



[1970-2018] Neoclassical developments:

They spread worldwide, as well as having multiple repertoires and dialogues with contemporary dance.

Attempts to approach the major dance trends

In the 1970s, artists' drive towards a new classic, a "modern" ballet as it was called in those years, had been ongoing for more than a half century and several generations had already formed since the Russian Ballets. Neoclassicism was not only the "new", that is the "present" of the "classical", it had become a past that needed to be protected, a repertoire to be kept alive and passed on. In addition, from the 1970s onwards, several generations coexisted in the present: those who had already defined their ambition and those who were exploring theirs! When it comes to contemporary neoclassical dance, that is dance now, it is necessary to consider both geographical and cultural aspects in order to show the multi-faceted vitality and the particular challenges of this aesthetic that has changed over the centuries.

Classicism and neoclassicism: an international dimension and repertoires shared worldwide!

Today, national and world famous companies have a multi-faceted repertoire where classical academic works converge with neoclassical, modern and contemporary works. We can also include creations with guest choreographers who have multi-faceted aesthetics. Whether it is in France or other European countries, in Russia, in China, in the United States or in Cuba, this phenomenon is identical to a more or less conservative dimension linked to the political values of the States and to the history of this art within cultural areas. For example, Russian, Chinese and Cuban national companies offer a prominent place to the more conservative values of classical dance, whereas companies from other cultural areas, such as North America or Eastern Europe, are more likely to represent a more diverse repertoire.

Western classical dance spread around the world, and even coexisted alongside other classical dances. Political events and new worldwide diplomatic cards went hand in hand with this international reach. Thus, the repertoire of the National Ballet of China, established in 1959, consisted of Chinese classical works - from the Cultural Revolution - western classical works passed on, largely, by masters of the Russian ballet and a neoclassical repertoire, particularly works by Balanchine. In 1981, this same George Balanchine freely gave the Israël Ballet of Tel Aviv the rights to represent his works. In the 1960s, the Opéra de Paris hosted ten or so of Balanchine's works but it now holds more than thirty of them. Therefore, the New York City Ballet is not the only custodian of its founder's works.



As a sign of a new era, cultural areas were opening up due to travel made easier at the end of the 20th century: auditions, performances, training, competitions took place on an international level. Maurice Béjart inaugurated Mudra in Brussels in 1970, one of the leading schools in Europe, followed by Mudra-Afrique in Dakar in 1977, which was run by the Franco-Senegalese Germaine Acogny. Dancers from different backgrounds and nationalities trained there. In 1973, the international ballet competition in Lausanne (prix de Lausanne) was created by the couple Braunschweig and Rosella Hightower, with the support of Béjart and Michael Wood. It quickly became an event that brought together young dancers from all seven continents. It was the creators of the 'prix de Lausanne' dream to discover talents from all over the world and seek the artists of tomorrow! The history of this competition tells us a lot about the history of classical dance performers from the end of the 20th century: they were versatile and had to be able to adapt their expertise and their interpretative skills to different repertoires, which were sometimes aesthetically and anatomically incompatible. Lets go back thirty years before the new century!

In the 1970s: European ballets evolved under renewed aspirations and influences

In the 1970s, ballet companies with a diverse repertoire and new committed management were established in Europe. There were the Frankfurt Ballet and then the Hamburg Ballet in Germany for the American John Neumeier, Nederlands Dans Theater in the Netherlands for the Czech Jiří Kylián, the Stuttgart Ballet and then the Forsythe Company for the man known as "the most European of American choreographers", William Forsythe...Some of them were trained exclusively as classical dancers, while others were influenced by modern, jazz or traditional legacies. In this way, Jiří Kylián also trained himself in the Graham technique and in folklore. While studying, William Forsythe became interested in classical dance, jazz and *rock'n'roll* as well as in musical comedy before joining the Joffrey Ballet in 1971, and then leaving for Europe. They have, however, one crucial common point in that they interpreted John Cranko ideas at the Stuttgart Ballet.

Their different cultures opened up a range of possibilities that had yet to be tapped. Likewise, some of them prefer to manage one company, while others will be invited in parallel to choreograph different ballet troupes around the world. In this way, the repertoires expand, diversify and very quickly modernise neoclassical dance. There were different sources of inspiration, such as philosophical discussions, reinterpretations, inspiration from the other arts...

Symphony number 3 by Gustav Mahler (1975) by John Neumeier: a hymn to Man, to music and to existence



John Neumeier met the new troop he had just started to direct through this creation: the Hamburg Ballet. He was 33 years old and dedicated this creation to John Cranko, his European mentor whose ideas he interpreted at the Stuttgart Ballet from 1963 and who gave him the opportunity to become a choreographer. He cut Mahler's symphony to six scenes while respecting the movements of the musical composition: Yesterday, Summer, Autumn, Night, Angel and Ce que me conte l'amour. Six initial stages for Man who is seeking the challenges of his existence. From the prince to the man and from the narration to the theme, the interpretation had a pluralistic nature, was more psychological and intimate. Neumeier translated these challenges in the body, experimenting with new supports and precarious balance, working the torsion rather than vertical alignment. He composed using strong geometrical figures on an empty stage. There was neither place nor historical time for this masculine hymn, moving, through the scenes, from the military and subdued body to a stronger body, showing the great male representations of the Judaic-Christian culture. Neoclassical dance thus took on a quasi psychoanalytical existential dimension.

***No More play (1988) by Jiří Kylián:
Webern, Giacometti... When art inspires art***

A small sculpture by Alberto Giacometti inspired Jiří Kylián for this choreographic piece, composed as a game with rules and mysterious language: a simple black stage where spaces of light were apparent as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that require assembly. *No More play* All play was eliminated, apart from the choreographic dialogue between movements, light and music. In fact, there was again no prince or witch, but performers, men and women, who performed with spatial organisation, musical rhythm and contact among partners. The organisation of the lines in the space became complex. The temporality of the movement plays with accelerations, suspensions and silences. The dance partners responded to each other through counterweight lifts and balance as if they were inventing another language system for the moving body. The musical partition was always a crucial element for Kylián: Here, Anton Webern's atonal music in his *5 Movements for String Quartett, Op5* (1909), offered possibilities for this search. In the chosen excerpt, the pas de deux varies between fluidity and freeze frames, accents and continuity using a renewed language: new supports in the interactions and lifts, plurality of the lines in space and an extreme graphic quasi surgical precision produce a renewed poetic form.

**Neoclassical France after May 1968:
Beyond Paris and favouring mixed repertoires**

In 1968, the Contemporary Ballet Theatre was created on the initiative of the Ministère de la Culture under the artistic direction of Albert Cartier and Françoise Adret, from the Opéra de Paris. Located in Amiens, then in Angers, it became the Théâtre Français de



Nancy in 1978. It aimed to favour choreographic creation in collaboration with contemporary musicians and painters. The ideal aimed at sixty years earlier by the Russian Ballet Company reappeared. In 1972, Brigitte Lefèvre also left the Opéra de Paris to go to La Rochelle. She created the Théâtre du Silence (1974-1985) with Jacques Garnier, which contributed to the establishment of dance companies in the region. Its repertoire was divided between its directors' choreographies and the works of Maurice Béjart, Merce Cunningham, David Gordon, Robert Kovitch, Lar Lubovitch... With such a rich pool of candidates with different aesthetic aspects, mixing neoclassical and modern dance, the company accomplished important world tours.

The Opéra de Paris was also successful! May 1968 also took place in the theatre: the dancers questioned their desires and there were questions around the theatre concerning its heritage and culture. Three years later, a modern American dancer, Carolyn Carlson presented a solo show there, *Density 21,5*, as a tribute to the composer Varèse. Between applause and criticism from a public uninitiated in this "other" dance culture, she was nominated "star choreographer" in 1973 and became the head of the GRTOP - the theatrical research group of the Opéra de Paris. She modernised the theatre: in her workshops, the invention and renewal of body language was what was important. The dancer was encouraged to improvise and compose. Throughout these years, the Opéra de Paris also opened its repertoire up to modern pieces. Rudolph Noureev, appointed dance director in 1983, will perpetuate this cultural enrichment even if he refuses the idea of a specialised group in modern research. With him, the Opéra de Paris must be responsible for the well-known repertoire, develop research on the forgotten repertoire (especially that of baroque dance) but also open up to other repertoires and share rehearsal time with contemporary choreographers.

In the south of France, the neoclassic dynamic is strong, especially regarding training and passing on skills. Rosella Hightower, the undisputed star of the Ballets du Marquis de Cuevas and director of several ballets in the 1970s and 1980s, was a figure of the vitality of classical dance of the final decades of the 20th century. She founded the Centre International de Danse in Cannes in 1961, and since then was one of the first people to want a variety of disciplines to train dancers. In 1972, Roland Petit moved to Marseille and founded the Ballet National de Marseille. His troupe were rivals of the Opéra de Paris, especially thanks to extraordinary dancers regarding both their technique and their charisma.

In 1984, Jack Lang implemented ten measures in favour of dance, including the creation of a label: the centres chorégraphiques nationaux. They were places of creation in regions and directed by choreographers. This label was attributed to twelve contemporary and classical companies, based on their particular geographical locations. On the classical side, the Ballet du Nord d'Alphonse Cata, the Ballet du Rhin directed by Jean Sarelli, the Ballet national de Marseille of Roland Petit and the Ballet Théâtre Français de Nancy were selected. The Ballet Biarritz of Thierry Malandain was added to the list in 1998.



Mechanical Ballet (1996) of Thierry Malandain

Thierry Malandain is known for his interpretations of academic ballets such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Swan Lake*. With *Mechanical ballet*, he offered a choreographed version of the musical composition of the same name as the American George Antheil. *Mechanical ballet*, music composed in the 1920s was originally supposed to be the soundtrack for an experimental Dadaist film; the film by Malandain, which made reference to the inventions, machines and tailored bodies from the beginning of the last century. On stage, there was a ring surrounded by dance bars, a space of combat and rivalry where tensions between nature and culture, standardisation and personal expression and alienation and freedom were played out. The body language was bold and fixed. The lines of the arms and legs were taut. The bodies were toned and muscular. The language made no distinction between the sexes for bodies in their underwear. The composition played with the main choreographic paradigms for a given set: unison, question/response, mirror, opposition, cannon were the methods used in this punctuated and percussive writing, far from lyrical nature and often associated with classical dance.

Romeo and Juliet (1996) by Jean-Christophe Maillot: The aim was to revamp the repertoire and render the adolescent love bursts timeless

The Principality of Monaco opened its doors to the Russian Ballets at the beginning of the century, both for performances and rehearsals up to 1929. Then, the companies followed, the Monegasque princely rulers preserving the presence of dance on the Rock. In addition to the dozens of works by the Russian Ballets, still part of the repertoire today, were added works by Balanchine and several guest neoclassical, modern and contemporary choreographers. Following several invitations, Jean-Christophe Maillot became the director and choreographer in 1993. In 1996, he created *Romeo and Juliet*, with no balcony, swords or vials of poison. He retained the idea of a ballet in three acts but he created his drama, which was particularly inspired by the film of Franco Zeffirelli (1968) as a film script. He wanted to “give a contemporary dimension to works everybody knows, everybody has seen and of which everybody has references in mind”¹. Moving away from the socio-political dimension of ballet, it was the gesture of the love connection between the two young people that sparked interest: how did the neoclassical dance reveal the range of adolescent emotions through the movement?

End of the 20th century: mix cultures with the aim of experimenting with an emancipated neoclassicism

Art historians are continuously updating affiliations and artistic connections between geographical, historic and cultural areas to understand how an art evolves, while artists

¹ This is a quote from an interview with Jean-Christophe Maillot about *Romeo and Juliet* on a dance video



constantly link their art with their vision of the world: the notions of affiliation and recognition of authorship take a back seat. In the 1980s, neoclassical dance continued to mainly show a heroic and virtuoso body, celebrating an ideal beauty that seemed at times to be out of touch with the political and cultural events happening around it: The fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS epidemic, conflicts around the world (Gulf War, Lebanon War, Falklands War, Intifada, the Romanian Revolution, uprisings against Apartheid in South Africa), the Chernobyl disaster, social movements... However, for some artists, neoclassical dance will follow unconventional paths that will question their own values. Therefore, in the 1980s, William Forsythe stated that he no more followed in the footsteps of Balanchine than Balanchine in those of Petipa. He explained that he was living in the time of the atomic bomb, pollution, AIDS and computers, in an era where stress and violence predominated². In other words, he was a choreographer of his time, leaving a legacy - the classical vocabulary - that he manipulated, dismantled and reproduced to place neoclassicism in a contemporary world. Other artists like Karole Armitage in the United States and Michael Clark in England shifted towards the punk rock culture. Contemporary choreographers produced interpretations for classical dancers who were at times confused, such as *Cinderella* by Maguy Marin for the Opéra de Lyon or *Giselle* by Mats Ek who was invited to the Opéra de Paris. The body was pushed to its spatial, temporal and gravitational limits: extreme stretching of the limbs, imbalances, rate modulation, deformations and breaks, falls... Instead of being vertical, the dancers were horizontal.

***Wild thing (1988) by Karole Armitage:
A rock, punk and wild neoclassical dance***

There is a surprising cast with Jimi Hendrix for music, David Salle for costumes, Jeff Koons for scenery. The woman who was rapidly nicknamed the “punk ballerina” was not concerned about labels and that is why we see her name in connection with both classical dance and post-modern dance and performance! A curious syncretism in the work of Karole Armitage is that she replaced ballet shoes with heavy shoes, the bun with a short peroxide cut, and white and pastel tones with black. Her style and stage presence electrified classical dance: she played with speed, line fractures, ostentatious movements with her hip and her head from right to left and also from front to back, asymmetrical oppositions and impacts. She was trained as a classical dancer, performed Balanchine’s repertoire and then performed for Cunningham. In her own work, the presence of guitarists on stage helped with physical interactions between dancers and musicians in a format that was more like a concert than a ballet. In this way, she created a raw and violent neoclassical dance that brought about a shift in enshrined values.

***One Flat Thing Reproduced (2006) by William Forsythe, Revolutionary and spatial
example in the body of the dancer***

²For the exact quote, see the comments collected by Marcelle Michelle, in *Libération*, 9-10 December 1989.



Contrary to artists who base the construction of their language on neoclassical foundations to develop a contemporary dance - for example, British man Wayne McGregor - William Forsythe was always interested in questioning the hidden mechanics of his art. From the moment he began directing the Frankfurt Ballet in 1984, works such as *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* (1987) showed his intentions. Everything was a question of relationships: the relationships between the different parts of the body, between individuals and their surroundings, between dancers and their three-dimensional dance and the world of three dimensions. It was this geometricised abstraction of the perception of space that allowed him to “see” classical vocabulary in another light. To this end, he developed various means, mainly based on Rudolf Laban or through improvisation. In 2006, the dance video *One Flat Thing Reproduced* showed this wealth of elements: work on the themes and counterpoints, use of the accumulation and variants of the elements, isometry, the coordination of visible movements in space, an individual rhythm and a synchronicity that offered, when everything is combined, a visual density. What is most obvious in the physique of the dancers is this other relationship with the present weight. This new gravitational relationship engaged the body and the flow of movement in a different way among its members.

How to be neoclassical in the 21th century?

Entry into the 21th century was synonymous with a technological advance on a global level and neoclassicism was involved. After having founded *Improvisation Technologies* (1999), an interactive multimedia work for learning bodily movement through practising to improvise, William Forsythe developed *Synchronous Objects* (2009), a memory tool used to graphically transcribe the dance using *One flat thing reproduced*. In 2015, the Opéra de Paris started the 3rd scene, a digital creative space of original works for the Internet. The young choreographers used Internet resources, from community websites to networks and platforms to share a revised neoclassical dance. Le teaser of *In the Countenance of Kings* of Justin Peck has, therefore, been viewed several thousand times: in simple leotards for women or in shorts and t-shirts for men, the performers dance in trainers in the former train station of the 16th district, rue d’Oakland.

The 21st century is also that of memory and the affirmation of a neoclassical repertoire: the foundations and other trusts, just like the repertoire companies and schools that some had founded when they were alive are those who are responsible, and they perpetuate the vitality of the works of deceased artists. In the years 2000, a new generation born in the 1970s and 1980s emerged. Many of them had seen, as dance performers, numerous classical, neoclassical, modern and contemporary works. The question of affiliation or loss of identity was no longer important. Examples were the Belgian Jeroen Verbruggen, the American Justin Peck, the Russian Alexei Ratmansky or the Anglo-Saxon Christopher Wheeldon. They travelled internationally and accepted



offers to perform. Many of them did not set up schools and some of them did not even establish companies. They did not have “regular” dancers. Their venture formed itself around requests, invitations and contexts. It is interesting to note that anglophones use the term «*contemporary ballet*» to refer to their aesthetic undertaking, whereas some French people talk about “post classical ballet” when referring to the post-modern evolution of modern dance.

Conflicting paths/voices are constructed to attempt to respond to what neoclassicism means today. Some people continue to keep traditional ways alive such as the concours de Lausanne, while others focus their research on a study of the fundamentals of classical dance vocabulary following the lead of William Forsythe. Noé Soulier experiments with this language code by reversing the syntax in several creations: she is interested in the back swing, preparation and transition steps rather than jumps, turns and balancing. The formal grammar of the body is overturned, the language renewed through itself and the spectator no longer pays attention in the same way to the movement.

Why can't we get along (2018) by Benjamin Millepied.
When American syncretism sizes up its time

Intrinsically, American neoclassicism always knew how to establish several networks: the theatre scene, the Broadway scene, Hollywood, comedies or musical films but also sponsorships and partnerships with luxury brands - this brings to mind Balanchine and his link with Van Cleef & Arpels. The Frenchman, Benjamin Millepied, star of the New York City Ballet, director of the Opéra de Paris ballet between 2014 and 2016 but also of his own company “La Dance Project” and a production company, completely took advantage of these opportunities. The choreographer of *Black Swan* (2010) became involved with the clothes brand Rag & Bone in 2018 to produce a short film that mixed artistic genres with aesthetic dances. Skilful and popular dances, classical dance and hip-hop shared the same filmic space. Kate Mara and Ansel Elgort, dancers from the American Ballet, three Hiplet Ballerinas³, Kandi Reign⁴ and three members of Bulletrun Parkour⁵ once again took the stage. The space environment, the choice of music, the cinematic drama, the physical co-habitation and the modes of perception of the movement of the body brought about a shift in the essence of neoclassical ballet towards other horizons. Some people will say that neoclassical dance no longer exists, while others will see it as a renewed form due to its exposure to diversity.

³ Hiplet is a registered label that mixes classical technique of pointe (dancing on the toes) with hip-hop styles and urban dance.

⁴ She is a young celebrity of the hip-hop scene, a you tuber known for her participation in the Let's dance tour.

⁵ A dance collective who invest in all types of milieu without equipment.



Credits:

Excerpts selection

Céline Roux

Text and bibliography selection

Céline Roux

Production

Maison de la Danse

Author's biography:

Holder of a doctorate in the history of art, Céline Roux is an independent researcher. Specialising in the performative practices of the French choreographic field, she is in particular 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 coaching dancers. She also collaborates in the artistic projects of contemporary dancers-choreographers, whether for artist archives, the production of critical texts and editorial projects or dramaturgic coaching. She has contributed to a number of digital projects for the sharing of 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.