

DANCE HISTORY

A brief overview of the various
genres of dance

Constructed by:

Gus Andros

at

androsonballet.com

Ballet History

Ballet is a modern art, dancing is prehistoric. The history of ballet is but a fragment of the history of dancing. Ballet can be defined today as a theatrical entertainment of group and solo dancing usually to a musical, vocal or percussion accompaniment, with costumes, scenery, and lighting. CLASSICAL BALLET is movement based on the traditional technique from the French ballet of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Italian school of the 19th century. Classical ballet was brought to ultimate perfection by such great teachers as Carlo Blasis, C. P. Johansen, Legat and Cecchetti. CLASSICAL STYLE is based on the turn out, the five positions of the feet, pointe work and technique of beats, turns, elevation, and extension. MODERN DANCE originated as a reaction to the rigidity of classical ballet.

I feel that almost every dancer, choreographer and teacher has left his or her mark. Those of you, who are my students now or have been at one time, let it be known that it has taken hundreds of other dancers to give me my background. I teach you what others have taught me, and I hope that what I give to you will find its way to others.

According to Lincoln Kirstein, " It is difficult for most of us to remember, since the history of ballet in the last three hundred years is so richly documented and so thin in the three thousand years before." that even in the beginning of time dance has existed in all primitive societies. Humankind danced long before there was music. Dance may have been the reason for music in the first place. Those of you who know how important I think music is to dance might think I would not make such a statement. Early dancers created their own music by stomping on the ground, and later stretching animal skins across their legs and beating them with their hands or a stick.

Modern Dance

I hate talking about something I know very little about, but I cannot continue to talk about American Dance without telling you about Modern Dance. Most of the information that will follow will be from Anatole Chujoy's Encyclopedia.

I define Modern Dance with a quote from Nancy Stevens. "Originally a reaction against the rigidity of ballet. More body movement - more depth - no shoes. It has become a form of its own, with its own classical vocabulary." Chujoy says "Modern dance might well be termed primitive. The word 'primitive' is not used here to denote anything archaic, underdeveloped, exotic or quaint but to imply 'firstness'. Modern dance is primitive only in the sense that it has gone back to dance essentials."

Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis certainly were the beginning of this new form of dance in America, but in Europe there was Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman. From Ruth St. Denis came Ted Shawn and Martha Graham. Others coming at about the same time were Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Helen Tamiris, Daniel Nagrin, Hanya Holm, Jose Limon, Valerie Bettis, Agnes de Mille, and Merce Cunningham.

Tamiris, Holm, and de Mille choreographed for Broadway. Bettis made a big hit in a Broadway show "Inside USA" dancing "Tiger Lily". Valerie Bettis brought a very sexy image to modern dance.

It is getting harder to define the difference between modern ballet and modern dance. Martha Graham has brought in many ballet dancers to do her work, and the ballet companies are using more and more modern trained dancers.

Bruce Marks started as a modern dancer and at one time was a principal with American Ballet Theatre. Now he is the director of the Boston Ballet. Glen Tetley started with Graham before joining ABT. There were many more who used both techniques to enjoy success in dance.

I believe that both techniques have more to learn from each other and that in time to come they may become "one".

Broadway

The Broadway Musical is strictly an American phenomenon. It is an outgrowth of many different theatrical happenings. The "Black Crook", which opened in September 12, 1866, was a combination of Ballet, burlesque and music hall. The musical and the operetta overlap. "The Merry Widow" and Gilbert and Sullivan's productions helped lay the groundwork for what was later to come. George Balanchine in 1935 choreographed a musical. Later, Agnes de Mille in 1943 was responsible for a ballet being a major part of the musical in "Oklahoma". Before that, "Showboat" had proven that you could take a serious subject and make a musical. Dance is now an integral part of the Broadway Musical.

When I came to New York there were at least two or three auditions a week. If you could not make a ballet company you got a job in a musical. Most of the shows went on the road, and Summer Stock was the best way to get into Equity. Not all musicals were successful--some of them would open and close out of town.

Today the musicals have changed. Many come to us from England. It is funny how we in this country let other countries take over our arts. This is true in the musicals and also in Ballet. So far modern dance has remained an American art form.

"Gypsy" was a very successful revival. I have heard many people say "that is what a musical should be".

We have so many classmates that have graced the Broadway stage that I am afraid to name them for fear that I might leave someone out. Just know that the dancer next to you could be a Broadway Gypsy....

Dance on Film

Motion pictures are produced for one of two purposes: entertainment or education. Dance in film has been there from the start. There were incidental dances in many of the early films. With the coming of sound, music played a large part as background atmosphere. Even the silent picture houses had a piano or organ playing through the picture. I would say that many of your teachers first saw dance at their favorite movie theater.

Fred Astaire, and later Gene Kelly, did their best to produce the best of dance on film. While I was with the San Francisco Ballet, Hollywood would come and take some of our dancers to perform (I am sorry to say I was never picked to be one of the dancers). Balanchine choreographed for the movies. Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova danced in "Make mine Music".

In the 40's Hollywood did a terrible movie about the ballet world "Spectre of the Rose" starring Viola Essen. I saw this picture on an Army Transport Ship on my way overseas--can we ignore the date? Later in 1948 "The Red Shoes" showed a truer picture of the ballet world, and much later in 1977 "The Turning Point" reintroduced the public to the world of Ballet.

TV has done more for Ballet than even live performances. Today we can see the best and the worse of dance almost weekly. For a while Ballet was flourishing in many communities, but with the lack of funds these young companies are falling by the wayside. In an effort to keep alive, some of these companies are joining forces--San Jose Cleveland Ballet is a good example. Let's hope it works.

Dance Theatre of Harlem has had to close its doors. That is a shame that we all can take credit for. We have no qualms about bailing out crooked savings banks and allowing DTH to go under. Maybe a letter to your Congressperson might help.

This brief introduction to the various forms and genres of dance was found at Androsonballet.com under history of dance.