Legends in Dance

A Brief History of Ballet

by Susan Gehringer ©, Rev 3/16/2020

The art of ballet has been loved for centuries, taking on various styles and techniques as the decades pass. What started as a dance for the rich and royal, would eventually become an art for audiences all over the world. At its beginnings in Italy about 500 years ago, to the worldwide performing art of today, ballet is one of the most enduring art forms around.

It started with the Italian Renaissance

What would eventually be called ballet, began during the Renaissance around the year 1400 in Italy. In fact, the terms "ballet" and "ball" as in masked ball, come from the Italian *ballare;* to dance, and *ballo*, which refers to dances performed in the ballroom. From the 1400s-1600s, lavish Italian theatrical pageants of music, dance and pantomime were inserted between acts of a play, courses of banquets or court dances at balls. Court spectacles were common place for the entertainment of the aristocracy. These were presented in almost a carnival atmosphere. Some of the elements they had were elaborate sets, costumes, musicians with casts of thousands. They were originally performed in the castle banquet halls or ballrooms. Later they moved to theaters to enable elaborate stage effects and costumes in creating these dazzling extravaganzas. Themes ranged from comedy to drama, humor to politics. They were still performed in the heavy brocade costumes of the day and many times in leather masks to keep their identities unknown. The dance utilized steps and patterns that were common from folk and social court dance origins.

History's first known "Maker of Dances" (what we now would call a choreographer) was Italian dance master *Domenico da Piacenza*, (1400-1470). Instead of using well known social or folk dances, he would develop original compositions. He developed his own formulas for designing dances. In fact, around 1450 he published a book; *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*

LIVEWORKSHEETS

(dancing and choreography), which was the first written European guide on dancing. The book gives instructions on various dances, in great detail down to the position of the hands. *Domenico da Piacenza* would go on to establish basic steps and create movement vocabulary separate of the court dances that had been used up until then.

Into this creative era came *Catherine de' Medici* (1519-1589). De' Medici was born in 1519 into the wealthiest non-royal family in Europe. She was the granddaughter of *Lorenzo de Medici (known* as Lorenzo the Magnificent who was the most powerful and enthusiastic arts patron of the Italian Renaissance), and related to two Popes. She was raised within the wealth of the Italian court where art was revered. At the age of 14 she was betrothed the *Duke of Orléans*, second son of the current king of France. He would later become the French King Henry II. She brought with her the love of dance and pageantry from the Italian palaces to the French Court. History can point to *Catherine de' Medici* as a significant influence in the spread and development of the art of ballet. Not for the dancing per se, but the situation and support she created to allow it to flourish.

Catherine de' Medici and the French Court

To keep the rich and famous of the French Court entertained, Catherine would produce large scale festivals that would contain ballets with political, classical, mythological or romantic themes. The duty of designing these entertainments early on would involve Italians. Louis XII had brought; musicians, actors, designers and fashionable entertainments from Italy to prop up the imagination the French courtiers lacked. The court dances grew in size, opulence, and grandeur. These presentations moved from court halls to stages and outdoor venues to allow for large scale productions. Some performances were presented on elevated platforms so that greater audiences could watch the increasingly elaborate marvels. There are even drawings and notes that remain from scenes that choreographed horses and dancers in a large-scale show. Early in the French development of ballet was the concept of turnout (the outward rotation of the legs from the hip). It became the dominant feature of ballet technique. Dancers who performed on stages discovered by turning out enabled them to move quickly side to side across the stage.

The *Ballet Comique de la Reine* was an elaborate court spectacle performed on October 15, 1581. It is generally referred to as the first *ballet de cour*, (court ballets, names given to ballets performed in the 16th and 17th centuries at court). It was also the first ballet to have printed libretto. It lasted 5 ½ hours.

Catherine (also called the Florentine Queen of France) would continue to live a political but tragic life. Her husband, the King, died 7 years after taking the throne of a jousting accident. Through the years, two more of her sons would take the throne and die. She was also responsible for the cultural enrichment of the nation through her patronage of the arts and her

LIVEWORKSHEETS

efforts to refine the manners at court. She would remain a major political power through wars and civil religious unrest. Catherine de Medici would be recognized by some historians as the most powerful woman in 16th century Europe.

Fifty years later *Louis XIV* (1638-1715) would become the single most influential French monarch in support of the arts, and specifically ballet. Louis XIV was a powerful king and ardent patron of the arts. (Pictured left as the Apollo the Sun God in the ballet, *de ennui*) He was a dancer himself in his youth. Many men who would dance at court were swordsmen first, military trained in fencing and combat. Early ballet dances were performed by these expert swordsmen and derive much of their style from fencing positions. The discipline embraces the whole deportment of the sport. The position of the feet for balance, the legs held in turnout, the straight spine, the expressions of the face, the press of the shoulders, the lift of the neck.

The five classic positions and the basic arm positions and steps were named at the request of Louis XIV to his great ballet master. These have been codified, described and fixed into the regimen of daily exercise in all ballet classes today. Certainly, they have evolved over time but the fundamental steps and names remain unchanged. He demanded excellence from his nobles in the art of dancing. Hours of practice were required to ensure that there were never any mistakes. One misstep and a noble would lose favor at court. The king used this commandment to keep the aristocrats in line. To demand loyalty and obedience. But in all ballets, Louis was the star. He ensured that he was always the central figure.

During his reign he commissioned more than 1000 ballets, thus fostering the development of ballet in France. He was also instrumental is establishing dance as a profession for both men and women. In 1661 Louis XIV established the *Académie Royale de Danse*, the world's *first* ballet school, in a room of the *Louvre Palace*. In 1672 a more expansive dance academy was established within the Académie Royale de Musique (The Paris Opera House). This dance company survives today as the Ballet of the Paris Opera; the world's oldest continuously running ballet company (pictured). The foundation that Louis XIV built for the arts remained after his death. France continued its dominance in the ballet world through the century.

During the 1600s, the popularity of ballet grew not only in the French Courts, but trickled out to the courts in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Denmark and many others. The first professional ballet companies and troupes touring Europe for aristocratic audiences. By the mid-1700s ballet was separating from Opera and standing on its own. Up until then dance was not an expressive art, movement for movements' sake. Something to watch while the scenes changed in the play or dinner was served. It was movement between acts of an opera. But ballet was beginning to contain expressive, dramatic movement, fully developed characters

LIVEWORKSHEETS

and relationships, fully developed storylines. These beginning self-standing ballets would be considered the precursor to the narrative ballets of the 19th century.

Techniques, Costumes and Timelines:

Renaissance Ballet utilized the heavy, floor length brocade dresses of the era. (Pictured right) The music was freed from the heavy religious constraints of the medieval period and became more complex in range, rhythm, and harmony. The presentations, music, movement were still what was appropriate in the banquet halls of the palaces, but the plot of the ballets were myths, local tales of great deeds and the opulence of the royal house. But primarily pretty pictures of movement.

The Romantic Ballet (1800s) developed in a time of social upheaval. A new middle class was emerging from the success of commerce and industry. This class had started to patronize performances of drama, opera and the ballet. This changing time was concerned with the supernatural world of spirits and magic and often showed women as passive and fragile. These new ideas produced costumes that were shorter and gauzy to show the softness and delicate nature of the female dancers. Now called *romantic tutus (pictured left)*. These were calf-length, full skirt made of tulle. This era also marks the emergence of pointe work as this era also was dominated by female ballerinas. The 1827 ballet *La Sylphide* is widely considered to be the first, and the 1870 ballet *Coppélia* is considered to be the last work of romantic ballet period.

Neoclassical Ballet is a style that utilizes classical ballet technique and vocabulary, but deviates from classical ballet in its use of the abstract movement. Starting in the 1920s with *Ballets Russes*, it often does not include the traditional elements of storytelling or familiar characters. In neoclassical ballet, there often is no clear plot, or scenery. Music choice can be diverse and less traditional. It is generally recognized that George Balanchine brought this style to prominence in the 1940s.

Contemporary Ballet is a form of dance that opens up the doors for any style to influence a work made utilizing ballet technique. It can take on a wide variety of aesthetics, incorporating pedestrian, modern, jazz, or ethnic forms, so long as the movement has its roots in classical ballet. Many ballet companies have this style in their repertoire. Choreographer Twyla Tharp is considered to be the pioneer of this style.

The Emergence of the Russian Ballet Stronghold

Until the early 1800s ballet thrived in only Milan or Paris. But ballet was spreading across Europe in popularity. France was still the main training ground but was only producing technical ballerinas, not male dancers or *danseur Nobel*. But the Paris ballet machine only

LIVEWORKSHEETS

created 11 new works in a thirty-year period. Paris preferred its ballet in-between acts of the Opera, not on its own for a full evening. Although travel through Europe was opening up new interest in ballet it was fading from Italy in favor of Opera. Into this power shift entered Russia.

Russia had established their first ballet school in 1738 under the Czarist rule. This was known at that time as the *Mariinsky theater ballet (pictured left)*, the school was called the *Imperial School of Ballet,* also called the *Kirov Ballet* and established in St Petersburg (called Leningrad during the Soviet rule) But because travel was limited most outside of Russia knew little of the ballet being taught in that country. European dancers found a home there but were soon challenged by the rigorous training of the *Imperial School of Ballet* in St Petersburg. Moscow had the Bolshoi Ballet established later in 1856. The main teachers in Russia at that time were from France. By 1850 Russia had become a leading creative center of the ballet world. The popularity of ballet soared in Russia.

Ironically the person who would become the most important figure in the development of Russian ballet was *Marius Petipa*, (1818-1910) a French danseur. He would be responsible for the success of Russian ballet for almost 60 years. Specifically, he refined the excellence of the male dancer. He developed the style whose main purpose was to display classical technique; pointe work, high extensions, precision of movement and turn-out to the fullest. His detailed choreography contained complicated sequences that showed off demanding steps, leaps and turns. The *classical tutu*, much shorter and stiffer than the *romantic tutu*, was introduced during the Russian dominance to reveal a ballerinas' legs and the difficulty of her movements and footwork. (Pictured right on Anna Pavlova) The Russian ballet programs continued to produce some of the most influential dancers, ballets, choreographers and composers for the next two hundred years. By the early 1900s Russian ballet was the finest in the world and would continue that dominance well into the next century.

Turning Point: Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes

Into the transition of Russian ballet came *Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929)*. In 1908 *Sergei Diaghilev*, former administrator with the Imperial Ballet, was commanded to organize a ballet company with members of the Maryinsky (Imperial) and Bolshoi theatres to tour the world and show off Soviet supremacy. So, he created *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. His strength was his ability to gather talent and money together to create spectacles. He came from a very wealthy family and was an *impresario* (arts patron, producer, financier, and socialite). His passion was putting together artists that could benefit from each other. Painters, costume designers, composers, dancers and choreographers. He brought together a ballet company that included the best young Russian dancers of the day, among them *Anna Pavlova* (1881-1931), *George Balanchine* and *Vaslav Nijinsky* (1890-1950). Diaghilev's most notable composer-collaborator, was *Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)*. He wrote some of his most famous

LIVEWORKSHEETS

compositions for the *Ballets Russes* such as the *The Firebird (1910), Petrushka (1911), and Rite of Spring (1913).* Diaghilev liked to mold his creations and none more famous than the dance genius *Vaslav Nijinsky*. *Ballets Russes* would be the center of ballet creativity until Diaghilev's death in 1929. But the creative, nurturing environment would help propel *George Balanchine* to create the same type of environment in America.

Ballet in America

Ballet was performed in America as soon as the late 1800s in small traveling shows that came over from Europe. There was an exposure to the art form but mostly for the wealthy. Enter *Lincoln Kirstein*; the son of a wealthy Boston family that led a life in service to the arts. Kirstein wanted to build an American Ballet Company and School that would be equal to any European company. He had financial backing from other wealthy arts patrons to make it happen.

There were many innovators in the ballet world. *Ballets Russes* was the most creative at the time and their top choreographer was *George Balanchine (1904-1983)*. A Russian dancer of great technique, creativity and innovation. He came out of the Russian ballet machine but broke away due to the suppression of the arts during the Russian revolution. Kirstein had been advised by many if he wanted to start an American Ballet School, he would need George Balanchine, and no other. So, a meeting was arranged in 1933 and Balanchine agreed to come to America.

Balanchine famously insisted "*But first, a school*", reflective of the training he had at the Imperial Ballet School. He knew that most great dance companies were fed by an academy closely associated with it. This practice set up the concept of providing the company with dancers learning the specifics of his technique and choreographic style. The *School of American Ballet* was founded in 1934. The School remains in operation to this day and trains many of the top ballet dancers that bolster companies all over the world. His first American development was *Ballet Theater*, later called *American Ballet Theater* (ABT). He went as far as he wanted with ABT and left to pursue other creative endeavors such as movies and Broadway. He missed his beloved ballet and returned to create the *New York City Ballet* in 1948. It is there that most of his choreography lives and it remained his company until his death.

Classical dance was suffering, with attendance down considerably from its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. A time of renewed excitement for ballet was when there were Russian defectors; Baryshnikov and Godunov in the 1970s, and Nureyev in the 1960s. Soviet defections were exciting and gave the performers intrigue and mystery. When Baryshnikov danced for the New York City Ballet, the theater sold out houses all the time. The Russian defectors made ballet part of the Cold War, going to see them was going to see heroes.

Young people tend to see classical ballet as stuffy and inauthentic. But ballet is changing as the arts change to reflect the diversity of the American population. "*American ballet is ultimately an evolutionary art form, requiring many voices to creatively carry forward*," commented Justin Peck, New York City Ballet's resident choreographer. Misty Copeland, the first African-American principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre (ABT), echoed the sentiment. "I hope that American ballet will continue to evolve in a way that really embraces who we are as artists and Americans".

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Sources:

- Kassing, Gayle, *History of Dance*, Human Kinetics, 2007, pp.93-98,
- Reyna, Ferdinando, *A Concise History of Ballet*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1965, pp. 9-17, 28-29, 121-128,
- Editors, *A Brief History of Ballet*, Centre for Dance Education, Atlanta Ballet,
- De Mille, Agnes, *Dance to the Piper*, 2nd work, Da Capo Press, 1958, pp. 56
- Anderson, Jack, *Ballet & Modern Dance, A Concise History* 2nd edition, Princeton Book Publishers, 1977, pp. 77, 111,
- Editors, The-ballet.com, Ballet History.com, bbc.org, ballethub.com, alchetron.com
- Editors, Pittsburg Ballet Theater, A Brief History of Ballet
- Images: Ballet Chelsea, Getty Images, Victoria and Albert Museum, St. art gallery,
- Editors, New Tuscan Experience; 2013
- CBS Interview: *NYC Ballet forges the art form's future*, Interview of Peter Martins by Leslie Stalh, 11/25/2012
- Harven, Michelle PBS.org, *In "Ballet Across America," Misty Copeland and Justin Peck paint dance's diverse future,* 4/25/2017

Name_____ **Per**_____

Legends in Dance
History of ballet

Dance Standard: Understanding the historical contributions and cultural dimensions of dance. Study dancers from various cultures and historical periods. (3.3, 3.4)
Common Core: CCRST #1; Cite specific textual evidence to support text, attending to the precise details of the descriptions.

Highlight (do not underline) the answers in the attached text to support the response. Circle words in the text you are unfamiliar:

1. What were some of the elements of the Renaissance Court spectacles that were common place for the entertainment of the rich and royal in the Italian courts?

2. Who was history's first known choreographer? Why was his book so revolutionary?

3. What di Catherine de Medici bring with her from the Italian courts to the French courts upon her marriage to the Duke of Orléans, second son of the current king of France?

4. Why did the French develop the concept of turnout (the outward rotation of the legs from the hip)?

LIVEWORKSHEETS

5. What two things about the *Ballet Comique de la Reine*, the elaborate court spectacle performed on October 15, 1581, that were significant in the history of ballet? Name them both. (not the length of the performance)

6. There were several influences from the courts expert swordsmen that influenced the ballet movement. Name three.

7. Louis XIV would become the single most influential French monarch in support of the arts. Name three things that he did in support of ballet that lasted past his lifetime.

8. The evolution of costumes are reflected with examples of skirts. Name two costume and the era it is associated.

9. If comparing classical narrative ballets of the 19th century to neoclassical ballets; what is the <u>difference</u> as noted in the text?

10. Who was the most important figure in the development of the Russian ballet program? Name 3 things that he focused on to contribute to that excellence?

11. What is an impresario? Who was the impresario of the <u>Ballet Russe</u>?

12. What did *Lincoln Kirstein* want? Why was Balanchine so important to the venture?

13. Why was it important for George Balanchine to remark "But first, a school", when working on the first American Ballet Company?

14. List three words in the text that you did not previously have a strong understanding of their meaning. Be sure to circle words in the text that you are less familiar.

LIVEWORKSHEETS