

ORIGINS OF DANCE

Dance and music

It is unlikely that any human society (at any rate until the invention of puritanism) has denied itself the excitement and pleasure of dancing. Like cave painting, the first purpose of dance is probably ritual - appeasing a nature spirit or accompanying a rite of passage. But losing oneself in rhythmic movement with other people is an easy form of intoxication. Pleasure can never have been far away.

Rhythm, indispensable in dancing, is also a basic element of music. It is natural to beat out the rhythm of the dance with sticks. It is natural to accompany the movement of the dance with rhythmic chanting. Dance and music begin as partners in the service of ritual.

Dance as ritual

In most ancient civilizations, dancing before the god is an important element in temple ritual. In Egypt the priests and priestesses, accompanied by harps and pipes, perform stately movements which mime significant events in the story of a god, or imitate cosmic patterns such as the rhythm of night and day.

Sacred occasions in Greek shrines, such as the games at Olympia from the 8th century BC, are inaugurated with dancing by the temple virgins. The *choros* is originally just such a dance, performed in a circle in honor of a god. In the 6th century it becomes the centerpiece of Greek theatre.

In India the formalized hand movements of the priestesses in Hindu temples are described in documents from as early as the 1st century AD. Each precise gesture is of subtle significance. A form of classical dance based upon them - known as Bharata Nhatyam - is still performed by highly skilled practitioners today.

Dance as ecstasy

Any sufficiently uninhibited society knows that frantic dancing, in a mood heightened by pounding rhythm and flowing alcohol, will set the pulse racing and induce a mood of frenzied exhilaration.

This is exemplified in the Dionysiac dances of ancient Greece. Villagers, after harvesting the grapes, celebrate the occasion with a drunken orgy in honor of Dionysus, god of wine (whose Roman name is Bacchus). Their stomping makes a favorite scene on Greek vases; and dancing women of this kind, whose frenzy even sweeps them into an act of murder, are immortalized in a tragedy, the *Bacchae*, by Euripides. Short of this unfortunate extreme, all social dances promise the same desirable mood of release and excitement.

Dance as entertainment, dance as display

Egyptian paintings, from as early as about 1400 BC, depict another eternal appeal of dancing. Scantily clad girls, accompanied by seated musicians, cavort enticingly on the walls of tombs. They will delight the male occupant during his residence in the next world. But dancing girls are for this world too. From princely banquet to back-street strip club, they require no explanation.

Entertainment, and the closely related theme of display, underlies the story of public dance. In the courts of Europe spectacles of this kind lead eventually to ballet.

Ballet in France: 16th - 17th century AD

A favorite entertainment in Renaissance France and Italy involves ladies and gentlemen of the court being wheeled into the banqueting hall on scenic floats from which they descend to perform a

dance. Such festivities are much encouraged by Catherine de Médicis after she marries into the French royal family.

In 1581 a significant step forward is taken by Catherine's director of court festivals, Baltazar de Beaujoyeux. For a wedding celebration he produces the *Balet Comique de la Reine*, combining dance (which he describes as being just "geometric patterns of people dancing together") with the narrative interest of a comedy. It is the first dramatic ballet.

This French and Italian love of dance continues in the next century. At the court of Savoy, in Turin, there is a strong tradition of lavish amateur ballets for any festive occasion in the mid-17th century.

In France Louis XIII, son of Marie de Médicis, loves to show off his talents in this line - although, reports a contemporary, he "never performed anything but ridiculous characters". The king's typical roles include a wandering musician, a Dutch captain, a grotesque warrior, a farmer and a woman. His son Louis XIV enjoys similar pleasures, but his roles have a little more classical gravitas - a Bacchante, a Titan, a Muse and (presumably a favorite) Apollo dressed as the sun.

The dancers in court ballets are the courtiers themselves, and a large part of the pleasure comes from watching one's friends prance about in spectacular costumes. The English diarist John Evelyn sees Louis XIV dancing in Paris in 1651; he marvels not so much at the dancing as at so many sumptuously attired aristocrats.

But Louis XIV himself is genuinely interested in dancing, and in 1661 he decides that his colleagues are not up to scratch. He brings together the best Parisian dancing masters to form the Académie Royale de Danse, where his friends' skills may be honed. It is so successful that he follows it in 1669 with a similar Académie Royale de Musique.

These two institutions are merged to form the Paris Opéra (still in existence today). From 1672 professional dancers are trained. The institution settles down into what is recognizably a ballet company.

The first director, Pierre Beauchamp, choreographs many ballet sequences with music by Lully and others - and he devises his own system for recording the steps. (He is often credited with inventing the five classic positions for the feet, but more probably he is merely the first to record them.)

A spectacular ballet by Lully and Beauchamp is *Le Triomphe de l'Amour*, first performed in 1681 with Beauchamp dancing Mars accompanied by ladies and gentlemen of the court. Four months later the same ballet is performed again, in a public theatre, with a significant innovation - professional female dancers.

The female ensemble is led by Mlle Lafontaine, the world's first prima ballerina. She stars in many other ballets over the next twelve years (earning the title *reine de la danse*, "queen of the dance") before retiring into a convent.

Lafontaine and her colleagues are constrained by the heavy dresses which convention forces them to wear on stage, but the men suffer less restriction (when dancing heroic roles their usual costume is akin to a Roman soldier's short tunic, coming half way down the thigh).

Virtuoso male dancing rapidly becomes one of the great attractions of ballet. The first to demonstrate it is Jean Balon, who is with the Paris Opéra from 1691 to 1710. Famous for his lightness and agility, his name is possibly commemorated in the term "ballon" - still used today for the moment when a dancer can seem to pause in mid-air during a jump.