



## Dance

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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While prostitution may be the oldest profession, dance is almost certainly the oldest art. Worshipping and attempting to communicate with the unknown also seem to have been around forever. Over the years, these primal forces--sex, art, and spirituality--have intersected and sometimes happily merged, as when ancient temple dancers fornicated with devotees, guiding them via religious ritual toward divine resurrection of the flesh, while simultaneously raising funds to repair the altar.



A painting of Vaslav Nijinsky in a production of *Scheherazade* created by George Barbier in 1910.

During France's glittering Belle Epoque at the end of the nineteenth century, the foyer de la danse at L'Opéra was an exclusive show room of danseuses available for hire. Similarly, troops of boy-dancer prostitutes were active in the Muslim world for centuries and as late as the 1960s. Even today, Japanese geishas may be considered among the most sophisticated of dancer-prostitutes.

The connection between sexuality and dance is apparent as well in contemporary venues such as discos and clubs, where music and recreational drugs animate dancers to lustful frenzy. Less obviously, even conventional theatrical dance strives to provide its more passive audiences a vicarious erotic encounter with exquisite nubile bodies.

In the twentieth century, artistic dance has proven to be a haven for glbtq people, who have made significant contributions in almost every area, including as choreographers, performers, and teachers. A number of gay choreographers have also included, with varying degrees of explicitness, homoerotic content in their dances.

### Dance as Art

Dance is ephemeral. It generally leaves no artifacts for archaeologists. But it is clear that even pre-historic human beings danced from many of the same impulses and for similar ends that motivate human beings today: to release adrenalin, to celebrate or to mourn, to attract sexual partners, to express exuberance or despair, and to participate in religious rituals.

As a bonding agent, dance has been a factor in the creation of great civilizations as different as those of ancient Egypt and Greece and the Aztecs and the Incas. In contrast, Christianity, perhaps fearful of the sexual energy expressed in dance, excised it from its rituals.

Dance is at once a communal expression and a theatrical spectacle. The evolution of dance from communal ritual and individual self-expression to observed spectacle and choreographed movement is complex, but as dance developed into an art form requiring professional dancers who performed for spectators it became highly codified.

The rules that govern Indian dance, for example, were set out in the fifth century C.E. in the *Natya Sastra* of Bharata and the *Abhinaya Darpana* of Nandikesvara. The Western art of ballet was formally established

in 1588, when a textbook of ballet steps was published by dancing master Thoinet Arbeau.

Ballet became Europe's international theatrical artistic dance, but by the late nineteenth century it had been reduced to a vitiated form of *divertissement* in opera, except in Russia. There, under the bountiful patronage of the Czars, ballet remained a vital cultural force.

In 1909, the nobleman Sergei Diaghilev brought a company of Russian dancers, with choreographers, artists, theatrical designers, and composers, from the Imperial Theaters to Paris. Soon thereafter he formed an international touring company, the Ballets Russes, which dramatically influenced all areas of art in the twentieth century.

The gay presence in classical ballet in the twentieth century has been remarkable. Ballet may even be said to be the first multinational "gay industry," encompassing patrons as well as choreographers, dancers, designers, composers, and audience.

Even a short list of the most important gay contributors to twentieth-century ballet would have to include the following names: Diaghilev and his dancer lovers Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, Boris Kochno, Anton Dolin, and Serge Lifar; Frederic Franklin and Leon Danelian of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo; Oliver Smith and Antony Tudor of Ballet Theatre; Edward M. M. Warburg and Lincoln Kirstein of the New York City Ballet, along with their coterie of gay artists such as Paul Cadmus and George Platt Lynes.

In addition, there are such figures as Marquis George de Cuevas and Roberto Ossorio, who supported their own ballet companies; Sir Frederick Ashton of the Royal Ballet; Maurice Béjart, choreographer of great homoerotic works such as *Nijinsky: Clown of God* (1971) and *Songs of a Wayfarer* (1971), created for Paolo Bortoluzzi and the greatest and gayest superstar of them all, Rudolph Nureyev; Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino; Rudi Van Dantzig; Lar Lubovitch; David Bintley, who created the homoerotic *Edward II* (1995) for the Stuttgart Ballet; Matthew Bourne, who created a *Swan Lake* (1995) with all male swans; and sublime actor/dancer Erik Bruhn.

### **Modern Dance**

If the Ballets Russes revitalized ballet as an artistic form early in the twentieth century, another important development in dance at the turn of the twentieth century was the emergence of "modern dance." Among the most influential pioneers of modern dance--a loose term basically meaning non-balletic artistic dance--were three American women, Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and Martha Graham, as well as a German woman, Mary Wigman.

It was in the field of modern dance, pioneered by sexually uninhibited straight or bisexual women, who--like St. Denis, Duncan, and Graham--loved gay men, that gay creativity found its most accepting space. The fact that modern dance, unlike some other theatrical dance forms, was not "big business" allowed it to disregard many of the discriminatory practices of stage and screen, where "morals" clauses often caused performers, including dancers, to remain deeply closeted.

### **St. Denis, Shawn, and Mumaw**

Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), who had worked as an actress and dancer in commercial theater, experienced a revelation in 1904 when she saw an exotic poster advertising Egyptian cigarettes. The art nouveau poster combined the erotic and the exotic (features also exploited by the Ballets Russes), and St. Denis seized on these to create a vibrant stage persona and repertoire for herself and the immensely popular touring company she formed.

In 1914, St. Denis married a twenty-two-year-old gay man, the ambitious and sexually charismatic Ted Shawn (1891-1972), who became her dance partner. Shawn appeared at any opportunity in the scantiest of

costumes. In 1915, they founded the Denishawn Dance School in Los Angeles, which became a significant artistic center from which many creative dancers emerged, most notably Martha Graham.

Burton Mumaw (b. 1912), a student of Shawn's, first danced with the Denishawn company in 1931. Mumaw and Shawn soon became lovers and life companions. Shawn separated from St. Denis in 1933 and formed his Company of Male Dancers. Mumaw and Shawn were the leading soloists of the new company.

The repertoire allowed for maximum display of flesh, as, for example, with Native American warrior dances, and the company sometimes performed in the nude. Shawn claimed that his intention was to re-establish in the minds of Americans the right of men to dance. It is hard to imagine that the audience did not see the Company of Male Dancers as a gay group. It was disbanded with the coming of World War II.

After the war, at his farm near Lee, Massachusetts, Shawn established the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. It became a dance center of international renown.

### **Isadora Duncan**

Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) studied ballet as a child in San Francisco, and it was in rebellion against its strictures that she discovered her own form of moving to music, which she vaguely described as the expression of an inner urge or impulse. Her inspiration was the art of ancient Greece, which she claimed was antithetical to the decadence of the ballet.

Hence, she danced in loose "Greek" gowns, without a corset and without a body stocking, making her bouncing breasts a conspicuous feature of her performance. She also danced in bare feet, which caused great scandal at the time.

Duncan achieved tremendous success in Europe, but received a frigid reception in the United States, not least because of her scandalous private life and leftist political beliefs. Not only did she bear children out of wedlock, but she was known for sexual affairs with both men and women.

She also avidly endorsed the Soviet Union and communism, and late in her life she married the young Russian gay poet, Sergei Esenin. Her death in a freak automobile accident--she was strangled when her long scarf became entangled in the spokes of a wheel--ended what had become in many ways a tragic life, especially after the loss of her children in a drowning accident.

### **Martha Graham**

Martha Graham (1894-1991) may be described as the Shakespeare of dance. Like her predecessors, she found a way for herself to dance theatrically, but she went beyond them to create a new art form, a movement language with its own unique grammar and vocabulary, a language as formal and sophisticated as that of the classic ballet. Moreover, she created in that language choreographies that are now a major contribution to the world's cultural dance heritage.

Graham's technique is now integral to all theatrical dance and is also employed in contemporary ballet choreography. A student and member of the Denishawn company, Graham made her debut as a choreographer in 1926. She performed as a soloist and developed a company of women who were fiercely devoted to her.

The titles of her early works--*Lamentation* (1930) and *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), for example--reveal Freudian concerns. *Letter to the World* (1940), based on the life of Emily Dickinson, is often called the first modern dance ballet.

Graham was fearless in dealing with sexuality. Some of her greatest work, for example *Clytemnestra* (1958)

and *Phaedra* (1962), was inspired by Greek myth and drama, but it is most significant for its frank expression of women's lust for men. This primal subject found expression in Graham's own life when she fell in love with Erick Hawkins, an intellectual, bisexual dancer and sexual athlete famous for his stamina and for the size of his penis.

Graham and Hawkins were briefly married. Many members of her convent-like troupe of women were disgusted by the new dynamic in Graham's choreography, its adoration of male virility. When asked how she, among all choreographers of either sex, so well understood and appreciated the male sex, Graham replied, "Well, dear, I like men."

### **Theatrical Dance**

The movie industry and stage musicals during the twentieth century utilized the talents of uncounted gay male and lesbian dancers and choreographers, but fear of homophobic reaction caused most of them to hide their sexuality. The two great dancing stars of the Hollywood musicals--Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly--were self-consciously heterosexual.

Astaire (1899-1987) was a most unlikely masculine icon, with his reed slim, white-tie-and-tails elegance and effete appearance; but his witty songs, wise-cracks, and nimble tap-dancing won the public. In collaboration with gay dance director Hermes Pan, Astaire created innovative choreography for the cinema.

Gene Kelly (1912-1996), a hooper imported from Broadway almost as an antidote to Astaire, came to fame in the post-World War II years. Kelly had a short body and a limited dance vocabulary, but he compensated for these limitations by dancing with great physical vigor. His persona was the wise-cracking, blue-collar, all-American man.

His worst effort was when he unwisely attempted to show himself the equal of ballet dancers in the film *Invitation to the Dance* (1956). His greatest performance was his virtuoso solo in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Some of Kelly's films are marred by an element of homophobia, an ingredient no doubt added to reassure the public that not all male dancers were queer.

Even though the term "chorus boy" (like "hair dresser") was almost synonymous with "gay male," the New York stage also attempted to deny or minimize the gay presence in its ranks. Such was also the case with the many television shows that employed their own companies of dancers during the heyday of the musical. Indeed, homophobia was often overtly expressed by dance professionals such as choreographers Agnes de Mille and Jerome Robbins, the latter himself bisexual.

Robbins was particularly unusual for his ability to shift gears from musical theater to concert dance and back again. Although he pursued sexual relationships with men and women alike, he was deeply closeted about his bisexuality, yet in *The Goldberg Variations* (1971), he choreographed a stunning male-male duet.

Among other gay and bisexual choreographers who have made original contributions to the dance element in Broadway musicals are Michael Bennett and Tommy Tune, both of whom were dancers and directors as well.

### **Limón, Hawkins, Nikolais, Louis**

Many of the most significant dancers and choreographers of modern dance are aesthetic descendants of Martha Graham.

José Limón (1908-1972), for example, was a handsome Mexican-American with an heroic presence. He danced with great masculine force, but without macho brutality. He first danced with the Humphrey-Weidman Company, and then after serving in World War II formed his own company, for which he created

his most famous ballet, *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), based on Shakespeare's *Othello*. The ballet is a masterpiece whose theme is homosexual jealousy. Another work with deep moral sensibility and homoerotic subtext is *The Traitor* (1954), based on Judas's betrayal of Christ.

Erick Hawkins (1909-1994), Martha Graham's lover and catalyst, formed his own company after the end of his marriage to Graham, but he never escaped her shadow. He developed an abstract style influenced by Greek and Asian art. He created a repertoire in close collaboration with composer Lucia Dlugoszewski, whom he also married. However, despite his marriage, he continued an active, though discreet, gay sex-life until his death.

Alwin Nikolais (1910-1993) studied with Graham and Doris Humphrey, among others, and after service in World War II became director of the Henry Street Playhouse in Manhattan, a center for experimental theater where he developed his own company. At this time, Murray Louis (b. 1926), also just out of the service, became his student, his lover, his colleague, and life partner.

Nikolais's innovation was to choreograph movement for dancers who were encased in flexible costumes that completely obscured their human form. He was also a great lighting designer. Thus, Nikolais created the first truly "abstract" choreography, movement shaped with no connection to reality, which seemed to float in colored space.

Louis formed his own company and choreographed work noted for its comic timing and humorous style. Later the Louis and Nikolais companies merged. Murray Louis continues to create new work.

### **Cunningham, Taylor, Ailey, and Falco**

Merce Cunningham (b. 1919) was a leading dancer for Martha Graham, who created many roles for him, most notably the self-flagellating hero of *El Penitente* (1940). In 1942, Cunningham began an enduring relationship with composer John Cage (1912-1992), who began to write scores for Cunningham's ballets.

Forming his own company in 1953, Cunningham became a leading light in the avant-garde. Cunningham says that his choreography depends on neither music nor design for inspiration, but "on chance." Still, his later work appears tightly composed to music and uses many elements of classical ballet.

Paul Taylor (b. 1930), one of the giants of American dance, trained as a swimmer and so was in great shape when he came to New York in 1952 to study modern dance with Graham, Limón, Cunningham, and Humphrey, and ballet with Antony Tudor and Margaret Craske. Taylor first danced in Cunningham's company and then as a leading dancer in Graham's. He founded his own company in 1954, working closely with artist Robert Rauschenberg, who designed all of Taylor's ballets of the 1950s.

Taylor's work is quite varied, but always well calculated for the effects it would create. In an early piece, typical of the avant-garde of the era, *Duet* (1957), literally nothing happens. Taylor and his pianist did not move to Cage's "non-score." This nothing event, of course, gained him and his company much publicity and comment.

Although openly gay, Taylor evinces no particularly gay sensibility in his choreography. Indeed, at the opposite pole from Graham's, his work evinces very little sexual passion. Although he has explored psychological darkness, his work can be joyous and humorous. It sometimes expresses great tenderness for human frailty. Like Graham, Taylor reshaped the parameters of dance and attracted a new audience for a new art form.

Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) also studied with Martha Graham, among other teachers. After dancing on Broadway, Ailey formed his own company in 1957. *Blues Suite* (1958), one of his earliest works, defines the choreographer's particular genius. Deriving from blues songs and expressing the pain and anger of African

Americans, the work combines ballet, modern dance, jazz, and black dance techniques, plus flamboyant theatricality and intense emotional appeal. Ailey's masterpiece is *Revelations* (1960), which is based on African-American spirituals and gospel music. It may be the most popular ballet created in the twentieth century.

A student of Graham and a protégé of Limón, Louis Falco (1942-1993) danced with Limón's company. Ravishingly beautiful, with a great frizz of hair in the flower-child mode, he began to choreograph when he formed his own company in 1967. His early work was abstract, but he increasingly used decors and props designed by avant-garde artists. Eventually, he moved from modern dance to ballet, creating works for the Netherlands Dance Theatre, the Ballet Rambert, and La Scala Ballet. He was the choreographer for the film *Fame* (1980).

### **Contemporary Choreographers**

A number of contemporary choreographers are openly gay and often quite explicit in their depiction of homoeroticism and in presenting homosexual themes. There are also a smaller number of lesbian choreographers, although they have not yet won the kind of national and international recognition that the gay male and bisexual choreographers have achieved. Among the rising stars in lesbian dance are such figures as Anne Blumenthal, Jill Togawa, and Krissy Keefer. Togawa is associated with the Purple Moon Dance Project and Keefer is artistic director of the Bay Area's Dance Brigade.

In the vanguard of openly gay male choreographers are Bill T. Jones, Mark Morris, Joe Goode, Stephen Petronio, and Peter Pucci, all of whom came to prominence in the 1980s and established their own companies.

#### **Bill T. Jones, Mark Morris, and Joe Goode**

African-American choreographer Bill T. Jones (b. 1952) discovered dance while on a sports scholarship at the State University of New York at Binghamton, where he met photographer Arnie Zane, who became his lover and collaborator. In 1973, they formed American Dance Asylum and then in 1982 the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Their first big success was *Secret Pastures* (1984), which featured settings by gay artist Keith Haring. Zane died of AIDS in 1988 and Jones is HIV-positive; hence, disease and aging (as well as homosexuality and racism) have been important themes in Jones' works.

Jones has become a dominant figure on the contemporary dance scene and continues to work with major collaborators. His passionate ballet about terminal illness, *Still/Here* (1994), became the center of controversy when the *New Yorker's* dance critic Arlene Croce branded it "victim art" without even having seen it. The controversy served only to bring the work greater attention.

Another important figure in contemporary dance is Mark Morris (b. 1956), whose works typically mix elements of Eastern and Western cultures and the traditional and the avant-garde. They are set to a wide range of musical styles, from classical baroque to rock, and frequently explore sexual ambiguities.

From 1988 to 1991, Morris served as Director of Dance for the Belgian National Opera in Brussels. He brought European audiences dances with a distinctly American flair. In 2001, the Mark Morris Dance Center opened in Brooklyn, providing Morris and his company a permanent space in which to create, rehearse, and teach.

Joe Goode (b. 1951) often explores gay and gender issues in his work. Formed in 1986, the Joe Goode Performance Group quickly became a significant San Francisco cultural institution. Goode's work frequently challenges traditional assumptions about gender roles. Women often lift men and both sexes can appear strong and vulnerable. Goode also forthrightly approaches topics such as the plight of sex workers and the devastation wrought by AIDS.

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