



## Ballet

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Men in tights on the football field battling each other with calculated brutality and jumping into each others' embrace with screams of orgiastic pleasure whenever a point is scored are presumed to be heterosexual models for American youth. On the other hand, men in tights on the stage romantically dancing with women, tenderly carrying them overhead in apparently effortless lifts, are presumed to be gay.

But the gauge for manliness has not always been brute force. In other times virility was idealized through grace achieved by control and refinement of physical strength. And by that measure, ballet dancers are virile indeed.

Although it has sometimes proved embarrassing to those who periodically attempt to construct a macho image for ballet dancers, the enduring and persistent connection between ballet and male homosexuality is undeniable. This connection is undoubtedly related to ballet's remarkably masculine provenance. Unlike dance in general, which early on celebrated the fecundity of the female, the ballet was initially designed to celebrate male power.

### Origins and Early Development of Ballet

The first ballet star was Louis XIV of France (1638-1715), the sun king, who danced in extravagant *fêtes* with his court at Versailles. In 1661, Louis established the *Académie Royale de la Danse*, to teach his courtiers to dance, and to train ballet masters and choreographers, who then disseminated this form throughout Europe.

Until 1681, boys danced the female roles in professional ballets. Moreover, the physical technique unique to the ballet is directly based on the elegant but physically demanding martial art of fencing with the *épée*. An element of this discipline is grace under pressure. To show any sign of strain or physical effort would be beneath the dignity of a nobleman, as it is even today for a *danseur noble*.

Ballet's floor patterns were based on social dances of the French court, such as minuets and gavottes, while the dancers' movements were based on the very high style of the king's courtiers, who were accomplished swordsmen. Bows, flexibility of the wrists, *épaulement* (or carriage of the torso, in fencing a device to protect the chest from the opponent's *épée*) and "turn out" (or twisting the leg in the hip socket so that the foot is turned sideways, in fencing a device to improve balance), are examples of the martial arts techniques that became integral to ballet.

These basic techniques allowed for revolutionary developments later, as, for example, the addition of *pirouettes* and *grands jetés*, the multiple turns and big jumps always so appreciated by audiences.

By the 1720s, professional ballets were being given in opera houses all over Europe and women began to emerge as stars, notably Marie Camargo and her rival Marie Sallé. Their theatrical costumes became lighter

than the heavy court costumes, and high-heeled shoes were supplanted by soft slippers, allowing freer movement. An undergarment, the forerunner of tights, became standard stage wear as skirts were shortened to expose the legs. Over time, skirts went as high as they could go, ultimately culminating in the *tutu*.

Jean-Georges Noverre (1727-1810), a celebrated French choreographer, advanced the art of ballet through his ideas for the *ballet d'action*, or ballet with a plot and with mythological, heroic, and pastoral themes. Masks were discarded and spoken words were dispensed with, leaving the story to be told through movement, mime, and facial expression.

Noverre visited England, where he was dubbed "the Shakespeare of the dance." He became ballet master at the court of the Duke of Württemberg in Stuttgart and later worked in Vienna with the composer Gluck to create *Iphigénie en Tauris* (1779), and with Mozart, who wrote "Les Petits Riens" (1778) for him. He also taught ballet to Marie Antoinette; and when she became Queen of France, he was appointed ballet master at the Paris Opera.

Men of the Vestris family were stars of the ballet stage for three generations, notably Gaetan (1729-1808), his son Auguste (1760-1842), and his son Armand (1787-1825). Auguste had great physical technique; the height of his jumps was tremendous and his *entrechats* and *pirouettes* exhibited new virtuosity.

Carlo Blasis (1803-1878), ballet master of Teatro alla Scala in Milan, invented the ballet position *attitude*, based on the statue of Mercury by Giovanni di Bologna. This statue is almost as famous in gay iconography as Michelangelo's David. Blasis also published the first textbook for ballet dancers and teachers.

All over Europe, ballet developed from court entertainments to professional theater. In Sweden, King Gustav III (1746-1792), who liked to appear on stage himself, engaged a French ballet master and dancer, Antoine Bournonville (1760-1843), and twenty-four dancers to found the Swedish Royal Ballet.

In Denmark, where court dance spectacles had flourished from the time of Frederick II (1559-1588), ballet was well established at the Royal Theater by 1771. Auguste Bournonville (1806-1879), son of Antoine, administered Danish ballet for nearly fifty years and developed a distinctive technique that is still influential today.

Women became the dancing stars in the Romantic period. Ballerinas Maria Taglioni (1804-1884), Fanny Elssler (1810-1884), and Carlotta Grisi (1819-1899) became internationally famous. Elssler is also notable for introducing national folk dances into ballet choreography.

The Romantic motif was tragic love and emphasized the fragility and ethereal spirit of maidens. The introduction of the "toe shoe," which gave support to the foot and toes, allowed the dancer to rise onto the tips of her toes, which helped to create the illusion of defying gravity.

In this period, male dancers became mere *porteurs*, hoisting the ladies into the air to give them the appearance of weightlessness. The epitome of the ballets of this period is *Giselle* (1841). In Act 1, Giselle, a peasant girl, dies after being seduced and abandoned by a nobleman; and in Act 2, she is initiated by other victims of men into a conspicuously lesbian spirit world. *Giselle* remains the defining work for ballerinas today.

As the art of ballet in Western Europe declined in the second half of the nineteenth century, men disappeared from the stage altogether. Men's roles were danced *en travesti* by women. As several paintings by Degas illustrate, the opera houses' green rooms became a sexual market place where wealthy gentlemen could select physically fit mistresses.

## **Russian Ballet**

In the nineteenth century in Russia, then practically unknown to the West, men dominated the ballet, which was supported by the court until the Revolution of 1917. In 1734, Empress Anna had engaged the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Landet to teach dancing to cadets at the Military School of Nobles and then to create a School of Ballet. Tsar Paul I (1754-1801) studied ballet and danced in the Court Theatre.

In 1801, Charles Louis Didelot, a Swede who had been a pupil of Auguste Vestris in Paris, became ballet master at the Imperial Theatre. He was succeeded by two influential Frenchmen, Jules Perrot and Arthur Saint-Léon.

Another Frenchman, Marius Petipa, arrived in Russia in 1847. A choreographer as well as ballet master, he ruled over the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre until 1903. Petipa established the "classic ballet," which is based on the tradition and the rules of composition and technique developed during the preceding two centuries. Petipa believed in the primacy of choreography over all other theatrical elements. Among his greatest and still popular ballets are *La Bayadère*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*.

Choreographer Michel Fokine (1880-1942) challenged Petipa's insistence on the primacy of choreography and revolutionized ballet with his organic fusion of dance, music, and painting. Serge Diaghilev invited him to create ballets for the proposed season of Russian ballet in Paris in 1909. This launched Fokine's career and gave the Ballets Russes its initial repertoire, including such works as *Cléopâtre*, *Schéhérazade*, and *Petrouchka*.

Performing in these sensational and erotically charged ballets was the great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950). He re-established the primacy of the male dancer on the European ballet stage. Himself an innovative choreographer, Nijinsky created a completely new language of movement, one which abandoned classic ballet's courtly graces for a more primal, on-the-earth effect, as in his *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912) and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913).

Following in Diaghilev's footsteps, Rolf de Maré, a Swedish millionaire, created Les Ballets Suédois (1920-1925), to feature his lover, Jean Borlin as *premier danseur* and choreographer. Borlin created many ballets in collaboration with leading composers and artists of the Parisian *avant-garde*.

Among the ways in which Diaghilev's Ballets Russes revolutionized ballet is the space it carved out for gay men, both as members of a cosmopolitan audience and as artists whose work was welcomed. Attracting a large audience of gay men in European capitals and in America, the Ballets Russes may be said to be among the earliest gay-identified multinational enterprises.

In the Ballets Russes gay men, whatever their nationality, were highly visible and their influence extended outward from ballet into related art forms such as cinema, painting, music, and fashion.

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was an unrivalled font of creativity. Many members of the company went on to teach and found ballet companies throughout the world. Choreographers Léonide Massine and Bronislava Nijinska worked internationally, while George Balanchine, Serge Lifar, and Ninette de Valois established ballet theaters in, respectively, the United States, France, and Great Britain.

During the Soviet period, ballet remained a popular form of entertainment, but socialist realism dictated the subject matter (with workers in love with their tractors, for example). Moreover, the Soviet bureaucrats held a prurient view of men in tights--for classical ballets, for the sake of modesty, men were required to wear a kind of bloomers. Male dancers literally lived in fear for their lives should they be accused of being gay.

## **Ballet in America**

Ballet has always been popular in America, which has long been known as a place for dancers to make their fortunes. Elssler's visit in 1840 was extended from three months to two years. In 1916, Diaghilev and his company risked being torpedoed at sea to get to the United States during World War I, and then they toured by special train from coast to coast.

Immensely popular ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) toured the country for years with her own ballet company. Rudolph Nureyev, to many balletomanes a reincarnation of Nijinsky, became the God of Dance in America in the 1960s and 1970s. "I have danced in Champaign, Illinois," he told Dick Cavett.

Although many opera houses had corps de ballets, until relatively recently there were few independent ballet companies in the United States. A notable exception is the San Francisco Ballet, which was founded in 1933 as the San Francisco Opera Ballet and was brought to prominence by William Christensen, who arrived in 1938. In 1940, the company presented the first full-length *Swan Lake* to be produced in the United States.

A short lived independent company was Ballet Caravan, for which Lew Christensen, brother of William, choreographed *Filling Station* (1938), one of the first ballets with a distinctly American scenario. Christensen's collaborators on *Filling Station* were prominent in the gay artistic world of the time: Virgil Thomson (music), Lincoln Kirstein (scenario), and Paul Cadmus (costumes).

Cadmus' daring costume for the filling station attendant Mac's overalls used completely transparent material. In performance, of course, the dancer's genitals were covered by his bikini-like "dance belt," but the photographer George Platt Lynes somehow persuaded self-proclaimed heterosexual dancer Jacques d'Amboise to pose nude in this costume. The show-all photograph is now in the collection of the Kinsey Institute.

The first large-scale, major American ballet companies were the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (1937-1962), American Ballet Theatre (1940-current), and the New York City Ballet (1948-current).

Originally formed in Monte Carlo after the death of Diaghilev and led by choreographer Léonide Massine, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo became the national ballet company of the United States by virtue of its transcontinental tours from 1940 until its demise in 1962.

Financed with American money and directed by Serge Denham, a Russian banker, the company strove to continue the great tradition of the original *Ballets Russes*. One of its distinctions is that it commissioned many ballets by a dozen women choreographers, most notably Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* (1942).

The American Ballet Theatre, an outgrowth of Diaghilev star Mikhail Mordkin's Ballet, came into being in 1940, under the patronage and direction of Lucia Chase, herself a dancer. Incorporating classics and new work, great dancers and choreographers collaborated in creating perhaps the richest and most varied repertoire of any ballet company in the world.

Significant among the choreographers associated with the American Ballet Theatre are Antony Tudor (1909-1987) and Jerome Robbins (1918-1998). Of particular intellectual distinction is the work of English choreographer Tudor. Father of the psychological ballet, Tudor created dances concerned with the anguish of frustrated love, as for examples *Lilac Garden* (1936), *Undertow* (1945), *Pillar of Fire* (1942), and *Romeo and Juliet* (1943), to music of Frederick Delius, all featuring Tudor's lover, dancer Hugh Laing.

Jerome Robbins, the most famous American choreographer both in the ballet and on Broadway, was one of the most ferociously in-the-closet personalities in the dance world. Fearful of exposure if he failed to cooperate, he named many colleagues as Communist party members for the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Robbins' first ballet for American Ballet Theatre, *Fancy Free* (1944), about three sailor buddies on leave in New York City, is still an audience favorite. Created for New York City Ballet, his masterpieces *Afternoon of a Faun* (1953), an ode to narcissism, and *The Cage* (1951), a fable about woman destroying man, are rarely revived, but his more humorous and less provocative work is still in the repertoire.

Despite its precarious position as a touring company with no home theater, American Ballet Theatre has survived for more than sixty years and currently has an unrivalled complement of male superstars, including José Manuel Carreño, Angel Corella, Julio Bocca, Ethan Stiefel, Vladimir Malakhov, and Maxim Belotserkovsky.

The New York City Ballet was created by an odd couple, Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996), a rich, sometimes closeted gay man, and George Balanchine (1904-1983), the much married, ostentatiously heterosexual choreographer. With a home theater provided by the City of New York and, later, a huge grant from the Ford Foundation, this alliance produced the most politically powerful ballet organization in the United States.

Balanchine, after his initial success with Diaghilev, was a failure in Europe, but he spectacularly revived his faltering career in New York City and came to dominate the ballet scene for nearly thirty years. Like Petipa, he believed in the primacy of choreography and insisted his ballets were "pure" movement.

Dancers' individuality was suppressed as they were meant to be simply machine parts in the structure of his choreography. Nonetheless, two of his best known ballets remain *Apollo* (1928) and *Prodigal Son* (1929), both specifically tailored to highlight the special talents of Diaghilev's lover, Serge Lifar. Typical of Balanchine's celebrated "abstract" ballets are *Theme and Variations* (1947) and *Agon* (1957).

Along with Fokine, Balanchine is one of the few major twentieth-century choreographers who is recognizably heterosexual. Uninterested in choreographing for male dancers, Balanchine's fixation on the female is remarkably misogynistic, conspicuously in his requirement that the *poitrines* of his *danseuses* be flat as a boy's. This dictum has made the anorexic look *de rigueur* for his women dancers, which creates a weird stage picture in contrast with the pumped up bodies of today's male dancers.

Kirstein's preference for hunky, working class, "straight" men (as personified in *Filling Station*) and his abhorrence of "effeminacy" resulted, for many years, in his male dancers' faces looking like those of bloodless corpses on stage, as in their make-up they dared not put any color on their lips or cheeks. Formerly a leading dancer and currently the company director, the heterosexual Peter Martins is now choreographing ballets that more comfortably feature men and make them look good.

The Harkness Ballet (1964-1974) was founded by Rebekah Harkness (1915-1982). The remarkably gay-friendly Mrs. Harkness possessed such vast wealth that, in the manner of European sovereigns, she was the single patron of her company. A distinction of the Harkness Ballet was the excellence of the male dancers--and their often semi-nude costuming.

Most Harkness ballets were extremely sexy and many were suffused in homoeroticism, as, for example, the works of John Butler (1918-1993)--*A Season in Hell*, the story of Verlaine and Rimbaud, and *Sebastian* (1963) to music of Gian-Carlo Menotti. Also noteworthy are *Monument for a Dead Boy* (1966) by Rudi Van Dantzig (b. 1933) and *Gemini* (1972) by Vincente Nebrada (b. 1932).

The company mostly toured abroad, in the great theaters of Europe, to great acclaim, giving its dancers and choreographers a cosmopolitan experience unknown to their American colleagues.

The Joffrey Ballet, founded by Robert Joffrey (1930-1988), began as a small group touring in a station wagon. Support from Mrs. Harkness allowed it to grow into a major institution in American dance. It was famous for the youth and vivacity of its dancers.

Joffrey gave up his promising career as a choreographer--his ballet *Astarte* (1967) was the subject of a *Time* magazine cover story--to focus on building his company's repertoire, which featured the hyper-kinetic ballets of his lover, Gerald Arpino (b. 1928), as well as reconstructions of masterpieces.

Among Arpino's ballets are *Viva Vivaldi!* (1965) and *Olympics* (1966); reconstructions from the Diaghilev repertoire included Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Since Joffrey's death from AIDS in 1988, the company, directed by Arpino, has gone through several transformations and is now based in Chicago.

### **Other Major Choreographers**

Other major choreographers whose work has enriched the art of twentieth-century ballet are Sir Frederick Ashton (1906-1988), Maurice Béjart (born ca 1924), and Rudi Van Dantzig.

Celebrated for his gay wit and high style, Ashton first scored with the 1926 ballet *Tragedy of Fashion*. A pioneer in establishing British ballet as a notably gay workplace, Ashton was a member of the gay coterie of the late Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, whom he taught to tango. His relationships with men were not secret, particularly with dancer Michael Somes, whom he featured in many ballets, but homoeroticism was not an element in his work.

Ashton personally identified himself with women and delighted in creating roles for women, especially for his favorite ballerina, Margot Fonteyn. A virtuoso of his craft, Ashton worked in a wide range of styles.

Among his works are a ballet to the Virgil Thomson/Gertrude Stein opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1933-1934); abstract ballets such as *Monotones* (1965); and full-length works such as *Cinderella* (1948), in which he created a delightful role for himself as the Elder Ugly Sister; and *La Fille mal gardée* (1960), perhaps the wittiest ballet ever created. He was a founder and chief choreographer of London's Royal Ballet.

French-born Maurice Béjart studied classical ballet but early in his career established an individual style, which, new at the time, combined classic dance with modern jazz, and acrobatics with *musique concrète*, as in his *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1955). European based, his own company, under various names, became one of the world's foremost troupes, with continuous international tours.

Often infused with mysticism and ritual, as in his ballet *Boléro* (1960), or with sexual drama, as in *Nijinsky: Clown of God* (1971), Béjart's total spectacle ballets attracted huge new and young audiences that filled sports arenas, including New York's Madison Square Garden, as rock concerts do now.

Béjart created an autobiographical ballet in which he was featured as the Princess in *The Sleeping Beauty*. In this scenario, the evil fairy's curse on the baby Maurice was "You will be short."

Amsterdam-born choreographer Rudi Van Dantzig is a founder of the Dutch National Ballet and has created ballets for major companies throughout the world. He uses his personal experiences and feelings as a gay man as a source for his work, as in *Monument for a Dead Boy* and *The Ropes of Time* (1970). His autobiographical novel *For a Lost Soldier*, the story of a twelve-year-old Dutch boy's love affair with one of the Canadian soldiers who liberated his village from the Germans, was made into a major motion picture in 1994.

### **Conclusion**

Today almost every major city in America has a ballet company in its cultural center. But although the ballet industry has always been a gay-friendly work place, currently "don't ask, don't tell" is the prudent

policy.

As ballet companies are now big business, financed by sexophobic government agencies, conservative foundations, and cautious businesses, and with a concern for "family entertainment" (the annual *Nutcracker* for children is the greatest money-maker in the New York City Ballet repertoire), there is great emphasis on gymnastics, with an eye to breaking records in the manner of sports, at the expense of creative explorations of life and sexuality.

In the generally sterile atmosphere of institutionalized ballet today, a few joyous exceptions have been sighted, notably from England, such as Matthew Bourne's (b. 1960) fabulous *Swan Lake* (1996), in which the Prince is still in love with an enchanted swan--who happens to be a man--and David Bintley's (b. 1957) *Edward II* (1995) for the Birmingham Royal Ballet, an explicit account of Edward's passionate love for Piers Gaveston. These are evidence that the ballet can still be a medium for gay expression and provocative, thrilling theater.

### **Bibliography**

Baril, Jacques. *Dictionnaire de Danse*. Paris: Microcosme/Éditions du Seuil, 1964.

Chujoy, Anatole, and P. W. Manchester, comps. and eds. *The Dance Encyclopedia*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.

Craine, Debora, and Judith Mackrell, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Karsavina, Tamara. *Classical Ballet: The Flow of Movement*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1962.

Koegler, Horst, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Ballet*. London: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Tarasov, Nikolai Ivanovich. *Ballet Technique for the Male Dancer*. New York: Doubleday, 1985.

Vaganova, Agrippina. *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1965.

Wilson, G. B. L. *A Dictionary of Ballet*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1974.

### **About the Author**

**Douglas Blair Turnbaugh** is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.