

## **Dance in America**

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Dance is a familiar subject to all people, regardless of nationality, race, gender, ideology and religion. What's more, dance is an indispensable part of life. There was dance before people existed, dance in the harmonious arrangement and movement of the celestial bodies, dance in nature and later, when people began to inhabit this earth, they danced, too. Actually, people moved before they spoke intelligibly.

Since the impulse to move is inherent in all mankind, the American people also had their share of this impulse. Long before the establishment of the United States of America, there were numerous tribal communities such as the Navaho and the Sioux; naturally, these people danced to worship, to mourn, to celebrate and to communicate.

Yet, the introduction to America of what is today called the "American concert dance" was initiated with the immigration of the European and Asian people, the forced removal of Africans to this part of the world, and the subsequent migration of Latin Americans. As various cultural groups thus moved to America, they brought with them their own ethnic dances. In retrospect, it is seen today that the most notable aspect of these dances is that, once on American soil, they became the means of expression of a new nation in the process of establishing itself. Furthermore, these dances admixed to form new syntheses and novel types of dancing. To illustrate, it may be said that most of the formation of the American dance depended on the dance and music of the African and Caribbean peoples who had the ingenuity of combining "Scotch-Irish clog dances with their own ancestral dances." In fact, this became the earliest American native dance and the origin of modern tap dancing (Coe 1).

So, there has always been dance in North-America, be it pre-immigration type or post-immigration. Perhaps, the creativity and the liveliness in these dances surpassed the European dance spirit. However, dancing as a "fine art" did not reach America until the second half of the nineteenth century (Coe 1). Actually, the awareness that dance has a unique expressive force which could be utilized to assert the American cultural identity developed only recently. This was because the

Americans in the beginning were under strong Puritan influence. They assumed a Victorian denial of sensuality and the body. Also, there was always a feeling of inferiority towards the established culture of Europe (Coe 1). Although they had brought over that culture themselves, they were resolute to overcome its influence and establish their own cultural identity. This manifested itself in those days in a kind of trepidation. As choreographer Martha Graham observed, there was, in this newly forming nation, an immense "vitality, freshness, exuberance, overabundant youth and vigour, contrasts of plenitude and barrenness" (qtd. in Coe 2), the perfect raw material, in fact, to be developed as the most appropriate sources of dance (Coe 2).

Because of this exceptional quality of newness and this potential of exploration, numerous dancers and choreographers came to America from Europe. In fact, as early as the 1840s, Fanny Ellsler, visiting North America for two years, received a heartfelt welcome; to the extent that the House of Representatives had to stop its sessions because of her Washington D.C. visit (Coe 19). And indeed, when Margaret Fuller watching Fanny Ellsler exclaimed, "this is poetry!", Ralph Waldo Emerson retorted, "no, it is religion" (Cohen 67). Adeline Genee, Anna Pavlova, Nijinsky, and the Diaghilev Ballet were others to follow. Famous dance celebrities such as Massine and Fokine also came to America (Guest 137).

In the meantime, there were American dancers gaining fame in Europe, as in the case of Mary Ann Lee and Augusta Maywood, who travelled to Paris in 1839 and made a name for themselves there. Maywood then went on to spend twelve years in Italy where she was called "the queen of the air." Curiously enough, one of her triumphs was in a ballet based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. George Washington Smith, one of the first American male dancers, also danced in Europe with Mary Ann Lee in *Giselle*, supporting Fanny Ellsler as well as many other visiting ballerinas (Cohen 69-70).

Were the American people exposed to any dance performances before the arrival of the European dance authorities? The first arrival of ballet was as early as 1735 when an Englishman, Henry Holt, staged a performance in South Carolina. The reception was not particularly warm-hearted, the community being a utilitarian and Puritan one. Moreover, another of the first American dancers, John Durang, is reputed to have given performances illustrating American ideals (Coe 17). As European dancers travelled to America, they needed a *corps de ballet* to accompany them; thus, there were a number of American dance schools established during this period to train the members of such a *corps*. However, no American company existed and the American audience had to be content, for the time being, with the occasional European dancer (Coe 20).

It was only in the twentieth century that the need for the formation of an American dance company made itself felt. Yet, during the very first years of the twentieth century, something else occurred. Being considered a rebel of her time, Isadora

Duncan challenged all the classical principles of dance and rejected the costumes which she considered to be an imprisonment. Recognized in retrospect as a pioneer with an individualistic spirit, she tried to return to the Greek ideals of theatre, and, with her loosely-draped clothing and bare feet, introduced free movement. She was not well-received in America so she went to Europe and Russia (Koezler 168).

In St. Petersburg, in the winter of 1904-1905, Duncan danced in her flowing Greek tunic to illustrate the physical freedom of the body. She influenced notably Michel Fokine, then in his early thirties, who was searching for expressive action. Duncan, an American unacclaimed in her native land, thus created a landmark for the development of dance in general (Coe 22). Later on, as modern dance in America gradually evolved, Duncan's intentions would be considered worth being reevaluated.

In a way, Duncan's influence on the dance world in Europe illustrates vividly the give-and-take quality of the American dance heritage. In 1905, Duncan founded the first school of modern dance in Berlin. Then, in 1916, Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* first toured America, and in 1933, the *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* came to the US. A number of dance historians, Ivor Guest among them, assert that this was the year that the actual interest in ballet was truly established. Yet, the most important event occurred when, in 1933, Lincoln Kirstein met Balanchine and asked him to found and direct the School of American Ballet (Guest 137). Kirstein's objective was no different from that of Dame Ninette de Valois when she established the British Ballet; namely, "to further the tradition of classical theatrical dancing in order to provide adequate material for the growth of a new national art in America" (Guest 137). Indeed, this was a considerably arduous task because ballet was European in origin and had to be Americanized to become a national element of America.

Who was Balanchine? How American was he? Although he died in New York in 1983, Balanchine was born in St. Petersburg in 1904. He received his first ballet education in Russia and developed an intense interest in choreography. However, when he dared to present unconventional pieces, his supervisors immediately raised their eyebrows. While touring in Europe, he was engaged by Diaghilev in 1924, and was made the chief-choreographer of the latter's *Ballets Russes* in 1925, forming in the meantime his life-long friendship with Stravinsky. When Kirstein asked him to establish the School of American Ballet, Balanchine came to the US (Koezler 32). The School of American Ballet gave birth to the Ballet Caravan in 1936 and the Ballet Society in 1946, with Kirstein as general manager, Balanchine as the artistic director and Jerome Robbins as the artistic co-director. In 1948, when a resident ballet company of the New York City Center for Music and Drama was formed, it was named the New York City Ballet (Koezler 383).

Today, the New York City Ballet is the largest dance company in America, with 100 dancers and a repertory of more than 100 ballets. The majority of these ballets

are by Balanchine. His first creations were *Serenade* to Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* (1934), *Le Baiser de la Fée* to Stravinsky's music (1932), *Concerto Barocco* to Bach's Double Violin Concerto (1944) and *Ballet Imperial* to Tchaikovsky's second Piano Concerto (1941). These were Balanchine's early works entering the repertory to form significant pieces later (Guest 138).

During the same time, other choreographers staged ballets that represented American life. One very important choreographer, considered the creator of the first American ballet, was Eugene Loring. His *Billy the Kid*, relating the stories of pioneering days, of Native Americans and of robbers, was performed in 1938. While making use of Aaron Copland's theatrical score, Loring utilized occupational gestures such as driving wagons through wild forests, herding, riding horses, and fighting nature and life to show the expansion of the frontier. *Billy the Kid* was, moreover, the first work of its kind to exploit the film techniques of flashbacks, fades and cuts (Lawson 182).

Another choreographer who made use of gestures for communication while trying to represent American life was Agnes de Mille. In her *Rodeo* (1942), again to Copland's score, she made use of nods and winks to represent the rough speeches of the Ranch. Another characteristic of *Rodeo* was that "the rhythmic urge of true folk dance" was seen in hand-clapping and stomping. *The Fall River Legend*, on the other hand, portrayed a different aspect of American reality. Staged in 1948, to Morton Gould's score, this ballet is a dramatic work displaying lives frustrated by Victorian and Edwardian conventions (Lawson 183).

The forties, indeed, became an era when dance activities were soaring in America. On 11 January 1940, the American Ballet Theatre, another famous American Ballet Company, gave its first performance at the New York Radio City Center Theatre. The American Ballet Theatre professes to be "a museum of the best works of ballet history supplemented by an at least equally strong contingent of specially commissioned American creations" (Koepler 15). In fact, it was for this company that de Mille created her *Fall River Legend*.

The same year that *Fall River Legend* was put on stage, Balanchine created his *Orpheus* (1948) using music by Stravinsky. The Japanese sculptor Noguchi designed the setting and the costumes of this first *Orpheus*, that kept on being performed despite the war (Guest 139). Balanchine had an incredible skill of making use of the folk dances of Russia, the British Isles, Spain and Bali, and of American modern dance, square dance and of Broadway show-dancing. For example, in *Agon* (1957) he took seventeenth-century dances and transformed them into another brilliant ballet to Stravinsky's music (Coe 45). Although "agon" means contest, in Balanchine's ballet there is no winner or loser. It is basically a ballet of classical patterns of ballet steps, but the combination of these steps is highly original.

Balanchine is known as the "architect of abstract ballet." He himself preferred the term "plotless" for his works. The works may be "plotless" but the presentation of human relations is still there. The structural harmony of his choreography is exquisite. The dancers exhibit a physical ease that gives the impression that no effort at corporeal virtuosity is being deployed. Furthermore, a unique quality of Balanchine is that he is extremely sensitive to the musical plot which shapes his ballets, so that they may be labelled as "symphonic rather than operatic in shaping" (Mc Donogh 60).

On the whole, what the New York City Ballet achieved under Balanchine's guidance was the formation of an American style of dancing. It is undeniable that Balanchine in this give-and-take process of the formation of American dance brought with him the classicism of the Petipa heritage. Yet, what he accomplished in establishing the American style of dancing was to remove the decorative embellishments of the Petipa tradition and to establish purity, simplicity, neatness, and elegance resulting in magical beauty (Guest 140).

Balanchine concentrated on movement and rhythm. He said: "A choreographer can't invent rhythms, he can only reflect them in movement. The body is his medium, and unaided, the body can improvise for a short breath. But the organizing of rhythms on a grand scale is a sustained process. It is a function of the musical mind" (qtd. in Coe 45).

While dance was gaining an artistic dimension in ballet, another dance form was also assuming its shape: modern dance. (In fact, both ballet and modern dance developed simultaneously in America. The most important quality of modern dance was movement, as in the case of Balanchine's choreography. Although she was considered a rebel, Isadora Duncan concentrated on free movement disentangled from restrictions.) According to many dance historians, the true pioneers of modern American dance are Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham from the 1920s and 30s, although there was also the husband-and-wife team, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. Denishawn, as these two were called, used traditional dances of Egypt and India as a source to create a combination of new movements, but their style remained too decorative and restrictive. Graham and Humphrey, who may be called the first modern American choreographers, both concentrated on movement, though in different ways. Humphrey emphasized dance as a pure form of movement: she was highly aware of the power of gravity and the dancer's balance as the basis for movement. Graham, on the other hand, based movement on an awareness of breathing. While at the same time ballet was defying gravity, modern dance was earthbound. Following Ezra Pound's advice to "make it new" (qtd. in Coe 131), modern dance brought in a new element. Humphrey's newness can be seen in her 1931 dramatic masterpiece, *The Shakers*, which depicted the body-shaking ritual of a nineteenth-century sect to get rid of sin. In Humphrey's words: "It had a lofty purpose, it was dramatic, communicative, and rhythmic, and in

addition was truly communal, engaging every man, woman, and child in the colony "(qtd. in Coe 132).

Of the two, Graham did the more challenging work. She truly felt the Puritan heritage and the new freedom of the twentieth century while being conscious of the struggle between the two. She was determined to find a physical expression of her times. In fact, she was in pursuit of "a tempo, a rhythm and an attitude toward space which is peculiar to America ... unlike any other nation on earth" (Coe 133). Thus, she approached movement that embodies struggle, emphasized the weight of the body rather than removing it and did not deny the principle of gravity. On the contrary, it was a joy for her to give in to that force in her dances. While yearning for freedom of the body, she emphasized the overall importance of discipline. In her own words, "freedom to a dancer means only one thing. *Discipline*. The body is shaped, disciplined, honored, and in time, trusted" (qtd. in Coe 134).

It may be said that Graham exploited the body to reach the magical point of ecstasy. As a result of her continuous search for those magical moments, she created 175 dances. Another important aspect of Graham's artistry is that she went through the experiences of various generations and each experience widened her horizon.

In the twenties, Graham was aware of the "kinetic provocation" of New York City, which was alive with nightclubs, Broadway, movies and sport events. In Wallace Stevens's words, the "revolution of things colliding" influenced Graham as well. Referring to Graham's work, Kirstein wrote: "Her jumps are jolts; her walk, limps and staggers; her runs, heavy blind impulsive gallops; her bends, sways. Her idiom of motion has little of the aerial in it, but there's plenty of rolling around on the floor" (qtd. in Coe 141). Sometimes she was considered a "new barbarian" or a "dark soul" (Coe 141). The drama critic Stark Young once said that if she were to give birth it would probably be to a cube.

In the thirties, Graham, too, was interested in attempts to capture American reality through works reflecting the historical experience of the nation. Her *American Document* (1938) is an amalgamation of minstrel shows and spoken texts of the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the Sermons of Jonathan Edwards, the works of Walt Whitman and other Americans. This work became a masterpiece of dance-drama (Coe 143). Another work that celebrates American values is *Appalachian Spring* (1944).

After the Second World War, she created for Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev a work called *Lucifer* in which Fonteyn found herself dancing barefoot for the first time. In October 1976, Graham was awarded the Medal for Freedom as the first dancer to receive that award. Being a revolutionary, she was not just investigating her own spirit, but also the spirit of the age, while at the same time emphasizing the American spirit (Coe 152).

Sometimes, American modern dance is considered the art of the individual. Indeed, Martha Graham expressed this individuality perfectly. The dancers who worked with her, such as Merce Cunningham, were thus able to retain their own ideas. He himself was way ahead of his time and considerably unpredictable. "He has shown American audiences how to relax before a spectacle of constant change, to surrender the need to interpret, censure, foresee, possess" (Coe 124).

Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Robert Joffrey, Murray Lois and Alwin Nikolais are modern masters. Among them, Alvin Ailey has emphasized another aspect of American dance when he wanted to express the black cultural tradition. When he founded his troupe in 1958, he also revived the works of Katherine Dunham, the "black modern-dance" pioneer.

Alwin Nikolais, on the other hand, was conscious of the fact that dance was a ceremonial art, as well as an art of motion. Consequently, he perceived dance as a visual art. It had long been taken for granted that dance was a visual art, but Alwin Nikolais brought another dimension to it by insisting on the fact that a visual impact was essential. Thus, while emphasizing movement, he concentrated on sculptural dance sights. In one of his works, *Noumenon Sanctum*, choreographed in 1953, he made use of moving wool jersey bags that looked like sculptural figures. In other works, he exploited virtually every stage device, such as new lighting techniques, painting and sometimes voices. His spirit of individuality urged him to combine all the art works.

Among the modern dance masters, Twyla Tharp has a repertory of dances illustrating what Tom Wolfe calls "the hog-stomping baroque exuberance of American civilization" (qtd. in Coe 206). When she started in the 1960s, her work consisted of "unaccompanied movement studies." Then the components of music, humour, characterization, partnering and set design came together (Coe 206). She received training from all the famous modern-dance pioneers such as Graham, Cunningham, and Nikolais, and worked with the Paul Taylor dance company. One of her longest and most ambitious work is *Catherine Wheel* (1981), the greatest rock ballet ever made (Coe 220). Another work by Tharp is *Sue's Leg* (1976), also entitled "Remembering the Thirties." Actually, what Tharp does is to represent the energy, the momentum and the spirit of an era in American history. The 1930s might be labeled as the decade of dance. New dances were invented such as "Pepper Shaker," a combination of square dance and "Charleston. "

Among all the other dances, tap-dancing became so popular that it was included in university education programmes. There was also recreational dance, or even "endurance dancing" in competitions. One tends to forget that, with all this dancing, the 1930s were actually the Depression years. However, "the unquenchable optimism" of the people was reflected in dancing. What Twyla Tharp did was to make use of all this background information and, with a little bit of imitation and a little bit of parody, to create her own choreography.

In *Sue's Leg*, while the period of the 1930s is being observed, the prominent dancing figures of the era are spotted, one being Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, "the King of Tapology" and the first black Star of the Ziegfeld Follies. Tap dancing had become associated with black dancers despite its origins in Irish and English clog dancing (Wilson and Ferris 150). Actually, there is a distinct black dance in the American dance history.

Agnes de Mille is very much aware of the notes and rhythms of black dancing. The accent on the off beat or up beat is definitely very different from the European style. In the late nineteenth century, black performers increased, and the African heritage of the black Americans was expressed in dance. Before the abolition of slavery, the slaves had been forced to dance to show their skills, but they had not been allowed to use their tribal drums in order to prevent them from communicating secretly. This led to the emergence of hand-clapping and foot stomping. Such a rhythmic urge is clearly observable in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*. In the 1900s the black people moved to Harlem, New York. They had a tremendous influence on dances like the "Charleston," the "Ball in' the Jack," the "Shimmy," and the "Mooche." Dances such as the "Lindy Hop," the "Jitterbug," the "Shag," and the "Camel Walk" also had black roots (Wilson and Ferris 149-150).

Although it took a while for the black people to take part in ballet and modern dance, Alvin Ailey's group formed in 1958, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem started in 1969 are excellent examples of black modern dance and classical dance respectively.

Arthur Mitchell, a former New York City ballet dancer, is the co-director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. While they are combining the African tradition with the European classical dance tradition, the group emphasizes the importance of artistry; they consider themselves foremost artists. This is clearly seen in their refined, elegant and well-disciplined work. While preparing dances with ethnic origins such as *Dougla*, they have classical pieces as well. One excellent example of their artistry in classical dancing may be seen in *Three Movements from Holberg Suite*, choreographed by Arthur Mitchell to Grieg's music.

Dance has been a part of American culture ever since its beginning. While borrowing from the old dance traditions of European, Asian and African cultures, the Americans established their own dance heritage with their innovative, experimental spirit.

The urge to experiment is still going on and may be seen in recent dance works. However, since they have not passed the test of time as Martha Graham or Balanchine did, it is not easy to evaluate this post-modern enterprise.

Apart from the urge for experimentation and innovation--most of the time through rebellion against and rejection of the established dance traditions--the unique



quality of American dance is that all the variety of dances have always existed together. American dance history does not follow a linear development. Traditional dance turned into classical ballet, with modern dance, popular dance, and folk dance existing at the same time; while the choreographers who were involved in creating new dances had all this material to exploit as much as they could in this land of variety. As George Santanaya states,

... there are immense differences between individual Americans ... yet there is a great uniformity in their environment, customs, temper, and thoughts. They have all been uprooted from their several soils and ancestries and plunged together into one vortex, whirling irresistibly in a space otherwise quite empty. (qtd. in Luedtke 7)

In American dance, this vortex is definitely felt. Yet, what emerges is new but meaningful, experimental but artful, and above all beautiful.

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