Introduction

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Another ballet book?

Not exactly. A Companion, a book to accompany you when you go to see ballet or when you want to know something, find a name, a date, a work; it is a book to read and a book to consult, not on everything in ballet, not a complete book, not even a complete history. A book with essays that revisit aspects of this beloved and detested art form, a book that is needed as much as ballet is needed. Yes, "needed", as we need our bodies. Ballet shows us what the trained human body can do to make flesh become art. Ballet, the art of the body, puts our physical presence into form, into fantasy and into a deeper reality. "Needed" because in the nineteenth century ballet became a uniquely feminine enterprise, and to an extent it has retained this aspect in the twenty-first century. The great ballerina floats before us, telling us something about ourselves, our genders, our fears, hopes and, above all, prejudices. The artificiality and conventions of ballet protect our nervous sensibilities but also indirectly assault them.

Ballet is part of our history and our heritage and if we deny our past we will not comprehend the present nor grasp the future. Either in life or in dance. Ballet has a history, which reflects and refracts the social order in which it arises. A courtly society demands an art form in which the king can dance and his court revolve around him. A revolutionary society proclaims its ideals in dance; a conservative one does the same. Ballet, adored and reviled often for similar reasons, belongs to our contemporary cultural landscape as much as any other performance art. Ballet tells us about ourselves and the world we inhabit; it holds up a mirror and projects wishes and desires; it expresses our ideals and mocks our vanities; it demolishes certainties and tests limits; it creates values and sets standards; it invents the past as much as the future.

Constant reflection, introspection and evaluation are part of a process which helps us assess critically where we are and how we got there; then we can make choices for the future and think about alternatives. Such a process of thinking must never end; it is a vital component of our artistic consciousness. Thinking about ballet poses special problems because it creates its meanings without words. It literally "embodies" meaning. It lets us know in its own way what being human, having arms and legs, a gait,

a posture, a gesture, means or could mean. Ballet has changed but never gave up its history, its link to the past: the invention of the "white ballet" in the nineteenth century revolutionised and transformed a courtier's code into the "woman question". Every time a "classical" ballet is performed, it reminds us that the "woman question" still has no satisfactory answer. But the shape in which it is presented has significantly been transformed. Those new and old forms transport new and old philosophical questions alike.

The authors gathered together in this book come from many parts of the world; they stand for a truly international crowd, as international as ballet itself. The methods with which they work reflect different attitudes in research and highlight the fact that ballet is not one homogenous thing but a flexible art as well as a serious academic research subject. Many of the contributors combine practice and theory of dance and ballet and can thus offer a wide range of experience.

This *Companion to Ballet* consists of twenty-four chapters gathered in four parts on various aspects of the art form's historical evolution and on its aesthetic properties. They consider the most important developmental stages since its "origins" in the fifteenth century and travel to the end of the twentieth century, sometimes stopping to consider a particular movement, sometimes to contemplate a specific moment of importance, sometimes to review a particular artist's contribution or a specific choreography.

All the essays consider an art of the highest public interest and discuss ballet as an expression of "modern" ideas at various times. We never intended to provide a complete history or a full theoretical framework of aesthetic ideas. Instead we offer an impression of the most important elements, which demonstrate continuity and gradual evolution as well as those which mark sudden changes of artistic direction. This Companion is not a history book in the strict sense; yet it cannot ignore the importance of historical developments. Thus it has been organised along historical axes, for ballet is an art form, which has grown over time and peculiarly and intimately symbolises the age in which it arises.

In the first chapter we begin our journey in northern Italy to which Jennifer Nevile takes us and introduces us to the dance manuals of the fifteenth century, their philosophical ideas and the structure of an art form which they describe. We then make a leap to France and England and their royal courts. The genres of the *ballet de cour* and the masque took up the challenge of the ballet that was born a couple of centuries before in free city states and had been modified to celebrate the glory of emperors and empresses. Marina Nordera and Barbara Ravelhofer present court ballet as an integral part of a social order. Mark Franko introduces the "baroque body" – a concept through which a historical moment is preserved today; a

corporeal reality we can no longer recall but have to imagine and invent in order to understand the past.

In the second part we follow the transformation of court ballet to a bourgeois public expression. The modernisation of ballet in the eighteenth century lay in its opening up of spaces and its new approach to the human body and human movement. Dorion Weickmann supplies an overview of the concept of the *ballet d'action* and Sandra Noll Hammond explains the training principles that led to a complete professionalisation of dance. Tim Blanning and Judith Chazin-Bennahum write about two important and innovative choreographers and dance theoreticians: John Weaver and Jean-Georges Noverre. We leave the eighteenth century with the French Revolution, the event that changed all European societies and countries for the next 200 years. With its radical conceptions of a "new man" it also redefined the place, the order, the structure and aesthetics of human movement.

The third part looks at Europe and Russia after the French Revolution. Romanticism had descended upon France and Germany and quickly spread. Sarah Davies Cordova and Anne Middleboe Christensen evoke romantic representations in France and Denmark and the emergence of the ballerina as the ultimate embodiment of romantic ideas. Marian Smith reminds us of the close interaction between music and dance and recalls the often forgotten practices of composing for ballet. Lynn Garafola and Thérèse Hurley take us to Russia where the Italian-French Marius Petipa dominated ballet for two generations and together with the composer Tchaikovsky created ballets that belong to the canon of the art form today. Lucia Ruprecht argues that ballet as an art form in the public sphere very much depended on the critic; ballet entered the consciousness of the bourgeois audience through its written reflections in news-papers and journals as much as through its nightly performances. The critic was then, as now, an institution – an advocate for or against, a propagandist who used ballet to advance more than only a personal opinion. The chapter ends with my investigation of the ballet costume, especially skirts and shoes, in their cultural context. I interpret their formal properties and meaning: the full white skirt and the pointe shoes still symbolise ballet and the power of the female dancer.

The last and most extensive part examines the twentieth century. Ballet had become a well-established art form, no longer accessible only to an elite but to many – high and low. It also carried historical baggage with it, had over the centuries modernised and reinvented itself several times. With choreographies and performance styles, dance philosophies had developed. Dance had been "done" but also written; it had become memory of physicality and incarnation and had entered the intellectual sphere of European culture. By the early twentieth century ballet had to cope with its own history and the stereotypes and tropes it had created. With the Russian and Swedish

Ballets of the early twentieth century – both companies as well as aesthetic principles – Tim Scholl and Erik Näslund recall important instances of another modernisation process in ballet. The Russian as well as the Swedish Ballet soon were regarded as revolutionary breaks with tradition, yet both were also firmly connected with ballet's tradition as well as to other social and artistic developments of the time. The Russian Revolution of 1917, very much like its French predecessor, fundamentally shaped the European landscape and also affected ballet. From post-revolutionary Russia came the man who is synonymous with ballet – George Balanchine. Matilde Butkas traces Balanchine's career from Russia to Paris and eventually to the United States, whereas Juliet Bellow pauses in Paris to show how Balanchine broke down the notion of classicism in the 1930s before reinstating it in the 1960s. Jennifer Fisher focuses on one ballet – *The Nutcracker* – and describes how it was transformed from near failure to the most successful and most often performed piece of our contemporary era. Every small company can today realise its ambitions by staging a *Nutcracker* and integrate references to regional politics, cater to local tastes and satisfy the native community's demands. With the chapters by Zheng Yangwen on ballet in China and Lester Tome on Alicia Alonso's Cuban *Giselle* we see ballet in its worldwide context and understand the politics of internationalisation. Ballet from its very beginning had been an international affair. In the first century of its existence it had crossed the European continent and when the colonial powers spread their cultural ideals they took with them their value systems. Ballet too suited the needs of these powers to proclaim their ideas of rule and order. But it was neither a simple nor a one-sided relationship. Ballet, as other arts, is never just a tool in the hands of a regime to control nor a means to suppress indigenous interests. Thus for Zheng Yangwen ballet, like opium or communism, offered itself as a vehicle to translate contradictory beliefs in a society in full transformation. In China and in Cuba this initially foreign artistic articulation offered itself as an agent to formulate those national principles which it was supposed to help replace. My chapter ends the part by revisiting the ideological challenges of the entire century. I too emphasise that art and ballet have never been static but served the diverse needs of those who took up the challenge of expressing through movement the problems and tensions of their contemporary world.

The division in the twentieth century between ballet and modern dance has produced two very different types of movement art, often fiercely and destructively hostile to each other. The final chapter in Part IV tells the story of modern dance as a counterpoint to ballet in the same period. It is to be hoped that in due course modern dance will be granted the full treatment which it deserves in a Companion of its own. As editor I had to take another, difficult decision: did Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham

or Siobhan Davies belong in this book? I decided that these three as all other modernists certainly played an important part in the story of theatrical dance in the twentieth century but that they represent a different genre of dance. Their motivations in dance, their philosophies, movement codes, structural and formal features have to be treated independently from ballet.

The Companion does not provide a guide to becoming a ballet dancer. Problems of professional training, anatomical requirements and medical advice for dancers or nutritional questions have deliberately been excluded. Neither has the history of companies and theatre institutions, nor the rich history of ballet design been observed. Many names will not appear and many works are only mentioned in passing. But the omissions should make you, the reader, want to find out more, search for that volume which will solve your question and lead you to the next level of understanding. This collection of chapters should whet your appetite and rouse your curiosity. We hope the Companion will live up to its name – that it will accompany you as a useful guide and open up the complex, fascinating world of theatre and ballet. We hope that it will be a friendly and reliable escort during a first encounter with ballet as well as a good interpreter during future visits. My fondest wish is that at some future performance you, the reader, will remember a fact, a name or an evolution of technique that you first read in this book and now see on stage. If the pleasure of recognition or the application of information sharpens your enjoyment of the work before you, the Companion will have done its job.

PART I

From the Renaissance to the baroque: royal power and worldly display

1 The early dance manuals and the structure of ballet: a basis for Italian, French and English ballet

JENNIFER NEVILE

In the dance treatises of the fifteenth century choreographies were first recorded in Western Europe: dance became literary and philosophical as well as a physical skill and oral tradition. These treatises laid the foundation for the future structure of European dance. The main dance genres recorded in the treatises, *ballo, bassadanza*, and *basse danse* in the fifteenth century, *pavane, galliard, branle, almain, balletto, bassa, brando* and *cascarda* in the sixteenth century, were the dances of the upper levels of society: the courtiers and nobility, those who wielded power, as well as the wealthy merchants and trading families. Important state occasions, marriage celebrations, official visits by neighbouring rulers or ambassadors, annual religious festivities and theatrical events were all marked by formal balls or dancing at which members of the elite performed. Often these dance events took place in public spaces, on a stage erected in the main piazza in front of thousands of spectators. At other times the space in which the dancing was conducted was more private, being the main hall of a palace. But even on these occasions the dances performed were part of the official ceremonies and rituals, contributing to the presentation of the image of a ruler as a powerful and magnificent prince, whose authority could not be challenged. When a ruler and the leading members of his court danced in public before his subjects he was displaying his magnificence, and in doing so he was displaying his power. The Italians in particular were obsessed with protocol and ceremony, and one of the chief means of indicating rank was by spatial relationships among people. Thus dance, an art form with spatial relationships as its basis, was a significant tool in this presentation of power and rank through rituals and ceremonies.

The dances recorded in the treatises are overwhelmingly for both male and female performers (see Fig. 1). Many of the dances are for one or two couples, or for three performers, two men and one woman or vice versa. Some dance genres were processional in nature, for example the *basse danse, pavane* and *almain*, during which a line of couples paraded around the hall, exhibiting not only their skill at dancing, but also their sumptuous clothes, hairstyles and jewellery. Other genres chronicled the social

Figure 1 Maestro dei Tornei di Santa Croce, cassone panel, *La magnanimità di Scipione*, 1460. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Inventory No: 5804.1859.

interactions between the men and women. The choreographic sequences and floor patterns of the Italian *balli*, for example, emphasised typical interactions that occurred on a daily basis at court. Some of the *balli* enact themes of fidelity, fickleness or jealousy. *Sobria* is a *ballo* for one woman and five men where the sole woman remains faithful to her partner despite the advances and pleading of the other four unattached men. *Merçantia*, for one woman and three men, presents the opposite scenario, as the woman is all too ready to abandon her partner and flirt with the other two men. *Gelosia* (jealousy), a *ballo* for three couples, is a dance in which the men constantly change partners, thereby providing many opportunities for the display of this emotion. In the sixteenth century the confrontation between the sexes became more explicit with dances entitled *Barriera*, *La Battaglia* and *Torneo Amoroso.* Often these dances started with two lines of men and women who advanced and retreated before clashing (often striking hands that echoed swords hitting shields) and the final reconciliation. Other dance genres such as the *galliard* were explicitly choreographed for a display of virtuosity and athleticism, especially on the part of the man, who was expected to perform sequences of complicated variations that could involve kicks, leaps and turns in the air. Hundreds of these variations were recorded in the dance treatises, and competent dancers were expected to memorise many of them, to be used at will during a performance. By the sixteenth century the necessity for a courtier to be skilled in the art of dance was without question. The ability to perform gracefully, seemingly without any effort, was one of the