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The Rise of American Ballet

AMERICANS have always loved dance, both as a theatrical and as a participatory art. Despite occasional protests by strict religious groups, social dances were performed in the Colonies and after the Revolution in the new Republic. Eventually, Americans took up dancing as a theatrical career and welcomed professional dancers from overseas.

Many French émigrés—dancers and musicians among them—came to the United States at the end of the eighteenth century. Some of the dancers made a point of boasting that they had studied with Pierre Gardel and Gaetan Vestris. Whatever the truth of their claims may have been, they did much to enrich American culture and make French music, dance, and clothing fashions popular.

The United States may have been a democracy. Nevertheless, just as if they were Renaissance courtiers, young Americans from cultivated families were expected to be able to dance. Dance even became a part of the curriculum of the military cadets at West Point in 1817; their teacher, Pierre Thomas, also served as their fencing master.

Like the other theatrical arts, dance occasionally had to defend itself against charges of frivolity. It is no wonder, then, that when the New Theatre of Philadelphia opened in 1793, a motto above the proscenium arch declared that the building was intended "For useful mirth or salutary woe"—a sentiment remarkably similar to the one associated with the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

The eighteenth century produced at least one important American dancer: John Durang, a nimble artist famous for the deftness of his hornpipe. Once, in 1791, he danced this specialty with thirteen eggs placed on stage near his feet, without treading upon or breaking any of them.

Four American ballet stars were acclaimed in the nineteenth century: Mary Ann Lee, Julia Turnbull, Augusta Maywood, and George Washington Smith. Maywood appeared successfully at the Paris Opéra and Smith, the first American Albrecht in *Giselle*, was considered proficient enough to dance with Fanny Elssler, who was only one of several foreign ballerinas who toured America.

Ballet became a popular form of entertainment. After the Civil War, there was a vogue for elaborate theatrical productions involving ballet. *The Black Crook* (1866), the first and best known of these, was lavishly designed, told a fantastic story about a pact with the devil, and included ballet episodes led by Marie Bonfanti and Rita Sangalli, two much-admired Italian ballerinas. The success of *The Black Crook* prompted a host of imitations and sequels across the country. For the touring versions of such productions, a ballet master would simply go out on the road to audition and train dancers in the next town in which the show was to appear. Since he had only a short time to drill his ensemble, and since the dancers he selected were often children of poor immigrants who, to make ends meet, had to work in factories or shops during the day, it is not surprising that the choreography usually emphasized elementary steps and clear, simple patterns.

In extravaganzas of this sort, plot was usually of minimal importance and served largely to permit spectacular scenic and

choreographic effects. An anonymous journalist of 1866 termed the plot of one work "only an attenuated thread whereon were strung, like so many clothespins, or pins with no clothes to speak of, the limbs of . . . ballet girls." By present-day standards, however, some of these "ballet girls" might seem overdressed. Indeed, their costumes were often deliberately padded so as to enlarge the leg and create the soft plump look fashionable in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Among the leading creators of spectacles were the Hungarian-born Kiralfy Brothers—Bolossy and Imre, who came to America in 1869 and became famous for their elaborate stagings. Working together at first and then, after their split in 1886, on their own, they devised productions that literally involved casts of thousands and that included animals as well as humans. A typical example of their choice of subject matter was Bolossy Kiralfy's *King Solomon, or the Destruction of Jerusalem*, a success of 1891. Their choreography featured geometrical patterns and showed off sumptuous costumes. In many ways, their works were akin to those made popular by Manzotti in Italy.

Although there was much ballet to be seen in America during the nineteenth century, it never developed as a serious art until well into the twentieth century. The spectacles of the nineteenth century were considered aesthetically insubstantial by sophisticated theatregoers, and even some of ballet's serious admirers considered it to be, by its very nature, a foreign art that could never put down roots in the United States.

Because of the lack of permanent American companies, there was little sustained creative development. Standards of dance training also varied alarmingly from city to city. Some unscrupulous teachers put tiny children *en pointe*, which threatened them with serious physical injury, and certain dancing schools did little more than teach acrobatic tricks to showgirls seeking jobs in Broadway musicals. Fortunately, there were also serious, talented, and dedicated teachers who dreamed of a time when there would be a real American ballet.

Although companies with serious repertoires may not have existed, ballet dancers were often popular in the musical the-

atre. One such star was Bessie Clayton, a pupil of George Washington Smith, who in 1894 married Julian Mitchell, Broadway's highest paid choreographer in the early years of the twentieth century and the director-choreographer for the first seven years of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, the enormously successful series of revues that began in 1907. A blonde, blue-eyed, elfin dancer, Clayton reminded some viewers of Adeline Genée and, like that Danish ballerina, she spent most of her career in musicals and vaudeville productions. During the height of her fame, from 1895 to 1915, Clayton charmed audiences with a number of specialty dances, including a version of the cakewalk performed in ballet slippers that emphasized both *pointe* steps and, during the traditional cakewalk strut, deep backbends.

As the twentieth century progressed, ballet dancing in Broadway shows was often eclipsed by tap dancing and by the ballroom dance teams that had been formed after Vernon and Irene Castle achieved enormous popularity through their appearances in Irving Berlin's show, *Watch Your Step*, in 1914. Nevertheless, one of the greatest musical comedy stars of the 1920s was another ballet-trained dancer, Marilyn Miller, who captivated audiences in productions such as *Sally* (1920), *Sunny* (1925), and *Rosalie* (1928). No other female dance star was as popular on Broadway until Gwen Verdon appeared on the scene in the 1950s.

One of the leading Broadway choreographers of the 1920s and 1930s was Albertina Rasch, an Austrian dancer trained at the Imperial Ballet School in Vienna who opened her own ballet school in New York in 1923. Rasch organized highly disciplined groups of six to twenty women who could be hired out as units to dance in musical comedies, revues, or "prologs," the fancy stage shows that preceded the motion pictures in the more grandiose movie palaces. If Rasch's ballet numbers were seldom more than light entertainment, they were skillfully assembled and Rasch, who was fascinated with American culture, incorporated jazz movements into some of her works. In 1929 she choreographed a complete ballet to Gershwin's "An American in Paris" for *Show Girl*, a musical starring Ruby Keeler and Jimmy Durante that also featured Harriet Hoctor, a ballet

dancer who, like Bessie Clayton before her, was famous for her backbends.

As for serious ballet attractions, in the early twentieth century, America saw performances by Anna Pavlova, Mikhail Mordkin, and the Diaghilev Ballet. After World War I and the Russian Revolution, many Russian dancers—among them Fokine, Mordkin, and Bolm—settled in the United States and from 1927 to 1930 Léonide Massine created dances for the spectacular stage shows at New York City's Roxy Theatre.

Some of the Europeans who settled here began to champion their American pupils. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s Fokine put together a technically able company composed of his best New York students. In his choreography, however, it could be argued that Fokine never fully adjusted to the New World: his *Thunder Bird*, although based on Aztec mythology, used music by several Russian composers, including Alexander Borodin and Mikhail Glinka.

In contrast, America appears to have stimulated the choreographic and organizational abilities of Adolph Bolm. He staged many successful ballets in Chicago, including *Krazy Kat* (1920), which was based on a popular comic strip of the time. Chicago in the 1920s was also the home of the Pavley-Oukrainsky Ballet, a touring group headed by Andreas Pavley and Serge Oukrainsky. The presence of such choreographers in Chicago helped to make that city an important ballet capital from World War I to the outbreak of World War II. American-born choreographers began to work in Chicago, including Ruth Page, a pupil of Bolm, and Bentley Stone and Walter Camryn, who established a respected school.

After moving to California, Bolm was appointed ballet master of the San Francisco Opera and in 1933 he founded the company that survives today as the San Francisco Ballet. In 1937, when Willam Christensen took over as director, the company began its long and fruitful association with the Christensens, three dancing brothers from Utah. For many years, Harold Christensen headed the company's school. When Willam left San Francisco to found a ballet department at the University of

Utah in 1951, Lew Christensen took over the San Francisco Ballet. In 1973 he appointed Michael Smuin as codirector, and in 1985 Helgi Tomasson became director. In Utah, Willam Christensen's activities at the university led to the establishment of a professional company, Ballet West.

Philadelphia also had its heyday as a ballet center. It was there that Catherine and Dorothie Littlefield established a company—variously known as the Philadelphia Ballet and the Littlefield Ballet—that flourished during the 1930s. By dancing in Paris, Brussels, and London in 1937, it became the first American ballet company to tour Europe.

One of the most important figures in the New York ballet world has been Lincoln Kirstein, a man who, like Diaghilev, could call himself neither a dancer nor a choreographer. Although he has been a novelist, a poet, and a critic, he has always been haunted by ballet. One of the saddest occasions of his childhood was the day when his parents decided that, since he was only nine, he was too young to see Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. At last, in 1924 when he was seventeen, he did see that company and he felt as if he had reached the promised land.

Then, in 1929, he had an experience so strange that he could only interpret it as an omen. While sightseeing in Venice during a European visit, his wanderings brought him to a church, in front of which was moored a black gondola. Inside, Kirstein saw a crowd of mourners and, though he knew no one there, they looked curiously familiar. They had come to attend a funeral, which Kirstein discovered was being conducted according to the Eastern Orthodox liturgy. Only later did he learn that he had unwittingly attended the funeral of Diaghilev and that the mourners were Diaghilev's dancers.

There are those who would say that Kirstein eventually became an American Diaghilev. Yet, for all his respect for Diaghilev and his company, Kirstein was not content to be a fan of foreign dancers. He envisioned an American ballet company with a school attached to it that could train dancers in a distinctively American style. In 1933 he and a friend, Edward M. M. Warburg, decided to make that dream a reality. They

persuaded George Balanchine, the choreographer Kirstein most admired, to come to America to direct a new school and company. It was a risky prospect, but Balanchine was out of work and jobs were scarce during those Depression years. Balanchine accepted the offer, telling Kirstein that he would love to visit a country that had produced women as lovely as Ginger Rogers. On New Year's Day, 1934, the School of American Ballet opened in a Manhattan studio that had once belonged to Isadora Duncan. The students who enrolled ranged from experienced dancers who desired to appear with a serious ballet company to awkward beginners. Whatever the level of their training, all were enthusiastic and Balanchine soon started choreographing for them.

At first, his choreographic work-in-progress seemed to grow according to happenstance. Once, when he was rehearsing a passage in which the ensemble ran offstage, a dancer fell down. Balanchine kept the incident in his ballet. At another rehearsal, a dancer entered late. That too was incorporated into the choreography. The ballet that resulted from all this was *Serenade*, a tenderly lyrical abstract piece that many companies still perform.

When Balanchine had completed several works, the dancers offered a New York season in 1935, calling themselves the American Ballet. The repertoire, though small, contained several Balanchine creations that would be recognized as important—*Serenade*, *Errante*, and *Mozartiana*. Nevertheless, it failed to please John Martin, dance critic of the *New York Times*, who chided the company for what he called its decadent "Riviera esthetics." He even suggested that Balanchine should be dismissed. Martin, who reviewed dance for the *Times* from 1927 to 1962, was one of America's first major dance critics. Since he was intelligent, well informed, and totally devoted to dance, a denunciation from him was not to be taken lightly. In time, he came to support Balanchine. But for Martin in 1935, the American Ballet seemed insufficiently American. A review of some history may suggest why this was so.

The 1930s—from the Great Depression to the outbreak of World War II—were years of social upheaval and intense

nationalism. Political and economic troubles focused attention on working-class struggles, the plight of farmers, and the growth of labor unions, and Americans were urged to join together to achieve national unity. Because ballet was born in the courts of Europe, many people considered it an art for an oppressive aristocracy that had no place in democratic America. Instead of adopting ballet, these theorists argued, America should create a totally new dance.

The dance form they advocated was modern dance; and modern dance certainly deserved support. Yet if its partisans were right to claim its validity, they were wrong about ballet. Despite its origin in European courts and its emphasis on dignity of carriage (a virtue that need not be restricted to aristocrats), ballet does not inherently reflect any specific social system. Instead, it could be compared with a language. Just as English, German, and Spanish are, in themselves, neither moral nor immoral, they can be put to moral or immoral uses by the speakers and writers who employ them. Ballet is similarly flexible. In the seventeenth century it may have glorified monarchy; in our own century it has been used to praise communism. In its early days, ballet borrowed elements from elegant court ceremonies as well as from robust commedia dell'arte farces. Later, folk forms were translated into balletic character dances. Throughout history, imaginative choreographers have devised new balletic steps and have found fresh uses for old ones. Surviving both autocracies and proletarian revolutions, ballet has been able to depict princes and peasants, kings, commoners, and cowboys.

Balanchine and Kirstein persevered in the face of criticism, as did the pioneers in Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco. However, in the mid-1930s, all American ballet troupes found themselves confronted by a formidable rival: a company that prided itself on its glamour and Russianness. Wishing to perpetuate the Diaghilev tradition, René Blum and Col. Wassili de Basil formed the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1932, which was a sensation when it made its first American tour the following year. Balletgoers had legitimate reasons for rejoicing.

The company's repertoire included old favorites from the Diaghilev era and important new works by Léonide Massine. Some of Diaghilev's dancers, including the scintillating Alexandra Danilova, headed the roster. And there were three well-publicized teen-aged prodigies, the so-called "baby ballerinas": Tamara Toumanova, Irina Baronova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska. American ballet-lovers took them to their hearts, just as moviegoers adored child stars like Shirley Temple.

Blum and de Basil may have wished to be second Diaghilevs, but it soon became apparent that neither possessed Diaghilev's authority or his organizational skill. Factions arose and split off from the company, including one headed by Blum himself, and questions of legal rights to ballets became increasingly complex. In eight years, de Basil changed his company's name six times, at last settling on Original Ballet Russe. After 1938 his Ballet Russe was in direct competition with another Ballet Russe, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, which had been founded when Massine and a group of dancers became dissatisfied with de Basil. World War II separated both Ballets Russes from Europe. The Original Ballet Russe spent much of the war in Latin America, then returned to Europe and finally disbanded. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, under the direction of Sergei Denham, a Russian-born banker, toured the United States regularly until 1962, becoming in effect (if not in name) an American institution—and in many cities a beloved one. The managerial intrigues of both companies could serve as material for farce, if it were not for one tragic footnote: René Blum, a cultivated, much respected patron of the arts and the brother of French Socialist leader Léon Blum, died in a Nazi concentration camp.

Neither Ballet Russe attained the stature of the Diaghilev Ballet, and de Basil, Blum, and Denham may have learned through experience that Diaghilev was inimitable. Yet the two companies accomplished a great deal. By touring incessantly and emphasizing a sparkling dancing style, they introduced ballet to many people throughout North and South America. They helped Americans acquire the habit of balletgoing. And they also presented important ballets, particularly by Massine. The most durable have been *Le Beau Danube* and *Gaîté Parisienne*,

two frothy comedies. But Massine was also acclaimed for *St. Francis*, a retelling of legends about the medieval saint; and his most controversial productions of the 1930s were his "symphonic ballets," choreographic interpretations of famous symphonies. *Choreartium* was a massive abstraction to Brahms's Fourth Symphony. *Symphonie Fantastique*, to Berlioz's work of the same name, followed the composer's own scenario about a young artist's opium dreams. *Les Présages* (Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony) and *Rouge et Noir* (Shostakovitch's First Symphony) allegorically depicted the conflicting forces that can shape man's destiny, and *Seventh Symphony* (to Beethoven) was based on myths of the Creation.

Both de Basil and Denham increasingly employed American dancers, and Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo eventually consisted almost entirely of Americans. But because these directors' companies contained such words as "Russe" and "Monte Carlo" in their names, they may—especially in their earlier days—have reinforced the notion that ballet was a foreign art.

It is not surprising that in the 1930s Kirstein's American Ballet was in trouble: for lovers of modern dance it was not American enough; for some fans of the Ballet Russe it was too American. Nevertheless, it struggled along for several seasons as the resident ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera until Balanchine's unconventional choreography shocked conservative operagoers. Yet, if outraged socialites found Balanchine controversial, he managed to wow Broadway and Hollywood by producing dance sequences for musical comedies, such as *On Your Toes* (with its "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" gangster ballet) and *Babes in Arms*, and for films, such as *The Goldwyn Follies* and *I Was an Adventuress*. At a time when the choreographer of a Broadway show was usually referred to as a "dance director," Balanchine insisted on the now-familiar credit line of "choreography by . . . " in Broadway playbills.

To give his dancers additional employment and to encourage young American choreographers, Kirstein organized a second company, Ballet Caravan, in 1936. As titles such as *Pocahontas* and *Yankee Clipper* suggest, the repertoire featured American

themes and the company's choreographers sought to demonstrate that ballet was capable of treating American subject matter. Two works created by Ballet Caravan are still danced today. Lew Christensen's *Filling Station*, to a score by Virgil Thomson, is a ballet in the style of a comic strip; its hero is a filling-station attendant and other characters include truck drivers, passing motorists, and a gangster pursued by state troopers. Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid*, to music by Aaron Copland, juxtaposes scenes from the life of the notorious outlaw with panoramic depictions of the settling of the West to imply that, despite their superficial glamour, lawless characters like Billy cannot be tolerated if civil order is to prevail.

World War II forced both the American Ballet and Ballet Caravan to disband. Balanchine served briefly as a resident choreographer for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo during the war. With the coming of peace, he and Kirstein embarked in 1946 on a new project. They formed Ballet Society, a noncommercial organization designed to offer experimental works for a limited subscription audience. Two years later, Ballet Society presented some performances at the New York City Center of Music and Drama, an auditorium the city acquired in 1943 to be a performing arts center with its own resident opera and theatre companies. The company so impressed Morton Baum, chairman of the City Center finance committee, that he offered to make Ballet Society an official part of City Center, even though a friend who remembered the financially beleaguered American Ballet warned him, "You play around with Balanchine and Kirstein and you'll lose your shirt." Kirstein in turn was struck speechless by Baum's offer. Then he replied, "If you do that for us, I will give you in three years the finest ballet company in America."

Many dance writers would say he kept his promise. The New York City Ballet, as Ballet Society was renamed, is now considered one of the world's great dance companies and since 1964 has had handsome quarters in the New York State Theater of Lincoln Center. Although many choreographers have produced works for the company, the repertoire has always been dominated by Balanchine and it was Balanchine who was respon-

sible for the company's distinctive style. A prolific, even-tempered, and imperturbable worker, Balanchine created ballets in a steady flow of inspiration, saying that his muse came to him "on union time." Even if critics used flowery language to describe his ballets, he eschewed rhetoric when he talked about choreography, preferring to liken his craft to skills such as carpentry and cooking.

Balanchine's ballets range from a serene *Orpheus* to a sprightly adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Yet Balanchine was best known for his plotless, or abstract, ballets. He did not invent the abstract ballet—Fokine probably did that with *Les Sylphides*—but no other choreographer explored this genre more thoroughly. Despite his ability to tell effective balletic stories when he chose to do so, he was essentially an anti-literary choreographer. "Why should we do Shakespeare?" he once remarked. "Shakespeare's already done Shakespeare." Balanchine often removed elaborate settings and costumes as well as complicated plots from his ballets. Instead, he put his faith in the power and beauty of movement, and his faith was deep.

The steps in Balanchine's abstractions were always closely interwoven with the music, yet these ballets were more than animated music appreciation lessons. Each of his abstractions reflected Balanchine's personal response to a score. Balanchine once termed music a "floor for dancing," and using music as a solid base he was capable of building remarkable choreographic structures. The rigor of Bach's Concerto for Two Violins is reflected in the crisp, bracing *Concerto Barocco.* The choreography for *Divertimento No. 15* is as gracious as its Mozart score. *Kammermusik No. 2,* to Hindemith, has the power and energy of some complex machine.

Newcomers to Balanchine need not feel intimidated by the word "abstract." One does not have to master erudite theories to appreciate his choreography; one need only watch closely as the choreography proceeds. Through changes of movement quality, it often evokes moods or personal relationships. The movement may be tense or relaxed, abrupt or flowing, carefree or somber; and the ways the dancers move in space may suggest love or hate, attraction or repulsion. Patterns form and dissolve and the sum of these patterns gives each ballet its particular emotional character. For example, the steps in *The Four Temperaments* (Hindemith) look as enigmatic as the symbols of a medieval alchemist. One episode of *Scotch Symphony* (Mendelssohn) introduces a woman who seems as ethereal as any sylphide of the Romantic era; the ballet can therefore be interpreted as a tribute to Romanticism. *Liebeslieder Walzer* (Brahms) simply shows young people waltzing in a ballroom. Yet the shifting patterns of their waltzes hint at flirtations, infatuations, and lovers' pangs.

Balanchine's movement vocabulary is that of classical ballet inherited from Petipa, and in homage to his Maryinsky training Balanchine produced his own versions of scenes from *Raymonda* and *Swan Lake.* But when he used contemporary music he often distorted academic technique with unexpected shifts of weight or energy—not merely to shock, but to revitalize tradition, just as a poet may revitalize language by putting familiar words or verse forms to new and unexpected uses. Among modern composers, Balanchine particularly admired Stravinsky and set ballets both to concert works by Stravinsky and to scores especially written for the dance. The most famous Balanchine-Stravinsky collaboration is probably *Agon* (1957). Its title is the Greek word for "contest," and it could be regarded as a set of games or athletic events—Olympian games for young gods—because the ballet's atmosphere is so electric and the dancers triumph without ever losing their elegance. *Agon* is sometimes regarded as one work in a trilogy of Balanchine-Stravinsky ballets deriving from Greek sources, the others being *Apollo* (1928) and *Orpheus* (1948). Each celebrates the civilizing powers of art, *Apollo* and *Orpheus* expressing this idea through stories drawn from mythology, *Agon* doing so abstractly.

Although Russian-born, Balanchine admired America's vigor and physicality and the freshness of the American people at their best. Occasionally, he made use of specific American themes in his works. He created ballets to Sousa marches (*Stars and Stripes*) and Gershwin songs (*Who Cares?*), and his *Square*

Dance ingeniously combines classical steps, square dance patterns, and Baroque music. Even at their most nonrepresentational, Balanchine's works could still be considered American in spirit because of their energy and athleticism. Their language may be classical, but Balanchine choreographed classical ballets with an American accent.

After Balanchine's death in 1983, Lincoln Kirstein continued as general director of the New York City Ballet and Peter Martins and Jerome Robbins were named ballet-masters-in-chief. Both Martins, who became sole ballet master, and Robbins have contributed new works to the repertoire, and the company has preserved its legacy of Balanchine ballets.

America's other large-scale ballet company is American Ballet Theatre, founded in 1939 as Ballet Theatre. The company was an outgrowth of the Mordkin Ballet, a group directed by Mikhail Mordkin that offered familiar classics and new works choreographed by Mordkin in a traditional Russian style. But Richard Pleasant, Ballet Theatre's first director, had bolder ambitions. He dreamed of a company that, like a great art museum, could offer significant examples of many styles and historical periods. Therefore, for Ballet Theatre's first season in 1940, Pleasant assembled works by eleven choreographers, ranging from masters such as Fokine and Nijinska to comparative unknowns. After Pleasant entered military service in World War II, the company was run by several directors and managers until Lucia Chase and the scene designer Oliver Smith became codirectors in 1945. As a wealthy young widow, Chase had become seriously interested in dance and had appeared with the Mordkin Ballet. She helped finance Ballet Theatre's first season and continued to contribute to the company in the seasons that followed. Entering the dance field as a rich amateur, she became a thorough professional, single-minded in her devotion to ballet. When Chase and Smith retired as directors in 1980, they were succeeded by the Russian-born, Kirov-trained Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the great male dancers of our century. Baryshnikov left American Ballet

Theatre in 1989 and was replaced by a new team of codirectors: Jane Hermann and, in a return to the company, Oliver Smith. In late 1992, Jane Hermann resigned.

Over the years, American Ballet Theatre has tried to remain true to the spirit of Pleasant's original concept, and its directors have often characterized it as a museum of the dance. It has produced classics, such as *Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, Giselle, La Sylphide, Les Sylphides, Petrouchka,* and *La Bayadère;* it has commissioned new ballets, and has revived contemporary works first staged by other organizations—among them Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid,* created for Ballet Caravan in 1938, and Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo,* which received its world premiere by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942.

The year 1942 was a significant one for American ballet, for *Rodeo*'s production by the Ballet Russe was a sign that the company, separated by war from Europe, was willing to Americanize itself. *Rodeo,* to a score by Aaron Copland, tells of a tomboyish cowgirl who realizes that, to compete with frilly young ladies for the attention of the ranch hands, she too has to dress in a ladylike fashion. An ingenious device employed in both *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid* is the use of a bowlegged, bent-kneed stance to make the dancers resemble cowboys riding horses.

Granddaughter of economist Henry George, daughter of writer-director William C. de Mille, and niece of movie director Cecil B. deMille, Agnes de Mille has been particularly interested in the introduction of American subject matter into ballet. One of her best-known pieces for American Ballet Theatre is *Fall River Legend,* based on the story of Lizzie Borden, the shy New England woman who, in a sensational murder trial, was accused of killing her father and stepmother. De Mille has also choreographed many successful musical comedies, including *Oklahoma!, Bloomer Girl,* and *Carousel.*

The most influential of these shows was *Oklahoma!* (1943), the Western musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II that de Mille was invited to choreograph because of the success of her cowboy ballet, *Rodeo,* the previous year. All of

de Mille's dances for the show possessed gusto. But the one that prompted the most comment was "Laurie Makes Up Her Mind," a miniature ballet in which, during a dream, the heroine (represented here by a dancing alter ego) comes to terms with her feelings about two young men.

The creators of the best musical comedies of the past had always tried to establish believable pretexts for dance numbers. But admirers of "Laurie" claimed that it significantly advanced the show's plot, and de Mille was lauded for having integrated dance with the production's dramatic values. As a result, some critics declared that *Oklahoma!* revealed the growing sophistication of the American musical. Yet it could also be argued that the older musicals possessed a sophistication of their own because of the way plot, songs, dances, and comedy routines were skillfully treated in them as separate but equal components of a total theatrical entity, just as mime and dance existed as separate parts of a Petipa ballet. Given the vigor of *Oklahoma!*, such arguments would have sounded merely theoretical to audiences of 1943; *Oklahoma!* established a trend, and for a decade or more miniature ballets were important parts of many Broadway musicals.

Of all foreign choreographers introduced to American audiences by Ballet Theatre, the most important has been British-born Antony Tudor, who was a clerk in London's Smithfield Market until performances by Pavlova and the Diaghilev Ballet made him decide to study dance. He soon attempted choreography, creating works such as *The Planets*, *The Descent of Hebe*, and his first masterpieces, *Jardin aux Lilas* and *Dark Elegies*, in England before leaving for New York to participate in Ballet Theatre's debut season.

Like Balanchine, Tudor extended the range of ballet—but in a totally different direction. Whereas Balanchine often gloried in movement for its own beauty, Tudor used movement to explore psychological states. Through movement, he made thoughts and feelings visible, thereby enriching the possibilities of narrative ballet. Tudor's ballets—there are not many, for he was a painstaking craftsman—always employ the classical

vocabulary, yet he could modify traditional steps to suggest the changes of a character's mind or the way that character may be pulled by conflicting desires. For Tudor, small gestures could be as significant as big leaps and he made the wave of a hand or the flick of a wrist reveal much about a person.

Tudor's ballets often combine psychological insight with social comment. *Jardin aux Lilas* (*Lilac Garden*) concerns a woman about to be wed in a marriage of convenience to a man she does not love. Among the guests at a party in her honor are both the man she loves and her husband's former mistress. The ballet becomes a series of furtive meetings and hasty partings, the characters always taking care to conceal their true feelings behind a mask of polite manners. The final irony of the situation is that, although these people are well-to-do, their concern for social position hinders them in their search for personal happiness. *Pillar of Fire* depicts the anguish of a shy woman who fears spinsterhood; because she wrongly suspects that the man she loves does not love her, she commits what her prim neighbors would call a moral indiscretion with another man. Other major works by Tudor include *Undertow*, an examination of the social and psychological forces that cause a young man from the slums to commit a sex crime; *Dark Elegies*, a ritual of mourning; and *Romeo and Juliet*, a choreographic adaptation of Shakespeare's play that often resembles a set of Renaissance paintings in motion. Whereas Balanchine emphasized the extroversion of American dancers, Tudor concerned himself with the direct expression of personal feelings. Together, they have profoundly influenced American ballet style.

So has New York–born Jerome Robbins, whose first work, *Fancy Free* (to music by Leonard Bernstein), was an immediate hit at its premiere by Ballet Theatre in 1944. Its plot was as simple as it was genial—three sailors on shore leave during World War II try to pick up some girls—but it was tightly constructed and demonstrated Robbins's ability to fuse ballet with Broadway, jazz, Harlem, and Hollywood dance styles. If its World War II setting now makes *Fancy Free* seem a "period piece," its sense of fun has not dimmed.

Fancy Free's mixture of classical and popular dance idioms is typical of Robbins's approach to choreography. Working for both American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet, he has been thematically and stylistically eclectic. His *Interplay* is a perky jazz suite. *Afternoon of a Faun*, his meditation on themes from Nijinsky's ballet, transforms the faun into a young dancer rehearsing in a studio. *Moves* is a ballet in silence that appears to be abstract, but that proves rich in emotional implications. *Dances at a Gathering*, to Chopin piano music, is also plotless. Nevertheless, its witty and tender episodes suggest much about human relationships. *The Cage* created a scandal at its premiere in 1951 because it implied that the way female insects such as the mantis devour their male partners after mating may have parallels in human behavior. In contrast, *Ma Mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*) is a sweetly whimsical and deliberately childlike retelling of old French fairy tales; and in *Glass Pieces* Robbins has made a balletic commentary on the experimental "minimalist" music of Philip Glass. Robbins's theatricality has also helped him become an important choreographer and stage director on Broadway, where his successes have included *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Thanks to the influence of Robbins—and of de Mille, who has also both stage-directed and choreographed Broadway productions—choreographers are now often asked to direct musicals as well as to create dances for them.

Conceivably, the fascination with divergent dance styles that Robbins has always displayed could only have developed in a nation like America that was settled by people of many cultural and social backgrounds. Equally eclectic in his choreographic approach is Eliot Feld, whose choreographic debut, *Harbinger*, was presented by American Ballet Theatre in 1967. He now heads his own Feld Ballets/NY and his creations over the years have ranged from the lyricism of *Intermezzo* to the horseplay of *The Jig Is Up*.

Feld's company is one of several important smaller ballet troupes. Another is the Joffrey Ballet, which Robert Joffrey founded in 1956 when he and a few dancers rented a station

wagon and went off on a tour of one-night stands. Despite adversity, the company persisted, then prospered; in addition to touring, it has given long seasons in two home cities, New York and Los Angeles. In its choice of repertoire, the company exhibits an intriguing split personality. On the one hand, some of its ballets have been deliberately trendy and topical: Joffrey's *Astarte* was a mixed-media spectacular that combined live dancers with films and psychedelic lighting effects; Gerald Arpino's *Trinity* paid tribute to the peace movement and "flower power" generation of the 1960s; Arpino's *Jamboree*, a festive ballet on Southwestern themes, was commissioned by the city of San Antonio, Texas. On the other hand, despite Joffrey's untimely death in 1988, the company continues to offer a representative sampling of time-tested works by Bournonville, Fokine, Massine, Balanchine, and Robbins, as well as *The Green Table*, an antiwar ballet by the German Expressionist choreographer Kurt Jooss. Contrasting satirical scenes of bombastic diplomats gathered around a conference table with grim vignettes showing the devastation of war, *The Green Table*, choreographed in 1932, was obviously inspired by World War I. Unfortunately, given the political state of the world, it continues to seem all too timely.

At the turn of the century, American ballet was insignificant. Less than 100 years later, America has now become, along with England and Russia, one of the "big three" nations of the ballet world and the one in which ballet is most diversified in its manifestations. Like American culture as a whole, American ballet has absorbed many influences.

In addition to the groups mentioned, there have been touring companies organized by the art patron Rebekah Harkness bearing the name Harkness Ballet. Outside New York, professional companies have developed in many cities. Among them are the Boston Ballet, the Pennsylvania Ballet of Philadelphia, the Washington Ballet, the Cleveland Ballet, the Cincinnati Ballet, the Atlanta Ballet, Ballet West of Salt Lake City, the Hartford Ballet, the Houston Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet, and Pacific Northwest Ballet of Seattle.

In 1968, Arthur Mitchell, a leading dancer of the New York City Ballet, founded Dance Theatre of Harlem to demonstrate that, contrary to the claims of the bigoted or the misinformed, blacks were capable of excelling in classical ballet. Since then, Mitchell's company has been a success both in America and abroad. Not only has it commissioned new works, but it has also offered ballets such as Fokine's *Schéhérazade*, Nijinska's *Les Biches*, and the second act of *Swan Lake*. One of its most ambitious productions is what has been called a Creole *Giselle*. Staged by Frederic Franklin, who had been a *premier danseur* of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, this version preserves *Giselle*'s traditional choreography, but transplants the action to the Louisiana bayous in the nineteenth century.

An enormously important, if unexpected, influence on American ballet has been modern dance. Some of the modern dance pioneers may have scorned ballet and some of their balletic contemporaries may initially have been mystified by modern dance. Yet modern dance choreographers have done much to enliven the ballet repertoire. As far back as 1947, Valerie Bettis created a work for Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and Merce Cunningham choreographed for Ballet Society. Since then, Cunningham has staged pieces for both American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet. A work by Paul Taylor has been danced by American Ballet Theatre, and Twyla Tharp, once considered an almost mathematically complex choreographer, has entertained large audiences with her productions for the Joffrey Ballet and American Ballet Theatre; in 1984 she and Jerome Robbins collaborated on *Brahms/Handel* for the New York City Ballet. During the course of the twentieth century, America has developed two principal forms of theatrical dancing: ballet and modern dance. From antagonistic beginnings, they have come to be on friendly terms.

Related Readings

Lincoln Kirstein on American Style

The American style will not imitate the Russian, but instead be its equivalent for our time and place. Our legitimate reflection of a Democracy is of necessity not distant, but immediately intimate. There is *pride* in both styles, the awareness of the human body in all of its super-human released essential energy I leave with my readers their choice of future style in the dance. The choice ultimately depends among other things on which political or economic system has the best bet in America. American style springs or should spring from our own training and environment, which was not an Imperial School or a Parisian imitation of it. Ours is a style bred also from basket-ball courts, track and swimming meets and junior-proms. Our style springs from the personal atmosphere of recognizable American types as exemplified by the behavior of movie-stars like Ginger Rogers, Carole Lombard, or the late Jean Harlow. It is frank, open, fresh and friendly. It can be funny without seeming arch, and serious without seeming pained. These actors or dancers like them, wish to establish a direct connection, approaching personal intimacy or its theat-

rical equivalent with their audiences, like Helen Morgan perched on her piano, or Paul Draper appearing not as a dancing-entertainer, but as an artist-guest and host from his own dance-floor.

The Russians keep their audience at arm's length. We almost invite ours to dance with us. Anyone of us would like to know Fred Astaire, since we have known other nice, clever but unassuming boys like him. The same is true of Paul Haakon's clean, manly brilliance, his brilliant apparition like a pocket-Hercules; Buddy Ebsen, a contemporary Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett, seems to have just hoofed out of the sticks; and Ray Bolger is the eccentric dancer's paragon for the "Tin Man of Oz." These dancers have the American style, and so has the cynical footwork of Donald Duck and Popeye, the Sailor. It is this kind of feeling we will have to find and accentuate in order to provide American dancers with their best background, and American dance audiences with their best entertainment.

(Lincoln Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*. New York, 1938, pp. 44–45; also in his *Ballet: Bias and Belief*. New York: Dance Horizons, 1983, pp. 200–201)

Balanchine on Abstract Ballet

I am so often told that my choreographic creations are "abstract." Does abstract mean that there is no story, no literary image, at best a general idea which remains untranslated in terms of reality? Does it mean the presentation of sound and movement, of unrelated conceptions and symbols in a disembodied state?

I said on another occasion that no piece of music, no dance can in itself be abstract. You hear a physical sound, humanly organized, performed by people, or you see moving before you dancers of flesh and blood in a living relation to each other. What you hear and see is completely real. But the after-image that remains with the observer may have for him the quality of an abstraction. Music, through the force of its

invention, leaves strong after-images. I myself think of Stravinsky's *Apollon*, for instance, as white music, in places as white-on-white. . . .

For me whiteness is something positive (it has in itself an essence) and is, at the same time, abstract. Such a quality exerts great power over me when I am creating a dance; it is the music's final communication and fixes the pitch that determines my own invention.

Some choreographers seem to be so uncertain of their own medium that not only do they seek the ballet that "has a story" but they also have the story told in words. To me these are no longer ballets, they are choreographic plays. Any amplification necessary must come from the music which may, at times, make use of a chorus. Much can be said in movement that cannot be expressed by words. Movement must be self-explanatory. If it isn't, it has failed.

The dance has its own means of telling a story and need not invade the field of the drama or the cinema. The quality of the movement and the choreographic idea decide whether the story is understandable. In most cases, the criterion of success or failure lies in the choice of the subject matter.

Music is often adjectived as being too abstract. This is a vague and dangerous use of words and as unclear to me as when my ballets are described that way. Neither a symphony nor a fugue nor a sonata ever strikes me as being abstract. It is very real to me, very concrete, though "storyless." But storyless is not abstract. Two dancers on the stage are enough material for a story; for me, they are already a story in themselves.

(George Balanchine, "Marginal Notes on the Dance," in Walter Sorell, ed., *The Dance Has Many Faces*. 3rd ed. Pennington, N.J.: a cappella books, 1992, pp. 98–99)

The Ideals of Ballet Theatre

1. There already exist opera theatres, symphony theatres, sports, moving-picture, painting and dramatic theatres. In

each of these cases the term, "theatre," is inclusive. . . . All the dramas, all the comedies, all the burlesques, all the revues during a certain period make up what we call that season's Theatre.

2. Ballet Theatre, accordingly, is incomplete if director or audience, because of personal preference or prejudice, narrows the concept of theatrical dance as a whole. From the whole being greater than any of its parts, comes the Ballet Theatre conviction that the whole must never be ruled by any of its parts, no matter how great. This applies not only to individuals but also to types and styles of dancing.

3. The Gallery Idea is a translation from museum to dance terms of a system which can comprehend the collection and display of masterpieces of all times, places and creators with the provision that they attain a certain standard of excellence. The Ballet Theatre's first repertory was not a random collection, but an attempt to show at least one masterpiece from each of the greater periods. . . .

4. . . . Ballets are the most ephemeral of art works because they can always disappear when the mind that remembers them dies. Ballet Theatre has assumed the duty of keeping for this time and this place the most authentic copies of the best of the past. Not only have they intrinsic interest but they are a constant admonitory standard to the young dancer and choreographer of today.

5. A true ballet theatre cannot stop with being a collector. Its duty to the present is to be a contemporary Lorenzo di Medici to choreographers, designers, composers who require as material a company for creating the classics of tomorrow. The past must not be let to die; neither should the present.

6. Ballet is a community art. . . . A ballet director does well to consider himself the mayor of a small community and in recognition of this Ballet Theatre dancers are chosen for citizenship as well as for dancing ability.

7. Citizenship is fostered by Fair Play, sometimes called Democracy. It means in general the right in every individual to advance as far as his native abilities, enhanced by uniform

educational opportunities, will allow. To Ballet Theatre it means alternation of roles, suppression of favoritism, etc.

8. No artistic dictatorship is a Ballet Theatre policy. No one choreographer has artistic, financial or political control over the work of another choreographer. . . .

9. A financial freedom as well as moral freedom. At the outset Ballet Theatre unionized its own dancers. . . . dancers (contrary to a romantic fallacy Ballet Theatre tries hard to kill) prefer to be freestanding individuals, earning salaries rather than favors and, by this self-respect, they expand as artists.

(Unsigned statement in Ballet Theatre souvenir program, 1941)

Working with Tudor

You can't be a dancer in Tudor ballets. Everything is based on classical technique, but it must look non-existent. The structure is emotional; the technique is twisted, disguised. The flow of the movement phrase must never be broken, and this is what makes his choreography so difficult technically. He may want—and expect you to be able to do—four pirouettes, but you can't let the preparation for the pirouettes show. The turns are part of a phrase that may be saying "I love you, Juliet," and you must not interrupt that phrase to take a fourth position preparation, because then you are paying attention to yourself as a dancer and not to Juliet.

Tudor sometimes seems hard and vicious, but he has respect for his performers. You are not his tool; his string-pulling lets you be alive on the stage. You must be serious and dedicated, because he demands that you enter completely into a role. Once he knows you understand the character, he will trust you creatively. He never set my final walk-off—now a quite famous one—in "Pillar of Fire." I knew there had to be something vulgar and nasty in it, and some-

thing of the arrogance of a strutting sailor. So I just walked, with hips tight and shoulders up, and Tudor said that was just right.

(Hugh Laing, Interview by Selma Jeanne Cohen. *Dance Perspectives* 18, 1963, 79)

British dancer Hugh Laing (1911–1988) worked with Tudor in both London and New York. He portrayed major roles in the premieres of many important Tudor ballets, including *Jardin aux Lilas* and *Pillar of Fire*.