



## Béjart, Maurice (1927-2007)

by John McFarland

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Perhaps the preeminent descendant of Sergei Diaghilev and Serge Lifar, Maurice Béjart was a significant presence in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century dance as an innovator with a radical vision. Central to his reinvention of classical ballet was his creation of palpably homoerotic dances that celebrate male beauty.

Born Maurice Jean Berger in Marseille, France, on January 1, 1927, Béjart in his youth was an ardent student and appeared to be following the strict example set by his father Gaston Berger, a hard-working university administrator and educator who was largely self-taught. Béjart was so fanatical a student, in fact, that he had to be enrolled on doctor's orders at age fourteen at the ballet school of the Marseilles Opera for exercise to increase his physical vigor, a prescription that worked wonders for over sixty years.

Young Maurice also exhibited his father's trait for independent action when he abandoned academic schooling after graduating from the Lycée de Marseille and the Faculty of Philosophy in Aix-en-Provence in 1945. Breaking free on many levels at eighteen, he left home for Paris where he studied ballet and soon dropped "Berger" to adopt the maiden name of Molière's wife.

After studying with Léo Staats, Lubov Egorova, and Madama Rousanne (Sarkissian) in Paris, he performed with Mona Inglesby's International Ballet and the Royal Swedish Ballet and sealed his reputation as industrious and disciplined before creating dances for his own path-breaking companies.

*Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1955, with a score by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry), featuring the first electronic score to accompany ballet, established Béjart as an innovator with a radical vision.

After presenting an electrifying interpretation of *The Rite of Spring* (set to the classic Igor Stravinsky score) informed by myth, sexual heat, and stage flash in 1959 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, he founded The Ballet of the Twentieth Century, a company that had a major influence on the European Dance Theatre movement.

Based in Brussels until 1987, Béjart developed his ideas of ballet as total theater to explore the complex forces buffeting the individual in contemporary society. His highly theatrical and often shocking productions, some on such a grand scale that they had to be staged in stadium-size arenas, attracted new, youthful audiences in unprecedented numbers.

Béjart famously remarked, "Choreography, like love, is made by couples. Since I began I've been perpetually creating the same ballet, journal of friendships, my loves, my discovery of the universe." *Nijinsky: Clown of God* (1971, set to a score combining music by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky and Pierre Henry), a dreamlike meditation on Vaslav Nijinsky and his legacy, is only one prominent example of Béjart's personal identification and connection with his choreographic subjects.

Many times that connection, as in *Nijinsky: Clown of God*, was palpably homoerotic. In addition to

reimagining Ballets Russes classics such as *The Firebird* (to the original Stravinsky score), *Pétrouchka* (to the Stravinsky score) and *The Specter of the Rose* (to a score of a piano piece by Carl Maria von Weber, orchestrated by Hector Berlioz) to spectacular effect, he also derived inspiration from such gay icons as Prometheus, Dionysus, Orpheus, and Saint Sebastian.

Collaborating closely with many extraordinarily handsome men (Argentine Jorge Donn and Italian Paolo Bortoluzzi among them), Béjart consistently created dances celebrating male beauty and eroticism, not the least of which was the all-male variant of his *Boléro* (1960, to the throbbing score by Maurice Ravel).

As far back as the early 1970s, Béjart's popular success and penchant to showcase the virtuosity of his artists ruffled the feathers of many dance purists, including Arlene Croce, the influential dance critic for *The New Yorker*, who carped about his "cult of the dancer."

Undeterred by critical sniping at his vision for dance, the choreographer worked on, enticing ballet superstars such as Suzanne Farrell in the early 1970s and Sylvie Guillem in the 1990s to join his company and dazzle audiences in new ways.

An inveterate showman, a convert to Sufism and a long-time student of Zen Buddhism, Béjart integrated his diverse artistic, spiritual and social interests by viewing dance as a religious rite available to all, not just an elite.

By refusing to regard any aspect of life as profane, he celebrated the carnal without apology; his work, ever theatrical, carried an unambiguously sexual charge.

In his last years, Béjart worked from Lausanne, Switzerland, where he could have rested on his laurels and received homages from his own spiritual heirs in the European Dance Theater movement (Pina Bausch, Boris Eifman, and Matthew Bourne, among others). Instead, he remained prolific and fully capable of stirring controversy.

Audiences and critics were either enthralled or enraged by later offerings such as the celebratory *Ballet for Life* (1997, set to a score combining classical Mozart with pop-rock Queen), in response to the AIDS-related deaths of his friends Jorge Donn and Freddie Mercury of the rock group Queen; and *Bolero for Gianni* (1999, set to his all-time-favorite Ravel score), a tribute to the murdered Gianni Versace, who had designed the eye-popping costumes for that 1997 dance.

Such projects, as well as his many collaborations across classical and popular lines, permitted Béjart not only to present his work to large theater audiences but also to record a remarkable number of performances on film and video for wider accessibility.

Although beset by kidney problems and other illnesses in his final years, Béjart continued working until the very end of his life. He died on November 22, 2007.

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