

Migration of Twentieth Century European Dance Artists

Author-s:

[Claire PAOLACCI](#) [1]

Abstract

Dance artists, whether they were dancers, dance instructors, ballet masters, or choreographers, have always travelled to practice their art. Their journeys, which were voluntary in the case of training or tours, were sometimes forced by war, epidemics, or political and financial reasons. While French and Italian artists migrated throughout Europe during the early days of the professionalization of ballet, the political upheaval that marked the continent during the early twentieth century led to increased migration, primarily from East to West. For all that, growing globalization of exchanges also favoured the mobility of dance artists across Europe and toward America.

Article

The 1917 Russian Revolution prompted the departure of dancers from imperial theatres, as ballet was associated with the Tsarist regime, and poorly looked-upon by the new government. For example, the Tsar's former mistress Mathilde Kschessinska (1872-1971) had to leave Russia due to the close links she had with the imperial family. She found refuge in France, where she taught dance according to the classical tradition of Marius Petipa (1818-1910). The Bolshoi Theatre dancer Mikhail Mordkin (1880-1944) left for Lithuania, before settling permanently in the United States. Many artists were touring abroad when the war broke out in Europe, and were unable to return to Russia, with most choosing not to return to the country of their birth after the conflict. For some, such as Adolphe Bolm (1884-1951), the choice was made as early as 1917, when he seized the opportunity of performances in America with the Ballets Russes company to find work there and become naturalized as an American citizen. Others waited for peace to return. Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) extended her American tour for the entirety of the Great War, and then chose to reside in London to pursue her international career. Alexandre Volinine (1882-1955) and Nicolas Zverev (1887-1965) continued to perform with Serge Diaghilev's (1872-1929) troupe until 1926, before embarking on personal careers, the first doing so in France, and the second seizing opportunities that presented themselves across the globe.

After being initially enthusiastic about the Bolshevik regime, some disenchanted artists left the country, such as Josef Lewitan (1894-1976), who in 1920 emigrated to Berlin where he met his future wife Eugenia Eduardowa (1882-1960), an exile like himself. Some artists who were too young to flee

the Soviet regime in 1917 waited a few years before doing so. During a tour in Germany in 1924, George Balanchine (1904-1983) and his wife Tamara Geva (1907-1997), along with Alexandra Danilova (1903-1997) and Nicola Efimov (1910-1982), defected and sought refuge in Paris, where they joined the Ballets Russes. After the troupe's dissolution, Balanchine and his three colleagues settled in the United States, where he became an American citizen and founded the NYCB (New York City Ballet). Dancers once again left the USSR after the Second World War, often with more media attention due to the Cold War. In 1961, Rudolph Nureyev (1938-1993) took advantage of a Paris tour by the Kirov Dance Company to request asylum in France and begin an international career. Thirteen years later, Mikhail Baryshnikov (1948-) defected during performances by the same company in Canada, where he performed for a number of years before joining the NYCB and becoming naturalized as an American.

Russian dance artists were not the only ones to flee their country for political reasons. Beginning in 1933, many dancers and choreographers fled Nazi Germany due to their Jewish identity, foreigner status, or political commitment, or to a choreographic style deemed "degenerate," with these four reasons sometimes being combined. The Lewitan-Eduardowa couple found asylum in Austria and then France, before settling in the United States in 1947. Victor (1902-1974) and Tatiana Gsovsky (1901-1993) had been Russian exiles in Berlin since 1925 but were forced to stop their activities and settle in Paris, before returning to Germany in 1950. The Berlin Opera ballerina Ruth Abramovitsch, who was Jewish and a communist sympathizer, left to teach in Poland until 1939 and then fled to Brazil after her country was invaded by the Nazis, before finally settling in Canada. Pola Nirenska (1910-1992), who was forced in 1933 to leave Mary Wigman's (1886-1973) troupe due to her status as a foreigner and a Jew, returned to Poland before taking refuge in England in 1939 and emigrating to the United States a decade later. A foreigner on German territory, the Italian dancer and choreographer of Hungarian origin Aurel Milloss (1906-1988) had a position at the Düsseldorf theatre, before going to Budapest in 1935 and settling in Rome in 1938.

Some artists, while not personally concerned by the eviction measures for German society decreed by the Nazis, left the country out of solidarity, for example Kurt Jooss (1901-1979), who emigrated to England in 1933 when forced to part with the Jewish dancers in his company. He opened a successful dance school in Dartington Hall and later one in Cambridge but returned to his country of origin in 1949. Others, however, were won over for a time by the favourable policy for dance implemented by the new regime. Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) directed the Berlin Opera until 1934, accepted responsibilities at the Ministry of Propaganda and was entrusted with the staging of the 1936 Olympic Games. However, he refused the censorship of his works for the event by Joseph Goebbels, and definitively left Germany the following year for Dartington Hall, ultimately settling in England. While there he developed his theory of movement, and a number of his students spread his teaching in Great Britain, notably Lisa Ullmann (1907-1985), who joined Jooss in 1933. Wigman was not interested

in politics, but nevertheless took part in a number of events organized by the Nazi regime. She was soon forced to close her school for free dance in Dresden and, wanting to remain in Germany, left to teach in Leipzig. She fled communism in 1950 and moved to West Berlin, where she opened a school for dance expression, and pursued her career as a choreographer. In 1953 one of her Leipzig students, Karin Waehner (1926-1999), also left the German Democratic Republic to live in Paris, where she founded her own company.

In parallel to these many political exiles, some artists chose to emigrate for primarily artistic reasons. Attracted by the Ballets Russes company, Serge Lifar (1905-1986) left Kiev in 1923 to join the troupe. He became its first dancer, and upon the death of Diaghilev (1929) chose to work for the Opéra de Paris, where he worked towards the renewal of French ballet. Hanya Holm (1893-1992), who was the director of the dance school founded by Wigman in 1931 after the success of her American tour, settled on the other side of the Atlantic, where she became one of the pioneers of modern dance. Attracted by new French dance, Toméo Vergès (1953) settled in France in 1980 and joined the companies of Maguy Marin (1951-) and Carolyn Carlson (1943-), before creating his own in 1992. Finally, when he did not receive the financing needed to create his troupe in 1959, Maurice Béjart (1927-2007) emigrated to Brussels, where he founded the Ballet of the twentieth century. Twenty-seven years later, after differences with the new director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, he dissolved his company and founded a new one in Lausanne.

Whether as voluntary or forced exiles, and whatever their motivations, dance artists contributed to the growth of influential exchanges, promoted the circulation and evolution of genres and styles, and contributed to the creation of new dance schools in Europe and beyond, thereby ensuring a global impact for European choreographic art.

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