



[1930-1960]: Neoclassicism in Europe and the United States, entirely in tune with the times.

Attempts to approach the major dance trends

In 1929, when Serge de Diaghilev died, the main choreographer at the Ballets Russes was George Balanchine. The troupe did not survive its producer but neo-classicism emerged although it was not labelled as such at that time. The period called it “modern ballet”. Without calling the choreographic language inherited from post-romanticism into question, classical choreographers of the 20th century would nourish it and enrich it in particular through the themes addressed, through physical invention and through the choice of collaborations which reflected their time and its preoccupations. Although the Ballets Russes never opened a school, future generations would transmit and teach the founding principles of these emerging neo-classical forms.

“Neo-classical”: the term was first used after the Second World War in particular in the French press. Serge Lifar used it to define the arabesque and the *dégagé* in his *Traité de danse académique (Treaty of Academic Dance)* in 1949. However, it was not a “school” or a “movement” which federated. This word was used to define the classical dance emancipated from the only repertoire of the 19th century. “Neo-classical” is first and foremost what takes place in the bodies: vertical and horizontal planes were challenged in particular by not observing aplomb (balance) or verticality but also through swaying and asymmetry. Works were narrative, expressive and even abstract and embraced musical renewal.

**From the 1930s,
In Monte-Carlo and beyond: ensuring that the legend of the Ballets Russes
continued
In London: creating the British classical form
At the Opera de Paris: renewing excellence.**

In Monte-Carlo, the Ballet Russes’ legacy had a strong hold. Companies followed hot on the heels of others and competed like René Blum’s Ballets de Monte Carlo and Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes. Before leaving for the United States, Léonide Massine was a figurehead of this Monégasque choreographic vitality. Some of Diaghilev’s former dancers became independent and created their own programmes such as Vera Nemtchinova and Léon Woizikovsky. Bronislava Nijinska moved from one company to another based on commissions placed. From Paris to Monte-Carlo, the Russian label continued to be a thing that dreams were made of pending its takeover, during the post-war period, by a rich patron, the Marquis de Cuevas.



Although many of these Russian dancers took up exile in the United States between the two wars, a great many troupes were established in Europe. In England, two former members of the Ballets Russes, Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert, followed by Frederick Ashton, would stimulate the creation of British ballet. Ninette de Valois established schools (such as the Academy of Choreographic Art in London, the Abbey Theatre School of Ballet in Dublin, then the Sadler's Wells Ballet School) with the intention of creating a repertoire ballet company with dancers who would be trained in an exclusively-British style. Companies and schools as such appeared as ancestors of the current-day Royal Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet and the Royal Ballet School.

At the Opera de Paris, the Ballet Russes' creativity and presence could be felt as of 1914. Diaghilev's company even performed there in particular in 1925. The director Jacques Rouché would invite talented composers and painters for new creations so as to renew the repertoire. Dance was acknowledged there but without the brilliance of a Michel Fokine. Following an unsuccessful collaboration with Balanchine in 1929, Serge Lifar was appointed Ballet Master and choreographer. He was twenty-five years old and would pursue this role until the end of the 1950s. Accounts were unanimous: Serge Lifar added a touch of youthfulness to an institution, which was still heavily influenced by the 19th century. However, youth rhymed with expectations and discipline. The repertoire was renewed and expanded in particular through the creation of a host of works promoting masculine dance. He developed new corporal grammar wherein, for example, feet would keep their natural direction for walking and arabesques, and dégagés and développés would be performed with legs parallel. He initiated adage classes and breathed life into a new generation of French étoiles like Yvette Chauviré, Solange Schwartz and Lycette Darsonval. In 1935, he created *Icare (Icarus)*, inspired by aviation and ancient myth. Entitled "ballet without musical accompaniment", Serge Lifar adjusted the rhythms of the percussions, a rhythmic partition which was then incorporated and orchestrated. Paul Larthe created the scenery and costumes then, in the 1962-version, by Pablo Picasso, however unlike the collaborations he had had with the Ballets Russes, the costumes and scenery did not hamper the dance. For Serge Lifar, dance was considered paramount and he supported the supremacy of the choreographer though without dismissing parity between the arts: collaborations, of course! But dedicated to dance. *Icare* would be used to illustrate his *Manifeste du chorégraphe (Choreographer's Manifesto)*. He described the founding principles of renewed ballet in ten points. He, in particular, advocated the musicality of the danced movement confronted with external music imposed on dance. He also asserted the status of creator. The neologism "choréauteur" (choreauthor) was born.



***Suite en blanc* (1943) or how to create “fine visions”!**

For Serge Lifar, dance was “the en-dehors, balance, ecstasy, elevation... Controlled, ordered, applied geometry”¹. With *Suite en blanc*, he proposed a ballet without a pamphlet. A lack of argument which he justified as follows: “When I composed *Suite en Blanc* I was only concerned about pure dance irrespective of any other consideration: I wanted to create fine visions, visions which would be in no way artificial, cerebral. This led to a succession of genuine little technical studies, of choreographic shortcuts independent one from the other, related to each other through the same neo-classical style”². *Suite en blanc*, performed hundreds of times at the Opera and, of course, on many other stages, was created in 1943 with imposing Art Deco scenery, which was now reduced to a simple raised stage set against a backdrop of black curtains, with two lateral stairways for access from the back of the stage. Through his desire to show a “dance which dances”, he removed all dramatic, pantomime and narrative aspects to centre stage the essence of his art. A one-act ballet with eight themes (*La Sieste – Thème varié - Serenade - Pas de cinq - La Cigarette - Mazurka - Adage – La Flute*) which portrayed the choreographer’s panel of movements in a format which, from the very title, conjured up white romantic ballet and even Michel Fokine’s *Les Sylphides*, reputed as the first-ever abstract ballet. He perpetuated a vision of dance which embraced an ideal of beauty. The work was reproduced in 1946 for the Nouveaux Ballets de Monte-Carlo, and entitled *Noir et Blanc (Black and White)*; it would lead to a disagreement in 1958 between its author and the new director of the Monegasque company, the Marquis de Cuevas... Disagreement which picked up so much steam that it finished off with a sword fight! Choreography really is something serious...

The United States and the 1930s and 1940s: inventing American classical dance.

In the United States, classical dance was not deeply rooted. It existed through Russian dancers, in particular Diaghilev’s, who had migrated to settle on the other side of the Atlantic. As such, for example, Louis Tchalif, Michel Mordkin, Theodore Kozlov, Adolph Bolm founded schools and companies. Michel Fokine and Léonide Massine were also among these Russians exiled in the New World. In 1933, the patron Lincoln Kirstein met George Balanchine and dreamt of founding a totally American company: The Ballet Society. It would take some time for this project to become reality. The company,

¹ Quote translated from an extract of an interview with Serge Lifar in an episode of the documentary series “Visages contemporains” in 1963 (« l’en-dehors, l’équilibre, l’extase, l’élévation... C’est la géométrie contrôlée, ordonnée et appliquée »).

² Quote taken from the *Livre de la Danse* by Serge Lifar, published by Journal Musical Français, 1954, pp. 186-187. (« En composant *Suite en Blanc* je ne me suis préoccupé que de danse pure, indépendamment de toute autre considération : j’ai voulu créer de belles visions, des visions qui n’aient rien d’artificiel, de cérébral. Il en est résulté une succession de véritables petites études techniques, de raccourcis chorégraphiques indépendants les uns des autres, apparentés entre eux par un même style néo-classique »)



created in 1946, became the New York City Ballet in 1948, following several previous attempts and the foundation, in 1934, of the New School of American Ballet. As such, American ballet was now able to train its dancers in its school and produce them in its company under the leadership of a Russian: George Balanchine.

At the same time, in 1939, the American Ballet Theater (first called Ballet Theater) was created by Lucia Chase and Richard Peasant, a repertoire company comprising three lead choreographers: Antony Tudor, a British man who arrived in New York in 1940, the American Agnes de Mille back following an acclaimed performance in London and Jerome Robbins, from a family of emigrant Russian Jews. The programmes alternated between repertoire ballets like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* and current-day works which contributed to Americanizing ballet: the works produced evoked American customs and the dizzying pace of the New World. Subsequently and, for a decade, the famous Russian dancer and choreographer Mikhail Baryshnikov would take over as director.

In 1942, the San Francisco Ballet was established. Then in 1956, the Joffrey Ballet. American classical dance was born and developed as such in a myriad of structures but did not prevent European companies from touring such as the Marquis de Cuevas' Grand Ballet. This company, created in 1947 in Monte Carlo, and financially supported by the Marquis' wife, one of the Rockefeller daughters, was an enormous success until 1962 as if the spectre of the Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo was pursuing its route across the Atlantic.

From dramatic ballet to musicals: Ballet develops with the strength of American-style syncretism

American ballet quickly gained its independence from post-Romanticist ballet codes which had gained their pedigree from European classical dance. It embraced American themes: history of the United States, miscellaneous news items, pursuit of the Wild West, cowboy and Indian culture, an array of themes which renewed the genre and boosted the development of its identity. The composite evening format, where works focusing on a variety of realms were performed one after the other, was frequently adopted. Ballet would also quickly showcase American-style syncretism: flirting with ballet, drama, entertainment, dance from the world of theatre and of musicals. American classical dance surfed shamelessly between these different performing art production networks without any fear of being catalogued in one field rather than another. There was only a short step between Broadway and Hollywood, there was only a short step between Broadway and the Italian stage.

***Pillar of Fire* (1942) by Antony Tudor: Example of a psychological ballet**

Pillar of fire was defined in American English as a psychological ballet, i.e. a narrative ballet boosted by powerful dramatic demonstration and great importance given to expression. It implemented classical ballet forms on the choreographic level and as



regards body language yet without ever excluding modern-day stylistics: the psychological aspect of the roles predominated. This led to a naturalistic dimension which highlighted modern emotional expression, combining austerity and elegance. The scenery whisked the spectator off to a small country town in 1900 and recounted the story of Agar, a young girl who planned to live a life of celibacy among her sisters. She was confronted with the motives of passion which encircled her and the judgements of her peers, exposing American puritanism as well as the pressure of community forces. In the end, she found the man she loved. Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) promoted the dramatic aspect of the work considerably. In this creation's initial casting, our attention is drawn to two names: an American who would devote a great part of her career to France and to training classical dancers as of the 1960s in Cannes, Rosella Hightower, and a young dancer around twenty years old who would play a key role in American neo-classical dance: Jerome Robbins.

George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins: the American genius.

Jerome Robbins, a pupil of Michel Fokine, who had practiced all sorts of dances and had performed on Broadway and for the Yiddish theatre, was a figure of American syncretism, embracing it through physical experience as a dancer. A choreographer, he created works for ballet, for musicals, for theatre, for films and for television. Through his blend of lyrical beauty and humour, Robbins developed an inventive palette and a prolific production whose scope is little known in Europe. His works include the indispensables like *Fancy free* (1944), *On the Town* (1945) his first musical and, above all, the iconic transposition of *Romeo and Juliette* into the New York ghettos of the 1950s: *West Side Story*. His collaboration with the composer Leonard Bernstein was decisive and would be renewed several times. In 1949, Balanchine invited him to share the direction of the NYCB. For a decade, the two men would mark this company with their know-how and would develop a joint project: to invent an American identity for classical dance.

***Agon* (1957) by George Balanchine: When dance is an interpretive demonstration of music.**

For Balanchine, the female dancer became vertical, with legs stretched long, bust flat and neck extended. The body's aplomb and stacking of volumes (legs/pelvis/torso/head) were no longer necessarily observed. Lines in space, speed and disequilibrium became strong elements of composition. The pas de deux became a gravity-fed game between partners. The dance was articulate and graphical, free from narrative constraints. Likewise, Balanchine advocated dance which could do without scenery and costumes: a dance floor, an illuminated cyclorama, a leotard and tights were all it took. *Agon*, a major work in the repertoire, is considered as the prototype of Balanchine's art. The subject: the dance itself performed through a succession of small groups of dancers. The music-dance relationship reigned supreme in particular when



collaborating with a composer whom he had known during the Ballets Russes adventure: Igor Stravinsky. Together, they formed a couple focusing on tradition: the structure of the dance had to be stringently subject to the structure of the music it interpreted.

George Balanchine also created ballets with an American culture base, such as cowboys in *Western Symphony* (1964) based on traditional American melodies and renderings of 4 July parades in *Stars and Stripes* (1958). In 1970, *Who Cares?* was created to music by Gershwin, another sign of his acculturation. Like Jerome Robbins, in addition to the many ballets which he created until he passed away in 1983, he quickly moved towards musicals, revues and cinema. *On Your Toes* (1936), *Goldwyn Follies* (1938), *Cabin in the Sky* (1940) are just some of the productions which made Balanchine known outside the “reserved” circuit of theatre classical dance, especially as after the beginning of the 1930s and the economic and social crises post-1929, Broadway and Hollywood were about to enter their golden era: sequins and entertainment seemed to be the remedy for the distress of life.

Jewels (1967) by George Balanchine: When Broadway style finds its way into ballet.

Jewels comprises three parts evoking the precious gems which the leading “schools” of classical dance are associated with: emeralds for the French Romanticist school, rubies for American tradition, diamonds as a tribute to the virtuosity and the great Russian ballets. This ballet centre stages his artistic journey, from beginning at the Mariinsky Theatre, choreographing for the Opera de Paris and founding the NYCB. “Rubies”, as such, reflects this American tradition borrowed from Broadway music-halls, translated through jazzy intonations and movements performed to music by Igor Stravinsky. Wrists were willingly broken. The pelvis leaned forward on the pointe, tilted backwards or swayed to the sound of piano notes. Hips shifted from en-dehors to en-dedans. Bodies were visible from all angles and the lines of legs weaved their way through the entire space, as such, conveying another tone to classical vocabulary.

In France, the 1950s: New creations and independent companies.

Like other European nations after the Second World War, Paris saw young neo-classical companies come to the fore such as Ballets des Champs-Élysées (1945), Roland Petit’s Ballets de Paris (1948), Ballets Jeanine Charrat (1951), Maurice Béjart’s Ballets de l’Etoile (1954). In fact, a new generation of choreographers and dancers emerged outside the great Institution of the Opera de Paris. The performer became a preeminent focus for these choreographers who created “bespoke” roles and the incorporation of dance. Paris, at the end of the 1950s, appeared as a European crossroads for the art of



movement with in particular the Theatre des Nations Festival and the International Dance Festival at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

Roland Petit, a curious person with unfailing artistic freedom.

Roland Petit, who had studied at the Opera de Paris school, in particular under Serge Lifar, became the official choreographer for the Ballets des Champs Élysées (1945) then founded the Ballets de Paris (1948). He worked hand-in-hand with writers, painters, decorators and stylists from a host of spheres such as, to cite but a few of the names everyone knows: Serge Gainsbourg, César, Max Ernst as well as Yves Saint Laurent. The list also included some who had formerly partnered with the Ballets Russes such as Jean Cocteau and Natalia Gontcharova. Roland Petit's tastes, which comprised literature, existentialism, musicals and cabaret, were heteroclitic and his vocabulary was inspired by this. In 1972, he even fine-tuned the choreography for a Pink Floyd concert. That same year, he settled in Marseille as director of the neo-classical dance troupe which ranked second in importance just behind that of the Opera de Paris: the Ballet national de Marseille to which he added a training school in 1992.

Le Jeune homme et la mort (1946) by Roland Petit, existentialism performed.

Nijinsky had his *Spectre de la Rose*, I'm going to give you your own spectre: said Cocteau to a very young dancer, Jean Babilée. In an atmosphere, which was somewhat existentialist, a prevalent line of thinking at the time, it was Cocteau who proposed a pamphlet. The staging focused on the suicide of a young painter in his studio who, dreaming of Love, met Death embodied by a seductive woman against a backdrop overflowing with symbols exposing the antagonistic ideals of Humans. The work, rehearsed to jazz music, was presented to the public accompanied by Bach's *Passacaglia*: the "accidental musical synchronicity" adds strength to the acrobatic body language. For Jean Babilée, Roland Petit composed a dance full of leaps and falls, moments of anticipation and repeated glances at the watch worn on the wrist conjuring up the psychological disturbance of the young man. In 1966, Zizi Jeanmaire and Rudolf Nureyev performed the roles for the filmed version. The choreography was modified: Roland Petit's writing focused on the personality of the person who danced it.

The Béjart phenomenon: an international focal point and a quest for symbiosis between cultures.

Refusing to focus on tradition exclusively, he is known as a precursor through his use of concrete music for ballet – even though Janine Charrat had already sampled this – and *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1955) would pave the way for collaborations with Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. In 1960, Maurice Béjart created the Ballet du XXe siècle (Ballet of the 20th Century) in Brussels. Although his French beginnings were not



supported, in Belgium he was able to unfurl his creativity. Creation and training became but one. In the 1970s, he opened Mudra, one of the most important schools in Europe; then, in 1977, Mudra-Afrique in Dakar, directed by the Franco-Senegalese Germaine Acogny. Dance is a ritual movement and it is universal. The performance and the stage are places for producing total, ecumenical art which goes beyond cultural, philosophical and/or religious differences. As such, he would surround himself with performers with strong personalities, like Jorge Donn, and sought themes which were in tune with the times and quested vocabulary which went beyond cultures as he did not wish to define dance by genre, style or category. He was perhaps one of those who intensely questioned classifications between neo-classical, modern and contemporary, yet remained very attached to the first which he perceived as a “working basis” for incorporating all other danced movements. At the same time, refusing to focus on the public of theatres exclusively, he moved his shows on-tour to circus tents and sports halls and reached out to other audiences and shook up the habits of season ticket holders: in 1967, in the Cour d’Honneur in Avignon, he created *Messe pour le temps présent*, a hymn to rebellious youth where jeans replaced tights and where classical barre exercises and pelvis-swaying jerk interacted.

La Neuvième symphonie (The Ninth Symphony) (1964) by Maurice Béjart, hymn to fraternity.

This ballet without any argument, presented upon creation at the Cirque Royal in Brussels, then at the Palais des Sports in Paris, would be performed around the world in venues seating thousands of spectators. The show was intended to be reunifying: Humanity watches fraternal humanity dancing as an extension to Beethoven’s score, and texts by Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich von Schiller. Example, par excellence, of the symbiosis between cultures and the fraternity between races which Maurice Béjart desired so much. For him, it was first and foremost “a profound human participation in a masterpiece that belongs to the whole mankind, and is not only played and sung here, but is danced, as were the Greek tragedies of Antiquity and primitive religious rites.” The choreography used collective unifying forms: unisons, lines, farandoles, circles... and the ground unveils the scenario: a myriad of forms, figures, dotted lines sketching out universal rites, whilst serving as points of reference for the dancers. Dance is a ritual that unites us.

Meanwhile in Russia...

Whereas everything to do with neo-classical development stemmed from Russia, 1930s’ Russian classical dance had to deal with political scorn: art had to be utilitarian on pain of being declared decadent. With the borders closed until 1945, Stalinism saw through art the means to assert social realism. Behind the Iron curtain, Stalin renamed the Mariinsky as Kirov and encouraged ballets which exposed Bolshevik ideology. Forms were conventional: narrative ballet in three acts. The Bolshoi, a ballet company



established in Moscow would also adhere to these precepts. Dance was virtuoso in its technique and that would become the signature of Russian dance. From the 1950s, the Western public was enthralled by charismatic étoiles such as Vladimir Vasiliev. However, these étoiles only wished for one thing: to flee the communist regime whilst on tour. This is exactly what Rudolf Nureyev (in 1961), Natalia Makarova (in 1970) and Mikhail Baryshnikov (in 1974), amongst others, did.

To go further:

A myriad of bibliographical references exists for this period. The bibliography proposed has been selected to enable readers to enrich their knowledge, to access iconographic accounts and to gain insight into the words of artists and eyewitnesses of their times.

Sources

Serge Lifar, *Le Manifeste du chorégraphe (The Choreographer's Manifesto)*, Paris, Étoile, 1935, extract taken from Marcelle Michel and Isabelle Ginot's, *La Danse au XXème siècle*, Paris, Bordas, 1995, p.44.

Maurice Béjart, *Lettres à un jeune danseur*, Paris, Actes sud, 2001.

Michel Robert, *Maurice Béjart, une vie – derniers entretiens*, Bruxelles, Editions Luc Pire, 2009.

Roland Petit, *Rythme de vie, entretiens avec Jean-Pierre Pastori*, coll. Paroles vives, published by *La Bibliothèque Des Arts*, 2003.

Monographic publications

George Amberg, *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*, Amberg Press, 2007 (1923).

Marie-Françoise Christout and Brigitte Lefèvre, *Serge Lifar à l'Opéra*, Editions de la Martinière, 2006.

Dominique Genevois, *Mudra, 103 rue Bara. L'école de Maurice Béjart 1970-1988*, Bruxelles, Contredanse, 2016.

Gérard Mannoni, *Roland Petit*, coll. L'Avant-Scène ballet/danse, ed. L'Avant-Scène théâtre, 1984.

Jean-Pierre Pastori, 2. *La danse : Des Ballets russes à l'avant-garde*, Paris, découvertes Gallimard, n°332, 1997 (for the most recent publication).

Florence Poudru, *Serge Lifar : la danse pour patrie*, Hermann, 2007.

Florence Poudru, *Dans le sillage des Ballets russes, 1929-1959*, Pantin, CND, 2010.

Annie Suquet, *L'éveil des modernités (1870-1945)*, Pantin, CND, 2012.

Robert Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*, ed. Harper Collins, 2004.

Amanda Vaill, *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, Broadway Books, 2008.



Exhibition catalogues

Zizi Jeanmaire, Roland Petit - un patrimoine pour la danse, (dir. Alexandre Fiette)
(exhibition, Geneva, Musée Rath), Somogy editions, 2007.

Open sources

Dossier “le style néoclassique, une maladie honteuse ?”, in *Journal de l’ADC*, n°39, April-June 2006, pp.3-9 / <https://archives.adc-geneve.ch/assets/files/journal%20de%20l'adc/JADC39.pdf>

Credits:

Excerpts selection

Céline Roux

Text and bibliography selection

Céline Roux

Production

Maison de la Danse

Author’s biography:

Céline Roux is an independent researcher who holds a PhD in History of Art. A specialist of French choreographic-related performative practices, she is moreover the author of *Danse(s) performative(s)* (L’Harmattan, 2007) and *Pratiques performatives / Corps critiques # 1-10 (2007-2016)* (L’Harmattan, 2016). A lecturer, trainer and teacher, she works in a variety of higher education contexts as well as in dancer training. She also partners on the artistic projects of contemporary dancer-choreographers for artist archives, producing reviews and editorial works as well as dramatic art coaching. She has contributed to several digital projects for sharing choreographic culture such as *30ansdanse.fr*. Alongside her activities in/for/around choreographic art, she has practiced Hatha yoga in France and in India for several years.

This Course was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.