

Dressing for the Dance

For decades, the masters of modern dance gradually pared down the traditional elements of the art—costume, music, even movement itself. They also pared down their audiences. Today, our author writes, dance is fitting itself out in a new set of clothes and hoping to renew itself as a more popular art form.

by Joyce Morgenroth

In the intimate performance spaces of New York's eclectic downtown concert dance scene, audiences can expect to find politics mixed with their art. In her dance, *Sarah*, choreographer Ann Carlson, wearing a strapless dress and high heels, symbolically upends traditional notions of femininity by turning herself upside down and sticking her ladylike heels up in the air. Christine Doempke, dancing in combat boots, presents herself as strong and awkward, casually disregarding the usual expectations of dancerly grace. Mixing wit and social commentary, these dancers communicate not only by how they move but by what they wear.

The use of costumes as social statements is probably as old as dance performance itself. In the 17th century, the lace conspicuously displayed by aristocratic dancers in the royal courts of western Europe reflected their privileged role in society, just as since the 1960s dancers in elastic-waist pants and T-shirts—or, on occasion, wearing no clothes at all—have announced the coming of sexual equality and freedom from formal social constraints.

Dance costumes also reflect the changing role of theatrical dance within society. Once integral to the functioning of aristocratic regimes, dance now often aims to subvert the political status quo. Rejecting the aristocratic aesthetic underlying the European dance tradition, American concert dance since the turn of the century has broken free from the inherited values of decorum, virtuosity, expressivity, and beauty. This impulse unites Isadora Duncan's sandaled and loosely draped reaction against pointe shoes and tutus at the beginning of the century, Martha Graham's angular, percussive denial of ballet's lyricism a few decades later, and Merce Cunningham's withdrawal from narrative and separation of music from dance beginning in the 1950s. It continues in the Judson Dance Theater's rejection of virtuosity and even basic dance technique during the 1960s, and soon thereafter in the minimalists' ultimate questioning of the very urge to move.

Yet by repudiating elegantly turned-out positions, soaring leaps, and multiple pirouettes, by giving up narrative and doing away with glamorous costuming,



In Sarah, Ann Carlson uses a pair of high heels and black dress to comment on one vision of femininity.

modern dance not only parted ways with classical ballet but abandoned the qualities that for centuries had attracted audiences. Trying to escape from aesthetic assumptions associated with wealth and inherited privilege, and hoping to forge an aesthetic better suited to a democratic and pluralistic society, the new American dance instead ended up producing inaccessible work that excluded the general public. While the elegantly attired courtiers of prerevolutionary France had a captive audience of court aristocrats, 20th-century American dancers cultivated an audience

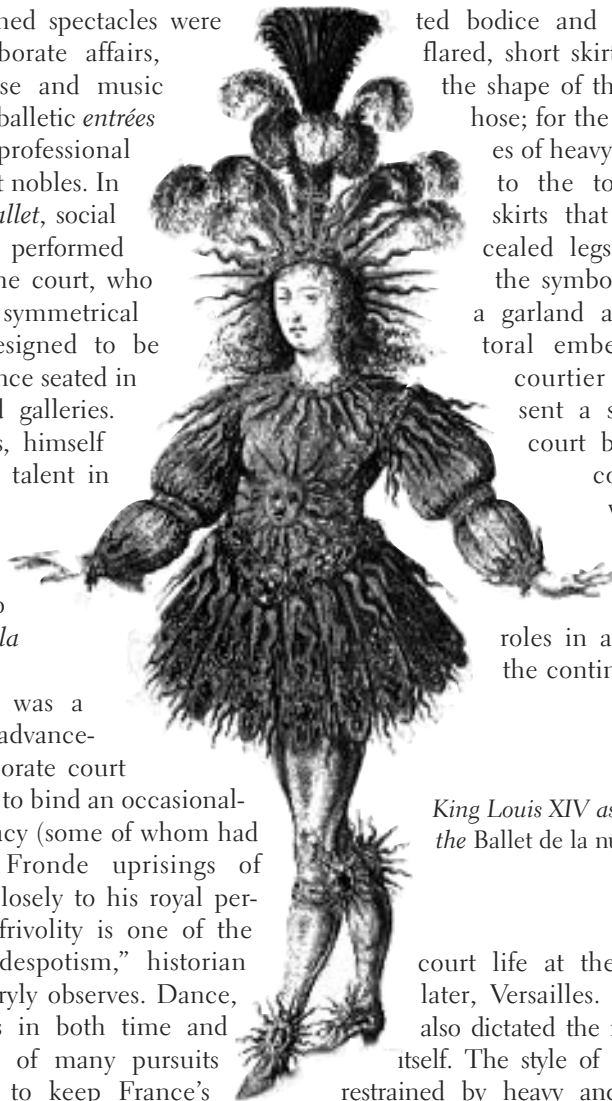
among the *artistic* elite in order to survive. Taking to the dance floor in well-worn sneakers, the Soho dancers of the 1960s might not have traveled so far as they probably have believed from their 17th-century forebears in fancy heeled pumps.

Ballet and modern dance grew out of courtly traditions that germinated in Renaissance Italy and flourished in the court ballets of King Louis XIV in 17th-century France. Although based on the social dances of the court such as the *gavotte*, the *courante*, and the *gigue*,

these choreographed spectacles were much more elaborate affairs, with spoken verse and music interspersed with balletic *entrées* performed by professional dancers and select nobles. In the final *grand ballet*, social dance steps were performed by members of the court, who traced detailed, symmetrical floor patterns designed to be seen by the audience seated in the court's raised galleries. The young Louis, himself renowned for his talent in dance, came to be known as "the Sun King" after he played Apollo in the *Ballet de la nuit* in 1653.

Dancing well was a prerequisite for advancement in the elaborate court life Louis created to bind an occasionally restive aristocracy (some of whom had joined in the Fronde uprisings of 1648–53) more closely to his royal person. "A solemn frivolity is one of the sound tools of despotism," historian André Maurois dryly observes. Dance, with all its costs in both time and money, was one of many pursuits Louis cultivated to keep France's aristocrats preoccupied. "As a matter of policy, Louis forced magnificence upon all," Maurois writes. "He drained everyone by making luxury honorable, and thus reduced the courtiers to dependence upon his bounty for their existence." In both form and content, the court ballets served a variety of political purposes. It was no accident that in the *Ballet de la nuit*, Louis's sun arrives—accompanied by Honor, Grace, Love, Riches, Victory, Fame, and Peace—in time to drive away thieves looting a burning house (symbolizing France). It was said to be the king's favorite role.

Dancers wore costumes in the style of court dress: for the men, a coat with a fit-



ted bodice and a *tonnelet*, or flared, short skirt that revealed the shape of the legs in their hose; for the women, dresses of heavy fabric tailored to the torso with full skirts that entirely concealed legs and feet. By the symbolic addition of a garland and other pastoral embellishments, a courtier might represent a shepherd in a court ballet. In such costumes one was both a shepherd and a count, playing roles in a ballet and in the continuing drama of

King Louis XIV as Apollo in the *Ballet de la nuit*

court life at the Louvre and, later, Versailles. The costumes also dictated the forms of dance itself. The style of movement was restrained by heavy and cumbersome clothes that restricted the mobility of limbs and torso. The shoes, like the normal footwear of the court, had flexible soles which allowed for small springing steps, but the raised heels worn by both men and women limited the possibility of jumping.

When Louis stopped performing in the 1660s, he raised the prestige of professional dancers, once restricted to comic and grotesque parts in court entertainments, by allowing them to assume noble roles. He also gave his approval to several new academies that sped the rise of professional dance, beginning with the short-lived Académie Royale de Danse, launched in 1661. It was soon

> JOYCE MORGENROTH is associate professor of dance at Cornell University and the author of *Dance Improvisations* (1987). Copyright © 1998 by Joyce Morgenroth.

followed by the Académie Royale de Musique, which took up residence in the Paris Opéra and became the home of opera-ballet, in which dance and sung drama were mixed. Performances were open to the paying public, but aristocrats and aristocratic sensibilities still dominated. Yet with a new professional class of dancers performing on public stages, further divergence of stage dancing and court social dancing, and of performer and spectator, was inevitable.

A formal school for the training of dancers opened at the Paris Opéra in 1713. Beyond the practice rooms, dance was also being codified in print, notably in Pierre Rameau's *Dancing Master* (1725), which described and illustrated correct posture, the five turned-out positions of the feet, and proper execution of dance steps.

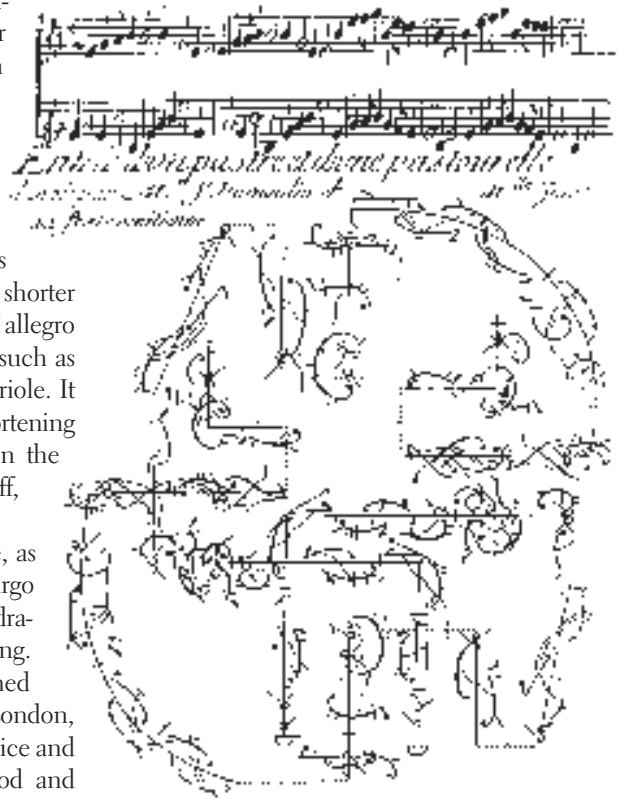
Innovations in dance costume inevitably accompanied these changes, and they were heralded by two rival star ballerinas—the two Maries. Marie Camargo, debuting in Paris in 1726, quickly won acclaim for her apparently effortless and brilliant technique, and especially for her *entrechats*, jumping steps in which the feet are crossed several times in midair. She was the toast of Paris. To make it easier for her to perform these difficult steps—and for the audience to see and appreciate them—Camargo shortened her skirts a few inches. Widely imitated, the shorter skirt eventually permitted an array of allegro techniques—brilliant jumping steps such as the now-familiar *jeté*, *sauté*, and *cabriole*. It also inaugurated the progressive shortening of the ballerina's skirt, which led, in the 20th century, to the now-familiar stiff, hip-length tutu.

Camargo's great rival, Marie Sallé, as reserved in her personality as Camargo was effervescent, was known for the dramatic, expressive quality of her dancing. In 1734, she arranged and performed her own version of *Pygmalion* in London, giving up the panniered skirt and bodice and the elaborate hairstyles of the period and wearing instead a simple muslin dress over her corset and petticoat, with her hair arranged loosely. Sallé had all of London clamoring for tickets to *Pygmalion*, but it

would require nothing short of a real revolution before such radical changes in costuming could take hold.

The expressive style found its most eloquent advocate in the dancer and dancing master Jean-Georges Noverre. Reacting against sterile movement and declaimed narrative, he argued emphatically in his *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets* (1760) for a form of dance in which the movement itself could reveal human emotions. To allow for this change, Noverre called for an end to the stiff *tonnelets* and the elimination of masks that hid the natural emotions of the face. The particular style of movement he espoused included mimed sequences that we today would find stilted and melodramatic, but Noverre's broader principles would powerfully influence the story ballets of the next century.

The great transition in dance began with the French Revolution. With the end of the court's dominance, dance became more accessible to the people, its popularity helped in an odd way by the system of cen-



These choreographic notations by Louis Pécour were published in 1712, at a time when dancing masters were codifying their art.

sorship in revolutionary Paris. The censors allowed ballet more freedom than theater, considering movement less potentially subversive than words. The boulevard theaters that had proliferated in Paris didn't carry the prestige of the Opéra, but they charged less for admission and attracted a much larger audience, featuring revolutionary displays and ballets with stories revolving around farmers, merchants, and other ordinary members of the bourgeoisie. Costumes reflected the rejection of aristocratic standards. The body was given great freedom in light, flowing fabrics, and in one fashion for female dancers, even more constraint was abandoned with the exposure of a single breast. The aesthetic of the court was being replaced by the aesthetic of the people.

The emerging architecture of public theaters encouraged new kinds of choreography. While at Versailles and other royal courts the dancers had usually been surrounded by an audience on three or four sides, sometimes seated in raised galleries, dancers now performed on a raised stage, separated from their audiences and framed by a proscenium arch. Instead of watching from surrounding raised galleries, the audience now faced performers frontally and on roughly the same plane. This perspective gave jumps, turns, and large gestural movements greater importance. With the prevailing use of soft, flat-heeled shoes and light fabrics, dancers were able to perform brilliant pirouettes and leaps.

The new emphasis on vertical posture and airborne movement provided a fertile context for the Romantic aspirations of early-19th-century artists. In story ballets such as *La sylphide* (1832), choreographed by Filippo Taglioni, fairies, sylphs, and other fantastic creatures tempted humans from their real lives into fantasies of otherworldly happiness. Ballerinas captured the ethereal quality of their characters by dancing on the tips of their toes and wearing net and gauze. Period prints of ballet dancers show an exaggeratedly small and tapering foot. In the pointe shoes that developed during this period, the vulgar, useful foot almost vanished entirely. In its place was the illusion of an elongated leg and only a

most tenuous connection to the ground.

Over the years, pointe shoes were made with increasingly reinforced toes and shanks, giving greater support to the dancer's foot. The supported pointe shoe also constricted the foot, creating an impression of delicacy but giving the foot a narrower and less flexible base when flat. As in the Chinese tradition of foot binding, women were meant to appear as dependent, aesthetic beings existing for the pleasure of men. Despite the fact that women were center stage in ballet, it was men—whether they were the male ballet masters, librettists, and choreographers who created the ballets, or the influential male patrons who admired the physical beauty of the ballerinas—who determined the aesthetic. Reviews and articles written at the time by prominent writers such as Théophile Gautier focused as much on the physical charms of the leading dancers as on their artistic interpretations, fanning the passions of competing male balletomanes who argued vehemently for either the ethereal quality of a Marie Taglioni or the sensuality of a Fanny Elssler. In the world of 19th-century ballet, influential men were admitted backstage to meet the dancers and seek their sexual favors. Starring ballerinas took as lovers those with money, good looks, or power, and were themselves able to wield power as a result.

It is hard for us today to grasp the extent of ballet's popular appeal during its Romantic heyday. Dance critic Jack Anderson tells how Ralph Waldo Emerson blissfully compared his admiration for Elssler to religion; when she performed in Washington, D.C., Congress adjourned for a day.

But ballet in the second half of the 19th century suddenly slipped into decline, especially after the death of major French choreographer Arthur Saint-Léon and several of Paris's more promising ballerinas. The best European dancers and ballet masters gravitated toward Russia, where the art had enjoyed strong royal patronage since the reign of Catherine the Great a century earlier. A succession of European choreographers and teachers developed what is still known as the Russian style,

which emphasized the grand “presentation.” The greatest of these masters was Marius Petipa, who served the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg for more than 50 years, first as a dancer beginning in 1847 and then as ballet master, creating such classic works as *Don Quixote* (1869) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890). Given the renewed aristocratic patronage, it is hardly surprising that dance returned to the classical aesthetic. (However, Moscow’s taste in ballet was less aristocratic than St. Petersburg’s, a difference reflected even after the Russian Revolution in the styles of the Moscow-based Bolshoi Ballet and the more classically oriented Kirov Ballet in Leningrad.) Petipa’s methodically plotted arrangements of the corps de ballet harkened back to the floor patterns of the early French court spectacles. In his classical ballets such as *Swan Lake* (1895), ballerinas wore full, multilayered net skirts topped by tight-fitting bodices that more closely resembled the formal court dress of the 17th century than the filmy Grecian styles of the Romantics.

This step backward was followed at the turn of the century by a great leap forward. Isadora Duncan, claiming inspiration from the movement of ocean waves off the coast of her native California, envisioned a new dance in which the woman’s body would be uncorseted and her feet planted firmly on the earth. Sandals or bare feet—considered scandalous innovations in some circles—allowed for more natural movement and permitted Duncan to express a spirituality connecting earth and heaven. As she became a celebrated public figure in Europe after appearances in Budapest and Berlin in 1903 and ’04, she also became a spokeswoman for her own version of feminism. She publicly rebelled against marriage and against the aesthetics of ballet, including the constricting and painful pointe shoes. The dancer of the future, she declared in a famous lecture in 1903, “will dance not in the form of a nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette but in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression. She will real-



Isadora Duncan in a 1903 dance pose as Iphigenia, who in Greek legend was sacrificed so that the Greeks could sail on Troy

ize the mission of woman’s body and the holiness of all its parts.” She would possess “the highest intelligence in the freest body.”

In advocating a personal exploration of movement, Duncan was a crucial forerunner of modern dance. And while she completely rejected ballet, with its orchestrated and formalized ensembles, she nevertheless inspired changes in its form. Her performances in St. Petersburg early in the century left a deep impression. While the Imperial Ballet became increasingly fossilized, a young Russian choreographer for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, Mikhail Fokine, was encouraged by Duncan’s ideals to pursue the search for more natural and expressive movement in ballet. Arriving in Paris in 1909, the Ballets Russes excited all of Europe with a performance of *Prince Igor* that had the audience storming the stage to



Nijinsky and a frieze of nymphs in a 1912 performance of Afternoon of a Faun

embrace the dancers. Fokine was soon succeeded as company choreographer by Vaslav Nijinsky, whose angular and sexually suggestive *Afternoon of a Faun* in 1912 outraged many dance aficionados and provoked *Le Figaro* to pronounce it “loathsome”—which, of course, only stirred more public interest.

The Ballets Russes was very much a part of the early-20th-century avant-garde, performing to the music of Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, and Claude Debussy, and enlisting the likes of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Georges Braque to design sets and costumes. Its innovative choreographers introduced new ideas about dance that did not depend on the turned-out legs and pointe shoes that had been indispensable to 19th-century ballet. Yet despite the fabulous success of the Ballets Russes, its influence did not survive the brilliant impresario Diaghilev, who died in 1929. Virtually all of the ballets seen today throughout Europe and America come from the earlier Romantic and classical traditions.

With the decline of the Ballets Russes, much of the innovative energy in dance flowed from modern dance, with its emphasis on individual movement and expression—a dance form that took root, not surprisingly, in the United States. It was in America, land of automobiles, jazz, and women’s suffrage, that women finally took on the central role of choreographer and, in doing so, created an entirely new form of concert dance. The modern dance pio-

neers of the 1930s and ’40s, notably Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, repudiated ballet’s aristocratic roots, its notions of femininity, and the emblematic satin slipper that represented constraint and emphasized beauty, lightness, and delicacy. They strove instead to reveal the struggle against gravity. Graham, for example, built her technique around the principles of “contraction” and “release,” including movements of violent intensity, exuberance, and percussiveness. Often giving up shoes altogether, these innovators choreographed and danced works about woman as pioneer, as leader, as passionate being—mythic, heroic, and powerful—and used costumes befitting such characters. Instead of portraying sylphs, they chose Clytemnestra, Joan of Arc, and the archetypal matriarch as their subjects. They danced barefoot (or in the most elemental of slippers) for control, economy, and immediacy, and for liberation from a physically painful masquerade of femininity.

The next generation carried the revolt against tradition even further, inaugurating what the dance world now calls postmodernism. Inspired by the Zen ideas of composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham in the 1950s, dancers increasingly emphasized spareness and an intellectual, almost theoretical approach to movement. Accordingly, costumes were pared down—jeans, underwear, skin. Dance moved away from music, character, and story—the very elements that had provided the foundation for Isadora Duncan and

other modern dance pioneers. In the 1960s, Yvonne Rainer, one of the Judson Dance Theater's most influential choreographers, heralded a new mood in dance, saying "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image." Dance was not a display of virtuosic technique, Rainer and others insisted, it was "movement." Anyone could do it. In fact, the simplicity of an untrained body was preferred to the affectations of a trained one. Dancers performed simple tasks: sitting, walking, carrying mattresses. The sneaker became the performance shoe of choice precisely because it was ordinary footwear.

But the more unpretentious dance aimed to be, the more elitist it became. Invariably, it alienated traditional audiences and appealed more to artists and intellectuals interested in the art's social and political content. Had dance come full circle? Like the Sun King's 17th-century aristocrats, avant-garde dancers in the 1960s donned costumes self-consciously drawn from their "real" life; both made political and artistic statements addressed to an exclusive audience. Even the performance spaces of postmodern dance bore a resemblance to the early court theaters. The Manhattan lofts, galleries, and churches that hosted avant-garde dance companies put performers and audience in close proximity, and sometimes even restored audiences to their former places in raised galleries along the sides.

In the past two decades, there has been a movement away from the austere process of paring down that figured so prominently in early postmodern dance. Now the byword is "inclusion." Embracing nondance movements, popular dance styles such as break dancing, as well as rigorous dance technique, contemporary dance has been willing to encompass even ballet, its long-standing archenemy. The old distinction between ballet and modern dance has been blurred by a series of breakthroughs, some of them already decades old. George

Balanchine, a veteran of the Ballets Russes who helped found the New York City Ballet in the 1940s, created a 20th-century American ballet so well crafted that even skeptical modern dancers took an interest in it. Beginning in the 1970s, modern dance icons such as Twyla Tharp and Mark Morris choreographed for major ballet companies such as the Joffrey Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre. And during the past 20 years, Kirov-trained ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the great dancers of the century, has crossed over to modern dance.

The new dance has established no single direction for itself, and too often in contemporary dance (and its sometime-sibling, performance art) autobiographical or political "authenticity" substitutes for craft, technique, and inspiration. But some modern dancers, such as Morris and Trisha Brown, have rediscovered theatricality, musicality, and a rough-and-tumble athletic virtuosity. There is also a renewed appreciation of costume, a turn marked in Tharp's *Sue's Leg* (1975), in which the dancers appeared in replicas of their well-worn rehearsal clothes—but replicas wittily created out of elegant satin and jersey materials by designer Santo Loquasto. Very often, today's dancers wear costumes ironically, donning prom dresses and thrift shop castoffs as a way of putting distance between themselves and what they wear and of commenting on the audience's expectations. Yet they are still wearing costumes, and they are still providing an element of theatricality and interest that was until recently virtually banished from dance.

How far the postmodernist rummaging in the neglected trunks and closets of dance heritage will go, and how widespread it will be, remain unclear. But showing once again that the old can be made new, the contemporary pastiche of the traditional and the avant-garde recently acquired an interesting new source of possibilities and a new emblem: the split-sole sneaker made for pointe work, already being worn by both ballet and modern dancers.