

# The History of Ballet

The earliest precursors to ballets were lavish entertainments given in the courts of Renaissance Italy. These elaborate spectacles, which united painting, poetry, music, and dancing, took place in large halls that were used also for banquets and balls. A dance performance given in 1489 actually was performed between the courses of a banquet, and the action was closely related to the menu: For instance, the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece preceded the roast lamb. The dancers based their performance on the social dances of the day.

The Italian court ballets were further developed in France. *Le Ballet Comique de la Reine* (The Queen's Ballet Comedy), the first ballet for which a complete score survived, was performed in Paris in 1581. It was staged by Balthazar de Beaujoyeux, a violinist and dancing master at the court of Queen Catherine de Medicis. It was danced by aristocratic amateurs in a hall with the royal family on a dais at one end and spectators in galleries on three sides. Since much of the audience saw the ballet from above, the choreography emphasized the elaborate floor patterns created by lines and groups of dancers. Poetry and songs accompanied the dances.

Most French court ballets consisted of dance scenes linked by a minimum of plot. Because they were designed principally for the entertainment of the aristocracy, rich costumes, scenery, and elaborate stage effects were emphasized. The proscenium stage (see Theater Production) was first adopted in France in the mid-1600s, and professional dancers made their first appearance, although they were not permitted to dance in the grand ballet that concluded the performance; this was still reserved for the king and courtiers.

The court ballet reached its peak during the reign (1643-1715) of Louis XIV, whose title the Sun King was derived from a role he danced in a ballet. Many of the ballets presented at his court were created by the Italian-French composer Jean Baptiste Lully and the French choreographer Pierre Beauchamp, who is said to have defined the five positions of the feet. Also during this time, the playwright Moliere invented the *comedie-ballet*, in which danced interludes alternated with spoken scenes.

## Early Professional Ballet

In 1661 Louis XIV established the Academie Royale de Danse, a professional organization for dancing masters. He himself stopped dancing in 1670, and his courtiers followed his example. By then the court ballet was already giving way to professional dancing. At first all the dancers were men, and men in masks danced women's roles. The first female dancers to perform professionally in a theater production appeared (1681) in a ballet called *Le Triomphe de l'Amour* (The Triumph of Love).

The dance technique of the period, recorded by the French ballet master Raoul Feuillet in his book *Choregraphie* (1700), included many steps and positions recognizable today. A new theatrical form developed: the opera-ballet, which placed equal emphasis on singing and dancing and generally consisted of a series of dances linked by a common theme. A famous opera-ballet, by the French composer Jean Philippe Rameau, was *Les Indes galantes* (The Gallant Indies, 1735), which depicted exotic lands and peoples.

Eighteenth-century dancers were encumbered by masks, wigs or large headdresses, and heeled shoes. Women wore panniers, hoopskirts draped at the sides for fullness. Men often wore the *tonnelet*, a knee-length hoopskirt. The French dancer Marie Camargo, however, shortened her skirts and adopted heeless slippers to display her sparkling jumps and beats. Her rival, Marie

Sall, also broke with custom when she discarded her corset and put on Greek robes to dance in her own ballet, *Pygmalion* (1734).

During the second half of the 18th century the Paris Opera was dominated by male dancers such as the Italian-French virtuoso Gaytan Vestris and his son Auguste Vestris, famed for his jumps and leaps. But women such as the German-born Anne Heinel, the first female dancer to do double pirouettes, also were gaining in technical proficiency.

Despite the brilliance of the French dancers, choreographers working outside Paris achieved more dramatic expression in ballet. In London the English choreographer John Weaver eliminated words and tried to convey dramatic action through dance and pantomime. In Vienna the Austrian choreographer Franz Hilverding and his Italian pupil Gasparo Angiolini experimented with dramatic themes and gestures.

The most famous 18th-century advocate of the dramatic ballet was the Frenchman Jean Georges Noverre, whose *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (1760) influenced many choreographers both during and after his lifetime. He advised using movement that was natural and easily understood and emphasized that all the elements of a ballet should work in harmony to express the ballet's theme. Noverre found an outlet for his ideas in Stuttgart, Germany, where he first produced his most famous ballet, *Medea and Jason* (1763).

Noverre's pupils included the Frenchman Jean Dauberval, whose ballet *La fille mal gardee* (The Ill-Guarded Girl, 1789) applied Noverre's ideas to a comic theme. Dauberval's Italian pupil Salvatore Vigan\*, who worked at La Scala, a theater in Milan, developed a variety of expressive pantomime performed in strict time to the music. Charles Didelot, a French student of both Noverre and Dauberval, worked mainly in London and Saint Petersburg. In Didelot's ballet *Flore et Zephire* (1796), invisible wires helped the dancers appear to fly.

Toe dancing began to develop at about this time, although the dancers balanced on their toes only for a moment or two. Blocked toe shoes had not yet been invented, and dancers strengthened their light slippers with darning.

The Italian choreographer Carlo Blasis, a pupil of Dauberval and Vigan\*, recorded the dance technique of the early 19th century in his *Code of Terpsichore* (1830). He is credited with inventing the attitude, derived from a famous work by the Flemish sculptor Giambologna, a statue of the god Mercury poised lightly on the toes of the left foot.

## **Romantic Ballet**

The ballet *La Sylphide*, first performed in Paris in 1832, introduced the period of the romantic ballet. Marie Taglioni danced the part of the Sylphide, a supernatural creature who is loved and inadvertently destroyed by a mortal man. The choreography, created by her father, Filippo Taglioni, exploited the use of toe dancing to emphasize his daughter's otherworldly lightness and insubstantiality. *La Sylphide* inspired many changes in the ballets of the time—in theme, style, technique, and costume. Its successor, *Giselle* (1841), also contrasted the human and supernatural worlds, and in its second act the ghostly spirits called *wilis* wear the white tutu popularized in *La Sylphide*.

The romantic ballet was not restricted, however, to the subject of otherworldly beings. The Austrian dancer Fanny Elssler popularized an earthier, sensuous character. Her most famous

dance, the cachucha (in *Le Diable Boiteux*, 1836), was a Spanish-style solo performed with castanets, and she often performed very stylized versions of national dances.

Women dominated the romantic ballet. Although good male dancers such as the Frenchmen Jules Perrot and Arthur Saint-Leon were performing, they were eclipsed by ballerinas such as Taglioni, Elssler, the Italians Carlotta Grisi and Fanny Cerrito, and others.

Taglioni and Elssler danced in Russia, and Perrot and Saint-Leon created ballets there. Elssler also danced in the United States, which produced two ballerinas of its own: Augusta Maywood and Mary Ann Lee, both from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In Paris itself, however, ballet began to decline. Poetic qualities gave way to virtuosic displays and spectacle. Male dancing was neglected. Few ballets of note were produced at the Opéra during the second half of the 19th century. An exception was *Coppelia*, choreographed by Saint-Leon in 1870, but even in it the principal male role was danced by a woman.

Denmark, however, maintained the standards of the romantic ballet. The Danish choreographer Bournonville, who had studied in Paris, not only established a system of training but also created a large body of works, including his own version of *La Sylphide*. Many of these ballets are still performed by the Royal Danish Ballet.

Russia also preserved the integrity of the ballet during the late 19th century. A Frenchman, Marius Petipa, became the chief choreographer of the Imperial Russian Ballet. He perfected the full-length, evening-long story ballet that combined set dances with mimed scenes. His best-known works are *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and *Swan Lake* (co-choreographed with the Russian Lev Ivanov), both set to commissioned scores by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky.

## **20th Century**

With time, Petipa's choreographic method settled into a formula. Fokine called for greater expressiveness and more authenticity in choreography, scenery, and costume. He was able to realize his ideas through the Ballets Russes, a new company organized by the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev.

The Ballets Russes opened in Paris in 1909 and won immediate success. The male dancers, among them the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, were particularly admired because good male dancers had almost disappeared in Paris. The company presented a broad range of works, including Fokine's compactly knit one-act ballets with colorful themes from Russian or Asian folklore: *The Firebird* (1910), *Scheherazade* (1910), and *Petrushka* (1911). The Ballets Russes became synonymous with novelty and excitement, a reputation it maintained throughout its 20 years of existence.

Although the most famous members of the company were Russian (among them the designers Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, and the composer Igor Stravinsky), Diaghilev commissioned many Western European artists and composers, such as Pablo Picasso and Maurice Ravel, to collaborate on the ballets. Diaghilev's choreographers, Fokine, Polish choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, Nijinsky, Russian-born Leonide Massine, Russian-born American George Balanchine, and the Russian-born French dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar, experimented with new themes and styles of movement.

The offshoots of the Ballets Russes revitalized ballet all over the world. The Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, who danced in its early seasons, formed her own company and toured internationally. Fokine worked with many companies, including the future American Ballet Theatre. Massine contributed to the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, a company formed after Diaghilev's death. Two former members of the Ballets Russes, the Polish-born British dancer Dame Marie Rambert and the British dancer Dame Ninette de Valois became the founders of British ballet. Rambert's students included the British choreographers Sir Frederick Ashton, Anthony Tudor, and John Cranko. De Valois founded the company that became Britain's Royal Ballet. Balanchine was invited to work in the United States by Lincoln Kirstein, a wealthy American patron of the arts. Lifar worked at the Paris Opera and dominated French ballet for many years.

In the 1920s and 1930s, modern dance began to be developed in the United States and Germany. The American dancers Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, the German dancer Mary Wigman, and others broke away from traditional ballet to create their own expressive movement styles and to choreograph dances that were more closely related to actual human life. Ballets also reflected this move toward realism. In 1932 the German choreographer Kurt Joss created *The Green Table*, an antiwar ballet. Anthony Tudor developed the psychological ballet, which revealed the inner being of the characters. Modern dance also eventually extended the movement vocabulary of ballet, particularly in the use of the torso and in movements done lying or sitting on the floor.

Popular dance forms also enriched the ballet. In 1944 the American choreographer Jerome Robbins created *Fancy Free*, a ballet based on the jazz-dance style that had developed in musical comedy.

The idea of pure dance also grew in popularity. In the 1930s Massine invented the symphonic ballet, which aimed to express the musical content of symphonies by the German composers Ludwig Van Beethoven and Johannes Brahms. Balanchine also began to create plot less ballets in which the primary motivation was movement to music. His ballet *Jewels* (1967) is considered the first evening-length ballet of this type.

Two great American ballet companies were founded in New York City in the 1940s, American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet. The latter drew many of its dancers from the School of American Ballet established by Balanchine and Kirstein in 1934. Since the mid-20th century, ballet companies have been founded in many cities throughout the United States and in Canada, among them: the National Ballet of Canada, in Toronto (1951); Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, in Montreal (1952); the Pennsylvania Ballet, in Philadelphia (1963); and the Houston Ballet (1963).

Beginning in 1956, Russian ballet companies such as the Bolshoi and Kirov performed in the West for the first time. The intense dramatic feeling and technical virtuosity of the Russians made a great impact. Russian influence on ballet continues today, both through visits from Russian companies and the activities of defecting Soviet dancers such as Rudolf Nureyev, artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet from 1983 to 1989; Natalia Makarova; and Mikhail Baryshnikov, director of the American Ballet Theatre, New York City, from 1980 to 1989.

Dance in general underwent an enormous upsurge in popularity beginning in the mid-1960s. Ballet began to show the influence of a younger audience, in both themes and style. The athleticism of dancing was enjoyed in much the same way as sports, and virtuosic steps were admired for their challenge and daring. Popular music such as rock and roll and jazz was used to accompany many ballets.

Today's ballet repertoire offers great variety. New ballets and reconstructions and restaging of older ballets coexist with new works created by modern-dance choreographers for ballet

companies. Choreographers experiment with both new and traditional forms and styles, and dancers constantly seek to extend their technical and dramatic range. The frequent tours of ballet companies allow audiences throughout the world to experience the full spectrum of today's ballet activity.

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