



Dance and props

From the end of 19th century, props have made it possible to enlarge the body, to extend or constrain the dance and to make the transition to modernism outside the limits of a narrative body.

This duo of body/object may well be the hallmark of the transition to modernism and gave rise to the diversity of 20th century dance, with its many schools and styles – Loïe Fuller's *Danse serpentine*, Isadora Duncan's famous free-style dances, Mary Wigman's expressionist dance and Martha Graham's expressive dance, then the creations of Alwin Nikolaïs and of contemporary choreographers like Philippe Decouflé or Christian Rizzo. The prop can be seen as a way of extending movement, like a poetic resonance where the body/prop relationship creates the emotion.

1. Loïe Fuller and the *Serpentine dance*

Butterfly woman, flower woman, fire woman – it's fair to say that the first dancer to choreograph with props was Loïe Fuller, with her use of lights and veils.

She became one of the queens of the Belle Époque and the first modern artist to perform solo outside the traditional ballets and the revue shows.

The dancer's body disappears in favour of the undulating movements created by the play of the materials patented especially for her performances (silk, sticks, phosphorescent chemical substances), to which she added the effects of mirrors and colours using light projections made possible by the brand new invention of electricity. Her *Danse serpentine* impressed the biggest names in dance and inspired the Symbolists and the artists of the Art Nouveau movement. Loïe developed a very personal dance style based on an extremely widespread genre from the music hall stages: the Skirt Dance. She was freed from rules and conventions, invented the multi-media performance as it were and led the way to the 20th century.

2. Léonide Massine and *Parade*

During the 1920s, the coming together of the visual and the performing arts strongly influenced choreography, which began to adapt dance to the physical reality of the costumes and the props. Diaghilev, the brilliant director of the Ballets Russes, fascinated by Cubism and Futurism, decided to finance the creation of the ballet *Parade* for which he engaged Jean Cocteau to write the scenario, Pablo Picasso to design the set and the costumes, Erik Satie to compose the music and Léonide Massine to create the choreography. In *Parade* each dancer is a character subjected to a type of dance influenced by the costume or the prop they wear or carry. According to Cocteau, the



costumes and set of *Parade* “far from hindering the choreographer, obliged him to break with tradition”.

Parade is often regarded as the first modern ballet.

3. Oskar Schlemmer and the Triadique Ballet

In contrast to this movement, which tended to represent the mechanical and industrial aspects of the modern world through ballet, Oskar Schlemmer created his *Triadic Ballet* (*Triadisches Ballett*).

“With the *Triadic Ballet*, the product of the “pleasure which it proved to be to play with forms and material”, Schlemmer wanted above all to offer a “celebration of form and colour” and to contribute as a painter and a dancer to the revival of the theatre, by reviving the costumed ballet.”¹

4. Joséphine Baker

At the height of the Roaring Twenties, Josephine Baker, star of the *Revue Nègre*, inspired a new passion for all things concerning African art. With her mischievous airs and her comical belt made of bananas, mixing jazz, Charleston and primitive dance, Josephine Baker and her outfits overturned all the clichés and accepted ideas of this 20th century world simultaneously fascinated by exoticism and ill at ease with everything foreign to European culture.

Josephine Baker used the tricks expected by the white public, dancing almost nude and accentuating her animality, while distracting them with her outrageous genius.

5. Alwin Nikolaïs and *Sanctum* and *Imago*

In the 1950s and 60s, Alwin Nikolaïs experimented with bodies and space – physical, luminous and kinetic. He fused the organic with the geometric. To realise his concept of total theatre, he created his own music, sets and lights. He made a great deal of use of masks and props: “masks so that the dancer becomes something different, something other; and props to further increase his physical size in space. The latter were not instruments intended to be used like shovels or swords, but would extend the flesh and bones of the dancer.”

An American critic said: “With Nikolaïs, the dancers become the props and the props dance.”²

In *Sanctum* and *Imago*, the dancers carry extensions made of tubes on their heads and on the end of their arms.

¹ Oskar Schlemmer, *L'homme et la figure d'art*, Éditions Recherches Centre National de la Danse, 2001, p. 44-45

² Oskar Schlemmer, *L'homme et la figure d'art*, Éditions Recherches Centre National de la Danse, 2001, p. 139



Today, contemporary choreographers continue to experiment with these dancing objects, which have become true creative partners.

These artists often use a mix of circus arts, installation art and contemporary dance.

They free the props from their previous sole purpose as performance aids and give them a new poetic sense of elation and grace.

6. Christian Rizzo and Cathy Olive and *100% polyester, objet dansant n°(à définir)*

Some props move by themselves, using the force of the wind.

"100 % polyester, objet dansant n° (à définir)" a short poetic gem created by Christian Rizzo and Cathy Olive makes the props dance, without the support of the body. Only the wind coming from the ventilators placed on the stage allows the two tunics to intertwine, to turn and to be personified by the Aeolian movement – the magic of the elements, the magic of movement without life.

After training in visual arts and a brief flirtation with fashion design, Christian Rizzo created his company Association fragile where he fuses installation art and performance, using both artists and object on stage. He likes to organise "rituals sumptuously articulated by the handling of objects which connect the dancers among themselves."³

7. Phia Ménard and *Vortex*

A juggler, among other things, Phia Ménard is interested in everything that reflects impermanence, the transformation of bodies, identities and materials, something she aptly calls "hybridisation".

She works with natural elements in cycles to create pieces inspired by ice (*P.P.P, Ice man* and *Black Monodie*), by wind (*L'après-midi d'un foehn* and *Vortex*) and future pieces inspired by water, with *Belle d'hier* as the first instalment.

With *Vortex* and *L'après-midi d'un foehn* (children's version) she positions herself in the middle of a wind created by about twenty ventilators. She performs using this partner element and some plastic bags which gradually transform into tiny dancing people, terrifying giants and all-consuming DNA spirals. With these moving images, she brings us back to the origins of our own organic nature.

8. Yoann Bourgeois and *Cavale*

"For me, circus art is a way of performing which connects the body and a physical force."⁴

³ *Panorama de la danse contemporaine*, Rosita Boisseau, Édition Textuel, 2008, p. 531-535

⁴ Yoann Bourgeois



This choreographer, juggler, artist, concerned above all with the instability of the body and of objects, promotes the idea of an “aesthetic of risk”, an aesthetic consisting of playing with elation and “moments”, real moments of reflection for the audience.

In *Cavale*, Yoann Bourgeois uses a base and trampoline, a staircase, two dancers and the imbalance found just between the moment of falling and of being suspended.

For this choreographer, props are a pretext for momentum, a point of suspension, a musical counterpoint.

In *Les Fugues*, which he defines himself as “a series of spectacular little dances for a man and an object”, each dance is written for a particular object based on a score from *The Art of Fugue* by Bach.

Therefore, the juggling balls become poetic notes and the bouncing of the bodies on the trampoline become suspensions of successive moments of simple pleasure.

9. Geisha Fontaine and Pierre Cottreau and *Une pièce mécanique*

Geisha Fontaine and Pierre Cottreau are fans of subverting all kinds of rules usually associated with performance.

Une pièce mécanique unites two dancers and a mechanical corps de ballet made of 25 objects/mobile sculptures on the stage.

Dancers and objects are both subject and theme of the dance here, the corps de ballet make its entrance on stage and constitutes a gigantic mechanism made of original sounds and organised movements, thus composing a musical score and an autonomous choreography. This universe of plastic and sound surrounds the two dancers. You cannot help but think of a hi-tech version of the *Triadic Ballet*.

This material dance, created using computer programming, mathematics and geometry, causes the human interpreters to be transformed by their contact with the mechanical objects; the composition of humans and objects becomes a new poetic device.

Whether virtual or living, the emotion remains.



To go further :

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Credits :

After years in dance-studies, at the Conservatoire d'Avignon, then at the National Center of Contemporary Dance of Angers, Julie Charrier is moving towards the production of documentary films and live performances captations mainly centered around contemporary dance for many production companies. As a consultant, then editorialist, she participated in the birth and development of Numeridanse.tv. She coordinates for the ACCN and the Ministry of Culture, delegation to dance, the digitization of the French choreographic heritage and created the site www.30ansdanse.fr.

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