

Dance History – a brief overview

French Court spectacles of the 16th & 17th centuries existed to glorify the state and the monarchy. They were essentially a mixture of art, politics and entertainment – plays, with musical interludes. Courtiers and noblemen wore heavy ornate costumes and masks and any dancing consisted largely of groups of people moving in intricate patterns around the space. Women's roles as such, were invariably played by men. Dancing was considered to be a very social activity and at the end of these evenings in court, the audience joined the noblemen and danced a long dance, often led by a royal or state official.



During these centuries, ballet in France gradually progressed from this sort of entertainment for the court noblemen (who had little or no formal training,) into a professional art form. This was definitely helped along by Louis XIV, who started the process of the creation of the 'Academie Royale de Danse' in 1661. The purpose of the academie was to train dancers to perform in the King's opera ballets. (Ballet & opera had not yet evolved into separate art forms.)

The 18th century saw the age of the brilliant dancers, technical elements of dancing were improved by the sheer raise in standard of the dancers. This century saw the rise of the so called 'ballet d'action,' in which stories unfolded purely through the dancers' movements. In 1760, a dancer and choreographer, Jean Georges Noverre published his 'Letters on dancing and ballets' – which were very influential on choreographers right across Europe. Noverre shunned the use of masks. Facial expressions of the dancers would reinforce their gestures he wrote. Costumes were altogether too cumbersome, he said and should all be made of lighter fabric to allow the dancers to move.

Choreographers had been exploring many themes for ballets such as mythological tales, historical drama and love stories. By the end of the 18th century, ballet had established itself as a legitimate vehicle for

dramatic expression, rather than it being a pretty interlude in a play or an opera.



The 19th century was regarded as the Romantic period in ballet. We saw the introduction of pointe work, the shortening of costumes to allow greater freedom of movement and the arrival of the 'tutu.' Ballet, its dancers and choreographers seemed to be consumed with the desire to create the illusion of weightlessness.

There was a definite association of the female dancer with ethereal creatures such as sylphs and fairies. This whole period was depicted by the famous painter, Edgar Degas, who was often to be found sketching dancers in rehearsals at the Paris Opera.



There was then a move away from romanticism and a concentration on technical virtuosity and ballets which were a very grand physical spectacle. In the late 1800s we saw the discovery of electricity, the invention of the telegraph and the appearance of the first steam boat. But no new choreographers appeared on the scene, no worthy ballets were created and ballet seemed to be an art form heading into a decline.

In Russia, there had also been ballets that were huge spectacles, crowd pleasingly pretty and littered with technical virtuosity. In 1890, Marius Petipa presented his ballet *Sleeping Beauty* and proved himself to be the authority on the form of big ballets. For example, all his ballets would have a pas de deux – which all shared a common form

- The opening adagio for the ballerina & her partner
- Followed by 'variations' solos for each
- And the concluding coda – usually a display of magnificent technical virtuosity.

In 1895 Lev Ivanov and Petipa staged their Swan Lake with a score by Tchaikovsky.

But changes were afoot – not only in Russia, but also in Europe. In Russia, an empresario called Serge Diaghilev created a company called the Ballets Russes which performed in Europe. Diaghilev was a genius at getting financial backers and even more so for marrying the talents of the latest & most talented composers, designers and choreographers. (Natalia Goncharova, Coco Chanel, Jean Cocteau all designed for Diaghilev.) Composers like Stravinsky and choreographers like Nijinsky & his sister, Nijinska all worked for Diaghilev.

The Ballets Russes really was a catalyst for change in the ballet world. Diaghilev almost aimed to be shocking and controversial. In Paris in 1913, when Nijinsky's work The Rite of Spring was shown, the audiences actually rioted. This was because the ballet was SO far removed from what audiences had been used to. Gone was the prettiness, the poise and the spectacle of Petipa.....



The Rite of Spring depicted a harsh primitive world, a prehistoric peasant tribe and a completely new technique – with parallel legs and footwork, a lower centre of gravity and strong percussive, repetitive movements performed in a very 2 dimensional way. Parisien ballet lovers had never seen anything like this before and they didn't understand it. Diaghilev, who was known for risk taking, was thrilled that the current scandal surrounding his company had created so much publicity for him. Ultimately, The Rite of Spring and many other ballets from the Ballets Russes, paved the way for the experimentation that we saw in ballet and dancing throughout the remainder of the 1900s.

Background to American Modern Dance

As a reaction against the poise and prettiness and the escapism of traditional ballets, young dancers and choreographers across the world started to experiment with the form and the subject matter of dances. There was no longer a set idea of what ballet or dance should be like and therefore each choreographer was free to explore his/her own ideas.

In 1914, Ruth St. Denis met Ted Shawn and the two of them created a dance school in Los Angeles in 1915, for dance as a most serious art form. They taught a wide curriculum that aimed to bring harmony to the mind, body & spirit of it's students. The dance company toured throughout the 1920s & 1930s. Doris Humphrey (who later became a very famous choreographer,) was a student at Denishawn.

Also in America, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham created a real alternative to ballet in their works, but audiences often found their work ugly and depressing. Themes of pain and suffering, human issues and sexual repression were in sharp contrast to the escapist entertainment of the ballets of the late 19th & very early 20th centuries.

One of Martha Graham's pupils, Merce Cunningham became famous for his collaborations with composer John Cage using 'chance' methods for creating works. They even rolled dice to decide which dancers performed each night.....which meant that some dancers who learned the dance, never got to perform! Cunningham embraced randomness in the extreme.

In 1953 a choreographer called Alwin Nikolais created a piece called Masks, Props and Mobiles in which, at one point, dancers were entirely encased in bags that were stretched into different shapes by the dancers movements. Some dance critics refused to acknowledge the performance as dance at all. But there was a great deal of experimentation in the world of dance at this time – choreographers threw out any acceptable forms in dance and started to make up their own new rules.



The choreographer Lester Horton founded his company in 1932 and included black, Hispanic and Asian dancers as well as whites. This is significant because although we had seen an end to the segregation of whites & blacks in America much earlier, black dancers were not seen in dance companies. Often when 'ethnic' roles were needed in shows, producers used to 'black-up' white dancers, rather than employ blacks.

Lester Horton evolved a technique incorporating movements from ethnic dance forms and had a flair for drama. The Beloved (1948) is a savage tale of a man who murders his wife.

Of course in the 1930s and 1940s we also saw the rise of the American musical: Fred Astaire in Top Hat (1935,) Busby Berkeley's 42nd Street (1933,) Fancy Free (1944,) by Jerome Robbins..... Also at this time, because of the increasing popularity of the calypso (Caribbean syncopated music) musicals started using some black performers.

One of the more famous musicals featuring black dancers was the Tropical Revue (1943,) choreographed by Katherine Dunham. Dunham and her peer Pearl Primus were leaders in black dance in the 30s & 40s. Dunham formulated her own technique based very much on the isolations of different parts of the body – a basic characteristic of many African dance forms.



Pearl Primus created among others a work which protested against the gruelling life of hardship of the Sharecroppers (US tenant farmers) called Hard Time Blues.

In the 30s and 40s in America, a lot of small associations sprang up – The Worker's dance League for example, was dedicated to political activism and often performed at political rallies etc. The New Dance Group (1934,) wanted to make dance accessible to all people and offered dance classes with very low fees and did performances about hunger, unemployment and war.

In the 1940s this particular group shifted it's focus to themes of rural American folk and dance which had a much more relaxed style. One of the group's choreographers who believed strongly in social commitment wanted to bring dance to a wider audience. Her name was Helen Tamiris and between 1928 and 1942, she created a series of dances based on negro spirituals.

Alvin Ailey studied dance with many different teachers, including Horton, Tamiris and Graham, as well as Jack Cole the jazz choreographer. Ailey was involved in various dance groups and performances before starting his own company. His most famous work, Revelations (1960,) is set to negro spirituals and depicts the hopes for a better existence for Black Americans and in many ways reflects images of Alvin's childhood.



THE HISTORY OF JAZZ DANCE

The history of jazz dancing is extremely unique in that it has developed through the influence of several other dance styles and techniques. It grew up alongside the American jazz music tradition and like jazz music, has its roots in African and slave traditions. Later, though, it became entwined with tap, Minstrel shows, vaudeville, swing, and Broadway. As a result, the movements and styles associated with jazz dancing have been constantly changing over the decades.

The Early 20th Century

On the journey to America, slaves in the 1800s were allowed to dance in order to keep fit. These dances continued on the plantations in the American South.

In the early 1900s, as black Americans became the forerunners of the jazz movement; jazz dancing was very closely related to tap dancing. In fact, a jazz or tap dancer was traditionally part of a jazz band, and these dance trends soon spread to the audience and the public. The result was dances like the Charleston, Jitterbug, Boogie Woogie, and swing. One of the most popular and influential dancers of the vaudeville era was Joe Frisco. Frisco's dance was a series of shuffles, camel walks, and turns, and he incorporated stand-up comedy into his act. He was known for his unmistakable stuttering voice, his Derby hat, and a big cigar. He appeared in the Ziegfeld Follies in 1918 and was a staple of the American vaudeville scene.

Theatrical Jazz: Cole, Robbins and Fosse

Perhaps the greatest influence on jazz dance as we know it was Jack Cole. Born in 1911, Cole was a choreographer and theatre director and is known today as 'the father of jazz dance'. He is credited with developing the ballet-based movements and theatrical expression which are the touchstones of contemporary jazz dancing. Cole's 'theatre dancing' appeared in his musicals (including 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum', 'Kismet', and 'Man of La Mancha') and films (including 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' and 'There's No Business Like Show Business'). In Hollywood, he was famous for his work with Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe. His work influenced the next generation of choreographers in theatre and film and his style is still very present today.

Among those influenced by Cole's work were Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse. A student of ballet and theatre, Robbins began his career in the chorus line of Broadway musicals. He worked constantly throughout his life, splitting his time between choreographing ballet and conceiving, directing, and choreographing musicals. During his career, he collaborated with George Balanchine, Stephen Sondheim, Ethel Merman, and Barbara Streisand, to name a few. His crowning achievement was 'West Side Story', which he created together with Sondheim. He went on to become the ballet master of the New York City Ballet in 1972. Robbins' ability to fuse balletic and theatrical movement made his choreographic style artistically and commercially explosive.

Similarly, Bob Fosse's influence on jazz dance throughout the second half of the twentieth century is extremely distinctive. Unable to conform as a young dancer to the rigid positions of ballet, Fosse incorporated inward turned knees, hunched shoulders and burlesque-inspired sensuality into his choreography. He worked tirelessly as a film and theatre choreographer, director and writer and became known for his use of bowler hats, canes and chairs. Some of his most noted works include 'The Pajama Game', 'Sweet Charity', 'Cabaret', 'Damn

Yankees', and 'Chicago'. In 1999, the musical 'Fosse', based on Fosse's own life and choreography, won the Tony Award for Best Musical.



Past Meets Present

Today's jazz styles range from those slinky Broadway-inspired movements, to a more lyrical or balletic style, to include even hip-hop based video dance, which takes influences from street dance techniques. Basic jazz technique is still based on the mastery of turns, leaps, kicks, and fluid style, but every jazz class and jazz teacher is unique. While some may favour the theatrical end of the spectrum, others may opt for harder and faster movements that combine hip hop moves with traditional jazz steps. However, jazz dance continues to be a genre which can vary according to contemporary trends, while maintaining a strong and consistent foundation