Ballet and Modern Dance

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Introduction by
Selma Jeanne Cohen

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Frontispiece
1 Martha Graham in Clytemnestra, *1958.*

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Introduction

Susan Au begins this book by remarking that a 20th-century observer would probably have trouble recognizing a 16th-century court ballet as a ballet. So much has changed since then – our ideas about the function of a dance work, about its most suitable venue, the kinds of sound accompaniment and decorations appropriate to it, the skills expected of its performers, the role to be played by the audience with respect to the occasion. What has changed and the manner in which it has changed are detailed in the following pages, that trace the evolution of theatrical dance from a spectacle designed to impress an invited audience with the wealth, taste, and righteousness of their hosts, to a myriad of manifestations designed sometimes to please the eye, sometimes to move the heart, sometimes to alter the moral or political views of spectators from many walks of life who have paid for their tickets of admission.

The history that Ms Au delineates is rich in diversity, diversity that seems just now to be multiplying rapidly. While early developments occupied decades, even centuries, the current scene appears to offer almost annual accruals of innovative productions. Indeed, many a 20th-century observer has had trouble recognizing a 20th-century ballet as a ballet. The puzzlement accelerated in the 1960s when the identity problem expanded to include dance itself. It was difficult enough when the choreographer eliminated entrechats and pirouettes, but when he began to eliminate movement . . . We value the new, but it has given us problems.

This book arrives at an opportune moment. Inundated with dance experiments, seeking to separate the genuine advance from the merely exhibitionist, we have arrived at a time when we need to explore the background of the current 'dance explosion'. Viewing it in isolation from what has gone before, we cannot achieve a balanced perspective. As we read here, we see how the present was formed through extension, revision and revolt out of the past. That dance is changing is not new; only the quantity and speed and the degree of change have accelerated.

It is not always easy to be open to the unfamiliar, to forms so new that they bewilder. It is comforting, however, to learn about the audiences of the past, for they had their problems, too. Sometimes an innovation strikes at such a perfect moment – surely *La Sylphide* was one – that all observers recognize its claim to greatness. But sometimes a battle is necessary. How hard John

Martin had to fight to make his contemporaries see the point of the modern dance. Here, as we read about the failures and the successes, and about the failures that were later successes, we begin to cultivate the acumen to discern the place of the dance we have just seen within the whole picture of the evolution of the art. History does not tell us what to like, but it does give us the means to make intelligent choices.

This book is limited to the story of theatrical dance in the western world, which is already a great deal to manage in some 200 pages. The time restriction is dictated by the available evidence; only from the era of the court ballet do we have a continuous flow of documents to tell us about the development of theatrical dance. The geographical restriction is something else, for the situation of dance beyond America and Europe has presented a remarkably different picture.

Western dance has been characterized by change; gradual at first, then increasingly rapid. In Asia and Africa, however, stability has been the norm. There dance has served to define the rituals that mark the stages of the life cycle; it has been a medium of social cohesion for the community, perceived as a model of moral values, a symbol of the achievement of harmony with the physical and spiritual environment. In such societies tradition is sacred; the ways of the ancestors are respected and preserved.

Now these societies are hearing the western message of change. Companies have toured; sometimes dancers have remained to teach, offering instruction in techniques that are enticing in their strangeness. Television has spread the ideas of ballet and tap and modern and post-modern dance for all to adapt or absorb. Whether the non-western countries can take ideas from these new forms and still maintain the integrity of their national traditions remains to be seen. Perhaps this book can serve them, as it serves us, in elucidating the present by exploring its relation to the past.

As the varieties of dance proliferate, the situation becomes increasingly complex and challenging. Susan Au can meet the challenge because she has prepared herself assiduously. A tireless researcher and meticulous scholar, she has, nevertheless, not restricted her experience to archives and museums. In fact, she is equally at home in the dance classroom and the theatre auditorium. It is this essential combination of thinking and doing, of reading and viewing, that enables her to make us see dance history as a living panorama, a vivid tradition that informs and illuminates our experience of dance today.

Selma Jeanne Cohen

2 A ballet class at the Paris Opéra, painted c.1876 by Edgar Degas. The teacher is the aged Jules Perrot, joint choreographer of Giselle *in 1841 and in his youth a famous dancer.* *See pages 52–3.*

A Most Obedient Servant

A 20th-century observer would be hard put to recognize the art form we call ballet in the French court ballets of the 16th and 17th centuries. The earliest of these performances preceded the invention of the proscenium stage and were presented in large chambers with most of the audience seated on tiers or galleries on three sides of the dancing floor. Since the majority of the spectators viewed the performers from above, most of their attention was focused on the 'figures' or floor patterns traced by the dancers as they moved about. The figured dance or horizontal dance, as it was called, consisted largely of geometric forms, often overlaid with symbolic meanings. They were almost always danced by single-sex groups rather than by men and women in couples.

The dancers in the earliest ballets were not the highly skilled professionals of today. Instead, they were usually noble amateurs, often led by the king or queen. In contrast to today's ballet dancers they would seem very earthbound, for the steps and movements they executed were derived from the social dances of the time, which emphasized decorum, grace and elegance rather than feats of strength or agility. The dancers' costumes, based on the fashionable court dress of the day, were meant primarily to impress spectators with their opulence and inventiveness; freedom of movement was only a secondary consideration.

Lengthy performances and a leisurely pace were characteristic of many of these entertainments: beginning late at night, they went on for as many as four or five hours. Early court ballets tended to have a processional flavour, with decorated cars or large pieces of movable scenery, resembling the floats in modern-day parades, carrying on dancers, singers and musicians.

These courtly spectacles, alien as they might seem to our eyes, were nevertheless the ancestors of the art of ballet. Behind them lay a long tradition of court festivals and entertainments, reaching back to the processions and mummeries of the Middle Ages. In contrast to these medieval entertainments, the court ballet served secular rather than religious functions, frequently combining political motives with the desire for pleasure and diversion. It existed primarily for the ruling class, which supplied a large proportion of the performers as well as the audience. The different components of a court ballet – dance, poetry, music and design – were usually

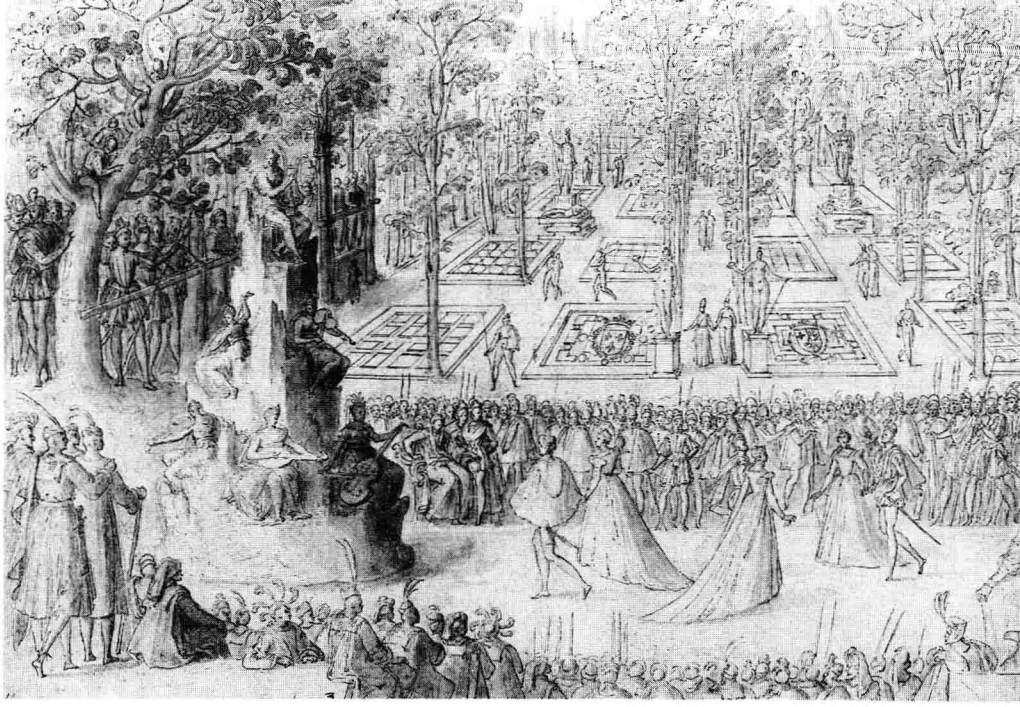
3 The setting for the Ballet Comique de la Reine Louise *(1581), as shown in the frontispiece to its libretto. The scenery included a mass of golden clouds, concealing singers (left), the garden and palace of Circe (centre background) and the grove of Pan (right).*

coordinated by an organizer who supervised the entire production. The collaborators could be noblemen or professionals, but they all joined in expressing the aristocratic point of view. In short, the court ballet was a carefully calculated mixture of art, politics and entertainment; its chief purpose was to glorify the State, which could be symbolized, as in the time of Louis XIV, by the reigning monarch.

Both France and Italy contributed to the development of the court ballet. The courts of both countries had long delighted in grandiose spectacles combining, in different proportions, costumed and masked performers, fantastically decorated cars, songs and instrumental music, speeches and verses, dances, mock battles and jousts. These entertainments were presented between courses of a banquet or acts of a play; they accompanied royal entries into a town or celebrated special events such as aristocratic weddings. Catherine de' Medici, who is said to have brought her taste for dancing to France from her native Italy, included dancing in many of the royal entertainments she commanded; an early example is *Le Paradis d'Amour* (1572), presented at the wedding of her daughter Marguerite de Valois and Henry of Navarre. This dance, performed by twelve ladies dressed as nymphs, was itself part of an elaborate mock-combat that concluded with a display of fireworks.

The court ballet, however, did not simply evolve out of the traditions of its predecessors. To some degree it was a conscious invention, strongly influenced by current ideas on the arts. The Académie de Musique et de la Poésie, founded in Paris in 1570 by the poet Jean-Antoine de Baïf (1532–89) and the composer Thibault de Courville, exerted a particularly powerful influence on the development of the court ballet. Baïf and his followers wished to resuscitate the poetry, music and dance of the ancient world. The Académie's concept of an art form that would fuse all the arts was to some extent realized by the composite form of the court ballet, which united poetry, music, dance and design.

The court ballet had particularly close ties to the literature of its time. Most ballet themes derived from literary sources, and the ballets themselves included spoken or sung verses which were called *récits*. Printed librettos containing these verses, together with explanations of the ballet's intentions and symbolism, were often distributed to the audience. Symbolism and allegory were important components of the court ballet, as they were in the art and literature of the period. Persons, objects and events were more often than not subject to multiple levels of interpretation. Manuals such as Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) provided an abundant source of visual symbols or 'emblems'. The court ballet was itself an emblem: in its union of the arts it represented the harmony of the celestial spheres, as manifested on earth in the



4 Like most court ballets, the Ballet des Polonais *(1573) was followed by a ball that mingled performers and onlookers. Musicians dressed as Apollo and the Muses accompanied the dancing from an artificial Parnassus (left).*

government of the ruler. In addition, the court ballet used emblems in more concrete forms: as figures of the dance, characters, or elements of the scenery or costumes.

Furthermore, the 16th and 17th centuries believed that the court ballet was more than a frivolous diversion. Like the other arts, it could exert a real effect on the lives of those who watched and participated in it. Dancing in general was considered a means of socializing the individual and drawing him into harmony with the group, and formed an important part of the education of a gentleman. Most court ballets ended with a 'grand ballet', celebrating the return of concord or harmony within the context of the ballet; this was followed by a ball in which everyone joined, symbolically drawing both spectators and performers into accord with the ideas expressed by the performance.

One of the first works to be recognized as a true court ballet was the *Ballet des Polonais*, staged in 1573 to honour the Polish ambassadors who were visiting Paris upon the accession of Henry of Anjou to the throne of Poland.

Commissioned by Catherine de' Medici, it was organized by her compatriot Baldassarino da Belgiojoso, who had taken the French name of Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx (fl. *c.*1555–87). Its highlight was an hour-long ballet danced by sixteen ladies representing the provinces of France. This ballet consisted of many intricate, interlacing figures, which the ladies were said to have performed faultlessly.

Beaujoyeulx was also responsible for an even more ambitious project, the
3 *Ballet Comique de la Reine Louise*, which was presented in 1581 as part of the wedding festivities for the Duc de Joyeuse and Marguerite of Lorraine, the sister of Queen Louise. The *Ballet Comique* was the first court spectacle to apply the principles of Baïf's Académie by integrating dance, poetry, music and design to convey a unified dramatic plot. Beaujoyeulx took charge of the choreography as well as the general organization of the ballet. The plot was derived from an episode in Homer's *Odyssey*, the encounter with the enchantress Circe, who transformed men into animals. In Beaujoyeulx's reworking, this story was given added meanings. Circe, representing man's baser passions – his animal nature – was defeated with the help of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom; Pan, symbolizing the forces of nature; and Jupiter, the omnipotent ruler of the gods.

At the beginning of the ballet a courtier playing a 'fugitive gentleman' cast himself at the feet of the king, Henry III, to beg his aid in resisting the machinations of Circe. This was not merely as an appeal to the king's vanity. Like the wedding itself, the ballet was meant to reconcile warring factions and heal the religious strife that had torn the country. Circe was a symbol of civil war, while the restoration of peace and concord at the end of the ballet represented the country's hopes for the future. The king was invoked in his own person as the means of realizing these hopes.

The ballet's choreography consisted of figured dances; Queen Louise and her ladies, dressed as naiads, were borne in on a three-tiered fountain to dance with twelve pages. Forty geometric figures, danced by naiads and dryads, comprised the concluding grand ballet.

The rise of the court ballet in France paralleled the birth of opera in Italy. In Florence the Camerata, a group of poets and composers comparable to Baïf's Académie, sought a similar fusion of the arts. The development of the court ballet also coincided with the opening of the first public theatres in France and the rise of the great French playwrights Corneille and Racine. Although the court ballet shared certain tendencies and influences with contemporary opera and drama, it placed more emphasis upon dancing than the opera, which tended to reserve dances for the interludes between acts, and was more flexible in form than classical drama, since it did not have to observe restrictions such as the three unities of time, place and action.

5 Grotesque dances provided a lively contrast to the stately dignity of the court ballet. In this scene from the Ballet de la Délivrance de Renaud *(1617), the monsters summoned up by the enchantress Armida have turned into comical old people.*

As the 17th century began, the court ballet started to diversify both its form and its subject matter. In the *Ballet d'Alcine* (1610), the text was sung rather than declaimed; this was the first time that musical recitative, which had been developed by the Camerata, was used in France. *Alcine* also introduced a new element of comedy, which was to become increasingly important in the court ballet. For example, a grotesque dance was performed by twelve knights whom the enchantress Alcine had transformed into objects such as windmills, flowerpots and bass viols.

The court ballet also began to draw inspiration from new sources. Chivalric romances, which were popular in the literature of the time, came into favour early in the 17th century. The *Ballet de la Délivrance de Renaud* (1617), an important example of this theme, demonstrates how the court ballet could be turned to political purposes. Inspired by Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, it resembled the *Ballet Comique de la Reine Louise* in its story of a man's deliverance from the toils of an evil sorceress. In this ballet, however, the theme was pointedly applied to the actual situation of the nation. Louis XIII, having recently freed himself of the regency of his mother, Marie de' Medici, and the various court conspiracies against him, was anxious to establish his authority as king, and chose the court ballet as a memorable means of announcing his intentions.

Reflecting real events in allegorical terms, the ballet depicted the reclamation of the hero Renaud (Tasso's Rinaldo) from the life of aimless luxury and frivolity imposed upon him by the enchantress Armida. It included scenes of magic and comedy, both of which were popular with audiences of the time: for example, Armida, enraged by Renaud's defection, summoned up demons in the shapes of crayfish, tortoises, and snails. To her chagrin, however, these creatures turned into ridiculous old people. The climax of the ballet was a scene of celebration in the golden pavilion of the crusader Godefroy de Bouillon, played by the king, who led his lords in a grand ballet. Louis also played the role of the spirit of fire, which was associated with both divinity and purification.

Although these works used a unified narrative structure, later productions placed less and less emphasis on dramatic continuity. In the *ballet-mascarade*, the dances, preceded by a spoken *récit* or a song, were tenuously connected by a slender plot. Similar in form was the *ballet à entrées*. Each *entrée* was structured like a *ballet mascarade*, with an opening *récit* or song followed by dances. A series of *entrées* was usually linked by a common theme: The *Ballet des Voleurs* (1624), for example, featured nocturnally inclined characters such as Night, the stars, thieves and serenaders. Each *entrée* involved a relatively small number of performers, usually between three and six.

The episodical nature of these two forms required less planning and rehearsal, and therefore less expense, than the dramatic ballets. The taste for ballet spread to the bourgeoisie, who produced these ballets on a modest scale in private houses in imitation of the ballets presented by the king and his court. M. de Saint-Hubert, whose book *La Manière de composer et faire réussir les ballets* [*How to Compose a Successful Ballet*] was published in 1641, stated that a royal ballet usually consisted of thirty *entrées*, a 'fine ballet' of at least twenty, and a small ballet of ten to twelve.

Between 1620 and 1636, satirical ballets that mocked the manners and
24 pretensions of their time became particularly popular. Among their favourite targets were professions and national types. In the *Ballet des Fées de la Fôret de Saint-Germain* (1625), the fairies' retainers include roulette players, Spanish dancers, warriors, headhunters and doctors. The *Ballet Royal du grand bal de la Douairière de Billebahaut* (1626) took place at a pompous reception given by the aged and ugly dowager and her fiancé, Fanfan de Sotteville. The international guest list included Atabalipa, the king of Cuzco; the Great Turk; the grand Cacique, mounted on an elephant; and the Great Cham, on a camel. The costumes, designed by Daniel Rabel, struck a fine balance between fantasy and authenticity, but they already displayed a taste for caricature that was to grow increasingly pronounced in the course of the century.