Striving for perfection just fed my insecurity and drive to improve. I think I was compensating for feeling like a sissy. I remember feeling different as a child but I don't know if it was because I was gay or not. At age twelve I experimented sexually with some boys in the neighborhood. It felt sinful which added to my enjoyment. I remember reading about homosexuality in the library and that boys grew out of it eventually. I had a few crushes on boys in school but I didn't understand why these feelings weren't going away. I bought my first muscle man magazine in high school and remember feeling like it was wrong. Thinking I would be doomed to hell, I became very active in our church ministry.

When I was thirteen years old my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a radical mastectomy. I had to change her dressings in her bedroom and felt overwhelmed. She would ask me not to look at her other breast and would talk about the sin of desire. It was confusing to because I certainly didn't desire her so it felt very weird. She was sick for the next five years and I continued my involvement in the church and in my senior year I "gave my life to Christ." Part of my commitment to the church was bargaining for my mother's life and promising I wouldn't sin.

My mother died when I was eighteen, three weeks before I went off to college. I remember feeling sad and angry that my prayers and deals hadn't helped her in the end. When I was nineteen, my father remarried again to a woman with two children. I thought it was too soon for him to fall in love with another woman. My step-mother was very nice to me and we later developed a great relationship. She's been very supportive after I

came out to her at my father's funeral six years ago. She has also been great about my career transition.

My parents never went to college and it was very important to them that I get a solid education. I went away to college and majored in Music Education. I later received an additional BA in Concert Organ. I continued to sing, dance, and act in college and continued to get the praise and encouragement that meant so much to me. I struggled with my sexuality in college and immersed myself in every conceivable activity. I was in "Who's Who in American Colleges" for three consecutive years. My career in show business sort of snowballed in college – it's what I knew how to do.

I had a speech teacher in college who served as my mentor during college and helped me lose my southern accent. He was a former dancer who had performed on Broadway. I found out later that he was gay and always loved his stories about New York and "the Great White Way." As a senior, I met a woman in the drama department and became engaged to be married. I hadn't yet had sex as an adult but thought that by committing to marriage I'd stop thinking about the hunky football players.

When I was twenty years old, I came to New York to see shows and explore the city. I instantly loved it and knew that I'd never live anywhere else. I returned to school and got a Masters Degree in Voice in one year. That year the woman I was engaged to met another man and, thankfully, broke off the engagement. I felt on some level that once I got back to New York my life would really start for me.

### **Life as a Dancer**

At twenty-one, I moved to New York on a Friday and got my first Broadway show on Monday. My training and perfectionism paid off big time. I was one of the first male dancers in New York to be hired as both a dancer and singer. It's standard now, but back then there use to be a dancing chorus and a singing chorus. I was very fortunate to have had such great teachers and mentors along the way who demanded the best from me. That show was a huge success and ran for many years. I stayed in that show for one year and went to another huge musical hit. It began a seven year run of back-to-back Broadway shows for me. I assumed that it would continue that way indefinitely.

I had sex with a man for the first time during that run. He was a lovely dancer who I've remained friendly with ever since. Being gay wasn't something anyone talked about back then. It was private and considered no one's business. Looking back on it now, all of the boys in the chorus were gay but it was still taboo - even in theater. I fluctuated between having sex with men and women throughout the 1960s and finally went to a psychoanalyst to "fix" my homosexuality. I spent five years and thousands of dollars trying to be someone I simply wasn't. It's infuriating now to think about and my current therapist helped me accept where I was -and society was - at the time.

Along the way I continued studying dance, voice, and acting. I gradually was hired as the understudy for the male leads. At age thirty, I landed my first leading man role on Broadway opposite a British musical theater star. Opening night I flew my father and step-mother to New York, hired a limo, and took a huge table at Sardi's. It was a night I will never forget. I thought it would launch me as the new male lead in musicals. The reviews were great but it didn't transform me into the next Danny Kaye. There was

an older character actor in the show who told me not to get caught up in the bullshit of the business. He explained that he had been in my shoes thirty years earlier but his career had dried up. I'll never forget that conversation and promised myself I'd get out before they didn't want me.

Over the next twenty years I continued to work consistently on Broadway, off-Broadway, and internationally on tour. I went back and forth between ensemble and leading roles. I made a nice living but I never saved it or invested in a home. I was usually hired as the understudy to the male lead and danced in the ensemble. I felt like I was on roller coaster for many years, going from one show to the next, always planning for my next gig. It was all about planning and thinking about the next job. I never got used to being cut or turned down for a job. I prided myself on trying to be whatever the director or choreographer was looking for. Each time I didn't get a job, it felt like a personal slight or I had done something wrong.

Before my father died I flew him and my step-mother up to New York for the last time to see me in a show. I was playing the lead and after the show he told me how proud he was of me. It took forty-eight years, but I finally heard what I needed to hear. (*crying*) I never told my father that I was gay and I regret that. I'm sure he knew but I would have liked for him to know me better. I kept him at a distance for many years because I thought I was protecting him. My father died when I was forty-eight and I finally came out to my step-mother and nieces after his funeral. It felt like a huge burden was lifted. It was the same feeling of being unburdened that I experienced when I later made the transition from show business.

In my thirty plus years in the show business, I'm proud to say that I never had to take a job other than performing in a show. I'm proud of the work I did and grateful for the opportunities I've had. I've worked with the best choreographers and directors in the business and played every major house on Broadway.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

By the time I was fifty, work had slowed down considerably for me. My agent wasn't able to get me the top auditions. I had several auditions for younger directors who barely looked up from the audition table. I gradually felt that my thirty year resume meant nothing in the business. Friends of mine were going through similar experiences and I felt angry and embittered. The handwriting was on the wall and I thought of that advice my older character actor gave me. I couldn't believe I'd been dropped by the business I had loved.

I had considered leaving the business before when my friends and colleagues began dying from AIDS in the 80's and 90's. I seriously thought of packing up and leaving each day I read about another friend who died. It was very difficult and helped put things in perspective for me in my forties. As I started my transition process, I began volunteering for different AIDS charities and that gave me a sense that I was contributing to the cause in some way.

My father had also changed careers in his fifties and became a golf course manager, something he'd done as a young man. I thought about him as I began to consider my own career transition and the friends that had died along the way. I contacted a career counselor and began the process of finding myself beyond performing. I was scared because I thought I couldn't do anything else except dance and sing. I met



with the counselor and began what has been an incredible journey of self re-discovery. I took a seminars and skills-building classes for the next six months. I made my full-time job finding my next career. I spoke with other former dancers and performers who encouraged me to continue exploring. I continued to seek the career counselor and support groups for over a year. It made the transition so much less isolating and normalized the mixed feelings I was having.

I was committed to the change. It was difficult and challenging because all I had only known was the inside of a dance studio and the backstage of a theater. The thought of being in a business setting was terrifying but exciting. Would my sexuality be an issue? Could I fit in other settings? I was hardwired to be an expert in everything I did. I learned how to use a computer and refreshed my typing skills. I learned it's impossible to be an expert when you're trying to learn something new. I also realized that I'd been treated like a child for many years. The term, 'chorus boy' never becomes 'chorus man' as you get older. Dancers are treated like they're missing their brains and that is so wrong! We're told where to stand, what to do, how to act. It doesn't instill a lot of confidence and I knew I could handle more than I had been given up to that point.

I worked for a company as a professional organizer for several months. I enjoyed the "hands-on" part but it wasn't very challenging intellectually. I began researching financial corporations and got an interview at the firm where I currently work. I was hired after several interviews as the liaison to the retired partners. My people skills and organizational details were transferable to the corporate world. I've since changed positions and learned about corporate life. I've had moments when I've been given

corrections or critiqued, but it doesn't feel as personal as it did in show business. My manager trusts me to make decisions and take the responsibility for them.

I can go to the theater now and appreciate it for what it is, rather than be on the "look out" for a role that I might be right for. I have friends who struggle to stay in the business and work from time to time. God bless them, but no thanks! I have no desire to return to theater. I had a wonderful career and am grateful for the experiences I had. Maybe that's why the transition was difficult but not devastating. I accomplished what I had set out to do. Transitioning actually gave me greater confidence in my talents and abilities. Instead of cutting me off from something, it feels like I've expanded beyond what I thought I could do.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

After reviewing Richard's narrative, themes have emerged in relation to previous narratives presented and existing developmental and transition theories. In the following section they are presented as "I themes" with raw data from the interviews.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME 1:** *I feel a sense of agency and satisfaction with myself that I didn't when I was performing.*

At age 55, Richard is experiencing a new sense of agency and satisfaction in his life which he described as markedly different from his self experience as a dancer and performer.

There's more to my life now besides what I do and that gives me freedom, you know? I can't say I was ever really satisfied as a performer. It was always about getting the next job or audition. I'm not a child anymore and show business breeds that, I think. I mean 'chorus boy' implies a lot, right? I have more responsibility and don't have to raise my hand to use the bathroom. It's nice to be at this point in my life where I don't have to prove myself anymore. I can do what I want and not feel like the world is going to collapse on me....It didn't happen overnight, no. It was the sum of my experiences I think. Each time I took an action as far as changing careers went – I took it with me. There was no wasted time – because it all added up to where I am now an more than I thought I could do.

As in Tom's narrative, Richard's gradual accumulation of experiences in his new career eventually have led to a sense of security and freedom. Additionally, he described feeling more grown up and less professionally infantilized in his new career. Pine's (1982) "expansionist" perspective on transformation of sense-of-self could be useful in thinking about Richard's experience of transition. The self concept gradually evolves and changes through new experiences in a cumulative way. During the transition, Richard did not experience a disruption at his core as he moved into the new career. Bit

by bit Richard's career transition and new job were metabolized into the ongoing sense of himself as a responsible, capable adult.

**THEME 2:** *I enjoy my newfound financial security and sense of control that my current job allows.*

Of the difficulties Richard pointed to as a performer, his main complaints seemed to be the financial inconsistency and the feeling that he lacked control over the direction of his career. This theme has been salient in many of the previous narratives as well.

My job is varied really, I'm the archivist and museum manager at [financial institution]. I'm full-time, get paid every two weeks – and that's such a nice feeling. You know that in shows there was always the threat of the closing notice being posted and you don't have any control over it. That's why even though it's not the most exciting job I've ever had – that's OK – I've had that. It's the first time in my life I've had financial goals for myself and have been able to plan ahead for anything.

Again, the idea of financial independence and autonomy is present in his narrative. Other participants have also cited financial instability as a problematic element of the performer's life, however, Richard indicates that it was his primary motivator for change.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

**THEME 1:** *I was an incredibly driven child and the attention I received compensated for feeling less than.*

Richard described his childhood as being dominated by strict religious family practices and an early investment in dance and music. Early on Richard felt pressured to be the best at everything he undertook. As in the previous narratives, Richard seemed narcissistically vulnerable to criticism and felt the need for perfection (Voeller, 1980;

Cornett, 1993). His experiences growing up in a home where perfection was rewarded likely increased his internal struggle for a healthy sense of self.

I was a driven child from the very beginning. It was the heart of the Bible Belt and I was raised strict Methodist. My parents were strict and pretty reserved. I was precocious and craved attention – pretty much a “goody-two-shoes” and tried to be a “good boy”....My dance and music training were there from the start for me and I never got tired of practicing the exercises. I was really driven to do everything the best - accordion, baton, gymnastics and dance classes. I loved the extra attention and striving for perfection just fed my insecurity and drive to succeed. Over-achieving is exhausting though, but I just ignored that.

As with the other participants, Richard recalled feeling different and later feeling sinful about his homosexual desires (de Monteflores, 1986). This led him to commit himself to the church ministry. Richard’s description of feeling different (as in feminine) was imbued with a critical evaluation similar to Maylon’s (1982a) description of internalized homophobic social attitudes toward homosexuality. This seemed to result in an internalized homophobia and negative attitudes and beliefs about himself.

I remember feeling different as a child....I was compensating on some level for feeling like a sissy. I fooled around with some boys in the neighborhood and that felt sinful but it felt good. Anything that felt good I knew I enjoyed it a little too much. I read about homosexuality in the library and that you grew out of it eventually. Thinking I would be doomed to hell, I became very active in our church ministry and just stuffed those feelings. For a while I convinced myself that I was really straight. I even went to therapy in the 1960’s and 70’s to get rid of it.

Richard’s sense of feeling defective lasted well into his adulthood but had its roots in his childhood experiences.

**THEME 2:** *My mother’s long illness and death had a profound impact on me and the choices I’ve made in my life.*

Richard described his mother’s evaluation of his achievements as central to his childhood experiences. As in the previous narratives, it would be simple to recognize

Freud's major theory on homosexuality (Lewes, 1988) in relation to the etiology of Richard's homosexuality. The mother-son relationship is overly close and overly stimulating, and because of the maternal over-involvement, the boy refuses to give up his erotic tie to her. However, Richard clearly experienced himself as a narcissistic extension of his mother and her death seemed to exacerbate his internal pressure to succeed.

My mom became the "mother of the boy who dances" in our hometown and that was the main point....My folks were good looking people – especially my father - and she probably had show business aspirations herself....I found out in therapy that my mom probably lived vicariously through me. They enjoyed my performances I think but I interpreted the looks on their faces when I was on stage as love. I think I did whatever I could to maintain my status.

Isay's (1989) theory which has previously been explained seems to account for Richard's experiences in a more complex way. He experienced his father as distant during his childhood and his anxiety about the early erotic attachment to his father was evident.

My dad was incredibly handsome....he was masculine and dashing. He was just not part of those early years for me. It was something about me that kept us from getting closer – maybe all the classes or my interests – I don't know....I wanted to be closer to him but once my mother became ill we never really connected again.

When Richard's mother was diagnosed with cancer he experienced several possible traumas. It seems the impending loss of his primary caretaker with whom he felt such a tie, left him feeling vulnerable and frightened. Turning again to the church he began to bargain for her life. Secondly, it became his responsibility to change his mother's dressings following her mastectomy which seemed to contribute to his shame around his sexual struggles.

When I was thirteen years old my mother underwent a radical mastectomy. It was devastating to think of our lives without her. She was sick for four years which extended the whole painful process. That whole thing added to my involvement in the church afterwards and in my senior year I “gave my life to Christ” and decided to pursue the ministry. Part of it was bargaining for my mother’s life.

Richard’s decision to pursue dance and music was connected to his mother and her hopes and dreams for him. In this sense, his career exploration ended at this point and, perhaps his Dream (Levinson, 1978) was motivated, in part, by this loss.

She died when I was eighteen, three weeks before I went off to college. I remember feeling sad and angry that the deals that I’d made with God didn’t help her in the end. I had her in mind when I decided on music education....I think my parents had show business aspirations of their own. Going into musical theater must have had to do with her hopes and dreams for me. I’m sorry she never got to see me in a Broadway show. I think that’s one reason why I stuck with it for so long – until right after my father died.

In this way, it appears that Richard was, at least partly, living out the dream that his mother had intended for either him or herself.

### **Life as a Dancer**

THEME 1: *Early on, I had difficulty taking in and enjoying my professional success and, instead, concentrated on getting the next job.*

Richard’s professional career took off quickly when he moved to New York. He moved from one show to another but seemed unable to take in the experiences and appreciate the success he was enjoying.

I moved to New York on a Friday and got my first Broadway show on Monday. My perfectionism finally paid off big time. I went from one hit to another over the next 7 years. I assumed that it would continue that way for the rest of my life. I always honed my craft – studying dance, voice, and acting but didn’t give myself a chance to enjoy it really. I was too busy moving on to the next thing to make sure I got the next big show. I was constantly worried I’d never work again. I didn’t really trust other people in the business – the competition was fierce. People envied me because I was so successful and I got shit for that.

Richard's early adulthood was a time of intense ambition and he focused his energies on making it in show business and remaining vigilant about opportunities. However, Richard did not internalize these experiences as part of himself until he began his career transition process. Paranoid-schizoid mechanisms such as splitting, projective identification, psychotic anxiety, and the inability to experience integrated whole objects were clearly operating for Richard throughout this period (Jacques, 1965).

It wasn't until I sat down with Career Transition for Dancers a few years ago that I saw my career laid out in front of me. I had never appreciated it before. It was all outside of me and just like merit badges I'd achieved.

**THEME 2:** *Despite the fact that most men in theater were gay, I struggled with my sexuality for many years.*

Richard described knowing that he was primarily attracted to men. While he took some comfort in knowing other men in the chorus were gay he had tremendous difficulty accepting his homosexuality. In his struggle he tried to commit himself to heterosexual relationships but could not.

Being gay wasn't something anyone talked about back then. Most of the boys in the chorus were gay which was fun but it was still taboo - even in theater....this went on for years - I'd have sex with a guy, swear off, meet a woman, and couldn't follow through. I finally went to a shrink to "fix" myself. I spent five years and thousands of dollars trying to be someone I simply wasn't....I finally just allowed myself to enjoy the sex and keep it to myself.

In Cass's (1979) model Richard seemed to try to move toward the third stage, *identity tolerance*, but despite the exposure to other gay men, continued to struggle with internal and external prohibitions. The public and private aspects of self of his sexuality were quite disparate or split-off. Gradually, *identity acceptance*, at least privately,



occurred in the fourth stage, even though he attempted to pass as heterosexual in certain aspects of his life.

By the time I hit my thirties I didn't care what people thought. I kept it private as far as the business went because I was up for leading men roles, but I let myself have sex with guys.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

**THEME 1:** *My experience of coming out to family and the prospect of pursuing an alternative career brought a profound sense of relief.*

At forty-nine, Richard described feeling unburdened by his coming out to his step-mother and his nieces at his father's funeral. In Cass's (1979) model this initiated him into the sixth stage, *identity synthesis*.

I would have liked for him to know me better. I kept him at a distance for many years - I was hiding and thought it was protecting him. That's when I finally came out to the rest of the family. It felt like a huge burden was lifted. It made it easier to be with other gay people and straight people. I wasn't so pissed off at everyone. It was the same feeling of being unburdened after I decided to transition.

Richard's professional career continued to provide him with some rewarding experiences until he reached age fifty. He recognized fewer opportunities and experienced a shift in his enthusiasm and drive.

It was gradual but it felt pretty sudden. I was fifty and hadn't been getting as many auditions. My agent told me it would pick up again but it didn't really. I'd go in for auditions and the director or choreographer wouldn't even pretend to be interested. I just felt like all my hard work meant nothing....I felt myself getting bitter and thought of that character man twenty years earlier. I had been treading water for ten years but the handwriting was on the wall.

Richard seemed to identify with his father during this period allowing him to take consider alternative careers.

My father also changed careers in his fifties and became a golf course manager, something he'd done as a young man. I had always thought of that as a failure before. But I thought about him as I began to consider my own career transition.

Richard described the loss of many friends and colleagues to AIDS over the years as contributing to his decision to consider another career.

AIDS was part of it too because I'd had it. I'd lost so many friends during the 80's and 90's and saw so many people in the business ignore it – just totally deny that our friends were dying. Just losing so many people made me stop and think about what I wanted for however long I have left here....I just regret not getting out sooner.

Richard seemed to experience the loss of his friends as a time to reflect and evaluate his life. As noted previously, the experience of AIDS-related bereavement is a key determinant of mental health in gay men (Martin & Dean, 1993) and may profoundly influence their perceptions of midlife.

**THEME 3:** *Through the transition process I have come to appreciate my strengths and weaknesses in a new way and have gained a more consistent sense of self-worth.*

Richard described letting go of the somewhat rigid perfectionism he came to rely on in show business. As evident in other participant's narratives, Richard's experiences contain elements of what Jacques (1965) described as the movement from the paranoid-schizoid position in early adulthood to a more mature, integrated depressive position. Richard seemed better able to integrate his ambivalent feelings into his emerging sense of self. In mid-life an individual is able to accept the fact that "good" and "bad" are both aspects of the human experience (Jacques, 1965). While Richard was fifty years old, and well into midlife, he was able to incorporate a more depressive, integrated experience of himself.

I went to Career Transition for Dancers and began the process of finding out there's more to me than performing. I was frightened because I couldn't do anything except dance and sing. I met with the counselor and began what has been an incredible journey of self re-discovery. I took seminars and skills-building classes for the next six months. I made my full-time job finding my next career. I talked to former dancers who encouraged me to keep exploring. I continued to seek the career counselor and support groups for over a year. It made the transition so much less isolating and normalized it.

In sum, Richard's narrative introduced several new themes into the study, as well as supporting those previously remarked upon. At fifty-five, Richard was the oldest participant in the study and offered a different perspective in many ways. His thirty-year career as a dancer and performer depicted many of the stages that other participants described and offered possible outcomes in their career development. Certainly, his sexual orientation was less socially accepted in the 1950's and 60's which contributed to his ongoing difficulties in coming out. Richard described accumulating various professional experiences like "merit badges" and never fully appreciating his abilities until he began his career transition at age fifty.

Shortly before he began his transition he was able to come out to his step mother which seemed to be a significant moment in revealing himself. At various points in his career Richard considered possible alternatives but was able to move forward in a new way at age fifty. Perhaps the combination of declining professional opportunities, the impact of AIDS, and the prospect of financial uncertainty of old age propelled him into his new career and contributed to his "relief."

## **THE LIFE OF DONNIE**

*I met with Donnie on two occasions in his large, recently renovated apartment in New York after speaking with him on the phone. I was made to feel quite welcomed and he was open and candid about his relationship and professional life. I also met and spoke with his longtime partner who was interested in hearing about the research. As a couple, they were eager to share their experiences during Donnie's transition and insisted I stay for dinner after the final interview. On the whole, I experienced Donnie and Marty as strongly committed partners – sharing their lives and supporting each other through difficult health and career changes.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm a forty-two year old attorney and I live with my partner, Marty, in an apartment we recently bought. We're in the midst of completely re-doing it –which is a huge undertaking but we're negotiating the process as two attorneys would. *(laughs)* Marty and I have been together for 15 years and I can't imagine life without him. Marty has witnessed my entire process of going from musical theater through my undergraduate schooling and law school. He's also an attorney in a small New York City firm – but he's been at it a lot longer than I have. Marty is one of those walking miracles. He's been HIV + for as long as we've been together and has been asymptomatic. I'm HIV – but we're both diligent about our health, going to the gym, and eating right. I am satisfied with the decisions and changes I've made – both professionally and personally. My new career path wasn't immediately obvious but gradually unfolded. Mainly, I wanted to be present for my relationship and to have financial and career stability for both of us.

I've used and built on my experiences as a former dancer and actor in my work as an attorney. I recently joined a New York law firm which specializes in drug and malpractice defense. It's a tough job and I face learning mountains of new information each day but I enjoy the challenge. I go over the material like I would a new step or a script and find the part of it that I understand and build upon it. In court, I use my dramatic edge to get the jury's attention and I enjoy that. At my age being an associate can be difficult but I get by. The individual personalities at the firm are a breeze compared to those in theater. I also have joined some professional affiliations to get to know other areas of the law. Ultimately, I don't think I'll stay at this firm but I'm learning a lot.

I'm completely "out" at the office. In my interview with the senior partner he asked me about my life and how it fit into the busy schedule of an attorney. I openly discussed the importance of my relationship with Marty and everything that we'd gone through. I told him that I was disciplined and hard-working but that I had priorities and responsibilities to my partner. He hired me on the spot. The new position was more of a lateral move as far as level goes, but the potential to earn more money is much greater. That would be the only thing I'd like to change about my life right now - more money. We're in fine shape financially but I'd like Marty to be able to work less hours if he wanted.

My family is very religious but they are also very accepting of my relationship - they love Marty. In truth, they think because he's Jewish and from England that he might sprout horns at any moment. Marty comes with me to visit when I go to visit even though my parents struggle with us sleeping in the same bed. They do the best they can

and that's about all I can expect. I'm not particularly close with either of my parents. My siblings are all fine with it even though on some level they must have a hard time reconciling it with their religious beliefs. It's not that I don't want to be closer, I'm not going to work to earn their love and respect.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

I grew up on a farm in the Midwest. I felt completely out of place in my own family. I was raised Fundamentalist Catholic and my family is pretty white-bread, Germanic descent on both sides. I have three older brothers, and a younger sister who is a doctor – she's the jewel in the crown for my parents. My youngest brother is a monk. It was not exactly "The Waltons" on our farm. We worked really hard – I guess my parents weren't aware of child labor laws! I didn't enjoy living on the farm at all and couldn't wait to live in a big city like New York. I was pretty much a sissy boy growing up. I knew I liked boys from an early age and felt different from my brothers. I think they all picked up on it. I liked to read and help my mom cook and clean and I avoided the farm-hand work. I used to like riding horses and making up stories about moving to New York someday.

I didn't know what gay was exactly, but I knew I was attracted to my best friend, Gary. When we were eleven we started fooling around sexually together for a couple of years. In retrospect it was fairly innocuous behavior but I remember feeling incredibly excited about getting away with it. I had a crush on him but never dreamed of telling him that. It's sad to think that something so innocent felt so shameful at the time. I lost track of Gary and we ended up at different high schools.

I was definitely closer to my mom than my dad. As a child I never really thought my father liked me. Maybe he just didn't understand me. My first memory is of him taking me with him to castrate the baby male pigs when I was 5 years old. He'd hold the pig upside down and slice their balls off while I fended off the female sows with a pitchfork. One of the females dragged me by the ankle and my father grabbed me and pulled me with such force that I fell face first in the bucket of pig's balls! My first memory of my mother is at church snuggling up against her rabbit fur coat and feeling safe and warm. I think I'm much more like her in that she's more demonstrative than my father, talks a lot more, and is much more emotionally aware.

I went to a very small, Catholic grammar school. I was teased because I didn't play sports and preferred to stay inside for recess. I was fairly smart and skipped third grade which added to the teasing. I remember when my parents took me to see "The Sound of Music" at this incredible vaudeville house in downtown Ft. Wayne. I loved the gilded theater and the red velvet curtain. It was everything the farm wasn't and I just loved it. I bought the soundtrack and became interested in musical theater. My parents didn't know what to make of me but they didn't stand in my way. I just wanted to be part of it somehow.

In high school I underwent a real transformation. I always did well in school but almost overnight I became popular. I was tall and blonde and in high school people responded to that. I wasn't an athlete but I focused on things that I excelled in like academics, speech, drama and debate. I won the state speech finals and came in second in the nation. I was in the local papers and remember my father throwing me a surprise congratulations party. Something changed between us and I felt like I earned his respect.

We're very different people but it didn't seem to matter as much. My parents supported my interest in drama during high school and came to see all the shows.

My drama coach was an important figure in my high school years. He believed in my talent and pushed me to learn and focus on my goals. I thought he was gay but he was married – something I couldn't quite understand. I was the lead in most of the school shows and got a cast in a community theater production in the summer before my senior year. When I was seventeen I took my first dance class. I had a natural build and stretch for dance which made starting so late possible. I'm flexible and had what people noticed as a natural ballet line. I dated a girl in high school but we were really just good friends. We never had sex and on some level I think she knew I was gay. I felt at the time that it was necessary to put on a straight facade. Being openly gay just wouldn't have been possible. Maybe now, gay kids in school can get away with it – but I doubt it.

After high school I received a scholarship to a major college close to our farm. I attended for 2 years and majored in Fine Arts. It was rewarding but I was straddling between my parents home and school. I took some dance classes at school but nothing too seriously. I was working toward a career as an actor – or so I thought. My parents wanted me to finish college, but I had to get out of that place - I just wanted to get off the farm. I knew I was gay but I couldn't picture myself coming out in Indiana. There were gay people at college but they were marginalized and I wasn't willing to subject myself to that again. I auditioned for an acting conservatory in New York and was accepted. My parents were OK with it and let me move to New York without giving me a lot of grief.



### **Life as a Dancer**

When I was 19, I moved to New York and spent two years at an acting conservatory. I felt like I was out on my own and not accountable to others. I went to my first gay bar with a friend. It was a huge gay disco filled with 2,000 other gay men and I felt the power of not being alone. My father helped out with my tuition which was his way of letting me know that he cared what happened to me. I continued to take dance classes too, but I thought of dance as something to fall back on if acting didn't work out – imagine that. I did some off-off Broadway plays and some stock jobs. I was hired on and off but became frustrated by the incredible competition as a non-union actor.

After graduating from conservatory, I continued my dance training while pursuing acting roles. I gradually became more interested in musical theater once I found that you could make more money on Broadway or on tour in a musical than in repertory. I was getting noticed in ballet and jazz classes and teachers asked me to demonstrate steps and combinations. I made friends in classes and felt comfortable in the studio environment. There were clearly more gay guys in the dance studio than in the acting world – or so it seemed. I remember feeling more comfortable with my sexuality and for the first time dated guys from the studio. It was a pretty great time of my life.

By the time I was 22, I devoted most of my energy to pursuing musical theater jobs. I enjoyed the routine and predictability of dance class and the discipline and physicality of it all. I was completely out to my friends in New York and had told my sister that I was gay. At twenty-three I was hired for a national touring company of a major Broadway dance show. It was the hottest show on Broadway and I was suddenly a part of a professional world beyond my dreams. That show changed my life in that I went from a struggling performer to the center position in a hit musical and making more

money than my parents ever did. It was incredible to be up there with the crème de la crème. We were each featured in the show and I was considered among the best dancers in New York.

I enjoyed touring for the next couple of years and saved a lot of money. At twenty-four, I went to London with a show which was also an amazing experience. I was the first person in my family to leave the states. My parents were proud of me and visited me on the road several times. I hadn't come out to them but I was much more at ease with myself. The cast was like a family to me and my whole world revolved around the backstage dramas between cast members. I danced in other touring shows, commercials and television specials. I made great friends along the way some of whom I'm still very close with. It was all exciting at the time but the road was lonely and I wanted to be in a relationship. I never enjoyed going to bars and wasn't into the one-night stand thing.

Between touring jobs I met Marty in New York when I was twenty-seven. By this time AIDS had become a fact of life in the business. I had lost many friends and when he told me he was HIV positive I thought twice about becoming involved. I connected with him in a unique way and we moved in together. When I was twenty-nine I finally told my parents that I was gay after I started therapy. Therapy helped me deal with my family stuff and fears I had about Marty's status. Being gay went against everything my family stood for but they had to work that out for themselves. It's not something my father particularly liked to discuss but it changed my relationship with both of them and I can be myself when I'm with them.

I continued to tour with different shows on the road after Marty and I moved in together. I hated being away but he visited often. The visits were great but I worried

about his health and resented being away from him for so long. When I was thirty, I came back to New York and hoped to finally get a Broadway show and to stay home. After months of auditions I finally had to take a bus and truck tour for another year. The decision was solely a financial one and I promised myself I would never take another tour again. I felt like a traveling salesman and I was less fulfilled in the jobs I was getting. The gypsy life wasn't for me anymore. Touring simply didn't fit into my life anymore. The show was fun to do and the cast was great but I felt like I was just waiting to get back to Marty.

### **Career Change and Transition**

I'm disappointed I never did a Broadway show but my priorities shifted. I wanted to be at home with Marty and not still schlepping around the country on a bus. There was a budding realization that I didn't look or move like the younger dancers. They had more energy – fresher, more youthful. There were realities of my body getting older that I couldn't do anything about and that was frustrating. That optimistic dream that I had experienced in the vaudeville house seeing "The Sound of Music" was starting to sour on me. In truth, I had wanted to be a star, I think. I expected that I'd be featured more in shows as I got older but, in reality, the pinnacle of my career was between ages twenty-two and twenty-eight.

I wanted financial security and at the age of thirty-one I knew that I wasn't moving in that direction. I ended up in a dinner theater production of a show I had done five years earlier and for half the salary. While I had good flexibility and line there was a finiteness to a dance career. I was one of a pack - certainly replaceable and the sense of feeling special or chosen had faded. I reached a level and I couldn't get past it.

I got a temp job at a major university in New York. I never had worked in anything other than theater since moving to New York so it was a blow to my ego. I took some courses to learn the computer and Marty supported the new direction without pushing me. I was offered a full time position at work which included benefits and tuition remission at the university. I may not have known 100% what direction I wanted to go but I wanted to finish my degree.

I found I could still learn and I had curiosity beyond show business. I had been told what to do and where to stand for many years that I was insecure and afraid I'd fail. My boss was incredibly supportive and told me that I could do whatever I wanted – she really believed in me. Between her and Marty and other close friends, I felt for the first time that I could create a new career. I did well academically and graduated in 3 years going part-time at night and working full-time during the day. I also found career counseling and continued in therapy. I felt that I had some control of the direction my career could go. I took the LSATs and was accepted by a top-notch school. I surprised myself when I did well in law school. That was when I knew I wasn't going back to show business – I didn't need to. Law school was challenging but Marty was incredibly comforting.

I got a job at a district attorney's office and I distinguished myself from the other freshman lawyers. I took my acting skills and brought it into the courtroom. It's exciting and I truly love it. It really seems like the perfect combination for me – intellectual and creative. That was an incredibly rich learning environment and I enjoyed the trial experience.

Overall, I'd have to say that my transition wasn't that difficult. I had to let go of the fantasy that there was more for me in show business. I had doubts about being accepted or taken seriously when I considered changing careers and my self-esteem was shaken. In the end it took other experiences for me to believe that I could find another career. I had supportive people around me. Most of all, Marty encouraged me and anything I wanted to do was OK with him. He believed that I could get through it even when I had serious self-doubts. Part of my decision to change careers was based on his health issues. It was a matter of priorities and the importance of show-biz waned in comparison to the realities of our relationship. I am ambitious and disciplined which worked in my favor. I wanted us to be financially stable and independent and felt I was always putting my life on hold as a performer. I couldn't go on vacation because what if an audition came up?

I can't say that I miss dancing or theater on a daily basis. I love running into people I knew from the business and we still go to the theater. The part I miss most is the self-revelation of dancing – the vulnerability of good art. That's something I tend not to do in my work now. My life is full though, and stable, and that's something that's important to both of us. I don't know what's going to happen in the future as far as Marty's health goes, but I know I'll be here and not on the road - no matter what.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

After reviewing Donnie's narrative, several themes have emerged in relation to existing theories. In the following section they are presented as "I themes" with raw data from the interviews.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME 1:**     *Despite challenges which include my partner's HIV + status, I'm satisfied with the personal and professional choices I've made.*

Donnie described feeling satisfied with his new career as a lawyer and the choices he made that were based on his partner's HIV positive status and wanting increased financial stability. These choices required him to "break out" of the theater career and move in an uncertain direction.

I am happier now than I can remember being – both professionally and personally. Marty and I still have a blast together. His being positive was absolutely part of it – I mean I couldn't stand being away on the road so much. I had to break out of the safety zone of being where I was. Becoming a lawyer wasn't evident to me when I went back to school but it sort of unfolded. My priorities had totally shifted. Mainly, I wanted to be here for Marty and to have some control over my financial future for us.

Consistent with Hopcke's (1992) "AIDS-induced midlife crisis," in his early thirties, Donnie was confronted with his partner's mortality and questions that resemble a classic, midlife psychological transformation. In the previous narrative, Richard also cited the impact of AIDS on his personal and professional life as contributing to his decision to leave dance.

Additionally, Donnie's narrative is consistent with Maslow's (1962) assertion that there is within each individual the need for growth toward "self actualization" or psychological health. Donnie's narrative described his need for growth and to find a

stable life structure more suitable to his changing personal needs. Donnie's sense of his future is important in that, self actualization is meaningless without reference to a currently active future (Maslow, 1962). The future, according to Maslow, is dynamically active in the present and can be the basis for a fearful retreat or initiating activity toward improvement and adventure. Maslow contends that life events, similar to those that Donnie described, provide the opportunity for choice between growth and safety and occur in no chronological or predictable order (Maslow, 1962).

**THEME 2:** *It feels as if my new career draws upon various aspects of myself in a rewarding way.*

Donnie reported that he was able to draw upon certain aspects of his theater and performing career in his work at the DA's office. While he finds his new job challenging and at times stressful, he finds satisfaction in the process of building upon his skills as a lawyer.

I used my dramatic edge to get the jury's attention. I've taken the performing part of dancing and acting and working it into in my work....My job is a tough job and I there's mountains of new information each day - but I like a rewarding challenge. I go at it like new step or a script and find the part that I relate to and build upon it. I feel like progress I make is noticed.

Again, Donnie's narrative is consistent with Pine's (1982) "expansionist" perspective on transformation of sense-of-self which changes and accumulates experiences in an on going way . Donnie's transition seemed not to disrupt his core competencies but allowed him to bring them into a new career setting. Pine's emphasis on expansion instead of a return to an earlier, more authentic sense-of-self seems to reflect Donnie's experiences of change in sense of self.

Donnie's openness and comfort with his sexuality seems consistent with the final stage of *identity synthesis* in the Cass model (1979). From the narrative it seems that Donnie was less guarded or paranoid about his gay identity prior to the transition which may have contributed to his ability to move into an alternative career. Donnie felt less of a need to isolate himself from the heterosexual world.

I'm completely "out" at the office. I talk about Marty and I and they completely understand if something comes up for him health-wise and I have to take time off. I stopped caring what other people thought about it all after I came out to my family. I've always had friends who were gay and not –so it's not a huge thing for me at work.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

THEME 1: *I felt out of place on the farm and felt my sexuality and interests were very different from my brother's interests.*

Like the other participants Donnie described feeling different and out of place in his family (de Monteflores, 1986). He attributed these differences to his early sense of being gay as well as academic performance and his interest in theater. He focused on his abilities and found a way to build upon them in what seems to have been a useful way.

I hated it on the farm and couldn't wait to live in a big city like New York. I watched the "Superman" series and couldn't wait to get out of there. I was pretty much a sissy boy while I was growing up. I didn't know it was "gay" but I felt different from my brothers and I think they all picked up on it too. I knew I had a crush on my best friend Gary too....I liked to read and help my mom cook and clean and I avoided the farmhand work. I did really well at school - in academics, speech, drama and debate.

As in other narratives, Donnie described what Isay (1989) suggested may have contributed to his sense of inadequacy - establishing a closer connection to his mother and feeling a distance and even disdain from his father.

I was definitely closer to my mom than my dad. I never really thought my father liked me or was very interested so I did other things to get his attention. Maybe he just didn't



understand me. I think I'm much more like her - she's more demonstrative than my father, talks a lot more, and is much more emotionally aware.

**THEME 2:** *I felt ashamed of my early attraction to men and boys but found ways of compensating for it through accomplishments in theater and debate.*

Donnie's description of his early erotic attraction and sexual experimentation is consistent with much of the gay developmental literature (Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1989, 1996; Izzard, 1999, Martin, 1982; Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993). He described feeling ashamed of his desires and feeling a need to compensate for what he experienced as an inherent flaw in himself. Donnie's self-awareness of his homosexual sexual orientation, which usually occurs during adolescence, was preceded by an early sense of difference (Isay, 1989; Troiden, 1988). His sense of difference seemed to be alienating and fostered his already established sense of feeling marginalized (Stein & Cabaja, 1996).

I was teased as a kid and that really hurt. It was such a secret thing and I didn't know what gay was, but I knew I was attracted to my best friend, Gary. When we were about 11 we started fooling around sexually together for a couple of years. It was fairly innocuous but I remember feeling incredibly excited and scared about getting away with it. It's sad to think that something so innocent was so shameful to me.

Like many other participants, Donnie described a need to excel in most endeavors he undertook. For Donnie, it seemed a way of connecting with his father and eliciting responses that were important to him.

I worked hard to prove myself all the time, I think I was trying to make up for something else....In high school I hit my stride, though and wasn't the target of bullies. I was smart and pretty good-looking - I got through on that. I was in the local papers when I won the state debate competition. My dad threw me a surprise congratulations party. It really felt great to be recognized by my family - particularly my father. Something changed between us - I earned his respect. My parents were supportive of my interest in drama during high school and came to see all the shows.

### **Life as a Dancer**

**THEME 1:** *The decision to move to New York gave me physical and emotional distance from my family and allowed me to begin to accept being gay and develop my musical theater career.*

Donnie depicted his move from rural Indiana to New York as instrumental in his acceptance of a gay identity. A significant component of that move included separating from the strictly religious family home life and his parental expectations for him. It seems that part of his motivation for moving was to find other gay people whom he felt were not marginalized by their sexuality.

I went to college for two years but I was too close to home. My parents wanted me to finish college, but I had to get out of that place - I just wanted to get off the farm. I knew I couldn't come out in Indiana. There were gay people at college but they were the outsiders and I wasn't doing that again. I auditioned for a conservatory in New York and to my great surprise I was accepted. My parents were supportive of me becoming an actor or performer and let me move to NY without giving me a lot of grief.

Donnie experienced New York as exciting and filled with possibilities. He reported feeling less isolated when he went to a gay bar for the first time (Cass, 1979). His interests gradually shifted toward musical theater and dance as he became more attuned to the social and financial opportunities in that area.

It was exciting - I was out on my own and not accountable to others. I went to my first gay bar with a friend. It was a huge gay disco filled with 2,000 other gay men and I suddenly felt the power of not being a alone....I continued to take dance classes and became more interested in musical theater. I found out that you could make more money on Broadway or on tour in a musical than in rep.

Donnie also enjoyed the recognition he received in dance classes from teachers and peers. This is consistent with the notion of career playing a part in the developmental difficulties and, perhaps, compensating for deficiencies.

I was getting noticed in ballet and jazz classes and asked by the teachers to demonstrate steps and combinations. I made a lot friends in classes and felt really comfortable in the studio environment. There were clearly more gay guys in the dance studio than in the acting world – or so it seemed. I remember feeling more comfortable with my sexuality and for the first time dated guys from the studio. It was a pretty great time of my life.

Donnie's acceptance and integration of his gay identity (Cass, 1979), coupled with his emerging relationship with Marty, enabled him to disclose his homosexuality to his family. By his own account this has improved his relationships and fostered his sense of agency.

When I was twenty-nine I finally told my parents that I was gay after Marty and I had moved in together. I wasn't going to live a lie. I told my mom and she insisted on telling my father. It went against everything my family stood for religiously but I let them reconcile that for themselves. It's not something my father particularly likes to discuss even today but it changed my relationship with both of them and I feel more myself as a result.

Kimmel (1995) described a "crisis competence" forged by the coming out process and argued that this may buffer gay men from later crises in life.

**THEME 2:** *Over time I realized that the professional realities of being a dancer and my personal need for a relationship were virtually incompatible.*

While Donnie enjoyed success in his early and mid-twenties, with time, he found the "gypsy life" lonely and redundant. His felt the quality of his relationship with Marty was compromised by the realities of touring for months on end. As mentioned above, Donnie experienced some of what Hopcke (1992) proposed as "AIDS-induced midlife crisis," however he characterized it not as a crisis but rather as dealing with the realities of declining job opportunities (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994) and Marty's HIV positive status.

...when he told me he was HIV positive I thought twice about becoming involved....I hated being away but he visited every couple of weeks. I worried about his health and resented being away from him for so long. I had to take a bus and truck tour for another

year. I knew that life was too short so I promised myself I would never take another tour again. The gypsy life wasn't for me. Touring just didn't fit into what I wanted for our relationship.

Donnie's budding realization that he was not going to be a star is consistent with the movement toward the depressive position posited by Jacques (1981, 1965). At thirty-one, Donnie seemed to be experiencing a transitional period that Jacques and other theorists suggested somewhat later in mid-life.

I didn't look or move like the younger dancers anymore. They had more energy – fresher, more youthful. My body was getting older and I couldn't do anything about it and that was frustrating. The limitations were hard to deal with. That twelve year old's optimistic dream seeing "The Sound of Music" was souring. I had wanted to be a star, I think. I wanted to be featured more in shows as I got older - the pinnacle of my career was really between 22 and 28. I knew that I could keep on trying to do 4 pirouettes but there's a finiteness to dancing. I was one of a pack - certainly replaceable and the sense of feeling special was quickly fading. I reached a level and I couldn't get past it.

### **Career Change and Transition**

THEME 1: *I felt support and encouragement from my partner and others as I returned to school and gained confidence in new environments.*

Donnie noted that during his career transition process he found support and encouragement from Marty and a female boss at his temporary job. The process of accumulating experiences in school and at his new job allowed him to broaden his sense of opportunity and moved him along.

I may not have known 100% what direction I wanted to go but I wanted to finish my degree. I was scared because I had been told what to do and where to stand for many years – I was sure I'd fail. My boss was incredibly supportive and told me that I could do whatever I wanted – she really believed in me. Between her and Marty a new career seemed possible. I did very well academically and graduated in three years going part-time at night and working full-time during the day.

Donnie also found assistance through his professional union's counseling services and financial support.

Career Transition for Dancers was great – I could go there and just dump or say I'm scared or whatever. I wasn't as rattled by obstacles and didn't think the other shoe was going to drop all the time. I wanted to see how I fared on the LSATs and was accepted by a top-notch school. I surprised myself again when I did well in law school. That was when I knew I wasn't going back to show business – I didn't need to. Law school was challenging but having Marty there was incredibly comforting.

In sum, Donnie's narrative contained many similar themes already presented. His early sense of difference as compared to his brothers and his wish to move to New York are consistent with previous themes. Like the others in this group, Donnie had success in several areas of his life including academics. While he felt 'less than' in many ways he found value in his mind and focused on building on his inherent skills. His early "Sound of Music" fantasy peaked his interest in theater which he parlayed into developing his speech and language skills later in high school. It was in this arena that Donnie distinguished himself and gained the recognition he had hoped for from his father.

Donnie's focus on acting shifted toward musical theater and dance where he saw the potential for higher salaries and less homophobia. He enjoyed the self-revelation in performing and dance. Donnie's early success at age twenty-two allowed him to explore his sexuality away from his rigidly religious family and feel a part of a professional 'family.' He described feeling an important and real connection to both colleagues and the audience. In a sense, his dream was less about dancing solely as a career and more about using the art form to reveal authentic aspects of himself to and with others.

Over time, Donnie's relationship with his HIV positive partner became increasingly important. His drive to remain employed in musical theater and dance gave way to a broader life perspective. This coincided with his noticing his own diminishing

physical abilities as compared to younger dancers at auditions. While he did experience certain ego deflating moments in returning to school, he seemed able to tolerate the challenges of transition and move into a more adaptive and complex sense of himself and his world. Donnie's process was mostly characterized as ego-syntonic - the change was self-initiated - as opposed to experiencing it as a trauma. According to some theories, development and change are initiated when previous levels of functioning no longer serve the person (Valiant, 1977; Settlage, 1992, 1988). In this way, Donnie was able to imagine a life for himself and his partner beyond the world of show business based on his previous experiences and successes.

## THE LIFE OF SCOTT

*The initial interview with Scott took place in his private practice office, and the second in his apartment. Both spaces were comfortable and stylishly decorated. Scott made me feel comfortable and welcome in both settings. I had contacted him through a mutual friend who had worked with him at a union-affiliated counseling service. Scott and I had mutual friends but had only crossed paths a few times as working dancers. Scott was very open and forthcoming throughout both interviews. I sensed a level of comfort and familiarity with his own life story and the complex issues covered during the interview.*

### **Current Life Situation**

I'm a forty year-old social worker in full-time private practice as a clinical psychotherapist. I began my transition from a Broadway dancer into social work about eight years ago. I have been working for the past six years to build my practice while I was working at a gay and lesbian center as the Director of their Alcohol and Drug Program. I love what I do and have built up a rewarding and lucrative practice. Because my practice is made up of mainly gay men, it means treating a lot of people with HIV and AIDS. I have been HIV positive myself for fourteen years which makes it complicated. I enjoy working with people to explore and understand who they are and who they are *not*. To hear the harsh, self-critical judgements of these men is challenging. Trying to help move someone with HIV from feeling stuck and ineffective to a more alive place is radically different from dance and performing.

I've been with my partner, Brian, for almost 11 years. He's twelve years older than me and is HIV negative but has worked as an advocate for people living with HIV

and AIDS for many years. He's a lawyer and another former show-business person who he made his career transition in the mid-80's. He's been encouraging and a huge help in my transition in understanding the process. Brian also lost friends during the early 1980s to AIDS and decided to go back to law school. He worked at a big law firm and now he works as a welfare lawyer and advocate for Legal Services. His focus on representing the underserved in different communities has inspired me to be more socially conscious.

I am completely "out" in all areas of my life. Brian and I are almost professional gays! We're involved in gay organizations, we do pro bono work for different gay and non-gay groups. We've been involved in the Gay and Lesbian Center for years. We do outreach for schools on sexual orientation education and we're registered as domestic partners with the city. At his job we're fortunate to have same sex partner benefits – especially with my health status.

Recently there's been an odd shift in my relationship to performing and dance. When I first stopped dancing I needed to completely distance myself from it. I needed to know that I was more than my resume so I steered clear of people in the business. It was too painful and I cut myself off from friends in the business. Recently, Brian and I have gone to more theater and that's been stirring things up again. There seem to be older dancers in shows now and part of me thinks 'is it too late? Could I do one more show?' People I worked with are still working on Broadway and I wonder about my decision to leave. On one hand I'm very glad that I've made the transition that I did, but on the other, I got a lot of joy out of dancing and performing. I am satisfied with my work as a social worker and like the security and stability but there are times recently when I've missed the excitement of Broadway.



### **Becoming a Dancer**

I grew up Catholic in Oklahoma and have two younger brothers. We're only four years apart and were very competitive as kids. My parents were hard-working people but very irresponsible. They smoked a lot of pot and I was aware of their infidelity when I was very young. They often fought and finally divorced when I was fourteen. Neither of my parents went to college and money was always a big issue around the house. My father didn't finish high school and ran a specialized mechanic shop. My mom went back to work when I was ten and still works in the restaurant and hotel management business. My mother is bipolar and had her first break after my youngest brother was born. She stabilized later but was quite an abusive alcoholic for much of my childhood.

My mom had been a dancer and I started taking tap classes when I was seven. The studio needed boys so I was offered free classes. I was relieved at the prospect of getting out of the house each afternoon. Dance felt like a way out the house and I poured myself into it. Movement and dance were very natural to me and I picked up steps quickly. I wasn't athletic but I wasn't a sissy either. I was well coordinated and I have good rhythm for tap. I became the 'star child' at the studio and in my family. The teasing I got in school never really bothered me because I knew I wanted out of that house.

My dad came to all my recitals but my mom's drinking and mood swings kept her from getting involved at the studio or in school. My dad was the one who would make sure we got off to school and had dinner ready for us when I got home from dance class. My dad tried to teach me sports but he saw that I was much more comfortable in the studio and onstage. I didn't want him to think I was "femmy" so I tried not to walk or act too girly. I was aware that the other boys in the dance studio were girly and I worked hard not to be. I didn't know I was "gay" but I was attracted to men – mainly my father's

friends. I remember seeing older naked men in the shower at the YMCA and feeling like I wanted to be close to them. In first grade I had a crush on my best friend but I didn't know what to make of it.

When I was twelve, a male dance instructor came to the studio and took a special interest in me. I learned a lot from him as a teacher but he crossed a boundary. He was much older and he started giving me blow jobs in the dressing room. It was abuse but it also felt good. It was confusing because he was seen as an influential person in the community and I knew this secret about him.

I felt ashamed that my parents weren't educated and were rednecks. They'd called me a "prude" because I liked nice things and wanted more for myself. It's not that I felt better than them but I felt different from them. My parents never went to the dentist or had money to take vacations or trips. I wanted a better life when I grew up. I grew up fast and took on a parental role before I was out of grade school. I was independent and bought my own clothes because my parents thought I was too concerned with labels. I paid for my own dentist and, later, paid for my brother's dental work. When I was fourteen my parents got divorced and my father disappeared for a few years. After that, the studio became my home away from home. I started competing around the nation and my younger brother also started to take class. We went from private Catholic schools to public ones and I was fairly depressed. When I went through puberty I gained weight for a few years—even while dancing everyday. It was a blow to my self-esteem and I got made fun of at school.

In high school my body slimmed down, the braces came off and suddenly I was cute and popular. I was elected President of the Student Body and teachers encouraged

me to take college level courses. My teachers helped me to build some confidence about my intellect and I skipped a year of high school. I also began a five-year affair with an older married woman from the dance studio. I couldn't bring her to the prom so I had another girlfriend in high school that I also had sex with. It was all very secretive and I don't know if that's because I was hiding being gay or if there were too many boundary violations. I didn't know who I was sexually - whether I was gay or not. I was approached by a guy in school about having sex but I didn't know how to deal with it. I declined and six weeks later he committed suicide. I felt incredibly guilty.

I won national dance competitions and got a scholarship to study in New York in the summer. I came to New York when I was sixteen and I immediately loved it. I knew I would eventually live here and dance on Broadway. Despite my teachers' encouragement to go to college, I briefly moved to New York to dance when I graduated at age seventeen. I took dance classes and auditioned but I simply looked too young. I was green to the professional world and looked like a boy compared to the other dancers. I remember changing clothes in a dance studio while in New York and looking at these older, masculine guys. It was the first time in a long time I allowed such strong sexual feelings toward another guy to register for me. I returned to Oklahoma with a college scholarship and got my degree in Hotel & Restaurant Management knowing I'd come back to New York someday.

I was the first in my family to go to college and I longed to get away from the small town mentality. I had the scholarship and I did well academically. A local dance studio asked if I could teach part-time and over the next three years. I grew the business

five-fold. I also choreographed college reviews and shows. If nothing else, college gave me the idea that I could want and do more than my parents had.

I went to my first gay bar that summer and met a local illustrator, Jim. We hit it off instantly and started seeing one another. He worked for a retail store and by the end of the summer all his newspaper drawings looked like me. I was impressed that Jim was so “out” in his life and sexually and socially comfortable in different situations. He didn’t have many secrets and had integrity and self-respect. I had been such a chameleon for so long that I was unsure how to go about being the same person in different situations. I went back to school the next year to finish my degree and planned to go to New York. I was confused about being gay because I had a sexual history with women. I knew I was attracted to and cared about Jim but was too young to commit to that relationship.

My family wasn’t very involved in my life at that point. On holidays I would go home and see my brothers and mother. My senior year my younger brother came home for Christmas with pierced ears and dyed hair and announced he was gay. My father was pretty nasty about it and said things to me behind my brother’s back. I secretly envied my brother’s courage to come out to my family without apologies. Part of remaining so conflicted about my sexuality was my concern of falling from my “star child” pedestal.

### **Life as a Dancer**

After graduation, I moved to Dallas because I needed to get into the union before moving to New York. I felt a new freedom about my sexuality. I wanted to be with men more than women and it wasn’t at all confusing. I worked in non-union local theaters and occasionally bartended at a gay bar. A friend told me there was an audition in New

York for a long-running Broadway show. I knew I was right for the show so I flew to New York for the audition. I was finally seen at the very end of the day and kept for the callbacks the next day. It was so thrilling! At the end of the callbacks, the producer just said, 'OK, thanks for coming – we'll be in touch.' I wasn't hired that time but having made it down to the final cut gave me confidence. I returned to Dallas, packed my things and moved to New York for good.

It sounds cliché – but at twenty-two years old I felt like New York was home. I got a job waiting tables for a few weeks until I was hired as a dancer at Radio City Music Hall. It gave me my union card and allowed me entree into the professional dance world. It was a great first job and I learned a lot about backstage protocol. What struck me initially was the campy backstage humor. People were completely open about their sexuality – men and women – and it wasn't a big deal. It seemed insulated from the outside world and safe from ridicule and judgment. I was in the show for six months and established a network of friends and attended regular dance classes regularly.

At twenty-three I was hired for a touring company and was out on the road for almost two years. I loved touring at first and had a blast on the road. Most of the guys in the show were gay and the entire company became like family. I started dating a dancer in the show, Sean, who was older than me and, in retrospect, was not a wise choice. I saved \$20,000 on the road and felt that I had financial security for the first time in my life.

When the show closed, Sean and I came back to New York and moved in together. Sean got another road show and we were never in the same city long enough to work on our relationship. We were together for four years but were never monogamous.

It was primarily a relationship of convenience and there was tremendous denial about a lot of things – sex being the most obvious.

I was hired as a replacement dancer in my first Broadway show within two months of returning to New York. I was with the show for over four years and in many ways it was the highlight of my career. Dancing on Broadway was exciting but the cast had been doing the show for several years and everyone was at least ten years older than me. At first it seemed they hated me – especially the other guys. I was bubbly and enthusiastic and that didn't fly backstage. There were quite a few straight men in the cast and a lot of homophobia backstage. It was 1986 and there was AIDS phobia around the theater. The first person in the cast to get AIDS had advanced Kaposi Sarcoma skin lesions. It was so obvious to everyone but no one ever said anything about it or asked if he was getting proper treatment. I took a share on Fire Island with some guys in the show - everyone in the house is dead now except me. *(tearful)*. I've lost so many close friends and important relationships.

While Broadway was the fulfillment of a dream it also gave me the confidence and opportunity to try other venues. I started doing commercials and some TV acting parts. I suddenly had more money than I knew what to do with and felt I was on top of the world. I made friends in the Broadway community and developed a whole gay life here in New York. In 1986 I learned that I was also HIV positive through a routine blood test. The doctor knew I was gay and decided I needed to be screened for HIV. I was alone when he told me and felt my world fall away. I didn't tell anyone for many months. I went to the theater that night and did the show as if nothing had changed. I didn't go back for counseling or medical advice for three years. I learned much later that

I had been infected by Jim when I was twenty-two. I just kept on like nothing had changed and a Broadway show was a perfect diversion.

At twenty-seven, I finally came out to my parents about being gay because I couldn't stand being so closeted about my life. The pressure to remain the "perfect star child" kept me from telling them for years. My father was very supportive and apologized for homophobic comments he had made about my brother. He had lost his father a few months earlier and had changed. My mother was more hysterical about my coming out, but that's how she experiences everything. It brought us closer together and allowed me to begin to deal with my HIV status.

I began taking acting from a teacher who was instrumental in my becoming a therapist. He was incredibly warm and accepting and I was able to begin to tap into my emotional life for what felt like the first time. It was a particular acting technique that shares many of the goals of psychotherapy. I got in touch with my feelings and it gave me a safe space to do so. It was a gradual unfolding of what in my life had real meaning. It was hard because I wasn't someone who had given those questions much thought up to that point. Over the next few years I studied acting during the day and danced in the show each night. Coming into my own as an actor helped me to accept my HIV status and I began disclosing to people I trusted. My acting teacher was incredibly supportive and encouraged me to develop my emotional life in greater depth.

I met my current partner, Brian, through mutual friends and we hit it off. He insisted we practice safer sex. Through Brian I learned more about HIV and treatments available. I became active in AIDS awareness and started volunteering for local AIDS charities. I finally went to an AIDS expert for medical advice and told my parents that I

was HIV positive. It was less terrifying than I had anticipated and they were very supportive.

### **Career Changes and Transition**

I first began to consider other careers when I was twenty-nine. The show was scheduled to close and some of the female dancers had gone back to school to get their degrees and were talking about “wanting to move on.” There weren’t many shows running for dancers and not much to look forward to in the next season. Up till that point I hadn’t considered leaving dance but standing backstage closing night I thought, “there’s more to me than this.” Dancing was important but I’m more than a cute little chorus boy.

I bought the rights to the book, “Ground Zero,” and developed it as a play for myself. It deals with the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and was part of my process of coming out as an HIV positive gay man. I produced it myself and performed it off-Broadway. I found that experience very gratifying but I got feedback that it might be “too gay” for larger venues. My agents warned me not to pigeon-hole myself as a gay actor. They wanted to represent me but thought I shouldn’t be so open about being gay. In the end, I was left feeling quite disillusioned about the business.

The turning point for me was when my best friend Dennis died. We had worked and auditioned together but he was in complete denial about his HIV illness. After months of persistently coughing, I brought him to my doctor who admitted him to the hospital immediately. Dennis didn’t want to be admitted because there was an audition he wanted to go to the next day! A couple of days later he was dead. Living with the same disease and seeing my friends die had a major impact on my decision to re-examine my life. I couldn’t get excited about a Broadway show in the same way ever again.



Brian was instrumental in my transition. He was encouraging but not pushy. I did volunteer work which gave me a sense that I was making a difference in people's lives. I worked with people with HIV and physical disabilities and learned so much about myself. It made me feel like my life was worth something more than my looks and high kicks. I enrolled in a Master's Program in social work school and closed the door on show business.

In some ways, going back to school was reminiscent of my earlier life. I had been a very good student but had lost sight of that over the years. I really wondered if being in the chorus for so long hadn't dummed me up. Graduate school was different, because I wasn't afraid to make waves. I knew what I was willing to put up with. Brian and our friends – some of whom had also gotten Masters degrees later in life- helped me to get what I wanted and needed from school. I was exposed to the gurus of clinical social work and I felt engaged and stimulated in ways that I hadn't in years. It was a grueling two years and not that fast "fix" that the Broadway show gave me. I started therapy my second year in graduate school and still see the same therapist.

I think I use my sensitivity and creativity in other ways now as a clinician. Being a dancer will always be an important part of me but it doesn't mean that I have to do it professionally. I joined a gym recently and began taking some beginning dance classes. I still struggle with the way my body has changed - going from having a cut, slim, body, into a rounder man's body. I'm still working on saying good-bye to dance after all these years. I don't regret leaving the business but there is a part of me and my youth that is gone. There was nothing left for me there. I found a new purpose, something to get

excited about again. It's obviously less glamorous as a social worker but it's connected to my own growth as an adult.

## **THEMES GENERATED FROM THE NARRATIVE**

After reviewing Scott's narrative, several themes have emerged in relation to the previous narratives presented as well as existing theories in the literature. In the following section they are presented as "I themes" with raw data from the interviews.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME 1:** *I am challenged and rewarded by using my personal experiences as an HIV positive gay man to work with gay men as a psychotherapist.*

Scott finds his work as a psychotherapist both challenging and satisfying. His work with gay men focuses on their internalized homophobia and negative self-perceptions. His clinical observations are consistent with Hanely-Hackenbruck's (1989) position that therapeutic exploration with many gay men revealed internalized homophobia, which served to cause the individual "severe anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, relationship failures, or a feeling of being an imposter" (p. 35).

I love what I do but it's sometimes really hard. My practice is made of mainly gay men, so I treat a lot of people with HIV and AIDS. Being HIV positive myself for 14 years makes it complicated. It's so challenging to work with these guys to explore and understand who they are and who they're *not*. We're so hard and critical about ourselves – it's hard to deal with it day in and day out. Trying to help move someone with HIV from feeling stuck and dead to a more alive place is a far cry from dance.

As evident in Donnie's narrative, Scott also described his long-term relationship with Brian as serving as a model for his own growth and change over the past several years. Colarusso and Nemiroff's expansion on Kohut's (1981, 1978, 1977, 1971) notion of selfobjects and Loewald's (1960) theory of development in the analytic relationship seem consistent with Scott's developmental process in adulthood.

I've been with Brian for almost 11 years. He's worked as an advocate for people living with HIV and AIDS for years. He's another former show-business person and changed his career transition in the mid-80's. He's been encouraging and a huge help in my

transition. Brian lost friends during the early 1980s and decided to go back to law school. He works as a welfare lawyer and advocate for Legal Services. He represents the people who couldn't get a good lawyer and has inspired me to be more socially conscious.

As evident in other narratives, HIV and AIDS has profoundly touched the lives of many gay men, particularly those involved in the arts. Both Scott and his partner, Brian, appear to have been deeply touched and have made decisions based on their experiences. Scott's narrative supports the notion that the HIV epidemic may have moved a generation of gay men typically concentrating on consolidating personal identity into a period of heightened generativity (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). Similarly, Hopke's (1993) idea of "AIDS-induced midlife crisis" seems to be reflected in much of Scott's early adulthood.

**THEME 2:** *Lately, I've felt more nostalgic about the joys of performing and the need to find a way of incorporating dance into my life now.*

Scott noted that his long-standing relationship to dance remains an important aspect of himself. His nostalgia about the "good times" of Broadway has impelled him to begin taking dance classes again. He clarified this as helping bring together parts of himself from which he had distanced himself during his career transition.

There's this odd shift. When I first stopped dancing I needed to completely cut-off from it – to prove I was more than my resume. I totally steered clear of people in the business because I think it was too painful. I'm satisfied with my practice – I like the security and stability but there are times when I miss Broadway. I just started taking class again – beginners – just to try to work it out, you know? I know I can't do what I could – but that's ok....being a dancer is such a fundamental part of me. I think I avoided it until I knew that I was set in school, career, everything.

Scott describes what Jacques (1981) labeled as the move into mid-life and toward the depressive position. In this way, Scott seems to have rejected his feelings of loss and

sadness around the transition. He now seems to be integrating his experiences into his self-concept in a way that allows fuller acceptance of the passage of time and physical decline.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

**THEME 1:**    *Early on I felt ashamed of my family and I became the parentified child.*

Scott's narrative is replete with references to his shame about his family and the adult-like role he took on as a child. From what he described, his parents were unable to provide a stable and secure environment on a consistent basis. Scott found ways of meeting his own and his brother's needs but was lacking structure and a secure "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1958). This may have contributed to him later developing his "perfect star child" false self which Stein and Cabaj (1996) have noted in their clinical experiences with gay men.

My parents were irresponsible – smoking pot and fucking around on each other all the time. My mother is bipolar and had her first break after my youngest brother was born. She was also an abusive alcoholic....I was shamed of my parents and they hated that. They called me prude, elitist - because I liked nice things and wanted more. I felt different from them but not better. I was driven to have a better life. I grew up fast and took on a parental role before I was out of grade school. I was an independent kid and bought my own clothes –they thought I was too concerned with labels. I paid for my own dentist and my brother's braces. I became that good boy, perfect star child and it just got worse.

**THEME 2:**    *The structure of my early dance training and accumulated successes worked to counter a chaotic and unstructured home.*

Scott began dancing at age seven and the studio became a respite from his chaotic household. He found the structure of class and the consistency of his teachers in the dance studio a welcomed relief.

I started when I was seven. The studio needed boys so I was offered free classes. I was thrilled to get out of the house each afternoon. Dance felt like a way out of the house and I poured myself into it. Dance and rhythm came natural to me and I picked up steps

quickly. My teacher was great – she was there and on time every day. I took to class and the repetition of it – there was something comforting about that setting. After my parent’s divorce the studio became my home away from home.

Scott received recognition and praise as a dancer. In high school he began being noticed for his looks and academic abilities following puberty. These experiences seemed to help him develop and build on his talents and improve his self-concept (Kohut, 1971, 1977). His father also was supportive of his dance endeavors and Scott found it a more comfortable way of connecting.

From day one my teacher told me I could be a professional. She gave me more attention than the other kids and that felt good. I worked hard and got better and my dad noticed. He came to my recitals and that was better than trying to play ball in the backyard....In high school my weight dropped, the braces came off and suddenly I was cute and popular. I was elected President of the Student Body and my confidence improved. I capitalized on what I was good at –dancing and academics. I even skipped a year of high school.

In contrast to other narratives, Scott did not experience his father as distancing or rejecting but met Scott where his interests were. This seems to have had an important impact on Scott’s sense of himself and his relationship with his father. Once his parent’s divorced, however, Scott’s father was absent for several years.

**THEME 3:** *The sexual experiences in childhood and adolescence were stimulating but they blurred boundaries and confused my emerging identity.*

Scott described sexual experiences in his adolescence as confusing his emerging sexual identity. The adults in authority crossed sexual boundaries in ways that were stimulating but seemed to impact his sense of trust and safety in authority.

When I was twelve, this new dance instructor took a special interest in me. He crossed a boundary and started giving me blow jobs in the dressing room. It was abuse but it also felt good. He was warm and comforting to me after my parents split. I freaked me out though.

Like many of the participants, Scott also had a period of vacillating between heterosexual and homosexual activities. According to Cass (1979), this stage, *identity confusion*, involves confusion, turmoil, denial and increased feelings of guilt and alienation. Scott fluctuated between *identity confusion* and *identity tolerance* until he graduated from college and left home.

I had a five year affair with an older married woman from the dance studio. I couldn't bring her to the prom so I had another girlfriend in high school that I also had sex with. It was all very secretive and I don't know if that's because I was hiding being gay or if there were too many boundary violations. I didn't know who I was sexually - whether I was gay or not. I was approached by a guy in school about having sex but I didn't know how to deal with it so I said no - six weeks later he committed suicide. I felt incredibly guilty. All relationships screwed up my teenage years and were confusing. They totally affected my coming to terms with being gay.

In college summer stock, Scott experienced his first relationship with Jim, a local illustrator, who impressed Scott with his openness with his family about being gay. Scott seemed to begin to move into Cass's (1979) stage of *identity tolerance*, where he could tolerate his same-sex behaviors but not the possibility of being gay. Scott appreciated Jim's ability to integrate his sexuality across contexts. His own public and private aspects of his self that concerned sexuality remained split.

### **Life as A Dancer**

**THEME 1:** *Leaving home allowed me to come to grips with my sexuality and initiate my professional career.*

Scott's decision to move to Dallas after graduating from college to get his union card was based on his earlier move to New York at seventeen. He was surprised at how easily he came to terms with his sexuality and accepted his gay identity.

I moved to Dallas because I needed to get a union card and it was easier there than in New York. I felt totally free sexually – no more back and forth. I knew I wanted to be with men more than women and it wasn't at confusing – I could finally call myself "gay."

Some if it was getting away from home and the good boy, perfect star child thing. I bartended at a gay bar and really came into my own in the Dallas gay community – I was much less uptight or anxious. The only place that I was closeted was in auditions when I thought I should act butch or straight. It was a fun time but I was itching to come to New York again.

Much of his description follows what Cass (1979) describes as *identity acceptance*, even though Scott attempted to pass as heterosexual in auditions. During this stage, the individual engages in homosexual behaviors and can acknowledge to himself and friends that he identifies as gay. This period of acceptance gave Scott a safe context in which he disclosed to himself and others, thereby lessening his anxiety.

As in other narratives, Scott's fluctuating identity during adolescence seemed to follow along developmental lines described by Maylon (1982b). The biphasic development for gay men may begin with an incomplete identity formation and ego development because of the adolescent's need to adapt to the expectation of heterosexuality during adolescence. This is followed by more complete identity formation and ego development related to coming out as a gay man (Maylon, 1982b).

**THEME 3:** *HIV and AIDS had a profound impact on me both personally and professionally and allowed me to come out of hiding and into my own.*

Scott's experiences in New York included working closely with HIV positive men and eventually being diagnosed himself. Scott reported that he was in denial for three years following his diagnosis. Performing in a Broadway show seemed to support that denial and deflected the reality of his health status for a time.

When I was 26 I found out I was HIV positive....I didn't tell anyone. I went to the theater that night and did the show as if nothing had changed - typical. I didn't go back for any counseling or medical follow-up. I found out later that I'd been infected by Jim



when I was twenty-two. I just kept on like nothing had changed and a Broadway show was a perfect diversion.

Confounding his own denial, he found that the backstage environment fed a group denial about HIV among the other gay men in the cast.

There was a lot of homophobia backstage – and in theater overall. In 1986 and there was AIDS phobia backstage. The first person in the cast to get really sick had advanced KS lesions which were so obvious to everyone. I took a share on Fire Island and everyone in the house is dead now except me. Jesus it's so devastating to thinking about now. I've lost so many close friends.

Coming out to his parents was a significant event in his life and seemed to provide him a reprieve from the need to be perceived as the perfect son. It also allowed him to begin to accept his HIV positive status.

I finally came out to my parents about being gay. I couldn't stand being so phony about my life. The pressure I put on myself to be the perfect start child kept me from telling them for years. My father was great and apologized for the fag comments about my brother. He'd just lost his father and had changed – we became closer. My mother was hysterical but that's how she is with everything. It brought us closer together and then I began to with being HIV.

When Scott met his partner, Brian, he established a relationship that was more fulfilling and satisfying. Brian encouraged him to seek consistent medical care and exposed him to broader social contexts.

That's when I met Brian - he insisted on safer sex. I broke up with Sean after I told Brian I was HIV positive. Brian knew about the show biz world but wasn't impressed by it anymore. He made me get active in AIDS charities and I finally went to an AIDS doctor. It was like I'd been living in a cave for five years. His friends were active in politics. I saw how small my world was- it really was. I told my parents that I was HIV positive. It was less terrifying than coming out was and they were great with it.

Scott clearly seemed to move from a rigid defensiveness and denial to a more mature understanding of his HIV illness. According to Settlege (1992, 1988), development takes place when previous levels of functioning no longer serve the person.

Scott's new relationship no longer supported the denial of his illness and the broader experiences of Brian's friends increased Scott's social consciousness.

### **Career Change and Transition**

THEME 1: *Coming out personally and professionally about my HIV status, losing friends and colleagues, and professional disillusionment contributed to my career transition.*

Scott attributed the process of coming to terms with the AIDS epidemic as central in his consideration of alternative careers. At age thirty-two he was still capable of finding work as a dancer but opted to go in another direction.

The turning point for me was when my best friend, Dennis, died....he'd been coughing for months so I took him to my doctor who admitted him. Dennis almost refused because there was an audition to the next day – Jesus! He was dead two days later....living with this disease, seeing my friends die, all had a major influence about where I was in my life....standing backstage closing night I thought, 'there's more to me than this.' I'm more than a cute little chorus boy.

Initially, Scott was drawn to acting and, again, found the nurturing studio environment healing and comforting. Eventually, however, he felt acting was too homophobic and decided to pursue social work.

My acting teacher's partly responsible for me being a therapist. He was such a warm and accepting guy - I could tap into my emotional life for the first time. His approach is similar to good therapy. I had to get in touch with being HIV positive....My agents warned me not to pigeon-hole myself as queer. I shouldn't be so open about being gay. It left me sour about the business. I had heard of Career Transition for Dancers and I decided to meet with a counselor to begin discussing going back to school.

As in other narratives, Scott's narrative coincided with Hopcke's (1992) description of an early "AIDS-induced midlife crisis" which included a confrontation with his own mortality and his friend's. A supportive relationship and the reality of the

HIV epidemic seemed to have moved Scott from a paranoid schizoid position (Jacques, 1981, 1965) to a more reflective, depressive position.

I started doing volunteer work with people with HIV and physical disabilities. They taught me so much about myself and I felt like I was outside my small mindedness for the first time. It made me feel like my life was worth something more than my looks and high kicks. Graduate school exposed me to the gurus of social work and I felt engaged and stimulated in ways that I hadn't in years. It was a grueling two years and not that fast "fix" that the Broadway show gave me. I started psychotherapy my second year in graduate school and continue to see the same therapist.

Finally, rather than simply focusing on career consolidation and personal identity, Scott began to experience a period of heightened generativity and increased community involvement (Kertzner & Sved, 1996).

THEME 2: *My relationship was central in my career transition and gave me the stability and security I needed to explore my options.*

Scott cited his long-term relationship with his partner as providing necessary stability during the unstable process of changing careers. Knowing that his partner had previously gone through a similar process seemed to lessen Scott's anxiety around it all. It also took the financial pressures off of him for a period of time.

Brian was terrific, really terrific through all of this. I mean he never made me feel like I had to change careers and during it all he never made me think I was sponging off of him. I wasn't working during graduate school and he never once made me feel like a kept man! No, really, though, he's already been through it and knew how hard it was. He was my model and that really helped.

In sum, Scott's narrative was consistent with many already presented above. His early experiences reflected a sense of difference and a desire to distance himself from his family and distinguish himself. His chaotic home situation led to feeling overly responsible for much of what happened between his parents. He was vigilant and monitored his behaviors in an effort not to appear feminine to his peers or his father. His

respite was the dance studio where he was provided positive feedback and support for his talents and abilities. Scott's early sense of himself as a dancer and successes in competition led to an early occupational Dream formation (Levinson, 1978). Like Donnie, Scott was intelligent and had positive academic experiences which he also built upon.

Scott's adolescence was complicated by sexual experiences he had a male teacher and an on going affair with a married woman. While he acknowledged feeling attracted to older men by age seven, he felt confused about his sexuality through college. It wasn't until moving away to Texas that he allowed himself to identify as gay. He experienced his entrance into the professional world of dance as "insulating" him from the realities of the outside world. He felt part of the professional "family" after being hired for his first national tour at twenty-three and described the "fulfillment of [his] dream" when he was hired for a Broadway show at twenty-five. While he acknowledged the excitement of feeling part of the community and freedom to be "out" as liberating, he cited emerging "AIDS-phobia" as central to his professional experiences. The loss of many friends to AIDS and being diagnosed as HIV positive sent him on a journey toward self-acceptance and coming out.

Like Donnie, Scott's relationship was a significant support during his career transition. Brian was felt to be supportive financially and emotionally and, having been through the transition himself, someone with whom Scott could identify. Scott's narrative also generated several unique themes related to his HIV positive status. His career transition was recounted as the culmination of a process which included coming out to his family (both as gay and HIV +), establishing a supportive relationship, a

supportive mentor relationship and an emerging intolerance of a homophobic professional environment. In the section that follows, I will review the data presented in this section and propose broader second-order themes for further analysis.

## **SUMMARY OF THE NARRATIVES –TRANSITIONED**

The narratives of these five participants who have transitioned from performing into other professions demonstrated both similarities and differences among their individual experiences. This summary will begin by comparing and contrasting salient themes within the group with relevant developmental theories of Levinson (1978) and Cass (1996, 1979).

### **Current Life Situation**

The five participants in this group reported general satisfaction and the narratives reflected a sense of genuine engagement in their current life structures. At the time of the interviews they ranged in age between thirty-six and fifty-five years old which, theoretically, places them in different eras of development (Levinson, 1978). The narratives had a re-appraising quality to them and each participant in this group demonstrated a capacity to reflect on their current life structure in a meaningful way.

According to Cass (1979) the five participants who transitioned would broadly be considered to be in the sixth stage, *identity synthesis*. Martin (physical therapist) is out at work and cited his integrating his spirituality with his sexuality as central to his experiences. Tom (graphic designer) is open about his sexual orientation at work and socializes with gay and straight colleagues and friends. Richard (financial services) experienced a shift in his openness about being gay at age forty-nine when his father died. He relinquished his need to hide or “protect the world” from who he was and came out to his step-mother. He stated that this eventually allowed him to consider working in other contexts beyond musical theater. Donnie (lawyer) and Scott (social worker) also both described an openness and comfort in integrating their gay identity in ways consistent with identity synthesis. Each recognized a movement in “being more than just

gay” and “seeing my being gay as not the single most important thing about me.” It should be noted, however, that the men in this group and the non-transition group described relatively few experiences in which they felt the need to disclose their gay identity. This suggests that while the gay-friendly, professional milieu had a normalizing effect in ways that the men found helpful, it also may have isolated them from broader, non-gay dominated contexts and prevented broader identity integration.

According to Levinson, at thirty-six, Tom (graphic designer) was culminating his early adulthood life structure of the Settling Down and Becoming One’s Own Man periods (ages 32-40) and undertaking the tasks of settling “for a few key choices,...[creating] a broader structure around them, ...[investing] oneself as fully as possible in the various components of the structure...and to pursue long-range plans and goals within it” (p.140). In many ways Tom’s narrative broadly reflects the idea of “settling in” with the promise of some stability in his professional and personal life. His problematic relationship with an HIV positive photographer is being given serious consideration in his psychotherapy. He does not envision his current position as a graphic designer for a Broadway show advertising agency as his end result. Ultimately, he hopes to establish himself as a photographer. He continues to stay committed to his process of change despite his uncertainty and the insecurity of moving on. Tom acknowledged “miss[ing] the excitement” of show business and felt he needed to renew his enthusiasm for his work.

Richard (financial services), at fifty-five was the oldest participant in the study. His appraisal of his current life provided a unique perspective and genuine sense of fulfillment. He was enjoying the new life he was in the midst of creating, in a period

which Levinson (1978) posited was the Age Fifty Transition. He cited the importance of financial security and retirement benefits as part of his sense of satisfaction. He no longer finds it necessary to prove himself the way he did as a performer. He is enjoying feeling his age and appreciating his maturity without apology. He even leaves open the possibility of future career transitions. Richard did not miss dancing or performing and stated his only regret was not getting out sooner. He felt that he had been “treading water” professionally for the past ten years.

The three others in this group (Martin, Donnie, Scott) were between the ages of forty and forty-three, approximately the time during which Levinson (1978) predicts the Mid-life Transition. According to Levinson the three primary tasks of this period are: (1) re-appraising the past; (2) modifying the life structure; and (3) further individuation process. Martin (physical therapist) was the participant in this group that seemed to be the least satisfied both financially and personally. He admitted that he continued to miss performing and being part of the “Broadway family.” He still thinks about the possibility of returning to dancing and theater, although he stated that it was “really unlikely anyone wants a forty-three old tap dancer.” He appreciated the change in being treated as an adult in his new profession and the clear separation between his personal and work lives. Scott (social worker) also stated that he missed the excitement of performing and being a part of a show and had recently started taking beginning dance classes for fun.

There was evidence of a modification to the participants’ life structures and creating a life structure that might be more satisfying. Donnie (lawyer) was in the process of buying and remodeling a new apartment with his partner. He saw his recent move from the district attorney’s office to a private law firm as potentially more



financially and personally rewarding. Scott (social worker) had recently left his full-time position as a substance abuse counselor to build his private practice. He found the work with mostly HIV positive gay men rewarding and challenging.

Finally, each participant in this group made reference to HIV/AIDS and the impact it had on their personal and professional life. Martin credited a gay-friendly, non-denominational church with helping him deal with the AIDS-related losses he had experienced over the years as well as helping him accept being gay. Tom's current partner is HIV positive which clearly impacts his life in complex ways. He experienced loss early in his professional career on tour when members of the cast became ill and died. Richard described the loss of many friends and colleagues to AIDS over the years as contributing to his decision to consider another career and wondering how much time he had left. Donnie's partner is HIV positive and affirmed that it was a major factor in his decision to transition. Scott, who is HIV positive himself, recognized the many losses he had experienced over the years and his own sense of mortality.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

The Pre-Adult development of the five participants contained many similarities with respect to existing developmental literature. Each of the men began life dependent upon their families for protection and support (Levinson, 1978). However, the participants in this group also became aware that they were different from those around them, including their families (de Monteflores, 1986). This included feeling that they lacked self-confidence, and self-esteem. For all five participants feeling different included a realization of gender non-conforming interests and activities. Martin, Richard, and Donnie each reported feeling closer to their mothers as young boys and sensing a

distance from their fathers. Tom and Donnie sensed that their fathers did not like them. Martin, Tom, Richard and Scott were labeled 'sissy' and 'faggot' even though they did not consider themselves particularly feminine.

Each of the participants reported a strong affective connection to performing, theater and the arts by an early age. Martin, Richard and Scott were each deeply involved in formal dance training by grade school age. They described feeling like a dancer at their core and as a basic part of themselves. The dance studio was seen as a significant place where they found praise, approval, as well as pressure. Martin felt an enormous pressure to perform and please his parents in dance, music and academically. He was labeled as both a "golden child" and "prodigy" which carried with them pressures he found at times unbearable. Richard also was a perfectionist who earned straight A's and enjoyed "showing off" in dance class and band. Scott found safety and security from his chaotic household in the structure of the dance studio.

Tom began performing at age nine in local theater productions in which he experienced the recognition and validation he felt he never received from his parents. Donnie recalled seeing a musical production in childhood which peaked his interest in musical theater, but he did not actively begin performing until high school. Interestingly, neither Tom nor Donnie began formal dance training until after college. Both cited their natural flexibility and line as catching them up with others who began training earlier.

By early adolescence each of the participants had begun to make associations between sex and their feelings of difference. They described a vigilance and sensitivity to their home and school environments in which scanning for potential sources of ridicule or threats was necessary. They each became aware of same-sex attractions and for Tom,

Richard, Donnie and Scott this included sexual experimentation with other boys. Tom and Scott also reported sexual abuse and rape which certainly impacted their development.

In general, their individual connection to music, theater or dance intensified during adolescence. Tom, Richard and Donnie found themselves deeply involved in their school theater and music programs where they fit in more readily. Martin, Tom and Richard described the transformation they experienced as child/adolescent performers which brought on applause and recognition from others. Each of them reported the importance of specific teachers in encouraging their participation and increased peer socialization.

By the time they reached high school all of the men had been teased by their peers for being a 'fag,' a 'sissy' and most (Martin, Donnie, Scott) felt the need to monitor themselves for obvious "feminine" mannerisms and behaviors which they attributed to their emerging sexual identity. There was a conscious decision made by some of the participants during this period to try to fit in. Martin transformed himself into a swimmer and became popular. He stopped dancing altogether until college to avoid being ridiculed. Martin was the only one of this group who did not participate in theater or dance during high school. Donnie put on a "straight facade" and also enjoyed the popularity of being in the "A-crowd." In general, the high school years were difficult for all five of the participants, however, for most (Tom, Richard, Donnie, Scott), theater and dance clearly became ways of feeling connected to others and breaking their isolation. It also became a chief source of recognition and validation which was noticeably absent from the narratives up to that point in their development.

In terms of formation of an occupational Dream (Levinson, 1978), the participants in this group each reported a clear vision and commitment to theater and dance by the time they completed college. It seems significant that each of the men in this group reported success in multiple areas of their lives (sports, academics, teaching) and three (Richard, Donnie, Scott) had skipped a grade level. For Martin and Richard it is unclear whether the Dream was primarily self-motivated by an internal vision or by some aspect of a maternal wish or expectation.

Each felt himself as the agent in their pursuit of the Dream and in working towards their goals. Martin changed his area of interest several times during college, finally focusing on dance with intensity and drive. Tom went to college and studied graphic design with the intention of pursuing dance and musical theater afterwards. He was the only participant in the study who stated that he assumed from the beginning of his career that there would be an eventual end or transition. Richard felt his career "snow balled" during college and he simply followed the next logical step without questioning his pursuit. Donnie focused on acting and developed his passion for dance in the process of coming to terms with his sexuality. Scott earned his degree in hotel and restaurant management knowing that he would pursue professional dance afterwards.

As they entered the Early Adult Transition in their late teens and early twenties, (Levinson, 1978), the prevailing theme in these narratives was wanting to establish themselves as dancers and performers and create a distance from their families. This is consistent with Levinson's (1978) view that separation from the family of origin is a principle component of the task of leaving the pre-adult world. However, for these men the desire to create distance from family was driven and motivated by their career

aspirations and their need to integrate their sexuality. Each of the men in this group reported an increased passion for dance during this period and a central vision of moving to New York to dance.

Regarding gay identity, none of the participants initiated coming out prior to establishing themselves in New York. In Cass's model (1979), they generally fell into stages two and three, *identity comparison* and *identity tolerance*. While Martin, Tom, Richard and Scott were aware of their sexual attraction toward men, they fluctuated between holding a negative view of the possibility of a stable gay identity and tolerating that possibility. Donnie experienced less fluctuation in his gay identity but felt unable to come out until he left home. This is more consistent with stage four, *identity acceptance* in which the individual is seeking more contact with other gays to legitimize his internal experiences.

### **Life as a Dancer**

The men in this group described the Early Adult Transition and Entry Into the Adult World as dominated by a singular desire to dance and perform. Included in that pursuit was further separation and individuation from their families and positive experiences with other gay men. In general, their current narratives reflected a nostalgic, idealized sense of the early period of their career and the enjoyment of fulfilling their initial Dream.

Levinson (1978) predicted that Entering the Adult World meant facing two primary and conflicting tasks, *exploration* and *creating a stable life structure*. In Levinson's study the men focused on occupational and marriage choices. All five of the transitioners moved to larger cities where they experienced relief and necessary distance

from their families. They established an occupation as a primary component of their initial life structure while coming to terms with their sexuality. Entrance into the professional dance world meant being included in a professional context which allowed sexual diversity. It seemed to provide them greater access to other gay men and positive gay environments. They reported that it did not necessitate coming out to other dancers or colleagues because it was assumed that they were gay.

The men in this group seemed to focus solely on establishing themselves professionally without serious consideration of alternative careers. Once they had gained entrance into the profession, they experienced increased self-esteem and saw continued career opportunities. Each stated how important that first show was in changing his life and getting on the “inside track.” Upon moving to New York, Richard was quickly hired for a Broadway show and immediately became identified with the Broadway community. During that show he had sex with another man for the first time but struggled to accept his sexuality for many years. At twenty-three Martin had his first sexual experience while on the road with a show. At twenty-five he was hired for his first Broadway show where he finally felt “on top.”

Donnie is the only participant in the study who did not perform on Broadway and, in that way, felt he had not truly fulfilled his Dream. At twenty-two he immersed himself in dance and at twenty-three was hired for his first national tour. Scott was also hired for a tour at twenty-three and at twenty-five was hired for the New York company. Tom was frustrated by having to “pay [his] dues” for several years until he finally was hired for a Broadway show at twenty-eight. He was injured during that performance and never fully

recovered. Once they each achieved some success, the focus then shifted to maintaining their status as professionals and looking for the next potential job opportunity.

Levinson (1978) described the Age Thirty Transition as the period between twenty-eight and thirty-two that connects two structure-building periods (Entering the Adult World and Settling Down). Levinson described it as a time for reappraisal and reflection of the man's occupational direction and relationship situation which may be experienced smoothly or as a serious "crisis" (p.84). With the exception of Donnie the men in this group had, in many ways, achieved their initial goal and dream of making it to Broadway. Most of men in this group (Tom, Richard, Donnie, Scott) experienced some type of notable transition during this period of time.

Martin's narrative account of this period of time was not consistent with Levinson's theory. At no point prior to his injury at thirty-four did he report reflecting on his career nor did he become involved in a long-term relationship until then either. Tom achieved his goal of dancing on Broadway and established his first significant relationship at twenty-nine. His injury left him feeling physically vulnerable and he began to consider returning to school. The relationship initiated his coming out to his parents which was part of a transitional period for him. At thirty Richard earned his first leading role on Broadway but recalled cautionary career advice given to him by an older actor which stayed with him. He promised himself that he would leave the business before they stopped wanting him.

At twenty-seven Donnie began his relationship with his HIV + partner and began individual psychotherapy. At twenty-nine he came out to his parents and his family in order to include his partner in family functions. By the time he was thirty-one, Donnie

felt “stagnant” and resented having to be away from his partner on tour and decided to explore career options. Scott first began to consider changing careers at twenty-nine when the Broadway show he was in closed after four years. At thirty-one he returned to school disillusioned with the state of the theater.

### **Changes in Career and Transition**

All of the men in this group reported a growing pressure and professional dissatisfaction while working either on Broadway or on tour. There were frustrations in having to repeatedly prove oneself at auditions after years as a professional dancer. Within this group there were two participants (Martin, Tom) who felt their career transition was primarily the result of a physical injury, while the others (Richard, Donnie, Scott) felt it was self-initiated and the result of both de-selection and dissatisfaction.

Martin had a serious knee injury, and at thirty-five felt “out of control” as he struggled with alternative career possibilities. His partner, Carl, who had transitioned from dance several years earlier, encouraged him to return to school. Martin felt his mother was ambivalent about his possible transition and was unsure whether it was “premature” to consider other careers. After years of paying his dues, at twenty-nine Tom reached his dream of dancing on Broadway. During the opening night he injured himself and though he returned to the show several months later, he never fully recovered physically. Gradually he grew weary of the monotony of performing in the same show, eight times a week. His fantasies of what it would be like to be on the “inside” of the Broadway professional community were confronted by the realities he experienced. His disillusionment with himself and with what the profession had to offer led him to consider returning to school for graphic design.



At forty-nine Richard's father died and initiated a process of change and re-appraisal for him. After he came out to his step-mother at his father's funeral, he felt the "burden" lift. At fifty he further experienced a professional "slow down" in which he felt his thirty-year career was all but dismissed by those in authority. Concerned about his financial stability and future retirement, he consulted a union-affiliated counseling service and initiated the process of exploring career options.

As mentioned, Donnie's career transition was impelled by his partner's health status and the dawning realization that he would never be a star. His final performance in a dinner theater felt humiliating and allowed him to let go of the fantasy of show business. Finally, Scott's experiences in both disclosing his HIV + status to his parents and seeing his friend died from the disease created a context in which he took an inventory of his life. His professional dissatisfaction and the realization of the finiteness of his life contributed to his decision to return to school.

The process of transition itself was felt as a difficult "loss" by Martin and Tom. Martin felt that a part of himself was lost and described it as "mourning a death." Tom, on the other hand, felt the most difficult aspect of the transition for him was recognizing the importance of outside validation and that his principle motivation as a dancer was the fear of not achieving or being accepted. Richard, Donnie and Scott did not characterize it as difficult necessarily, but as a repeatedly committing to change and a tolerance for not "going for the quick fix."

Most in this group (Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) also cited being able to start over but having to tolerate being a beginner again was central to the process. For those four participants, the career transition required returning to school in their thirties and taking

the role of student. They each felt satisfaction in their academic achievements and re-discovering themselves as capable of thinking and expressing themselves outside of performing. Richard did not return to school but by working with a career counselor he gradually felt more confident and was able to envision himself in other work settings.

The most difficult aspect of the career change for some in this group (Martin, Tom, Scott) was losing the connection to the Broadway community. In some cases the transitioners consciously cut themselves off from peers and professional associates to keep themselves “on track” or from “getting sucked back in” to auditions. Martin even left New York with his partner in order to finish his training. Being able to find alternative supports to compensate for fewer social interactions with friends and colleagues was seen as a significant factor for them as well. All five reported that either their partners (Martin, Donnie, Scott), friends (Richard), or therapist (Tom) were central in providing that support. Eventually, Martin and Tom consciously chose positions (physical therapist with dancers/Broadway ad agency) that might bridge the old and new contexts.

All five gradually felt that their skills and competencies as dancers and performers were useful in their new careers. They each experienced the transition as expanding and broadening who they knew themselves to be. They felt that their self-discipline, accountability, interpersonal skills, and sense of humor were essential personal resources in their new careers.

## **SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR FINDINGS**

The data generated from the lives of the ten men in this study illuminate several areas of inquiry. This section synthesizes the data presented in the previous section in the form of second-order, general themes which underwent further analysis. While the data presented can be divided according to the two groups of men, those who identified themselves as having transitioned from dance and those who did not, there appear to be significant similarities as well as differences between the two groups.

### **Current Life Situation**

**THEME:**     *In general, those participants who have not transitioned feel less satisfied with their careers and relationships and seemed less open and comfortable with their sexuality than their transitioned counterparts.*

Most of those participants who had not transitioned from dance or theater at the time of the interviews reported feeling frustrated, unfulfilled, and “stagnant” with aspects of their personal and professional lives. Their characterizations of their current careers were laden with references to how the business had changed for the worse and lost its integrity. Most had only a vague notion of future career possibilities and none had serious plans to transition outside of theater or dance in the near future. Jeffrey was notably non-reflective and idealizing, choosing to focus solely on positive elements of his job. He reported feeling “lucky” to be working on Broadway and satisfied with his current position yet had little or no ambition to further his performing career.

All five of their narratives had an element of feeling stalled or waiting for something to happen to them. There were references to being treated like children as dancers and performers. Those who were currently performing reported few professional

demands or responsibilities that would contribute to their professional development. Chris had responsibilities as dance captain but felt like a “cog in the wheel” and not essential to the system. Dwayne’s resentment and bitterness toward the profession emanated from what perceived as the lack of true visionaries on the current Broadway scene. He felt he was “hiding” in the business and feared being “slammed by the critics” as a director. Jeffrey’s most challenging work responsibility was arriving at the theater on time. It seemed he was content to relinquish any responsibility beyond the duties of executing the steps each night on stage.

The two participants who were not employed (Stan, Jonas) had explored transition and had taken initiative to move in other directions (temp jobs/computer). Currently they were attempting to transition within show business (director/choreography) but had not ruled out returning to performing. Despite Stan’s dissatisfaction and feeling like a “faceless, mindless piece of the scenery,” he continued to audition and actively pursue job possibilities.

The group of non-transitioners were mixed in their overall satisfaction with their personal lives. Stan felt highly committed in his current relationship but anticipated difficulties as his partner grew older and questioned the effect it might have on his relationship. Jonas and Chris were not involved in relationships but reported wanting someone in their life. Jonas felt particularly isolated and cut-off from the theatrical community. Dwayne was mostly isolated and felt unable to “bring together” love and sex. Jeffrey was not optimistic about his future with his boyfriend and doubted the permanence of same-sex relationships in general.

Regarding gay identity (Cass, 1979), those who have not transitioned appear to be currently at earlier stages of development than those who have transitioned. Clearly, Dwayne appears to be at the earliest stage, *identity confusion*, in which he does not identify himself as gay despite his primary homosexual interests and behaviors. He previously had been involved in a long-term same-sex relationship about which he was fairly comfortable and open with friends and colleagues (stage four, *identity acceptance*). Stan, who is in a long-term relationship, describes himself “out” but continues to compartmentalize his sexuality from his family, which is consistent with stage four, *identity acceptance*. Jonas, Chris and Jeffrey have all come out to their parents and families and seem to be in stage five, *identity pride*. They are aware and focused on the differences between their own acceptance of their homosexuality and society’s rejection of them. There is a sense of “us” and “them” which serves to maintain a distance and a feeling of being alienated from broader social interactions.

**THEME:**     *Overall, transitioned participants were more comfortable with their gay identity and were increasingly satisfied with their careers and relationships.*

Prior to changing careers, the transitioners also described similar feelings of discontent and stagnation as the non-transitioners. Currently, the five participants who have transitioned into other careers reported feeling mostly satisfied with their careers and appeared to be at a developmentally higher stage of gay identity formation than the non-transitioners (Cass, 1979). They described a sense of accomplishment in finding and establishing expertise in another field. All five cited financial security in the new profession and future potential to earn more money as significant. The new career

seemed to allow all five to gain a sense of agency in their lives, particularly in the direction of their career. Several participants (Martin, Tom, Scott) admitted that at times they missed the “glitz” of being associated with Broadway but found satisfaction in the stability and security of the new professions.

Of the five in this group, the two who were injured (Martin, Tom) described the transition process as difficult and “traumatizing.” Martin (physical therapist) was the only one in this group that actively thought about returning to performing. Both made several attempts to return to performing but were unable to physically execute the dance moves. At first, they attributed the transition to the injury alone. In the end, all five cited an inability to find work (Richard, Donnie) and experienced a shift in relationship and financial priorities (Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) as well as stagnation and dissatisfaction (Martin, Tom, Richard, Donnie, Scott) which were considered central components that propelled their career change. Their feelings of dissatisfaction and stagnation (also described by non-transitioners) were seen by them as the necessary motivation for seeking career change. These appeared to have been the initial components which led to *contemplation* and *recognition* in the transitioners’ process of transition.

Most in the transitioned group (Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) described their satisfaction and new-found sense of control of the future direction of their lives in contrast to their careers as dancers, when some (Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) felt infantilized and kept in a one-down position. Even Martin and Tom who were more inclined to see the transition as a “loss” of an important part of themselves reported not regretting their transition. All five reported potential in their current jobs to develop the

competencies they acquired in school and training. In their new careers, they were also recognized and rewarded for skills in ways they had not experienced as dancers. Tom indicated he was not entirely “settled” in his career as a graphic designer and was moving toward fashion photography. Richard (financial services) was also less set on remaining at his job, yet felt that having made one career change might make others possible.

Among the transitioners, as in the case of the non-transitioners, there were a variety of experiences within recent and current relationships. Martin (physical therapist) described the “loss” he felt in the break-up of his eight-year relationship prior to returning to New York. Martin experienced his partner as instrumental in helping him initiate his transition but that his partner was, ultimately, too controlling. Tom (graphic designer) was quite unsure whether his current relationship with an HIV positive photographer would continue. He cited the stresses of his partner’s health status and dynamics in the couple’s relationship as potentially leading to a break-up. Richard (financial services) was neither involved nor interested in a relationship. He felt he was “not a relationship person” and unable to commit to one person. Both Donnie (lawyer) and Scott (social worker) were in relationships for over ten years. As mentioned, each described the importance of their partner in their career considerations and aspirations. Both also described the impact that HIV/AIDS had on their relationships which resulted in a shift in their life structure priorities.

In general, those who transitioned to new careers could be located in Cass’s (1979, 1996) model in stage six, *identity synthesis*. Cass characterized this stage as the individual’s emerging sense of being more than gay. For some (Donnie, Scott) it seems that they may have reached this stage prior to initiating the transition as evidenced by

their increased involvement in personal relationships with heterosexual friends and associates before making the actual transition. Martin, Tom and Richard seemed to move toward the sixth stage during the process of transition or, perhaps, as a result of the changing careers. In all cases, once they came out to their families (mother, parents, step-mother, respectively) they were much less concerned with feeling rejected or judged by others, enabling them to continue the transition process, to expand their experiences, and imagine themselves as part of the broader society.

### **Becoming a Dancer**

**THEME:** *In both transitioned and non-transitioned groups, childhood experiences included feeling different, ridiculed, and marginalized among family and peers contributing to underlying narcissistic vulnerabilities.*

Most of the narratives initially began with the participant's description of normal, average childhood, consistent with elements of Levinson's (1978) pre-adult self. Upon closer analysis, however, the participants seemed to long to feel "normal" and part of the world they saw around them. The data indicate early disruptions in their sense of security and stability in their childhood. Each recalled an early sense of feeling "different," and "out of place" in their family and peer group, supporting the literature on gay development (Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1996, 1989; Izzard, 1999, Martin, 1982; de Monteflores, 1984; Voeller, 1980; Cornett, 1993). Nine of the participants (Stan, Jonas, Dwayne, Jeffrey, Martin, Tom, Richard, Donnie, Scott) reported consciously feeling sexually attracted to boys or men prior to age thirteen. In some cases this attraction included sex-play with peers, however, sex abuse and rape were also reported by



Dwayne, Tom, and Scott which impacted their ability to trust and establish intimate relationships.

The participants cited longstanding difficulties with self-confidence, self-esteem and perfectionism and an early pressure to hide what they perceived as inherent defects of the self (Martin, 1982). There was a wide range of narcissistic difficulties evident in the individual narratives, however it is unclear what specific events contributed to these tendencies. Many of the early parental failures are consistent with the literature on pre-gay narcissistic vulnerabilities early in childhood (Alexander & Nunno, 1993; Cornett, 1993, de Monteflores, 1984; Voeller, 1980) and may have been influenced by oedipal issues and gender role confusion (Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1996, 1989). Many participants (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey, Donnie) described being drawn to atypical gender activities as young boys which became the target of teasing and experienced as shameful. Most reported being called 'faggot' and 'sissy' regularly throughout latency and beyond, including those who did not report an interests typically associated with females (Martin, Tom, Richard Scott). Adding to a sense of feeling defective and, for a time, inhibiting their expression of authentic interests. Stan, Martin and Tom were involved in some athletics but mainly in response to feeling ostracized and wanting to "fit in."

As a result, seven of the participants (Stan, Chris, Dwayne, Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) developed what would be consistent with a *false self* as described by Winnicott (1960). As one participant characterized it, the development of the 'mask' occurred in varying moments and contexts prior to leaving home. Most felt it necessary to monitor their behavior for feminine gestures, entertain for parental approval, or "be perfect at everything" which indicates that these false presentations were elicited in

response to narcissistic difficulties. Most participants felt a need to become somebody else or a drive for perfection which, in most cases, pre-dated the participant's involvement in performing. This suggests an underlying anxiety and hyper-vigilance about the world that is evident throughout various aspects of all of these men's lives.

During adolescence some participants (Stan, Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) described feeling an increased need to "pass" as heterosexual (Maylon, 1982b) in response to social peer pressure. While they felt a certain relief in socially fitting in and becoming a part of, ultimately, they were left feeling isolated and lonely leading "a double life." Some participants (Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey) began using food, alcohol or substances during adolescence to ameliorate painful feelings (Martin, 1982).

**THEME:**     *Both transitioners and non-transitioners formed interpersonal connections through the performing world of music, theater and dance during childhood and adolescence which lessened their isolation and helped bolster their sense of self-worth and competency.*

Most of the participants described an early struggle to be authentically "seen" or appreciated for who they were and reported feeling the pervasive need to hide from peers and family. As children and adolescents they were introduced to dance and the arts at various ages. Stan, Dwayne, Martin, Donnie and Scott each described an experience of feeling safe or comforted in relation to the music, theater or the arts. Jonas and Chris recalled significant moments in childhood when they witnessed their father's emotional reactions to theater and dance. Chris, Jeffrey, Tom and Richard described the

transformation they experienced in “performing” as children which garnered them applause or recognition from teachers, friends or family.

Most reported diminished isolation and feeling more connected either when performing or in the context of the theater program or dance school milieu. While only five participants began dancing before the age of twelve (Dwayne, Richard, Martin, Jonas, Scott) the others, (Stan, Chris, Jeffrey, Tom, Donnie) began performing in theater and music by adolescence. In both groups, those participants who began dancing at an earlier age described feeling like a dancer at their core, a basic part of themselves. With the exception of Martin, all were performing as dancers or in musical theater during adolescence and experienced an important sense of belonging to a social group including feeling accepted even while continuing to hide their emerging sexual inclinations. Nine of the participants described these adolescent experiences as central to their becoming dancers. In some cases, (Dwayne, Richard, Martin) they also felt their mother’s investment in their dance training and professional careers in a profound way.

Notably, none of the participants described seriously cultivating other interests or career plans outside of dance or theater. For some participants, their involvement in theater, music and dance marked the first time they felt competent or capable. Specifically, four of those participants who had not transitioned (Jonas, Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey) described themselves as mediocre, average or unmotivated in school. All others excelled in academics and sports (Stan, Martin, Tom), and three (Richard, Donnie and Scott) skipped at least one grade level. Three of the participants (Dwayne, Jeffrey, Richard) felt that they had not chosen to become dancers and performers but had “fallen into it” or found themselves pursuing dance professionally without any specific career

plan. Others described getting “hooked,” “intoxicated” or “bitten by the theater bug” during high school and college.

Concomitant to their interest in the theater and dance most participants became aware of other potentially gay peers in those social environments (dance studio, school theater, music classes). Participants described feeling both disdain and attraction to others who they sensed might be gay, indicating both their emerging struggles for a gay identity (Cass, 1979) and internalized societal homophobia (Maylon, 1982b). Through the course of their emerging careers, all participants described an investment in the body. In addition, there were several explicit mentions of the use of the mirror in dance classes which changed the way they perceived and experienced their bodies. Some (Jonas, Chris, Dwayne, Martin) had a conscious experience of becoming aware of their unique masculinity as reflected in the dance class mirror.

Overall, most participants described an increase in their self-worth as a result of their associations with the recognition they received performing in dance or musical theater. They described feeling special and singled out by teachers, peers and parents during this career-forming period. For most, this decreased their sense of isolation and increased social involvement with other, like-minded, peers. Even those who experienced themselves as “phony” or “faking straight” during high school and beyond, reported some authentic connection to others and “feeling a part of something special” through dance and theater.

### **Life as a Dancer**

**THEME:**     *Upon entering the adult world, career interests coalesced and potentiated further individuation and positive experiences with other gay men.*

Most of the men described the Early Adult Transition and Entry Into the Adult World (Levinson, 1978) as dominated by a strong desire to dance or perform professionally. The participants' reflections on the "old days" when they were each coming up in the business were nostalgic to the point of idealization. Up to this point, most had experienced positive feedback and encouragement by teachers and mentors to pursue their dreams professionally with few obstacles. These experiences helped them develop a driving singular focus on dance or musical theater by their late teens and early twenties. The one exception was Jeffrey, who lacked the self-confidence, drive and determination to consider or imagine any career until his mid- to late-twenties.

Consistent with Levinson's (1978) prevailing theme of separating from the family, most (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne, Martin, Tom, Richard, Donnie, Scott) moved to larger cities where they experienced "relief" and a "distance" from their families. They described feeling "free" and "energized" as they gained experience and made advances in their professional careers. Again, Jeffrey remained in his parent's home and had difficulty feeling competent or hopeful in taking on his professional role as a dancer and performer. Even after he was hired on Broadway his career happened "in spite of" himself.

Throughout their early career experiences, they experienced the social milieu of dance and musical theater as less judgmental and more accepting of their emerging sexuality. This, in turn, led to decreased self-judgment and greater exploration and establishment of a positive gay identity. Jeffrey did not initially socially include himself with others which the other participants found so vital in their experiences. Those participants experienced their Entry into the Adult World as a time to enjoy "teenage

stuff” of dating, sex and “partying” which they felt they had not fully experienced in high school and college. This seems to have fostered growth and differentiation from their families and allowed for further sexual exploration.

Most described having much greater access to other gay men and environments which allowed for some positive acceptance of themselves as gay (Cass, 1979). Even Dwayne, who does not identify as gay felt the freedom to allow himself to “go crazy” and established a four-year, same-sex relationship. With the exception of Jonas, none of the participants came out to their families during their early to mid-twenties. Many (Chris, Jeffrey, Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) waited until their early thirties or until they were involved a relationship to disclose to their parents. Some (Stan, Richard, and Dwayne) have not shared any part of their sexuality or intimate relationships with their parents seen by them as a way of “protecting” themselves and their parents.

Throughout their twenties, most described themselves as focused and driven toward exclusively negotiating entry into the theater world with greater and lesser degrees of success. Some (Stan, Dwayne, Martin, Richard, Scott) found lucrative, high-status national tour or Broadway jobs within a few months of their arrival in New York City. Others (Jonas, Chris, Tom) reported feeling “frustrated” and “confused” while “paying their dues” and waiting for their “big break.” Acquiring these high profile jobs impact the participant’s lives personally, professionally and financially and “took [them] to another level.”

There were recurrent mentions of feeling like part of a “family” which included being accepted into and belonging to a cast or professional company. The process of putting the show together during rehearsals was seen as a bonding time when the creative

and the personal relationships came together. The intensity of the work relationships was apparent in the narratives and most described the difficulties in separating once a show closed.

Overall, the participants experienced being in New York and establishing themselves as professional dancers as exciting and energizing, while all cited their universal dislike for auditions. For most of the men the competitive nature of the audition was both stimulating and threatening. Auditions were seen as a necessary evil which, when they resulted in being hired or “chosen,” had a powerful effect on their self-esteem. Getting the job touched them in ways that were described as highly personalized and validating. When not chosen or passed over they were often left feeling humiliated - not knowing what the director/choreographer was looking for. This speaks to the overlap between the individual’s need for approval and validation, and a potentially gratifying professional world where one felt the audience’s unconditional love.

**THEME:**     *Both groups experienced a noticeable shift toward career instability and heightened pressure to maintain their professional status.*

As described above, participants had mostly positive early experiences in developing themselves as dancers and beginning to establish themselves as professional dancers. Each participant described his own initial definition of success which included Broadway, touring nationally and acting. There were variations on the above theme with regard to when in the participant’s life he experienced the “roller coaster” of his professional career. Some (Stan, Dwayne, Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) reported achieving success early in their careers while others gained entry somewhat later (Jonas,

Chris, Jeffrey, Tom). Regardless of when they felt they had achieved their dream, each experienced an increased pressure to maintain it. Some participants (Stan, Jonas, Dwayne, Martin, Richard) cited professional disappointments and rejections at auditions as factors in developing a “thick skin” or “jaded attitude” so as not to reveal the disappointment or hurt.

Some participants (Stan, Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) described focusing and planning on the next big job in order to circumvent being caught off guard if a show closed unexpectedly. Their vigilance and feelings of insecurity and instability seemed connected to earlier experiences in their childhood. While some (Chris, Jonas, Dwayne, Martin, Tom, Richard, Scott) described the “relief” of settling into and “camping out” in a long-running show on Broadway or national tour, there was an underlying dread of having to begin actively auditioning again or being left out of work if the show closed unexpectedly. Several participants (Jonas, Dwayne, Jeffrey) may have used alcohol and substances in an attempt to deal with these feelings of uncertainty which negatively impacted their careers.

Most participants (Stan, Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey, Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) were able to establish long-term relationships which they characterized as providing stability and normalcy in the face of an unstable profession. Relationships were also a catalyst for some (Chris, Jeffrey, Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) to disclose to their families about being gay. Several participants (Stan, Donnie, Scott) cited wanting to balance the importance of their relationship when considering their career change. Many participants had difficulty balancing time between cultivating future dance prospects and remaining



committed to an intimate relationship. The need to take an out-of-town job (financially, professionally, etc.) was cited as the reason for several relationships failing.

Another aspect of maintaining their professional status was dealing with the competitiveness inherent to the audition process. As previously discussed, most stated their dislike of auditioning, while acknowledging the positive impact of “knowing you’ve beaten out all the others.” Furthermore, the competition seemed to ignite issues around their relationship to their bodies. Once again, most of the participants (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Jeffrey, Martin, Richard, Donnie, Scott) increasingly felt that their body was a “product,” or “calling card,” which suggests the competition in keeping the body looking and performing in at a high level. Several (Stan, Jonas, Richard, Scott) focused primarily on the appearance of their bodies and the required “gym time” in their week to maintain their masculine physique. Not appearing feminine or like “swishy chorus boys” was evident in many of the narratives (Stan, Jonas, Chris, Dwayne, Martin, Tom, Richard, Scott).

In general, most of the participants have experienced some sort of adjustment from the idealized, all-accepting experience of their initial life structure to a more realistic sense of the difficulties of maintaining a professional career as a performer. The “unconditional love” of the business and the audience was replaced by the day-to-day grind of performing and being ever mindful of future job opportunities.

### **Experience of Change and Transition**

**THEME:** *Those participants who have not transitioned perceived few physical changes in themselves and had a limited conception of a future dream or strategy for career development.*

What was most striking in the narratives of the five men who have not transitioned was the absence of physical changes they each experienced. None of the men in this group recounted any significant physical injuries and felt they “dance as well as ever.” There was a marked investment in maintaining their youthful mindset and appearance which seemingly would continue for an indefinite length of time. Time was something that had passed but was not applied to themselves. The business had changed (for the worse) but they had not. Stan noted that he “danced circles around” a much younger dancer at a recent audition but that as a trained dancer, he is not appreciated anymore. Jonas and Dwayne noted some physical changes (balding and stiffness) but not in a way that significantly impacts their professional abilities.

In general the five participants who remain closely involved in either actively performing in a show (Chris, Dwayne, Jeffrey) or pursuing acting, choreography and directing (Stan, Jonas) failed to conceptualize a clear future direction for themselves. There was little apparent contemplation of where one might be in ten years. Given their history of determination and drive, one might expect explicit ambitions or more concrete plans for the inevitable day when each can no longer dance. Stan, Jonas and Dwayne described only vague goals and ideas about choreographing, writing or directing but had little idea of how to actualize them. For each of those three wanting control over their future, control remained central to their attraction to directing and choreographing. Chris and Jeffrey touched upon possibly acting but without a specific course of action. Overall, there was a sense of mystery about the future which relinquished their power over future career direction or responsibilities. In that sense, the competencies and skills each

acquired over the course of their professional lives were not seen as providing viable options beyond their current circumstances.

The non-transitioners also experienced *recognition* of a changing environment and some passage of time consistent with the transitioners. However, for the non-transitioners, these experiences were not experienced as part of themselves and generally did not lead to further *exploration* or *investment* in other viable alternatives. In this way, while there was a recognition and conscious experience of dissatisfaction and frustration, it was externalized and seen as occurring outside of themselves and their control.

**THEME:** *Those who transitioned from dance into other careers experienced their partners, friends, therapists, and professional organizations as central elements in their support systems throughout the process.*

Those who transitioned to other professions repeatedly mentioned the important roles that others played in their transition process. It seems significant that all five of the men in this group had been in some type of individual psychotherapy during their adult lives. Only two of the non-transitioners (Chris, Dwayne) reported being in psychotherapy during their adult lives. Chris was the only non-transitioned in therapy at the time of the interviews. Martin (physical therapist) felt emotionally and financially supported by his partner who had also transitioned from dance. Martin felt the need to hide his considering changing careers while he was actively performing. Eventually, however, he experienced his partner's support as controlling and "pushing" him faster than Martin had wanted. Tom (graphic designer) utilized a union-affiliated professional organization for career counseling and individual psychotherapy during his transition.

Like Martin, he felt he had to hide his emerging interest in transitioning from friends inside the dance world. Tom's partner at the time was a choreographer and was not felt to be supportive of his return to school. In the end, their relationship ended at least in part because of Tom's increased time and attention to school.

Richard (financial services) found strong support through several union-affiliated organizations as well as older friends and colleagues. At fifty, he was one of the last surviving dancers in his cohort and utilized both therapy and career supportive seminars during his transition. Donnie (lawyer) felt strongly supported by both his partner and his female boss at his "survival job." Each played an important role in Donnie's transition by believing in him even when he was filled with self-doubt. Donnie also received some career counseling and psychotherapy during the process which allowed him space to consider his options. Finally, Scott (social worker) felt support and guidance from his partner who also had transitioned from show business some years prior. His partner's broad, socially conscious network of friends modeled other options. The stability and security of his primary relationship seemed particularly vital to his transition process. In addition, Scott has been in long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy throughout the process of his transition. Both Donnie and Scott felt that their partners served as models with whom they could identify in the their transition process.

**THEME:**     *Transition required maintaining an internal balance while negotiating the exploration, investment, and internalization of their expanded core competencies and new professional roles.*

The five transitioners described needing to internally balance between challenging themselves in new settings and maintaining their self-esteem. They generally reported experiencing the transition as expanding and broadening their sense of themselves but were cognizant of feeling narcissistically unsettled as well. After *recognizing* and *contemplating* the possibility of change as described above, they initiated further *exploration* through school, temporary jobs, and volunteer work. Some (Tom, Donnie, Scott) experienced a reminiscent sense of themselves as smart as they negotiated school. These new contexts provided them with the opportunity for different experiences with teachers, counselors, and peers beyond the performing arena. Most of the men utilized some union-affiliated organizations to brainstorm about potential career possibilities. Exploration of career options involved balancing and equilibrating those new, often challenging situations with the known, stabilizing sense of themselves as performers. Three of the non-transitioners (Stan, Jonas, Dwayne) seemed to initiate some exploration in other directions as well, but felt “pulled back in” by the business.

Gradually, the transitioners described further *investment* in the process of changing careers in pursuing additional training and schooling for some (Martin, Tom, Donnie, Scott) and tolerating others knowledge of their plans for change. They described increased isolation from professional peers and mentors and experienced doubts along the way. In other ways, they found that the increased responsibility (school, jobs, etc.) enhanced their feelings of competence and reinforced investment in change.

They all came to experience an *internalization* of the new professional role and as an ongoing process. All five of those participants who transitioned to other careers reported that the skills and competencies that they acquired during their professional

careers as dancers were felt to be applicable in their new careers. They each cited core aspects of themselves as central to who they were as performers and as assisting them through their transition. These core aspects included their commitment to tasks, self-discipline, accountability, interpersonal relatedness, and sense of humor. Of the five who transitioned, several (Martin, Richard, Donnie) were “surprised” that the interpersonal skills, including a sense of humor, that were fostered as dancers and performers were transferable to their careers in physical therapy, financial services, and law, respectively.

Issues around being gay and coming out in a new workplace were concerns for some of those who transitioned (Martin, Tom, Richard). Martin, Tom and Richard had felt inhibited and nervous about working in an environment that was not predominately gay. They wondered beforehand whether their sexual orientation would impede their acceptance into a new profession. Indeed, Martin and Tom chose jobs related and connected to the Broadway community as a way of regulating these concerns. Richard was particularly concerned because he imagined his Wall Street financial firm as conservative and homophobic. While not coming out in an active way, Richard gradually felt more comfortable to disclose his gayness to co-workers and his boss. Donnie (lawyer) was not concerned about working in a heterosexually dominated environment but wanted assurance it was not homophobic. During his job interview he openly discussed his partner and their life together. Scott (social worker) was also not interested in working in an environment where he would need to remain closeted in any way.

Overall, there appeared to be consistent patterns of childhood and adolescent experiences which influenced the participants’ emerging interests and self-experiences across both groups. Analysis of the narratives demonstrated that dance, performing and

the social and professional contexts played important roles in developing and accessing aspects of the self that were thought to be unacceptable. Differences are apparent between each group's location of the source of change and their abilities to negotiate potentially narcissistically challenging situations. In the following section the above themes will be developed and examined in greater depth through a proposed model for transition.

## DISCUSSION

This section introduces, examines, and discusses meta-themes across the life-span for the men in this study and integrates developmental theories. It is clear from the analysis of the data that no one theory of adult development, gay identity acquisition or transition adequately captures the experiences of the ten participants presented. Themes and ideas generated from the data analyses raise several hypotheses and suggest a model of transition specific to gay male dancers. In addition, the present discussion explores the limitations of the study and offers suggestions for further research.

### **Becoming a Dancer: Childhood and Adolescent Meta-Themes**

As summarized in the previous section, the ten men in this study had many similarities in their experience of growing up, separating from family, coming to terms with their sexuality, and establishing their initial life structure as professional dancers. While there were specific differences regarding the timing of certain events (awareness of same-sex attraction, formation of goals/Dream, and coming out), these men established profoundly personal connections to dance and professional communities that transcend their unique and individual experiences.

### ***Same Sex Attraction, Difference and Stigmatization***

There is a special problem related to the narratives of gay male development in that they almost always begin with cultural stereotypes. So although some of the men in this study may have been “sissies” (Green, 1987), and gender non-conforming (Corbett, 1993), others were indistinguishable from heterosexual children (Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith, 1981). Nevertheless each felt an early sense of *difference* and were forced to come to terms with cultural beliefs about homosexuality. Consequently, each



man's sexual identity included a process of learning who he was, as well as who he was not. The different pathways that led to this knowledge could be thought of as the cultural markers of a modern gay identity.

A significant experience of the men in this study was the intense feeling that each was all alone, unlike anyone else in the world. Overarching themes concerned early memories of same-sex attractions, difference, and feeling set apart from family and peers. In retrospect the men described the revelation of same-sex feelings as leading to feeling rejected and a sense of estrangement. Complicating this matter further were their frequent associations to gender non-conforming behaviors in childhood. As young boys, the men in this study necessarily had to negotiate cultural beliefs regarding masculinity and femininity. All children regardless of sexual identity must contend with a gendered binary code that divides the broad range of human expression into two categories intended to fit all (O'Connor and Ryan, 1993; Domenici and Lesser, 1995; Drescher, 1998). However, boys who grow up to be gay must find an explanation for unnamed feelings within the heterosexual constructs of gender and sexuality to which they have been exposed.

For some of the men in this study, early interests and same-sex attractions were labeled as feminine and may have interfered with them fully integrating their emerging identity as a boy. A frequent feeling was that of personal failure for being unable to meet parental expectations which included conforming to expected gender roles. These feelings of failure seemed to be linked to early feelings of difference and seemed to raise doubts about whether they could adequately conform to any of the social roles they may have been required to play.

A sense of difference is certainly not a feeling that is unique to gay men, and its meanings can be organized around other aspects of the self having nothing to do with sexuality or gender. But for the men in this study *difference* became closely linked to their sexual identities and, later, to their interest in dance and theater. The early, emerging feelings of same-sex attractions seemed to cause them to question their self-worth, and possibly their gender as boys. The ways in which gender concepts are taught to children may be confusing to a boy who grows up to be gay. It may be difficult to be confident about a masculine identity if one possesses a trait that is supposed to belong to the other gender (attraction or longing for closeness with other boys).

Salient in many of the narratives was the recollection of a distant father during their childhood and a close attachment with their mother. Contrary to traditional psychoanalytic theories, Isay (1996, 1989) suggests that gay men's distant and vague memories of their fathers, like those that heterosexual men have of their mothers, may be a defensive distortion arising from the anxiety the gay male adult feels about the early erotic attachment to the father. Indeed, the men in the current study reported physical curiosity and a need for closeness with their fathers as prominent in their early experiences. Those who described themselves as "sissies" in childhood may have incorporated those behaviors typically associated with their mothers as a way of attracting the fathers which may have contributed to unconscious confusion about their gender identity (Isay, 1996, 1989). Some men in the study did not describe their interests as gender non-conforming but were keenly aware of not appearing to be feminine in any way as they became aware of their same-sex inclinations.

Drescher (1998) posits that some boys who grow up to be gay may come to find physically interactive competitive sports too stimulating and overwhelming. Although avoidance of “rough-and-tumble” play was not evident in all the narratives, many did feel uncomfortable with team sports. When these men experienced problems with everyday rituals of masculine camaraderie, their difficulties were usually attributed to hypersensitivity by coaches or parents. These assumptions resonated with stereotyped cultural beliefs about “sensitive boys” and complicated their early understandings of what it meant to be a boy.

Across both groups of transitioned and non-transitioned participants, the men reported feeling stigmatized in the home and school environments and became highly attuned to scanning their environment for potential dangers. The need to hide core pieces of themselves was linked to childhood expectations of parental disapproval associated with their same-sex desires. Unconsciously, it seems that withdrawing from potentially humiliating situations increased their sense of isolation and difference and was a further source of shame. These dynamics may have established a pattern of anticipating rejection and disapproval in a variety of settings, both personal and professional.

Most participants described trying to imitate peers and taking on interests that were more socially accepted and gender conforming. Research has shown (Damon, 1977) that prior to adolescence children have highly developed abilities to assess social relations and social norms. The recognition of difference and the awareness of social messages about their same-sex attractions initiated what Cass (1979, 1996) describes as the *reciprocal interactional process* whereby the individual is both influenced by and influences the socio-cultural environments.

Aspects of the men's narratives were comparable to those of stigmatized minority groups (de Montefiores, 1986). Their childhood experiences included feeling outnumbered, denigrated by their family and peers. Most found themselves subjected to anti-homosexual attitudes and even violence from within their families, churches, and communities. Repeated experiences of real or imagined public humiliation seemed to have a powerful impact on their self-esteem and the need to hide important aspects of themselves. As a result, their narratives included the fear of being discovered and ongoing difficulties developing self-worth (Voeller, 1980).

It seems that to some degree everyone possesses a need to be seen as "normal" and experiences a distressing sense of abnormality when that need is not fulfilled. To experience the self as normal is to imagine that one is like everyone else and in some sense a relatively ordinary, average, and conventional sort of person. This was apparent in the participants' descriptions of their early experiences and their desire to be seen as "normal" during the interview. To be normal was to fit in and be socially accepted by one's peer group in meeting the group's criteria for group membership. When Sullivan (1953) suggested that we are all more human than otherwise, he seemed to be highlighting the commonalties between people as a way of avoiding scapegoating that may occur when someone is seen as unique or different. Being normal serves as an adaptive function by providing the security and comfort of belonging while relieving the fear of being shamed or persecuted for not fitting in.

Hetrick and Martin (1987) remark that gay and lesbian youth do not differ from heterosexual peers in terms of biological or cognitive changes but do experience psychological and social pressures that can result in feeling stigmatized. Stein and Cabaj

(1996) attribute the difficulties encountered by gay youth as the result of denying vital parts of themselves in response to stigmatization. Consistent with those studies, the men in the current study necessarily felt the need to deny their longing for closeness with their father and other boys which may have led to dissociative experiences. As adolescents the men in the study tended to become anxious, superficial and detached at a time when their heterosexual peers were learning social skills needed in adulthood.

For any adolescent, regardless of sexual identity, there is typically an increase in sexual feelings and desires. Socially sanctioned outlets for heterosexual adolescents such as high school dances and co-ed events are useful in developing the interpersonal skills required for later relationships. In these interactions, an adolescent's confidence may be reinforced through his ability to conform with conventional gender roles. However, these same rituals may generate confusion, shame and anxiety in the adolescent who grows up to be gay (Hunter and Schaefer, 1995). Indeed, as the men in this study moved into adolescence most were keenly aware that their feelings should remain hidden and tried to comply to heterosexual norms. One could extend Winnicott's (1960) concept of the *false self* which functions to comply with the mother's demands to these men's experiences of needing to comply to society's demands. Winnicott understood that the experiencing and sharing of feelings helped to organize an early sense of "true self." Where there is a false self, what is shared and displayed is essentially false because it is based on compliance to parental and social demands.

### *Dance and Performing as Facilitating Development*

Colarusso and Nemiroff (1987, 1979) have expanded on Kohut's (1977) notion of selfobjects and Loewald's (1960) theory of development in the analytic relationship and argue that relationships which promote development continue to take place in adulthood. As stated above, the participants' early experiences coincide with much of the literature on gay male development and the difficulties maintaining self-esteem (Cornett, 1993; de Monteflores, 1984; Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1996, 1989; Voeller, 1980). It is my contention that development may be promoted in a nurturing, facilitating work environment where the individual is provided an opportunity to experience and reveal himself in a reparative way. The men's narratives reflect an expansion of their self experience in the dance and performing milieu which seemed to facilitate developmental change and growth.

All of the participants described an important period during adolescence and early adulthood in which they experienced focus and vitality which emanated from their emergent sense of themselves as dancers and performers. They described the process of becoming a dancer as a transformative experience in ways that were consistent with elements of Kohut's (1977) notion of self-objects, in comparison to earlier periods when they felt different, defective and marginalized by family and peers. As discussed throughout, the child whose early experiences are dominated by inconsistent relatedness, anxiety and parents with primarily self-oriented motivations is more likely to have narcissistic disturbances.

The individual and varied experiences of the men in this study in dance and theater while coming to understand their sexuality were felt to be genuinely stimulating and rewarding. Dance seemed to actualize a unique potential and was a milieu in which

each was made to feel “special.” Their sense of difference was broadened to include more positive associations. Performing was felt to bring them each forward to be seen and recognized in a new and exciting way. ‘Being seen’ included a newfound social acceptance by others in dance or performance. This seemed to diminish isolation and fostered an interpersonal connection with others who had similar interests. Finding others who were interested in dance, music and theater seemed to signal the beginning of accepting and expressing previously split-off aspects of the “true self” (Winnicott, 1960).

In concrete terms, seeing one’s self in the mirror of the dance studio had a powerful impact and served to reveal his self to himself. This is consistent with aspects of Kohut’s (1971, 1977) notion of the grandiose self established via the mother’s mirroring response during infancy. Kohut posited that this necessary archaic grandiosity served to maintain self-esteem and fostered ambition. The participants’ descriptions of witnessing their “natural line,” “flexibility,” and ability to move in space were imbued with pride and awe. Their unbridled exhibitionism which is inherent in putting the body out to be observed and admired was in sharp contrast to and co-existed with hidden and secret aspects of their sexuality.

The mirroring and exhibitionism also allowed for a restructuring of their sense of masculinity which was held in contrast to their early sense of gender inadequacy. The men described the accretion of experiences in which their physical sense of themselves drastically changed. The rough-and-tumble play they avoided earlier could be substituted by the physicality of dance class in less threatening ways. For many of the men, it was their first experience of themselves as competitive and phallic in relation to other boys and men. Further, the dance gear itself presents the body and genitals in a manner that

unmistakably discriminates between male and female anatomy. In that way, the process by which the men were both mirrored and responded to partially served a reparative, developmental function in which they allowed themselves access to what they felt as real or authentic. In this sense, the dance studio itself served as a “transitional space” for these men to both gain a greater sense of their masculine identity and a platform to reveal and develop their authentic, emerging interests (Winnicott, 1958).

Most of the men also described the impact that performing in front of an audience had on them. Whether it was in high school theater or a dance recital, the recognition and acceptance they received through performing on stage was an important and powerful experience. Complicating this was the recurrent theme of the men’s need and striving toward perfection across various settings. It was as if many of the men felt their ability to achieve (academically and in performance) became the basis for their underlying sense of self-worth.

Rothstein (1986) states that the toddler whose mother is less empathic (or stated another way, whose investment in him is more narcissistic) will experience more intense separation anxiety. This is the result of a disturbance in an internalization of an early maternal/parental “smile” within the individual. The internalization of the maternal smile is the basis for the healthy individual’s sense of feeling loved primarily for himself rather than for his performance. Rothstein (1986) attributes the child’s need to “perform” in order to gain the approval outside of the self rather than having internalized it as part of oneself. So, while dance and performing provided opportunities for growth through new self-experiences, they also may have reinforced the narcissistic tendency toward a reliance on external structure for internal self-esteem regulation. The degree to which the



participants exclusively relied upon external approval to regulate self-esteem may have impacted their ability to consider or tolerate a career transition.

### **Life as a Dancer: Adult Developmental Meta-Themes**

#### *Initial Life Structure: Theoretical Applications and Proposed Functions*

Levinson (1986) described the life structure as the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at any given time which usually was comprised of occupation, marriage, and family. The initial life structure mediates the relationship between the individual and the social environment. It requires us to think jointly about the self and the world rather than making one primary and the other secondary. A singular focus and drive were described by most of the men in this study in constructing the initial life structure dominated mostly by career and an internal need for social inclusion.

The men described professional situations (auditions, rehearsals) in which their dance skills were tested against other dancers. These situations challenged their sense of perfection, omnipotence and exhibitionism (Kohut, 1977) which had been fostered in the process of becoming a dancer. They commonly experienced the audition setting as either humiliating or validating, depending on the end result of being "chosen" or not. Gaining entry and acceptance into the professional dance world (an initial life structure) where they were allowed to be "seen" provided validation and meaningful identifications.

The dance community functioned in similar ways to the "idealized parent imago" posited by Kohut (1971, 1977) in that the participants experienced both a sense of power by their social associations as well as safety and stability. The professional dance community could be seen as an idealizing selfobject which served to further ameliorate

the shame and stigmatization. In retrospect, the participants idealized the initial life structure and the professional dance community, which had normalized and welcomed their creative interests and inherent sexual attractions (Kohut, 1977). The value the participants place on being associated with a certain show and the perception of being on the "inside" of the business speaks to the power of this idealizing transference. The importance of being seen wearing one's show jacket emblazoned with the name of the show was present in several narratives. Selfobject failure may have occurred when the dancers were later confronted with certain realities of the business and experienced a break in the all-accepting, mirroring/idealizing functions of the professional community.

Early adulthood was a time of intense ambition during which the men in the study described a singular focus and drive toward making it in the world of professional dance and theater. The paranoid-schizoid mechanisms such as splitting, projective identification, and the inability to experience integrated whole objects were operative for many of the men while constructing their initial life structure. Jacques (1965) proposed these as necessary mechanisms during a period when the individual mobilizes defenses in order to achieve power, status and authority. In the early adult phase of life, contemplativeness, detachment, and resignation were not essential components of the men experiencing pleasure, enjoyment and success. There was a manic quality described in the narratives as the men packed their days with dance class, voice lessons, and auditions. Jacques (1965) proposed that this maniacally determined activity and warding off of depression can lead to some professional success and pleasure. The audition setting provided a space where the men could experience aggressive, competitive aspects of themselves which had been previously denied. Splitting and projective techniques

found expression in the intense satisfaction when chosen for a job and profound disappointment and anger when not. For many they developed a “thick skin” and a defensive armor in response to the potentially injuring audition experiences. Further, the paranoia and vigilance around securing future job possibilities was both a reality of the business, and perhaps reflected certain persecutory projections.

Consequently, intimate relationships played a somewhat secondary role for most of the men during their twenties. Although some of the participants had significant relationships during this period, the main focus was establishing their Dream (Levinson, 1978) and becoming a part of the professional Broadway community. Those who were able to establish relationships reported having to sacrifice them when they went out on the road or felt pushed to decide between career and relationship. McWhirter & Mattison (1984) propose that male couples progress through a series of relationships stages and must contend with unique difficulties that can tax the couple at various points in the process. This findings in the current study indicate that the time and energy required to reach and maintain the status as a professional dancer may have added to the difficulties in maintaining a same-sex relationship.

### *Coming Home and the Complexities of Coming Out*

As the men moved into adulthood, they faced the issues of separation and the establishment of the initial life structure (Levinson, 1978), and a concomitant process of gay identity development (Cass, 1979, 1996). In general, the men in both groups described the need to move away from their family of origin in order to pursue their careers as dancers and to explore their emerging sexuality. Fear of rejection seemed to

play a significant role in withholding from their family that they were gay. Not until much later did some of the men enter long-term relationships and even consider disclosing their sexual identity to their parents or family.

For most of the men further identity acquisition occurred once they moved to a large metropolitan city where there were a greater number of gay men – particularly in the performing arts. In the new environments, the men were increasingly aware of other gay men at college and in the theater/dance studio setting. For some this led to greater congruency between their internal thoughts and feelings about being gay and an external environment that allowed its expression (Cass, 1996, 1979).

Descriptions of their arrival to New York as being like “coming home” or “discovering who I really was” paralleled how many of the men described coming out to themselves. In Winnicott’s (1960) terms, perhaps it was a moment in which they made contact with what they experienced as their true selves - adding understanding to the multiple references in the men’s experiences to the Broadway community or the cast of a specific show as “family.” In these contexts, the men experienced further integration of identity and gained acceptance in ways that they may have hoped for from their families.

Coming out was initially described by the men as a subjective experience of inner recognition that their same-sex attractions were primary and relatively fixed. This inner recognition occurred at various ages but almost invariably in a performance-related context in which they felt accepted and understood by other gay men. It was a moment charged with excitement for some and trepidation for others. It was a realization that previously unacceptable feelings and desires were part of one’s self and shared by others. From this perspective, coming out to oneself was an integrative process that served to

affirm their inner sense of worth and decrease social isolation. For one non-transitioner (Dwayne) this inner recognition was later rejected following the loss of his partner and mentor. He did not currently identify as gay but had previously experienced a level of *identity acceptance*, when he was involved in a long-term relationship with another man.

By their mid-twenties most were immersed in the predominantly gay theater and dance communities and experienced pride and superiority in being gay consistent with Cass's stage five, *identity pride* (1979). In contrast to the literature on gay identity development, the men in this study reported few instances when they found it necessary to actually disclose their sexual identity to peers or colleagues. In the main, they did not report a "coming out" *process* to others, per se, because it was assumed by peers and co-workers that they were gay unless stated otherwise. It was as if either coming out to oneself or to one's family was a one-time event, an end point in their gay identity development. Coming out is a repeated verbal process that puts into words one's previously inarticulated feelings and ideas (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981).

While they described themselves as "out" in most aspects of their lives, the narratives suggest that there may be multiple "closets" from which to emerge. Despite most of the men characterizing themselves as being "out" and relatively comfortable with themselves, the life structure established during their twenties may have protected them from difficult situations in which repeatedly coming out might have been necessary. In that way, the initial life structure as a dancer and performer may have served as a facilitative developmental function as well as inhibiting broader gay identity integration within non-gay dominated contexts. For the non-transitioners, the initial life structure may continue to maintain the sense of being different and marginalized, and in that sense,

serve a defensive purpose by warding off potential rejections from family or the heterosexual culture in general.

### *The Dream and Its Viability*

A central question of this study asks how the men came to find dance as a career and what were their experiences in working toward it. While the experiences of the men in this study were consistent with some of Levinson's (1978) ideas, similarities in age and timing of events were largely not reflected in the narratives. Levinson posited that the origins of the Dream were the result of interactions between the individual's needs and talents, and his pre-adult experiences. While there were clearly reparative functions that dance and theater served for these men, there was very little indication in the narratives of *career exploration* in adolescence or young adulthood as described by Super (1990). It was as if the men in this study found a place where they fit in and no longer entertained other career possibilities.

The long-term viability of the dance career itself calls into question the usefulness of the Dream concept for these men. The eight participants who could be described as having a Dream were entirely focused on theater and dance prior to the Early Adult Transition. The Dream became constricted to making it into the world of professional dance and theater and left little room for exploration beyond the rigors of their dance training. Once the Dream of performing on Broadway (or a comparable level of achievement) was attained, there appeared to be few areas for growth or opportunity within dance. In fact, most were firmly established in their initial life structure by their mid-twenties and became consumed with the Dream's maintenance.

Levinson (1978) also described the Mentor as an older person in the man's life who introduces and assists in achieving the occupational Dream. Most of the men described the importance of several teachers (male and female) and mentors during the intensively focused period of becoming a dancer and performer. For some, they felt this was the first time that another person recognized a talent in them and fostered their potential. However, these relationships were complicated by unresolved conflict about their sexuality and gay identity formation. In that sense, the men were less available to be mentored during the career-forming period in late adolescence and early adulthood. If we expand the notion of mentoring, several of the men who transitioned to other careers experienced their partners and therapists as providing mentoring functions similar to those described by Levinson (1978) in their mid-thirties and beyond.

As described above, the latent meaning for those eight men who had a Dream was to feel "a part of" and "seen" which was expressed and pursued through dance and musical theater. The manifest goals of the Dream were often achieved by the time the participants were in their mid to late-twenties. Only two of the non-transitioners did not achieve higher professional status until their late twenties and early thirties. Once achieved, there appeared to be little area for growth or development in their professional role as dancers. Their focus shifted from gaining acceptance in the professional world to maintaining employment. Two of the non-transitioners could be described as not having formed a Dream (Dwayne, Jeffrey). Neither of these men focused on a pursuit that resonated with them on an internal level. They did not describe their careers as part of their identities but as either an obligation or "fate." While they had obvious talent and a

capacity to build a life structure, their understanding of their career choices was voiced in a naïve and immature way.

Levinson's (1978) Age Thirty Transition, in which one reflects upon the life structure and occupational and relationship choices, was moderately evident in the ten narratives. For the non-transitioners, The Age Thirty Transition consisted of mainly re-appraising their intimate relationships. Three of the non-transitioners ended long-term relationships during this period but two of those were not self-initiated. For most of the men, the period of time proposed by Levinson was the height of their performing career and there was little motivation or mental space for serious reconsideration. Two of the non-transitioners, neither of whom were employed at the time of the interviews, only reconsidered their performing careers in their mid- to late-thirties. Another non-transitioner had briefly "left the business" at thirty-five to pursue his painting following the deaths of his mentor and ex-lover, but later returned to dance. The timing of the career transition (between 28 and 32), was only consistent with Levinson's theory for three of the transitioners, one of whom initiated transition at thirty-one following an injury.

One of the less discussed constructs proposed by Levinson (1978) is the concept of *satisfactoriness* of the life structure. This has both an internal and external reference. Externally, it refers to the viability of the life structure in the external world. In a hypothetical, objective sense the individual weighs the advantages and disadvantages, successes and failures of the life structure, "How well is this going?" Internally, satisfactoriness refers to the suitability of the life structure for the self. What can be lived out within the life structure and what must be neglected or suppressed? For the men in



this study, the suitability of their performing career was congruent with the narcissistic needs of the self at a given time in their lives. As described above, it provided recognition and validation which allowed for expression of previously denied and split-off needs of the self. Over time, however, the physical demands of the career and their accumulated experiences of feeling infantilized as “chorus boys” may have shifted the life structure’s internal and external suitability.

#### *HIV, AIDS and the Depressive Position*

HIV and AIDS significantly impacted the lives of all of the men in this study which suggests another facet of the developmental process not fully explored or represented in much of the existing literature. Addressing life threatening illnesses and multiple losses is not limited to gay men, however the Broadway and dance communities have been particularly affected by AIDS, and for the men in this study, the loss of friends and colleagues occurred much earlier than would be expected in the general population.

As discussed above, Jacques’s (1981, 1965) theory of developmental positions in adulthood argues that the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions that Klein (1935) proposed in her theory of childhood development are re-enacted in adulthood. Ideally, the individual gradually moves from the paranoid-schizoid position in early adulthood to a more mature, integrated depressive position as they move into mid-life. According to (Jacques, 1965), the individual begins to integrate ambivalent feelings into his sense of self and is able to tolerate loss and accept that both “good” and “bad” are aspects of the human experience.

There were some differences in the way the two groups (transitioners/non-transitioners) described these experiences that may speak to each group's ability to tolerate loss and depression. Over the twenty-year history of the AIDS epidemic, to greater or lesser degrees most of the men reported multiple losses. Throughout their young adult lives they lost friends, colleagues in conjunction with dealing with their partner's and their own health issues. The community from which a sense of identity was fostered and on which they have relied upon for support is the same community which has been decimated by AIDS.

It was striking that only a minority of the non-transitioners included HIV/AIDS as having had a significant impact on their adult lives. It was a particularly remarkable omission given the many friends and colleagues with whom they had worked who had died from AIDS. This further supports the above hypothesis regarding a defensive stance these men may hold with regard to loss and depression. All of those who transitioned included references to HIV and AIDS as having significantly impacted them and their decision to transition to another career. For these men HIV and AIDS seemed to foster an existential examination of their life choices and introduced the possibility for change.

### **Experience of Change and Transition: Transitional Meta-Themes**

Throughout the thesis I have distinguished between the two groups, "transitioners" and "non-transitioners." The data suggest that those categories are, perhaps, only useful at a certain moment in time. The transition process for these men was neither linear nor straightforward and follow-up interviews could find non-transitioners at a different point in the transition process. For example, the oldest

participant, Richard, was fifty-five at the time of the interviews and had not seriously considered transitioning until age forty-nine. He experienced a career slow-down and the loss of his father and these external environmental precipitants shifted his perspective and initiated the possibility for change in a new and vital way. Had he been interviewed fifteen years prior he would have been categorized as a non-transitioner.

Pine (1982) sees career transition as a gradual expansion of the self in which the individual slowly incorporates the new professional role and, ultimately, integrates it as an aspect of the core identity. The data from this study indicate that those participants who transitioned into other careers experienced a gradual expansion of their skills, competencies and sense of agency in the world as they negotiated the transition process. Awareness of expanding possibilities and self-representations were experienced at various points throughout the process.

The concept of *adaptation* recognizes the role of the environment on ego development (Hartmann, 1939). The reciprocal relationship between the individual and how he experiences the environment lies at the very heart of these men's processes of change and transition. Maslow (1962) asserts that the need for growth and "self actualization" is a marker for psychological health. The role of the future is important in that "self actualization is meaningless without reference to a currently active future" (Maslow, 1962, p. 14). The future seems dynamically active in the present narratives of the transitioners. Whether their transition was motivated by financial insecurity, career stagnation, or changing relationship needs, those who transitioned elaborate a vital sense of themselves in creating their future. Most of the non-transitioners were unable to envision a future for themselves and, quite literally denied that any time had passed at all.

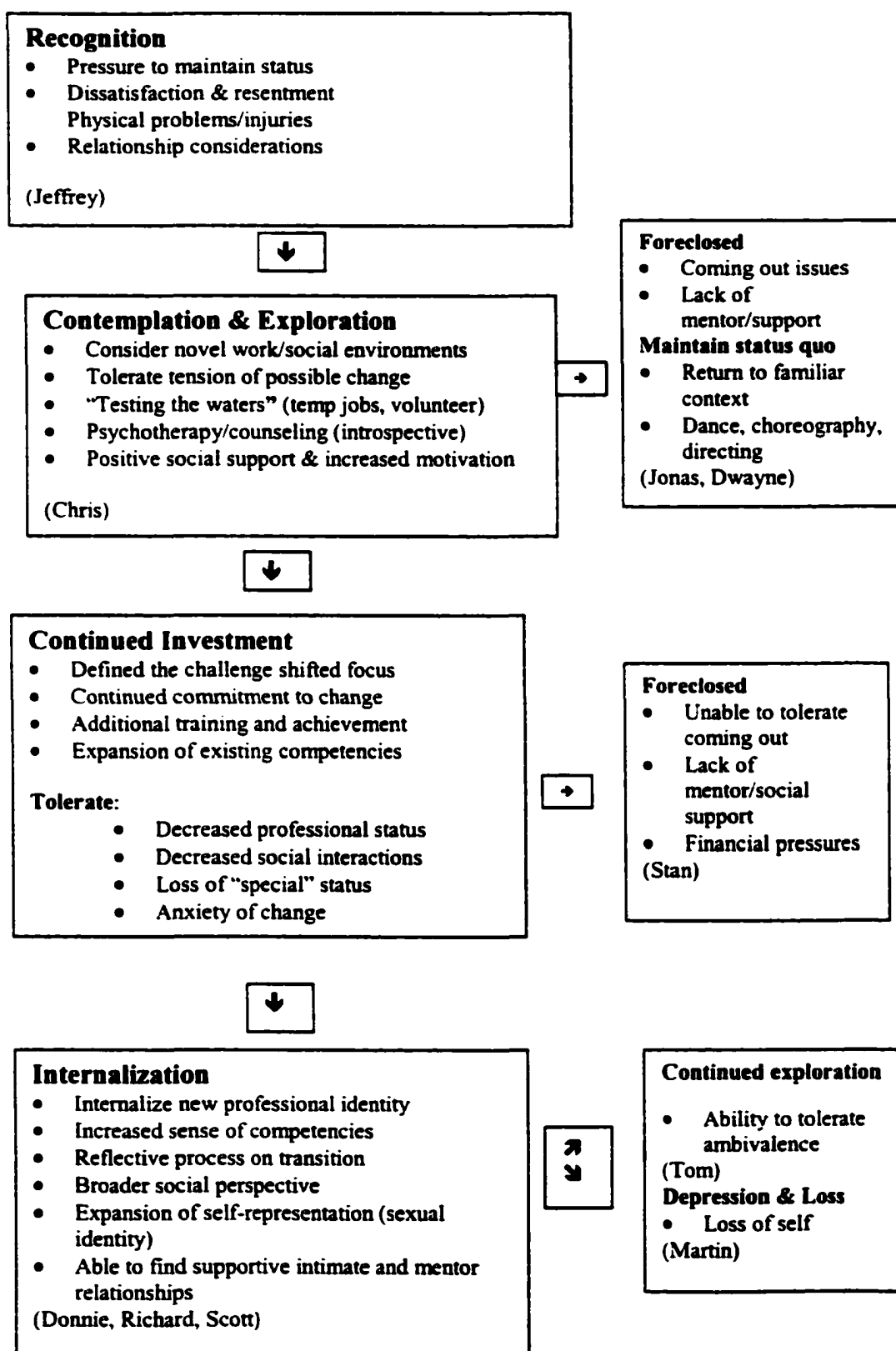
One non-transitioner (Chris), who was in psychotherapy was noticeably more open to change, reflective, and envisioned future possibility for change. Overall, those participants in both groups with experience in psychotherapy and counseling were less defended and more open to future change and possibilities.

## **A PROPOSED MODEL OF TRANSITION**

The proposed model of transition presented below suggests a pattern in the experiences of change based on the narrative data from the ten men in the current study. It is suggested as a template in considering aspects of career and personal transitions as described by this sample and can be diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.

The proposed model of transition contains many ideas included in Settlage's (1992, 1988) *process model* of development based on the idea that adulthood involves "growth, differentiation, and integration" and that development occurs when previous levels of functioning no longer serve the person (1988, p. 353). It is not a model describing an *optimal* way to transition nor does it suggest a singular path or timeline for dancers to transition. Rather, it attempts to capture and describe the experiences of the men in both groups who are at various points in an ongoing transitional process. There were certain conditions that seemed to be in place for those who were able to transition relatively easily and to establish a new life structure. Smooth transitions were facilitated by the individual's maintaining an open and flexible mental system (Settlage, 1992) and having available developmental objects (therapists, partners, and other transitioned dancers) with whom the men could identify and rely upon (Levinson, 1978; Valliant, 1977). At various points in the transition process participants dealt with coming out issues, finding suitable models for mentoring, and utilizing intimate relationships.

Figure 1: A Proposed Model of Transition for Gay Male Dancers



### *Recognition*

The men in this study reported protracted anxieties about maintaining their professional level once they had achieved what they considered success. Their professional status supported their sense of “being on the inside” and “on top.” Career maintenance was felt to be threatened when a show closed or when they were not selected at auditions. As a protective measure, many of the men in both groups developed a jaded attitude and a minimizing defensive stance that remains a key component when considering the likelihood of personal and professional transitions.

For the men in this study, an awareness of personal limitations and professional constraints as dancers began at various ages in early adulthood. This awareness disturbed their previous sense of stability and seemed to create an unsettled state of disequilibrium with varying degrees of mental and emotional distress. According to Settlage (1992, 1988) this state of disequilibrium can be ego-syntonic as in the case of the self-initiated desire to transition and ego-dystonic when change is thrust upon the individual. Most of the participants reported anxiety, dissatisfaction and resentment about long-term career viability and mounting career frustrations. Dissatisfaction and frustration were expressed by participants in both groups in feeling unable to gain control over the direction of their careers as dancers. After years of auditioning as professional dancers, they felt at the mercy of the directors, choreographers, casting directors and agents. While both groups recognized *something* had changed, they experienced and located the source of change differently.

Nine of the men’s narratives suggested a conscious state of *recognition* of the need for some type of change. One of the non-transitioners appeared to be at a *pre-*

*recognition* stage with little capacity for career reflection or assessment and found the consideration of future career change or adjustment intolerable. All five of the transitioners reported that change was initiated by first comprehending that something in *themselves* had shifted. Of those five, two decided to pursue acting for a time and remained in the performance domain. Four of the non-transitioners recognized that some type of change might be needed based on a changing business and *not in themselves*. None of the five non-transitioners anticipated a transition outside of musical theater but considered acting, directing, or choreographing.

Valliant (1977) proposes that intrapsychic change occurs as the individual is faced with external events that require higher-order defensive strategies in order to adapt to the external reality. In general the transitioners recognized limitations in themselves as well as the profession which created a space for new ideas and career possibilities to develop. Those participants who transitioned also recognized physical aging and decreased capacities in a way the non-transitioners have not and acknowledged the passage of time and the impact AIDS had on their personal and professional priorities. Two of the transitioners included recognizing the importance of spending time with their long-term partners and attention to their relationship as essential to their consideration of change.

The two transitioners who were injured were less attuned to an internal need for change and experienced recognition and the need for change as being imposed from the outside. Research in a related field found that injured athletes had greater difficulty and were less prepared to make the adjustments necessary for a career change (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1994). Athletes involved in the day-to-day maintenance of their physically demanding careers had not considered a back-up profession and were often ill-prepared

for changes. This can be extended to dancers immersed in the rigorous lifestyle of auditions, classes, and performances, which left little opportunity to consider long-term career plans.

Those men in this study who have not transitioned to other careers, generally described their lives in ways that suggest a more defended, less open mental system and utilized less sophisticated defenses including externalization, denial and projection. One non-transitioner (Jeffrey) had almost no capacity to consider the possibility of future change either in himself or in his career. For those who recognized a change in their career viability it was generally attributed to a negative trend in the industry and not to deselection or age. Their tendency to externalize change was exemplified in their sense that the "business had changed" but that they remained essentially the same. This anti-developmental view of the self seems maladaptive and denies the realities of aging (Hamilton, 1998). Interestingly, the two participants who initiated career transition after being injured had similar tendencies as those above, however, the source of the change (the injury) could not be denied. This may help explain their higher level of ambivalence and difficulties transitioning as compared to other transitioners in their group.

### *Contemplation and Exploration*

The next period involves thinking about and exploring potential career alternatives to dance. Tolerating the internal tension from the possibility of change was something that fluctuated for men in both groups. The central task for them was to define for themselves other areas of genuine interests. Most who reached this stage acknowledged that they had heretofore not allowed themselves to think in-depth about



other careers or interests. They experienced both excitement and fear of negotiating possible work environments. When considering possible new work environments, some of the participants acknowledged their concerns with having to “come out” as gay men.

As discussed above, it was noted by many that up to that point they had not needed to come out in work settings because of the prevalence of gay men in theater and dance. Initially, three of the non-transitioners and two of the transitioners focused on acting, directing or choreography in their initial exploration. This may be seen as a possible compromise for having to negotiate environments which the participants saw as not being “gay friendly.” In addition, the desire to remain feeling “special” was salient for some of the participants in both groups. *Contemplation* seemed to provide participants a mental space in which to begin to question their assumptions about themselves and their career path.

Eventually, all of the transitioners found some type of individual therapy or career counseling by the time they reached the *contemplation & exploration* stage. Most found these settings a useful place where they could psychologically “test the waters” for themselves within a non-threatening environment. Three of the participants who transitioned reported that their partner was the major source of support and guidance for them, two of whom had previously made similar transitions from theater. They described the importance of knowing that those closest to them understood and supported their decision for change.

Men in both groups who reported little support from peers, family or professional colleagues when considering a professional transition had more difficulty overall. One non-transitioner (Stan) found himself drawn into the new context of corporate business

and continued to invest himself in the transition process beyond *contemplation* and *exploration*. Dwayne, on the other hand, *foreclosed* further exploration and was unable to tolerate the financial pressures and increased anxiety of a possible career change. It remains to be seen whether the non-transitioner (Chris) will consider and explore alternative careers as his external work circumstances change.

The financial pressures of turning down jobs and committing to move in another direction proved too destabilizing for these non-transitioners and they *foreclosed* the exploratory process – at least for now. They returned to the familiar context of dancing and auditioning when offered jobs as dancers, preferring to maintain the status quo. The transitioners continued further contemplation and exploration of potential interests outside of the immediate performance domain. Two transitioners began to focus on careers that were related to and might maintain a connection to Broadway and performance.

### *Continued Investment*

At a certain point, the need and commitment for change seemed to move to a new level. Participants described focusing on a specific interest (physical therapy, graphic design) or goal (education, financial stability) and then took further steps toward it. While acknowledging discomfort with the uncertainty of the end result, the new goals and challenges provided a focus and direction for their anxieties. Interestingly, the transitioners experienced a process of “coming out” to their dancer friends and colleagues about their intended career change. As a result, some experienced increased social isolation and peer withdrawal. At times, many experienced the loss of their professional

status and affiliations as adding to the struggles in negotiating transition. Along these same lines, being able to tolerate the loss of their “special” status as performers was seen by the participants as significant. At these times, the transitioners continued to rely upon significant others, therapists, and other transitioned performers as needed supports in their commitment for change.

The non-transitioner (Stan) who remained committed to change up to this point found the increased isolation and loss of professional status too destabilizing and *foreclosed* his transition process – at least for now. Lack of support from his partner and family and his underlying tendency to feel the need to hide his gay identity at work were identified as the primary reasons for foreclosing the transition process and returning to the familiar performance context.

Four of the five transitioners returned to school for specialized graduate training. They experienced self-doubt about their ability to adapt to learning environments but they found ways to meet and exceed academic challenges. School exposed them to broader social contexts in which required them to interact and compete with others in different ways. Achievement in these new settings seemed to have a positive effect for most in realizing their existing competencies. The experience of being involved in a learning endeavor that recognized their intellect and other strengths (discipline, accountability, humor) seemed to further motivate change. However, narcissistic tendencies in needing to be “perfect” also infiltrated their experiences and added pressure to their self-expectations.

### *Internalization*

The next period of transition involved the *internalization* of novel self-experiences and the new professional role. Having made an entry into a new work setting, most of the transitioners experienced broader social interactions with both gay and straight co-workers. They found themselves in fewer exclusively gay settings and reported a shift in their gay identity as *part* of and not wholly defining themselves. In some cases this meant coming out in various settings including to their career counselor, bosses, and work colleagues which challenged the men's own internalized homophobia. There was less of a dichotomy seen between gay and straight colleagues and friends, which as mentioned, is consistent with Cass's (1979) final stage of *identity synthesis*. Clearly, the participants' experiences of change and transition were not entirely dependent on the level of their gay identity acquisition. However, the powerful feelings evoked during periods of change and transition required them to face unresolved, unintegrated fears of being accepted beyond the gay sub-culture.

The two injured transitioners reported an ongoing struggle integrating the loss of the Broadway community into their new life structure. The others admitted that, while they may not currently have experienced sadness and loss around the transition, those feelings were essential to their process of change. Pollock's (1981) concept of the *mourning-liberation* process sees mourning as a transformational process that provides for adaptation and includes the basic insight that parts of the self that once were, or that one hoped might be, were no longer possible. With the working out of the mourning of a changed self, lost others, unfulfilled aspirations and the feelings that surrounded them, there was an increased ability to face reality as it was and see the future for what it could

be. These salient characteristics from the narratives of those who transitioned perhaps better distinguishes the transitioners from non-transitioners in their ability to tolerate loss and allowed for new identifications and internalizations to occur. For those who progressed to this point in their career transition process there is relative contentment and fulfillment in the new career. For others, the transition process has simply opened the door to future possibilities with fewer obstacles and self-imposed limitations in their path.

The accumulated experiences of exploring, contemplating, investing, and depending upon others for support seemed to coalesce in a gradual transformation of the individual's self-representation (Loewald, 1960). This process involved not only coming to know and see oneself in a new professional role but feeling the personal impact of the transition process. This process included the ability to reflect upon their losses and recognize an expansion in the self (Pine, 1982). Many participants reported an expansion of what they thought themselves capable of which seemed to impact their sense of overall self-confidence. New attitudes, abilities, and values acquired in the transition process were integrated into an effective identity and became functional parts of the self that were compatible with other established ones.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

### **Limitations of Sample**

The ideas generated from this study were the result of a focused inquiry into the lives of a discrete group of men who were recruited without respect to randomization. The ideas proposed should therefore be applied cautiously. Clear patterns and themes emerged from the participants' narratives which supported aspects of previous research on gay men and adult developmental processes, despite the size of the sample used in this study. The use of purposive sampling focused specifically on gay male dancers and their experiences in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood and could compromise a broad application of these findings.

The participants were all white and currently living in New York City. They all came from similar middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds and most completed college. It is likely that these factors had an effect on the expectations and goals of the participants. Heterosexual men and ethnic minorities were clearly and purposefully not included and, therefore, are not represented in this study. In limiting the sample to white men there was no appreciation for the effects that racism may play in career development, gay identity development or transitional processes in the lives of male dancers of color. For example, Loicano (1989) postulated that development of a positive gay identity in black men may be linked to their stage of black identity development.

The men in this study ranged in age between thirty-six and fifty-five years and were a part of a unique historical episode that contained social and political events that may not be representative of other periods of time. In particular, most came of age after the initiation of the gay rights movement in the late 1960s and had access to the gay community in a more open way than previous groups of gay men. In addition, the

obvious impact of HIV and AIDS on the Broadway and artistic communities may have created a unique experience for men in this field during the mid-1980s and 90s.

### **Limitations of the Method**

The major limitation of using psychobiographical narratives as the method of a study is that it depends upon reconstruction and memory. The processes involved in constructing a gay identity, building and maintaining a performance career and transitioning out of it are all intrapsychic entities which are difficult to examine and explore. There is no pretense of an objective stance in gathering, analyzing or discussing the data as is standard in quantitative research. Most people tend to avoid material that is incongruent with their current self-representation and it is therefore left unmentioned. These limitations, however, do not detract from the importance of this type of research.

The interpersonal space created in the ongoing interview process, similar to that created in psychodynamic therapy, allowed for a relationship between researcher and participant to develop which elicited deeply personal experiences. In addition, each participant knew the researcher was a dancer, gay, and had made a career transition. This information in most instances created a shared reality and established an alliance which helped generate in-depth, personal accounts of each participant's life history. In that sense, it seems likely that the limitations of the study were also its greatest strengths.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While the current study helped to illuminate several areas of inquiry, it was restricted to the lives of this particular group of men. An expansion of the current study to include heterosexual male dancers (transitioned and non-transitioned), as well as gay

male transitioners who have successfully moved into the professionally related fields of directing and choreographing is now indicated.

Boxer and Cohler (1989) note that much of the developmental research with gay men and lesbian women has relied upon memory, particularly of adolescent development. Longitudinal research, both qualitative and quantitative, with gay and lesbian youth may present new or alternative hypotheses regarding homosexual development. Comparative cross-generational studies may also prove useful in further exploring the impact of stigmatization and socialization. Societal homophobic attitudes are being challenged as more gay and lesbian characters are represented in the media; open debates of gay and lesbian issues in political discussions are held; and the development of adolescent youth programs in communities and schools are established. Additional studies may provide valuable information on novel, emerging aspects of gay identity acquisition in gay youth.

The findings from this study point to the need for further investigation of adulthood in gay males. With the changing view on gay adoptions and parenting, it seems likely that some of the tasks described in previous studies of heterosexual samples (Brewster, 1998; Levinson, 1996, 1978; Srebnick, 2000) may become more prevalent and present new challenges in the adult lives of gay men who choose to become parents.



## CONCLUSION

In the present study, the lives of ten men between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five were examined and discussed in detail to gain a greater understanding of their lives as gay men, the process by which they came to professional dance, and their experience of change and transition. Hypothesizing a singular developmental line that would fit all gay men – or even all gay male dancers - is not relevant and none is offered here. Such a unitary approach would obscure the myriad psychological, interpersonal, and cultural beliefs from which their identities are constructed. The research demonstrated the complexities and interconnections between our childhood experiences and choices we make in adulthood. It also illustrated the variety of pathways we can undertake in understanding and integrating our experiences retrospectively.

A pervasive sense of *difference* as children became intimately linked to the participant's sexual identity and sense of masculinity which supported much of the contemporary literature on narcissistic difficulties and gender stress in gay men (Cornett, 1993; de Monteflores, 1984; Drescher, 1998; Isay, 1996, 1989; Voeller, 1980). These narcissistic vulnerabilities resulted, in part, from family, peer, and cultural stigmatization which contributed to the men's tendency to split-off or hide unacceptable aspects of themselves (Stein & Cabaj, 1996; Winnicott, 1960).

The validating experiences in dance and musical theater served a reparative, selfobject function in providing them a space to express and explore core aspects of themselves and develop positive gay identities (Cass, 1979; Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1987, 1979; Kohut, 1977). There was evidence of Levinson's (1978) construct of the Dream for many of the participants which primarily involved being recognized and appreciated

by the world. These compensatory aspects of the Dream served to repair certain developmental interruptions and fostered development.

Initially, the confluence of achieving their Dream on Broadway, coming out to themselves, and having access to other gay dancers provided a sense of competence and camaraderie. Ironically, being immersed in a gay-friendly, “homogeneous” performing environment provided few opportunities for these men to continue the process of coming out. For most of the men, coming out was seen as a singular event which was often averted altogether through their immersion in theater and dance. It was not until those who transitioned were presented with the possibility of an unfamiliar social and work contexts that they understood and experienced coming out as a continuous process. Transition then became more than simply changing careers but included coming to terms with and further integrating experiences of themselves in new situations.

The initial career paths and ongoing transitions in the lives of gay male dancers could be compared to mountain climbing. The path to the mountain’s peak was initially forged when many of us were still young and inexperienced. Feeling frightened and alone we embarked upon a journey in the hopes of reaching what we thought would bring us continued glory. Never veering from the path we kept our eyes on the peak never noticing other mountains along our way. Along the journey seasoned climbers helped us negotiate the path and helped us build our skills. We never lost focus of our singular goal – the top of the mountain. There was a feeling of exhilaration and accomplishment in reaching that peak, confirming our struggle toward achievement. Being with other climbers and standing up there somehow helped us feel less alone. Maintaining our place at the peak became our new goal as others were making their way up the mountain.

Some of us began to see the inevitable day when we would need to descend from the top and make room for those coming up. Our descent from the peak provided us a broader perspective from which we could see vistas that had originally gone unnoticed. Now visible were other mountains with multiple peaks that spanned a broader horizon.

**APPENDIX A****SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW****GAY MALE DANCERS**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

TAPE ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship status: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

Current occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Time:**

- Tell me about your life now?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How would people close to you describe you? (
- When you meet someone and they ask what you do, how do you respond?
- When you think about dancing and performing now, what springs to mind?
- To what extent do you consider yourself out as a gay man?
- (If applicable) Can you tell me about coming out to your family?

**Experiences as a professional dancer:**

- Tell me about your career as a dancer.

(If changed careers)

- Tell me about your transition into your new career.

**Developmental/Family History: before age 13**

- Can you describe what your family was like when you were growing up? (family composition, birth order, ages of family members, levels of education, professions)
- Family History (ethnic & religious background, living situation, deaths, separations, divorce, SES, parents' careers)
- What were you like as a young boy?
- Who were your playmates growing up?
- What did you like to do for fun?
- What are your earliest memories of your father? Mother?
- Who were you more like mother or father as a little boy?
- What was relationship with the other like? Mother? Siblings?

- When you were very young, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- What kind of student were you?
- When did you first learn about dancing or theater?
- When did you first begin to think you might be gay?

#### The Adolescent Life Structure (age 13-18)

- What was your relationship like with your parents during high school?
- How involved in dance/theater were you in high school?
- How did your family relate to your interest in theater and dance?
- Who were your friends in high school?
- What do you remember about puberty?
- Important intimate relationships in high school?
- How were you doing in school?
- Who were the important mentors or teachers along the way?
- Did you feel your interest in dance/theater supported by your parents?
- When did you first considered becoming a “dancer” as a profession?
- What other career paths did you consider?

#### Adult transition (ages 18-on up)

- Tell me about leaving home? How did it happen?
- Intimate relationship during this period?
- Describe the process of becoming a “professional” dancer?
- How did your career progress?
- What do you see as the relationship between being gay and becoming a professional dancer?

- Which aspects of your personality really suited your career as a dancer?
- What was the best and worst part of being a professional dancer?
- Overall, when you think about your whole career, how would you say it's gone?
- Do you know other dancers who had changed careers?
- What are your concerns about the future?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What has this interview been like?

**APPENDIX B****Career Transition in Dancers/Performers****PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that the purpose of the study is to explore aspects of my career as a dancer/performer as they relate to my conception of myself. Further, I know the study will focus on change and transition and the ways I experience them.

If I choose to take part, I agree to meet with the interviewer for approximately 1.5 hours to discuss my experience of my career as a dancer/performer.

I understand that my responses to all of the interviewer's questions will be tape recorded and will remain confidential. On the tapes I will only be identified by a participant identification number. I will not be asked my name, address or phone number during the taping but I will be asked to provide the information on a separate sheet of paper. I understand that this information will be kept separate from the interview tapes. By signing this form I agree that I am willing to be contacted in the future for possible interviews although I am under no obligation to participate.

While I may find the interview interesting and learn something about myself from it, I understand that the purpose of this research is not for my immediate benefit. I will be mailed a summary of the pilot study upon its completion to the address provided at the time of the interview.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I have about my participation in this study. I understand that my participation will not subject me to any physical risk or significant psychological distress. Further, I have been informed about the system for insuring my confidentiality and have no concerns on that matter.

Since my participation is voluntary, I understand that I can stop at any time.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have any questions or complaints about my rights as a subject, I may call Ethel Breheny, Institutional Review Board Administrator, at 212-650-7903 during office hours. If I have any further questions about the study, I may call Daniel Grady, at 212-650-6602 or Dr. Jeffrey Rosen, Professor of Psychology at the City College of the City University of New York at 212-650-5694. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

Witness:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name



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