
History

Classical ballet was almost two hundred years old when the American colonies began their dance history. One of the earliest recorded theatrical performances in the colonies was in Charleston, South Carolina, 1735. The early settlers brought their native folk dances with them, English minuets, gavottes and Scottish country dancing. Baltimore is created with having a dance academy by 1782, Philadelphia had three schools by the 1820s, and New York boasted of many theatrical entertainments.

John Durang (1768-1822) was born in Pennsylvania and is considered America's first dancer. He became a showman of many talents including acting, singing, pantomime, clowning on horseback, and dancing on a tightrope. He also played several instruments.

The influx of foreign dancers grew and many European dancers, mostly husband and wife teams, opened dancing schools. In the early 1800s the American audience saw its first pointe technique by the French ballerina Francisque Hutin.

Ballet's Romantic Era was in full bloom in Europe with its stars Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler, Fanny Cerito, Carlotta Grisi and Lucile Grahn. Of these, Fanny Elssler's two-year stay in America did most to fever the rise of ballet

there. She arrived in New York in 1840 and at her first performance, the audience stood and cheered as bouquets and wreaths were piled onto the stage – before she had danced. When Elssler returned to Europe, she left a new standard for ballet in America.

Philadelphia teacher Paul Hazard, formerly of the Paris Opéra, trained three students who became nationally and internationally acclaimed dancers. America's first ballerina, Mary Ann Lee (1823-1899), was a lyric dancer. Furthering her training at the Paris Opéra, she studied with Coralli, one of the choreographers of the ballet "Giselle". Lee was the first American ballerina to dance "Giselle" in its first authentic performance in the United States partnered by George Washington Smith as Albrecht.

Hazard's pupil Augusta Maywood (1825-1876) was also accepted for further training by the Académie in Paris. Noted as a virtuoso dancer, she captured hearts in Paris, Vienna and in Milan as prima ballerina assoluta at La Scala. America's first international ballerina was the only American to dance at the Paris Opéra until Maria Tallchief in 1947, a little over one hundred years later.

The third Philadelphian pupil of Hazard was George Washington Smith

(1820-1899). He danced as America's first Albrecht with Mary Ann Lee in "Giselle" and danced with the Fanny Elssler troupe as it toured the States. His long and distinguished career spanned the Civil War years (1860-65) when interest in dance was not very high.

Little was done in the U.S. to help establish ballet as an art during this period. It became the background movement around star singers, or before trained animal acts. Dance and theatre in America were having a hard time. Audiences wanted more of the girl's legs to show. Dancers were thought to be scandalous and theatre in general gave all a bad reputation. But out of these early performances in music halls, burlesque and vaudeville grew the truly American forms of dance and theatre – Broadway musicals, jazz and modern dance techniques, and eventually ballet.

1883 ushered in a new cultural era with the building of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. The Met established its first ballet school in 1909. Ragtime music was all the rage and the Jazz Age was beginning.

But in 1910 Anna Pavlova also mesmerized the world. In America, she transformed ballet into something that was not just for crown heads or heads of state, but an art that could be seen and enjoyed by thousands and thousands of people. Pavlova's greatest talent was her ability to convey the very essence of the creature, real or fairytale, that she portrayed

through dance. Her magic sent little girls all over the country swarming into dance schools.

From the ranks of the great impresario Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, the future of ballet in the western world would be carried on into the present. America's ballet history would be influenced by such stars as Mikhail Mordkin (1881-1944), Adolph Bolm (1884-1951), Michel Fokine (1880-1942), and George Balanchine (1904-1983).

A new wave of freedom of movement and expression was being created by breaking the boundaries of classic ballet technique. Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), Loie Fuller (1862-1928), Ruth St. Denis (1880-1968), and Ted Shawn (1891-1972) were exploring and refining this "modern" way of dancing. Martha Graham (1894-1991) introduced a new discipline based on the contraction of muscles.

As the modern dance movement was developing in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, classical ballet in the United States was growing. Catherine Littlefield, Ruth Page, and the Christensen brothers (Willam, Harold and Lew) all nursed the planted seeds which linked their talents to the future of ballet in Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Salt Lake City.

World War I (1914-1918) caused dancers to flee Russia and Europe to tour in South America, while others began to settle in England and the United States.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a very direct effect on the ballet world. The legacies of those who had been part of the Diaghilev era were passed on, and the next generation of teachers and dancers spread the world of ballet into most every major city in the world.

One great part in the weaving of the American history of ballet is the influence of the Ballets Russes. On cross-country tours, the familiar names in ballet from abroad – Léonide Massine, Alexandra Danilova, Frederic Franklin, André Eglevsky, Igor Youskevitch, Alicia Alonso and more – won the hearts of Americans. After a while, many of these tours began to include home-grown and home-trained American dancers.

Ballet choreographers were influenced by the modern dance movements and the Jazz Age. New American ballet choreographers like Eugene Loring (1914-1982) and Agnes de Mille (1905-1993) began with the unheard of use of natural movements to emphasize familiar things. Cowboys riding horses and rodeo roping tricks from Loring's "Billy The Kid" (1938) and de Mille's "Rodeo" (1942) led the way. Agnes de Mille broke all the established rules of dance on the Broadway stage by her use of dance to strengthen the story line of the musicals "Oklahoma" (1943), "Carousel" (1945) and "Brigadoon" (1946). Her "Fall River Legend" (1948) followed in the footsteps of Antony Tudor (1908-1987) who had given birth to the "psychological" ballets

as emotional outlets for social story lines rather than the usual fluffy fairytales of past ballet eras. Tudor's first ballet in this style was "Jardin aux Lilas" ("Lilac Garden") in 1936 and the first one he created in the United States was "Pillar Of Fire" (1942).

Jerome Robbins furthered the use of influences from outside the boundaries of classical ballet. Using modern dance, jazz movements, Latin rhythms, and Americana themes, he choreographed "Fancy Free" in 1944. His now classic Broadway musicals include "West Side Story", "The King And I", "Peter Pan", "Gypsy", and "Fiddler On The Roof". His choreographic work in ballet is well established with "Afternoon Of A Faun", "Dances At A Gathering", "The Four Seasons", "The Goldberg Variations", and many more.

The whole dance scene had changed and ballet continued to incorporate the creative explorations of other innovative choreographers like José Limón ("The Moor's Pavane", 1949); Robert Joffrey ("Astarte", 1967); Gerald Arpino ("Trinity", 1969), and Twyla Tharp ("Push Comes To Shove", 1976) to name only a few.

World War II (1939-1945) caused more disruptions and changes for the ballet world. Some of the choreography in Balanchine's work reflects the lack of men during this period. He is created with being a choreographer for females, but he

said that he created his dances using who was available to him and how many of them showed up at that time. They were mostly females. If three showed up, he created a pas de trois. If twelve showed up, he'd set a dance for the corps de ballet.

With the establishment of American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet, America now had two leaders on the world stage. Middle America had been exposed to the touring companies and soon demanded their own schools and companies. After World War II, the regional dance movement began to demonstrate that dance opportunities were available outside the hub of New York City.

Many dancers of varied ethnic backgrounds contributed to the history of American ballet. Native American Maria Tallchief was the first American ballerina to dance at the Paris Opéra since Augusta Maywood over one hundred years earlier. Arthur Mitchell was the first African-American dancer to be accepted into a classical ballet company on the world stage – Balanchine's New York City Ballet. In 1969 he was the driving force in creating, with Karel Shook, the school and company known worldwide as Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Ballet grew and improved in the United States and by the '50s many American dancers had become world famous. The Cold War continued between the USSR and the West. American impre-

sario Sol Hurok had been able to open a cultural exchange program, but the thawing of the Cold War was too slow for some and "leaps to freedom" began to attract world attention. Starting in 1953, defections to the West made headlines for many dancers and teachers such as Nora Kovach, Istavan Rabovsky, Galina and Valery Panov, Natalia Makarova, Alexander Godunov, Valentina Kozlov and Leonid Kozlov. But the shock waves felt around the world were by the defections in 1961 of Rudolph Nureyev (1938-1993) and in 1974 by Mikhail Baryshnikov (1948-).

Ballet began to rise in popularity and, together, these two male dancers made their names household words as they led the ballet world. Each pushed the boundaries of ballet, becoming superstars in other fields as well – modern dance, films, television and Broadway.

Modern communications technology has brought ballet to more people than ever before. New dancers and choreographers are constantly appearing on the scene. Fresh approaches to music, classical and modern, are being fashioned by Peter Martins, Mark Morris, Twyla Tharp and many others. Now, with the end of the communist regimes, a new wave of migration by the dancers and teachers of Russia is being felt here in America. And many new not-yet-famous names are hard at work in companies across the United States. Ballet, it seems, is assured of an interesting future.