

BOOK REVIEW

*Nouvelle Histoire de la danse en Occident: De la Préhistoire à nos jours*, edited by  
Laura Cappelle

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A book review of Laura Cappelle. *Nouvelle Histoire de la danse en Occident: De la Préhistoire à nos jours*. Paris: Seuil, 2020, 368 pp. ISBN 978-2021399899.

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The Greek philosopher Plato once said as a joke that a human being is essentially 'a featherless biped', and, when presented with a plucked chicken by Diogenes the Cynic, he added 'broad-nailed' to distinguish man from chicken<sup>1</sup> – but what he should have said was that humans also dance. And indeed, in more serious discussions, he did: 'whereas animals have no sense of order and disorder in movement (what we call rhythm and harmony), we human beings have been made sensitive to both and can enjoy them'.<sup>2</sup> In this way, one of the fathers of philosophy also became one of the fathers of a discourse about dance. Centuries down the line, there is no clear-cut answer to the question of where such a discourse belongs: to philosophy, education, or social theory? For behind the word 'dance' lie some of the most creative complexities of which the bipedal political animal is capable, at the crossroads between movement, meaning, and society.

The name of Plato is recurrent in the *Nouvelle Histoire de la danse en Occident (NH)*: in an early chapter about dance in ancient Greece, he is an arbiter of taste and morality in discussing the relation of vulgarity with ugliness, and the suitability of certain types of dances as the proper expression of civic engagement (with the exclusion of others, such as the *kordax*, too grotesque with its rhythmic body-slapping; p. 32). Later in the chronological sweep of the volume, Plato and Platonism are anchors for conceptions of dance as striving for an ideal. In the chapter on the Renaissance, it is the Platonic idealization of the perfect mechanics of an ordered cosmos that dance aims to reflect. In the nineteenth century, reaching its apogee with the choreographies of Marius Petipa, the forging of the ideal geometry of the body and the patterns created through the dynamics between the soloist and the corps-de-ballet is theorized by the famed *New York Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay (p. 141), through the Platonic lens of a sublimation towards ideal forms. In the twentieth century, it is modernist revolutionaries such as Isadora Duncan who are shown to appeal to Platonic philosophy in

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<sup>1</sup> An anecdote reported by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Tiziano Dorandi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.40.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1970), 653e.

view of recovering a pure form of dance beyond the artifices of a technically transformed body (pp. 167–68). Thus, to paraphrase the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's quip about Western philosophy being footnotes to Plato (not because he had all the answers, but rather all the questions), we can say that dance has developed in the footsteps of Plato, who set out its conditions for realization and the directions for its theory and critique.

Dance has held an ambiguous place in the historical and conceptual assessments of human achievement. Its physicality has made it suspicious to intellectual historians and philosophers, while its semantics, wavering between symbolism and ethnic and cultural identity politics, have led social scientists to consider dance to be the affirmation of a specific community or a class, and subsequently as the expression of one class rejecting or appropriating another. Accordingly, dance specialists in the academic world tend to belong either to a sub-part of performing arts departments or to sub-faculties of anthropology and social sciences. The most eminently universal of human activities, which goes far beyond the known rituals from the natural world, is thus treated as marginal, rather than mainstream. For, however wonderful the courtship rituals of exotic birds may be (perhaps even those of Diogenes' chickens!), these cannot count as dance precisely because of their biologically determined form and function. It is, in fact, the ambiguity of dance's place in the construction of civilization that makes a history of dance potentially explosive in capturing dance's position as in-between: in between ritual and rebellion, philosophy and physics, ethics and mythology, politics and ephemera, entertainment and political revolution. There has been dancing everywhere at every time, at the right and the wrong places, at the right and the wrong times, but serious mainstream scientific research has rarely taken that presence seriously enough.

The attitude and place given to dance in our early twenty-first century, however, have changed – the reasons for this change are appraised in the end chapters of the *NH*: social media, on the one hand, but, more deeply, the shared sense of the body's superior capacity to communicate in a globalized world, less divisive than words, more jubilant and cohesive. The democratization of dance through new means of access and ease of emulation exponentially requires, as the dance scholar Patrick Germain-Thomas notes (p. 329), the desires of our globalized societies to explode boundaries and limitations. Dance's inherent hybridity and infinite capacity for variation through its welcoming of, and indeed its nourishment from, inclusivity and diversity have transformed the status of dance in the arts and in society. Dance finds itself increasingly placed at the forefront of innovative and accessible communication about the complex world we are living in. It is often because words fail that dance takes on the relay of human communication across borders. The most recent widely publicized uproars in the dance world, concerning the 'old institutions' and their difficulties to adapt to new expectations of inclusivity,<sup>3</sup> rather than invalidate the claim of dance's social and aesthetic progressiveness, underline, on the contrary, how these expectations are not dreamt-up futures but requirements for the here and now. There is, in counterpart, the risk of uniformity in our aesthetic expectations and criteria for judgement, which looms behind the globalization and hybridity of traditions described in the double-authored contribution by scholars Federica Fratagnoli and Sylviane Pagès (pp. 317–25). Styles and traditions matter. And this is why it is important and necessary to have an erudite and enlightened globalizing history of dance.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the report on diversity at the Paris Opera, or the Berlin Staatsballet coming under fire for racial discrimination. See Pap Ndiaye and Constance Rivière, *Rapport sur la diversité à l'Opéra national de Paris* (Paris: Opéra national, 2021), <https://res.cloudinary.com/opera-national-de-paris/image/upload/v1612862089/pdf/q8admqhaczygb1jm2uls.pdf>; Kate Connolly, 'Berlin: Staatsballett's First Black Female Dancer Accuses It of Racism', *Guardian*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/09/berlin-staatsballetts-first-black-female-dancer-accuses-it-of-racism>.

The *NH* provides just that, with entries that are both of high academic standard and, at the same time, accessible to, and indeed addressing, a far broader readership, both in form (short, extremely readable chapters) and in content, by discussing dance within a complex social, philosophical, and political context. The credentials of the editor, Laura Cappelle, reflect the aims and achievements of the volume: a scholar and also a mainstream journalist, dance and theatre critic for some of the most important outlets in both the French and English media. All the chapters of the *NH* are in French, some translated by the editor; it is a testimony to the intellectual flexibility and open-mindedness of the French publishing house, les Editions du Seuil, that such a volume has been put together.

In light of the contemporary attitudes to dance, this new history re-evaluates the grounds for dance's centrality in human societies. The book challenges the tradition of boxing the history of dance into a niche field for the happy (mostly academic) few, first and foremost by demonstrating that neither the desire for nor the appreciation of dance was ever niche. Part of the newness of this history is thus a shift in perspective, which consists effectively in bringing in a plurality of points of view: the dancers (professional and amateur), the creators (conservative and avant-garde), the critics (traditionalists and adventurists), the political authorities (bigoted and propagandists), and the general public (heedlessly entertained or mindfully awakened). It is this wealth of viewpoints that helps to place dance firmly within the flow of history, reflecting, absorbing, and shaping its currents.

The *NH* is an edited collection of chronologically ordered chapters, ranging from the Palaeolithic clay vestiges of ritualized dancing, through medieval texts warning against the moral and theological dangers of too much dancing, up to discussions of what 'contemporary' means in post-modern and postmodern dance (where the loss of the hyphen, as explained by Marcia B. Siegel (p. 205), marks a switch from an aesthetic to a political dimension), up to the 2010s' globalized multi- and cross-cultural landscape. The volume very much fulfils the explosive potential of putting dance centre stage rather than as background accompaniment of the movements of history. Because it remains a compendium, with the formal necessity of brevity for all the entries, suggestions are implied without the space to develop them, for example (pp. 68–74) the case of Louis XIV of France, who – as suggested by Marina Nordera – seized autocratic power by reversing the principle of suspension of disbelief in his own danced performance as the sun; what you see is what really is: he is the Sun King because he embodies the dance of the sun. Dance is the most clearly communicative mode of expression, with music and words merely accompanying the dance. The suggestion is taken further by noting the contrast with the later years of Louis's reign, in which choreography became more esoteric, as gestures were less directly readable, thereby abandoning the direct symbolism of the early years of Louis's resplendent monarchy. Rich and up-to-date bibliographies can be found at the end of each entry to pursue such suggestions further.

Another striking suggestion is the link between expressionism in dance in 1920s Germany, based on an idealized classical naturalism, and the rise of Nazism (pp. 191–98). Here, too, it is not by chance that dance takes the forefront as a mode of communication, over words and music, relying on the clarity of the body's regimentation to express a new vision of reality. Rudolf Laban was a key figure in these years, a hugely important teacher and innovator in the 1920s and '30s (becoming, after the war, a visionary choreographer and teacher in England). In these years, he invented a new language to transcribe movement, the 'kinetography' (a project that is not without echoes of the analytic philosophy of that period, elaborating a new logical language free from ambiguities). Laban's vision was of a crystalline symbolism of movement, away from blurriness and ambiguities and the decadence of the *fin de siècle*, marked as 'too Jewish' (p. 197). The question that arises is thus: why this idea of dance, at this time, in this place? The answers, of course, are multiple and complex, as Laure Guilbert

shows. But the fact that Laban was hired by Goebbels to head the Berlin *Deutsche Tanzbühne* in 1934 only to be dismissed in 1936, shows the limits of the Nazis' association with such innovative physical expressivity. Too great an implication of the masses (over 1,000 amateur dancers were planned for the opening of the Olympic Games of 1936), and their being roused into an emotional frenzy (p. 198), was deemed too much of a risk and might have thwarted the radicalized Nazi ideology based on the subjugation, rather than emancipation, of the masses. Avant-garde dance was thus instrumentalized by a rising political force that, once in place, needed to then suffocate innovative approaches to the body precisely because it had measured how powerful they can be in terms of independence and self-emancipation.

The *NH* is a history without gaps. The continuity is constituted not merely by chronological linearity – a remarkable feat in itself – but also through its inter-disciplinary approach. Thus, changes in street fashion in Revolutionary France (lighter dress materials) had a direct effect on dance technique in making jumps go higher and leg work more emphatic (p. 108), which in turn accelerated the use of points to give the dancer an ever more immaterial and dream-like appearance. But there was a return effect as well: as the female dancer took centre stage, so the dynamics between men and women in society oscillated between the idolization and the independence of women. Dance found itself, in this way, at the crossroads of the great changes and upheavals of social history. Examining its developments gives us a privileged position from which to consider the power dynamics of domination and subjugation, creation and repression, liberation and conservative fears, which are at the heart of human civilizations.

As is explicit in its title, the point of view in the *NH* is the Western traditions and avant-gardes, but it is a history that is also global through the influences and contacts with non-Western traditions and inspirations that dance is especially sensitive to in virtue of its physical immediacy. An example is the late nineteenth-century Parisian Universal Exhibitions, which brought art and artists from all over the world to the French capital, thereby injecting into the horizon of possibles a whole new spectrum of movements and conceptions of physical representations inspired directly from India, Far East Asia, and Africa (p. 149). This horizontal fluidity was also echoed in dance's vertical assimilations of so-called lower forms of folkloric dances, which became reinvented in some of the most famous nineteenth-century choreographies for classical ballet (p. 149).

From a geographical point of view, the volume brings out a vivid multi-focal map of ever-shifting centres of activity – a map that becomes more precise as the nature of the evidence becomes more kaleidoscopic and multiple. The book is divided into four periods: (i) pre-modern, (ii) Renaissance to the nineteenth century, (iii) the twentieth century, and (iv) the end of the twentieth century / beginning of the twenty-first century. Each period has its own geographical transversality, but it is hard to deny the centrality of Paris, both for its home-grown contributions and for the city's capacity to welcome and integrate foreign artists and new ideas, from the Ballets Russes of the early twentieth century, marking the beginning of modern dance, to the first great figures of American modernism, Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, to whom Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau devotes an entrancing chapter in which Duncan's Platonizing philosophy of pure dance contrasts with Fuller's Mallarméean 'pure movement', opposing two visions of the body: Fuller's futurist technology-enhanced body versus Duncan's wild naked Greek body (pp. 167–68).

But the centripetal magnet of Paris has an equally centrifugal energy, dispersing students of the Paris Opera to the four corners of the world, to Stockholm, Vienna, or Milan, and forcing those who do not make it on the Parisian scene to find homes elsewhere, most notably Marius Petipa, who, in St Petersburg, not only created the tradition of classical Russian ballet but also single-handedly set up what is to this day an unsurpassable horizon of what counts as classical.

The focus on dance, rather than narrowing the field of discussion, broadens it to give a rich and complex overview of a society's ideals and aspirations in relation to economic and political frames. The place of the body, the fluctuating ideals of shape, grace, and alignment, the relation between the sexes, the place of women, and also the space for expressivity for the male dancer, the morality of touch, and the expressions of freedom of the individual versus the group are the major stakes of the evolution of dance through the ages. The *NH* gives a thrilling, jam-packed account of the past and present of our dance-enthused society.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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