Into a fantasy world: A history of ballet

Members of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Ensemble perform Swan Lake at the concert hall in Winnipeg on March 11, 2003. (CP PHOTO/Winnipeg Free Press/Phil Hossack)

Ballet can tell a story, express an emotion, reflect a piece of music or simply showcase a choreographed series of movements.

At the heart of the classical dance form, however, is a bit of deception.

Reality tells us ballet is a physically brutal art that contorts its dancers into movements unnatural for the human body. It demands the utmost commitment, willpower and strength for, at most, a few decades dancing in the spotlight.

A well-executed ballet, however, transports the audience into a fantasy world where dancers defy gravity as they leap, maintain balance during dizzying spins, glide along their tiptoes and rise into the air as if light as a feather. A fine ballet is graceful and natural.

Though it may encompass incredible technicality and difficulty, a ballet's audience is only aware of its ability to personify or evoke emotion – from rage to jealousy to love – simply though the movements and the lines of the dancers' bodies.

It is this illusory fantasy world that has enthralled audiences for centuries.

15th century:

Ballet originates as the court entertainment of Renaissance Italy, where the ruling aristocracy patronizes the arts and compete with each other by holding elaborate, costly parties featuring dance performances by their subjects.

16th century:

Catherine de Medicis, whose family ruled Florence, becomes the queen of France in 1547 and introduces the French court to the same kinds of entertainment she enjoyed in Italy. In 1581, her chief musician Balthasar de Beaujoyeux (whom she brought with her to France), creates what is considered the first ballet: *Le Ballet comique de la Reine*. At more than five hours long, the performance combines dance, an original orchestral work, sets, special effects, singing and spoken verse in its retelling of the ancient Greek myth of Circe.

17th century:

Louis XIV revives French interest in ballet. The Sun King greatly enjoys dance and – in his younger, fitter days – takes part in all the ballets given at his court. In 1661, he establishes the first ballet school, l'Académie Royale de Danse, to train dancers to perform for him. Around 1670, Pierre Beauchamps develops and codifies the five classic ballet positions at the Académie.

18th century:

Professionally trained French ballet dancers begin performing publicly around 1708 and similar dance troupes develop across the continent and eastward, including the acclaimed Russian Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg, founded in 1738.

Though early dancers wore heavy, elaborate costumes and floor-length skirts, the increasingly skilled and technically accomplished dancers demand costumes that do not hide or interfere with their movements. Famed ballet dancer Marie Salle dons flowing robes inspired by the ancient Greeks while her rival and contemporary Marie Camargo

shortens her skirt above her ankles, pulls on tights and removes the heels from her dancing shoes, effectively creating the ballet slipper.

Another set of rivals, choreographers Jean-Georges Noverre of France and Gasparo Angiolini of Italy, separately develop the dramatic style known as *ballet d'action*. Where early ballets were court entertainments that encompassed dance, theatre and singing, *ballet d'action* tells a story through dance steps and movements.

Noverre rejects opera-ballets and promotes ballet as a distinct art form. In his 1760 book *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets*, he criticizes the past style of dance that uses masks, wigs and bulky costumes to portray characters. He urges dancers to use only their bodies and faces to convey emotion and become the characters.

19th century:

Audiences begin to abandon ballets inspired by ancient Greek myths or dramas in favor of more romantic creations: fairy tales, love stories and escapist tales of dreamlike worlds or faraway lands.

Between 1820 and 1830, Italian dancer, teacher and choreographer Carlo Blasis writes extensively about ballet history and theory, and codifies the techniques of ballet.

The Romantic period influences ballet technique and fashion by inspiring *pointe*

shoes, which lift female dancers and portray them as heavenly beings, and *tutus*, which complete free the legs. Female dancers gain importance over their male partners and the concept of the prima ballerina is born.

Italian choreographer Filippo Taglioni creates in 1832 what is considered the first Romantic ballet, *La Sylphide*. The star, his daughter Marie Taglioni, changes ballet fashion by dancing the role of the fairy-like being dressed in a lightweight, white, calf-length skirt and a top that bares her neck, arms and shoulders. Taglioni's dreamlike dance style is later rivalled by Austrian Fanny Elssler's strength as well as by fellow Italian Carlotta Grisi, star of 1841's *Giselle*.

In 1847, French-born dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa joins the Russian Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg (which would become the Kirov Ballet) and helps the city

become the ballet centre of the world. Petipa introduces a rigorously trained *corps de ballet* and creates some of the form's enduring works, including *Don Quixote*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and restagings of *Giselle*, *Coppélia*,

La Sylphide and *Swan Lake*. His roles showcasing lead ballerinas would continue to be among the most desired parts for more than 150 years.

20th century:

Sergei Diaghilev establishes the Ballets Russes in 1909, employing Michel (Mikhail) Fokine as choreographer. Fokine advocates dancers using their entire bodies – as opposed to separate gestures – to express emotion. Among others, he creates *The Firebird* in 1910 and *Petrouchka* in 1911, enlisting composer Igor Stravinsky to compose original music for the two.


Beginning around 1910, modern dance develops in Europe and North America. Declaring themselves independent of ballet, proponents often state vehement opposition to the classical form, calling it unnatural and a form of torture. Ballet enthusiasts disparage the newer form as "barefoot ballet."

During and after the 1917 Russian Revolution, some of the country's finest dancers emigrate

to the West, join or develop troupes and open ballet academies. Their contributions to North America and Europe elevate ballet skill in countries like the U.S. and the U.K. to levels comparable to the acclaimed Russian troupes. These Russian dancers also dramatically increase worldwide audiences for ballet.

In the 1920s, dancer, choreographer and theorist Rudolf von Laban begins developing Labanotation, a system of dance notation used to record or make a blueprint of dance choreography. It eventually becomes a method of recording all body movement and is also used to analyze movement in sports and other areas.
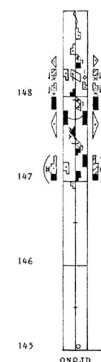
Dancer and choreographer Rudolf Nureyev elevates traditional male dancer parts, transforming the simple porter function into significant, athletic and dynamic roles.

Following his move to the U.S. and a job choreographing at the American Ballet Company (the country's first major ballet school), former Ballet Russes dancer George Balanchine co-founds in 1948 what would become the world-famous New York City Ballet.

Choreography begins to explore more abstract dance techniques: without or with less of a dependency on plot or storyline, as an expression of the music, or as a study in a particular style of movement. This is expressed in works like 1957's *Agon*, one of many collaborations between Balanchine and Stravinsky.

By the 1970s, many ballet and modern dance groups have eliminated their rivalry and both begin to incorporate each other's techniques in new productions.