

**Classical Ballet to Modern Dance:  
The Cultural Impact on the World of Dance in the American 1920s and 1930s**

The end of the First World War brought with it the beginning of a more expressive, unrestricted culture. This could be seen in the realms of media, fashion, and performing arts, and particularly in dance, in the United States. Though the war had taken place a continent away, America's physical and financial participation irrevocably took a toll on the country and shifted American culture in several ways. For example, prior to World War I, mass production of goods had been consistent, which created a sort of 'aesthetic conformity' across the nation. By 1917, when the United States officially declared war on Germany, many men felt there was an opportunity to break out of that conformity and sign up for a heroic, manly adventure. Patriotism was the prevalent attitude and is deeply rooted within the literature and propaganda of the late 1910s, as authors and film studios grappled with what was to come out of entry into war, who and what was "truly American," and encouraging the most wholesome, moral depictions of American life. By 1919, however, it was evident that the cultural landscape had shifted with an increase in postwar strikes, labor activism, the 'Red Scare' brought about by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and renewed interest in the women's suffrage movements. Americans were turning their focus to individual expression and civil liberties over the pre-war mass conformity.

As the new decade began, it is seen in both literature and theater that writers were attempting to convey the cultural changes as a "schism of generational attitudes," in which the 'lost generation' had no respect for anything.<sup>1</sup> This article explores the ways in which performing arts changed during the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on the transition from ballet to modern dance. Ballet, which came to the U.S. from Europe, was a traditional form of performing arts specifically for the elite to enjoy. There were tight restrictions on both

movements and the dancers performing them.<sup>2</sup> Modern dance represented a much more accessible art form, enjoyed by those of the lower-middle class in addition to the upper class, with choreographers being more expressive, using the bodily capabilities of almost any person, regardless of their body type or prior training in dance. Thus, it sprang up as a uniquely American dance form.

Although there are more elements that make up a 'dance culture,' ballet and modern dance are significant because they best reflected the broader American culture, defined here as the similar patterns in the way of living formed by a group of human beings during the inter-war years. This article refers to American culture as pertaining particularly to those who lived in the cities as a lower-middle class to upper-class population, unless otherwise specified. Through books, magazine articles, and newspaper articles, this author contends that popular modern dance stemmed from traditional classical ballet directly because changing forces from outside the world of dance such as in media, technology, and fashion, took traditional ballet and molded it into a new, more accessible, more expressive form of art. This discussion is important because through examining several aspects of the changing society during the 1920s and 1930s, the changes made from ballet to modern dance are understood more clearly.

Dance styles frequently fluctuated yet remained integrated in the makeup of American culture during the 1920s and 1930s. The post-war edginess and experimentation that arose in the 1920s influenced the way the dance audience perceived and enjoyed classical performances. The overarching theme of the decade was to shed the traditions and experiment with all things new, including fashion and dance. This cultural phenomenon is evidenced strongly by the female 'Flappers' of the 1920s who cut their hair short, wore skirts that showed their ankles, and danced

to jazz music—all things that the ‘wholesome’ American culture of the prewar years labeled outrageous and immoral. New dances and methods arose throughout the decade as well, seen in part through various dance marathons popular at that time. The expressive freedom that the 1920s offered—partially due to a blossoming economy—provided the opportunities that choreographers generally needed to broaden their skills of notating dance and skills to sharpen the individuality of their performances. Then, in 1929 the country entered the Great Depression. The multitude of difficulties faced by the United States during this period, including low income-jobs and shockingly high unemployment, impacted the broader culture including media, fashion, mass consumerism, and the performing arts. Americans were forced to be more frugal which in turn meant that the experimentation of the 1920s with new fashions, lavish parties, and consumption of goods was largely halted. Within the performing arts, however, a stable audience base that emerged during the previous decade provided the opportunity for modern dance to remain a part of the culture, and as with most of the popular culture that rose in popularity during the 1920s, provided an escape from the hardships of everyday life for many Americans. The product of a decade of experimentation (the 1920s) and a decade of hard economic times (the 1930s) set the stage for the ballet-to-modern dance transition.

From the beginning of that transition, modern dance sprang up as uniquely American. There was a vision by the pioneers of modern dance, who often came from a background of ballet dancing, to break out of the so-called “sterility” of ballet performances migrating from Europe.<sup>3</sup> Several modern dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Martha Graham “Americanized” dance, meaning they wanted American troupes to perform ballets which they altered slightly in order to appear as having attributes of the American culture as they

were living within that culture and experienced its influence.<sup>4</sup> Also, the audiences of those performances created during both decades notably impacted the development of new dance content. For example, Martha Graham wrote an article for *DANCE Magazine* in 1939 saying, “The future of dance lies not only in the hands of the dancer; it is equally in the hands of the public.”<sup>5</sup> The audiences of those performances also played a tremendous role in keeping modern dance alive during the years of the Great Depression from 1929 through 1939.

This article proceeds thematically. First, it examines the various elements of American culture during the 1920s including media, racism, technological advancements, and mass consumerism. It is important to highlight those features which led America into an era of mass consumerism, with what Kathleen Huber calls “a series of outlandish fads and crazes,” in order to understand how and why, in the midst of that decade, the world of dance changed in a way it had not previously.<sup>6</sup> That change occurred first as an undercurrent in the larger stream of mass culture which produced a separate entity of dance influenced by larger changes that occurred in society, which directly determines popular culture.

This article then explores American culture in the 1930s, a decade of economic depression. Much of the previous decade’s consumerist mindset ended with financial losses due to the stock market crash on Black Tuesday in October 1929. Those losses pressured the population economically, which had varying severity across the country and across social classes. That pressure caused a sort of domino effect on other elements of society including media such as movies, women’s fashion, and mass production and consumerism of practical and impractical products like electric razors, refrigerators, and nylon pantyhose. The pressure of economic losses also forced American culture to adjust to the domino effect that happened on

other aspects of the Depression such as high unemployment rates, with the performing arts not exempt from being affected by the economic depression.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, this article examines the overarching theme of dance itself. What was modern dance? Why did it emerge as a new, separate entity in the world of dance? How, specifically, does it differ from classical ballet? What role did the audience play in the development of modern dance? These questions are important and will be supported by melding themes, issues, and attributes of both the larger society and the smaller sector of dance together to give evidence to the idea that popular classical ballet transitioned to modern dance as a direct result of the broader cultural changes around it.

As mentioned previously, in America in 1920 there were several cultural and societal changes that occurred closely in a short time span, one after the other, and sometimes overlapping. First, technology changed in new ways; it gave shoppers a push to buy things they did not need and gave them things that made life in the middle class a little more comfortable. The mass production of items such as electric razors, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and automobiles, coupled with the rise of chain stores and use of “installment plans” which allowed persons to buy a product based on a credit system for that person to pay off later, perpetuated economic prosperity.<sup>8</sup> At the height of the 1920s era, its most memorable time, changes remembered include those in fashion, such as shorter skirts made available along with silk stockings for women who were sometimes seen as wild and called “Flappers.” The first Red Scare, a period in America’s history of strong anti-Communism campaigns, was also a part of society that changed as it pitted the nation against Communism and its followers, sometimes violently. Along with the first Red Scare, social tension between different ethnic groups created

division between those who immigrated to the country in large waves a few years prior and those who previously settled in America. Another memorable characteristic of the 1920s was the prohibition of alcohol sales for a time, which reflected a small push towards perceived morality; however, it most effectively caused a rise in crime rates. At the same time there were scientific and further medical advancements, such as insulin for diabetes, and a boom in almost every outlet of the entertainment industry such as movies, radio, television, and theater.

Such developments attest to the fact that America had shifted in tremendous ways from its pre-war culture of industrialization, environmental conservation, fashionable dresses with high collars and long skirts, hairstyles pinned up in a bun, and realism in drama and film.<sup>9</sup> The population in the 1920s dealt and experimented with those shifts, which provided both positive and negative outcomes. For example, positive outcomes included the availability of more technological and food products through department and grocery chain stores, making life more comfortable through increased purchasing of practical and luxury items in cities around the country. Some of the negative outcomes included higher crime rates for a time while prohibition lasted, and a rise in debt problems due to the payment of goods in installments based on a credit system. Also, out of those so called ‘experimentations’ came a new sort of edginess, individualism, and freedom of expression that was not present in pop culture prior to that time, for example, women shortening their hair to their jaw line in the place of long hair swept up and secured with combs.

Performing arts was a part of those changes that emerged in society in the 1920s, as they were not exempt from the fluctuations that came with a constant rotation of fads and crazes, partially seen in the audience dynamics changing from an older elite class to a younger middle-

class makeup. According to Kathleen Drowne, the more popular forms of performing arts among the middle class at that time were Vaudeville Theater, Broadway shows, and motion pictures, with ballet not having much influence within society and modern dance a fledgling art form in its beginning stages.<sup>10</sup> While it may be true that other forms of performing arts were more popular at that time, it is not the case that ballet was not without influence and modern dance was just emerging.

Evidence to demonstrate the firm presence of modern dance in America by 1920 is found within the existence of the Denishawn School of Dancing, established in 1915 to build momentum behind a new dance form made for almost any person who aspired to be a dancer. The Denishawn School of Dance pushed the ideas of modern dance forward in order to refine it and project it into society as a professional dance movement.<sup>11</sup> Also, in contrast to Drowne's assertion, Clive Barnes argued in his 1965 *New York Times* article that by the middle to end of the 1920s, "the modern dance movement was well under way...All the American arts had a new vigor and confidence and people wanted to see America dancing."<sup>12</sup>

With this in mind, beginning in 1929 on Black Tuesday, the next decade proved able to break down mass consumerism in society, which had a domino effect on many other elements of American culture. The mass production of goods that nearly defined the decade prior was cut severely. Unemployment and underemployment rates, here meaning a reduction of hours and a reduction in the income made for those hours, forced families to adjust to hardship. Many people turned to soup kitchens and charities to wait in "breadlines" for free food.<sup>13</sup> That way of life with its added pressure affected many more elements of society that went beyond the walls of the individual home.

Within the media, movies—though attendance declined—remained one of the most popular forms of entertainment, acting as a form of escapism from troubled lives. The movies made during that era seldom portrayed the hardships that faced the nation, instead, they popularized Gangster films, Westerns, Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction, Musicals and Animated movies still enjoyed today such as *King Kong*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Snow White*.<sup>14</sup> Other forms of popular media entertainment included radio shows such as dramas and soap operas, magazines such as *Time* or the *Saturday Evening Post*, in addition to readership of local newspapers. A different element of society, fashion, also changed in the 1930s.

Whereas in the 1920s skirts had been made shorter, they lengthened in the 1930s. Basic, mass produced attire on sale, clothing purchased to be completed at home, and pattern booklets increased in popularity during that time to cut down costs while still enabling consumers to retain a sort of individuality in fashion choices. Hairstyles seemed to match the sameness of the outfits, with no more bobbed hair of the 1920s, women typically grew longer tresses and had it styled with permanent wave machines that sculpted hair and secured it in place for an extended period of time.<sup>15</sup> The combination of those changes in media, mass production of goods, and fashion provide evidence to the fact that the economic depression Americans faced in the 1930s influenced the smaller parts of society that made its culture whole, yet another element of that cultural whole, popularized partially as a form of escapism from hardships, proved to be in the performing arts. Performing arts encompasses a variety of entertainment and professions. In the 1930s, popular performing arts included live musicals, drama, and circuses. Some argue that dance, particularly ballet and modern dance, remained an elitist form that was unavailable to the average American suffering from the Depression.<sup>16</sup> However, this is clearly not the case. As



Alwin Nikolais, a famous choreographer in the world of dance wrote about modern dance from the beginnings of it in the middle of the 1920s, “Muscular enslavement to the elitist pattern or any other could not survive its bondage forever.”<sup>17</sup> That statement suggests that even from the very beginnings of modern dance, and part of the reason for creating such an entity, lays in the fact that prior to its creation serious dance entertained elites only and was an inaccessible form of entertainment for people in the lower social classes. What this also suggests is that after modern dance became a stable entity its accessibility widened to a greater audience.

Not having a lower class audience already in place at the time of the stock market crash, modern dance would have most likely diminished during the Great Depression, as argued by Clive Barnes for the *New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> Again, to reiterate that modern dance was not inaccessible for those other than elites, John Martin argued about it in his book called *America Dancing*, “ [modern dance was] democratic in that it took the dance away from the little cult of initiates and urged everyone to practice it.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless of whether or not the popularity of ballet or modern dance rose or declined during the Depression, or whether or not they were more or less accessible, both dance forms remained present in the culture which Americans created in response to the hardships they experienced in 1930. Modern dance represented a separate entity of dance by the end of that decade.

From its beginnings in the twentieth century, modern dance emerged as the art form intent on using the entire body to express oneself. This is not to say that if one was a ‘modern dancer’ they would be permitted to flail about without restrictions or choreographed material to perform. However, choreographers developed a new method of dance formulas, called choroscript, in which the entire body’s capabilities played a role.<sup>20</sup> This dance notation made

possible the inclusion of more people who wanted to dance yet did not have the necessary physique to perform ballet. This is one of several differences between modern dance and classical ballet, to be defined and discussed later on.

An examination of classical ballet reveals many important aspects of its structure and elements within the dance style. The first thing about its structure is that choreographers used a strict, uniform set of rules for the motions desired from its dancers. Secondly, once a ballet became available it was reproduced over and over, envisioned to entertain the elite of society, so that variation was very limited. Alwin Nikolais wrote about the reproduction of dances in a *Theater Arts* magazine article, saying, “Any attempt merely to reproduce the composition from an already interpreted source inevitably results in sterility.”<sup>21</sup> Also, one of the most prominent elements found in the performance of a ballet turned out to be a desire to be “upward” as seen through things such as dancing on tip toes, called *en pointe*, jumping gracefully with great consideration of poise, and the constant lifting of ballerinas, which can be interpreted as partially a reflection of its elitist status seeing as the elites are highest in class.<sup>22</sup>

The dancers themselves abided by strict dietary habits and intense workout regimens to be in the desired shape to be able to get as “upward” as possible and thereby be among the top choices for a ballet performance. It was for many, if not all of these structural and elemental restrictions that became the catalyst for a change to modern dance. Given those examples, it is not difficult to point to several of the specific differences between the two styles that emerged in the twentieth century, in addition to the example of loosely restricted, more freely expressive choroscript of modern dance.

First, in contrast to ballet, the lesser restrictions on modern dance made the continual reproduction of the same work without variance virtually disappear. Restrictions disappeared because each choreographer expressed his or her own abstract ideas as a new form of artistic expression that exuberated individualism.<sup>23</sup> However, because they functioned in the larger society, choreographers experienced the same impact from events such as the Great Depression in the same way their audience felt it, which had an effect on the dances created during that period. Secondly, instead of focusing on being “upward,” graceful, and light, modern dance did not have a specific element to it that indicated an overarching pattern, with the exception that for most dances the entire body became involved. For the majority of performances, dancers performed in bare feet or soft flexible shoes and the performances that were created incorporated gravity into their presentations. To emphasize gravity in the performances, dancers often dramatically fell and made only short jumps with harder landings than in ballet.

The dancers, in contrast to ballerinas, consisted of a variety of different types of people including short or tall, and thin or fleshy since one of the messages behind modern dance emphasized that it maximized on the capabilities of the average human being. Therefore, those things made modern dance more accessible to people of almost all social classes but also almost all social classifications, meaning the societal labeling of people based on physical traits. That combination of expanding on who could be entertained by the performances and who could be a dancer in the performances, created the stable audience base which survived through the Great Depression and kept modern dance alive in society.

The audiences of performances were an inseparable part of modern dance. Choreographers functioned within the broader society in the same ways their audiences did,

experiencing the same twists and turns of the culture which affected the notation of dances. The audience expected certain products out of dance performances in order to keep them in attendance which choreographers supplied without losing sight of their own creativity in expressing themselves, or individuality. For example, when the 1920s culture fluctuated with its rotation of fads and crazes, audiences expected to constantly see something new and fresh for each performance. Many choreographers looked to pioneers of modern dance such as Martha Graham to find the balance between their own needs versus what their audiences demanded. Writing on that topic, Martha Graham insisted that “Dance cannot exist in the vacuum of the studio. It is not an ivory-towered art. It is one of the arts of communication.”<sup>24</sup> She continued by discussing how the creator of the dance must take his ideas and then go outside of the original source constantly to reorient and reevaluate technique and values, feeding off of them in order to develop the performances that create contact between the artist, performer, and audience.<sup>25</sup> When the Great Depression hit, choreographers suffered hardships as well. Unemployment rates skyrocketed across all professions, including dance. Several choreographers of modern dance survived in their career by allowing themselves to be absorbed into another company. Many did not necessarily like to merge, yet had no choice, because modern dance choreography was a profession done on an individual basis at one’s own company in order to best project the image they wanted.<sup>26</sup> All in all though, it was the combination of meeting the needs of the choreographers and meeting the needs of the audience as time caused fluctuations in society which created and maintained a stable audience base for choreographers over a span of two decades that allowed modern dance to survive in American popular culture.

In conclusion, the world of dance is not isolated from the influence of the broader society which surrounds it. The 1920s brought about a new era of mass consumerism and changes that allowed for new types of experimentation. The performing arts fluctuated in popularity and style with the constant rotation of fads and crazes. Along with the Great Depression came the breakdown of mass consumerism, however, entertainment, fashion, and the arts remained present in society though audiences declined. Through the combination of these two decades' changes in society as a whole, it is easily seen how dance also underwent significant changes. Professional dance prior to the twentieth century had focused on classical ballet, which had tight restrictions on dance and dancers and reproduced over and over, meant for performing for only the elite social class, and focused on being "upward." Modern dance rebelled against that structure, incorporating gravity, individualism, a wider variety of dancers through emphasizing the capabilities and entirety of the human body, and opened up the accessibility of the performances to a wider audience that included lower middle classes which helped create a stable audience base. The choreographers themselves experienced those same fluctuations of fads, crazes, and events of the 1920s and 1930s societies, plus they intended to meet the needs of their audiences which impacted dance notation and performance in a way that connected choreographers to dancers and to audiences. To sum up the overall changes made by modern dance as it developed into a separate entity of dance which stemmed from ballet, Alwin Nikolais wrote, "Modern dance emerged, threw away the crown, came off its high horse and proceeded to bare the feet-but much importantly, to bare the soul."<sup>27</sup>

---

---

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Whalan, *American Culture in the 1910s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 153-155, 182.
- <sup>2</sup> Alwin Nikolais, Untitled Manuscript, Unpublished, (Mahn Archive: Athens, Ohio) chapter nine. This manuscript is located within the “Alwin Nikolais Dance Collection” of the Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections in its Series 2.1d-Box 2, folder 38a. There are few page numbers surviving on the source, however, the chapter is entitled “Ballet and The Archetype.”
- <sup>3</sup> Alwin Nikolais, “A New Method of Dance Notation,” *Theater Arts*, February, 1948. This source is an article found in the “Alwin Nikolais Dance Collection” located in the Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections. It was a loosely placed item, not within the original publication, and no page numbers are found on this source for that reason.
- <sup>4</sup> William R. Klink, *The Arts of Twentieth Century America* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 14.
- <sup>5</sup> Martha Graham, “The Future of Dance,” *DANCE Magazine*, April 1939. This is an article source found in the “Alwin Nikolais Dance Collection” located in the Robert E. and Jean R. Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections. It was a loosely placed item, not within its original publication, and no page numbers are found on this source for that reason. It is one page in length.
- <sup>6</sup> Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s*, ed. Ray Browne (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 146.
- <sup>7</sup> Gary Dean Best, *The Nickel and Dime Decade: American Popular Culture During the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 1-17.
- <sup>8</sup> Drowne, 6.
- <sup>9</sup> David Blanke, *The 1910s*, ed. Ray Browne (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Drowne, 226.
- <sup>11</sup> Doris Hering, ed., *Twenty-Five Years Of American Dance*, (New York: Rudolf Orthwine, 1954), 88-91.
- <sup>12</sup> Clive Barnes, “Modern Dance: The Freewheeling Party Is Over,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1965.
- <sup>13</sup> William Young and Nancy Young, *The 1930s*, ed. Ray Browne (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 8.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-207.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.
- <sup>17</sup> Alwin Nikolais, Untitled Manuscript, Unpublished, (Mahn Archive: Athens, Ohio), chapter ten.

- 
- <sup>18</sup> Clive Barnes, "Modern Dance: The Freewheeling Party Is Over," *New York Times*, December 26, 1965.
- <sup>19</sup> John Martin, *America Dancing: The Background And Personalities Of The Modern Dance*, (New York: Dodge Publishing Company, 1936), 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Alwin Nikolais, "A New Method of Dance Notation," *Theater Arts*, February, 1948, page 1.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, page one.
- <sup>22</sup> Alwin Nikolais, *Untitled Manuscript, Unpublished*, (Mahn Archive: Athens, Ohio), chapter nine.
- <sup>23</sup> Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance View; Has Modern Dance Lost Its Idealism?" *New York Times*, June 2, 1985.
- <sup>24</sup> Martha Graham, "The Future of Dance," *DANCE Magazine*, April 1939.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Hering, 104.
- <sup>27</sup> Alwin Nikolais, *Untitled Manuscript, Unpublished*, (Mahn Archive: Athens, Ohio), chapter ten.