

Russian Ballet: An Overview

Ballet is said to be invented in the courtyards of Italy, although the dance as we know it is attributed to the mastery of the French. Indeed, ballet is fundamentally a European art form, with Russia being noted as another country making significant contributions. Testimony to this fact can be found in the fact that some of the world's finest ballet dancers come from Russia. Konstantin Sergeev, Olga Preobrazhenskaya, Agrippina Vaganova, Galina Ulanova, Mathilde Kschessinskaya, Tamara Karsavina and Yuri Grigorovich are just a few of the many Russian ballet dancers to have contributed greatly to the art form.

Russian ballet was introduced, along with other aristocratic dance forms, when Peter the Great undertook a westernization program in the 1700's. The first Russian ballet school was established in 1734 and by 1740 a full ballet company was founded at the Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg. This town, incidentally, is where timeless prima ballerina Anna Pavlova was born. In the 1800s Russian nobles sponsored dance companies of serfs, and Russian ballet assimilated native elements from folk dancing.

Famous French choreographer Marius Petipa spent fifty years staging Russian ballets, and became a dominant figure during that period. The stagings of Tchaikovsky's ballets were among his greatest triumphs. Other notable European dancers including Marie Taglioni, Christian Johansson and Enrico Cecchetti also performed in Russia throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These dancers brought western influences to Russian ballet.

In 1909, impresario Sergeev Diaghilev joined together with choreographer Michel Fokine, dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and designer Alexandre Benois and founded an innovative touring ballet company. After the staging of Stravinsky's controversial "The Rite of Spring", political events including World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution kept Diaghilev from returning to Russia. His Russian ballet company, The Ballet Russe, was headquartered in Paris until the time of Diaghilev's death in 1929. During that same period, emigre dancer Anna Pavlova toured the world with her troupe and exerted a huge influence on the Russian ballet art form.

George Balanchine, Georgian emigre and Diaghilev protege, formed the New York City Ballet in 1948. In the meantime, the Soviet government began to sponsor new ballet companies throughout the union. After a period of experimentation in the 1920s, Stalin's influence saw Russian ballet revert to the traditional forms of Petipa, in Russia reverted under Stalin to the traditional forms of Petipa. Changes were even made to the plots in order to emphasize the positive themes of socialist realism.

Without question, Rudolf Nureyev was the most influential Russian dancer of the mid-twentieth century. Nureyev, who defected to the West in 1961, is credited with establishing the dominant role of the male dancer in classical ballet. Mikhail Baryshnikov, another notable emigre, burnished an already brilliant career in the United States by defecting from Leningrad's Kirov Ballet in 1974.

Russia's largest cities traditionally have their own opera houses and symphony orchestras. Although funding for such facilities diminished throughout the 1990s, audience attendance remains high. Russian ballet companies such as the Moscow's Bolshoi Theater and the Kirov Theater in St. Petersburg are considered to be among the most renowned, and have hosted audiences regularly since the early 1960s.

Theoretically, ballet was born and raised in Italy and France. However, no one can deny the vast influence that Russia has given to the craft, or the incredible amount of talent that is put forth by Russian ballet dancers.