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# The Offending Classic



Nikolai Aistov as the Rajah, Julia Sedova as Gamzatti and Pavel Gerdt as Solor (ca. 1902). Courtesy of the Marius Petipa Society.

We have recently seen a conflict over a Depression-era mural on the wall of a public school in San Francisco. It came under attack by the student body for its offensive content to minorities, even though the 1930s mural in question was by Russian leftist émigré artist Victor Arnautoff (hardly a household name) and was created as a protest against the injustice propagated by the United States of America against minorities.[1] A dead Native American at the feet of the first President of the United States is the offending element within this image. The irony in this image, which contests our country's great

democratic myth, is apparently no longer legible as such to the very interpretive community the artist might well have wished to address today. The dead Native American is now taken literally, and the representation itself seen as a hateful statement.

This conflict serves to remind us that, over time, some art may find itself in need of historical re-contextualization, especially if it is itself attempting to recontextualize and challenge familiar myths. It also suggests that the very presence of the body in a representation is now more influential than any historical awareness of the politics of irony, let alone any historical sense of differing representational strategies that have long used bodies to convey ideas. Today it may be easier to take the body out of historical context in art that comes to us from the past. Beyond the general issue of censorship, no one will likely worry too much about this particular case. WPA art has never been considered classic, even in a town like San Francisco that still has some remarkable examples in public spaces like Coit Tower or the San Francisco Art Institute.[2] No hegemonic interpretive community stands behind WPA art, and, as a result, it becomes harder to see the Arnautoff polemic as symptomatic of a larger cultural conflict. The case does, however, seem symptomatic of a problem around representation itself as offensive; in other words, it may be symptomatic of a new crisis of representation, one which no longer centers on the failure to represent reality but instead on the raw reality of every representation.

This question of the representation of the body inevitably comes around to dance—an art in which the body and what it might signify hold center stage in more ways than one. The art of dance is distinct in being the single art in which the body is the most easily decontextualized from the surrounding work—in order to be consumed as if it existed in and for itself.[3] Yet, in the present controversies that swirl about nineteenth-century ballet classics such as *La Bayadère*, those which display the racial stereotypes of Orientalism, the problem is more complex than that of bodies alone. In such cases the entire context of the ballet, from its narrative premise to its movement details, can be seen to participate in the offense. Nevertheless a ballet, unlike a mural, can be adapted and altered. Resistance to change stems in part from the idea that ballet itself as an institution has need to maintain its classics intact. Yet it is far from evident that those ballets now considered classics of the nineteenth century are in any way intact relative to their original form. Training, technique, and therefore body morphology

have changed to such a degree over one hundred years that any "original" would today be unrecognizable.[4] The so-called classics have been adapting all along to the changing potentials of the body and the corresponding visual expectations of the audience. Moreover adaptation is unquestioned as a theater practice; indeed, as Martin Puchner has pointed out, drama privileges theatrical production over textual fixity.[5] A modern-dress *Hamlet* has never been considered an obliteration of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* per se. The "text" of a ballet—libretto, choreographic notes, etc.—is less determinant to the articulation of the work than is the text of theater,[6] which is quite literally a text; for this reason, new reconstructions of ballet classics, such as Alexei Ratmansky's recent production of *Giselle*, show well-known works that vary decisively from what we long thought the original was—until we learned otherwise.

Reconstructing an original ballet is never contested in and of itself, which seems to indicate that there is an awareness of the relativity of the ballet text in public consciousness. But ballet donors, funders, and audiences have a stake in the identity of ballet as "classical," which in popular parlance could be taken to mean "first class," or, in old-fashioned balletomane parlance, of Russian origin.[7] However, I would argue that the investment of the ballet audience in the classic is more tied up with the dancer's virtuosity or stylistic understanding than with the historical nature of the choreography. Presumably, a classic work is the culmination of a tradition and/or the most enduring realization of a distinct development within a tradition. So, for example, one might say that *Giselle* (1841) is unique to nineteenth-century ballet because it contains well-delineated characters making up a social whole. It is a ballet whose story turns on believable social relations between characters and correspondingly believable movement characterizations.

Or, one might say that *La Sylphide* (1832) is a classic because it weds a style of movement to a given form of escapist narrative, one where the ballerina plays a distinctly lyric role, thus generating a whole new technical approach (an analogy would be coloratura in nineteenth-century opera). Here, however, the origins of the classicism of the classic are cast in doubt when we consider Western interest in the bayadère of the early 1800s. Dance scholar Molly Engelhardt traces the influence of the travel narratives of Jacob Haafner from this period on Romantic ballet and on the creation of *La Sylphide* in

particular. The "enchanting and modest" qualities of the devadasi and her "light and ingenious steps" were contrasted disadvantageously by Haafner to the Western ballerina's "cold and meaningless gestures."[8] Could such descriptions have influenced Filippo Taglioni, who choreographed *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* two years before *La Sylphide*? If so, the classic *La Sylphide* owes something of its groundbreaking style to borrowing from the Indian aesthetic that informed the creation of the iconic character of the Sylph.




1838 sheet music cover showing The Bayaderes: Deveneyagorn, Ramalingani, Savaranim, Tille, Veydoun, Ramgoun, Amany, Savundiroun; [London], F. Glover—"Le malapou, or The Love Dance," performed by the Bayaderes, Amany, Title [sic], Saundirounn, and Ramgoun, at the Theatre Royal Adelphi, composed by J.J. Masset; London, Mori & Lavenu. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. "The bayaderes." Courtesy of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Let us now consider the case of the ballet we know today as *La Bayadère* and its status as a classic nineteenth-century ballet. As with many of the Russian "classics" of the mid- to late-nineteenth century (with the exception of Tchaikovsky's ballets, where the brilliance of the scores supports their choreographic expression), it is difficult, in light

of their conventionality, to defend their status as classics. Their presence in the repertory may be tied to the prominence of the dancers in the 1960s and 1970s, beginning with Rudolf Nureyev, who defected with great fanfare from the Soviet Union. One cannot underestimate the press coverage of these defections, their astute financial management in the Western world, and the impact of both on Western ballet repertoire.

This is not by any means to deny the richness of what each artist had to offer individually. Natalia Markarova staged *La Bayadère* for American Ballet Theater in 1980; before that, no Western ballet company had performed it. But did American dance really need this ballet? The demand for such ballets was in some way related to the demand for the Russian ballet stars themselves. And now, without those stars, this has become one of the ballets denounced for its exoticism and colonialism. Recall that excerpts from such works were once restricted to virtuosic showpieces for virtuosi in ballet galas (the pas de deux from *Le Corsaire* or *Don Quixote* come to mind). These numbers increased the public's expectation that the full works might actually intensify their pleasure, yet they instead turned out to be potboilers, not extensions of the virtuosic achievement. These are works in which no distinctive technical style unique to the ballet was developed, and where no new scenographic and costume innovations (such as, for example, tulle and gaslight in Romantic ballet) can be said to have embodied aesthetic intent in a distinctive form of danced narrativity. Why then do they now continue to be presented in full-length form, and why are they now considered to be classics? What of the classic status of the innovations of Antony Tudor, which moved contemporary ballet beyond the nineteenth century and into the twentieth? Paradoxically, the classic signifies innovation, and yet here we are faced with mere convention.

All this makes the situation of ballet within the current maelstrom of classic offensiveness to contemporary sensibility particularly perplexing. In ballet, the aestheticism of the form combined with the appeal of the star dancer collides with the offensive connotations of choreography, costume, and make-up. To take such contestations seriously in no way points to the destruction of the artwork. And beyond that no one seems to be calling for the obliteration of ballet per se. Never mind the fact that ballet itself is a hegemonic form, adept at appropriating other movement languages and establishing hierarchy

among them. This is not an issue. The polemics seem to be taking place among those who by and large patronize ballet. Moreover, the widely shared assumption that the nineteenth century provides us with the choreographic treasures foundational to ballet has not always been true, for several reasons. First, the classicism of nineteenth-century ballet is an invention of twentieth-century dance criticism; it began around the time that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes triumphed in Western Europe, shortly after the turn of the century. As French dance scholar Isabelle Launay has pointed out, the idea of a classic repertory of French ballet was an outcome of the Paris Opera production of Giselle in 1932—almost 100 years after its premiere in 1841.[9] Moreover, during the interwar period, Russian émigré dance critic André Levinson was largely responsible for promoting the idea of classical ballet as French. Hence, the very idea of the classic in ballet needs to be historicized, not taken for granted. Why is ballet being treated as though it were, first of all, permanent like a WPA mural and, second, immune to adaptation as a work of theater? Contemporary discussions in the philosophy of aesthetics often make the point that choreography is not a fixed art work in the same way as a sculpture or painting.[10]

This is not to say, however, that choreography lacks integrity and identity. The very fact that it can be either successfully or unsuccessfully handed down across time indicates that it has a unique identity, without which it would no longer be recognizable. But this defining substance of the work is much more typical of twentieth- than nineteenth-century ballet choreography, where less distinctiveness and innovation was expected of the choreographer. Moreover, the original choreographic scores of nineteenth-century classics, to the degree they exist, are highly discrepant from their contemporary manifestations. Informed historical performance practices are not typical of ballet and are in general of no particular interest to ballet-goers whose greatest desires are rewarded by contemporary technical skills as an end in themselves. More historically accurate versions of ballet classics, such as those first undertaken by Pierre Lacotte in the 1970s at the Paris Opera, can be fascinating, but they may not be terribly meaningful to the tried and true ballet audience; moreover, they also serve to underline in their own way the instability of the ballet masterpiece over time.

When a performer comes along who is able to re-embody that tra-

dition (Maria Callas for coloratura; Carla Fracci for Romantic ballet), the works in question are given new life in the present and generate much justified enthusiasm. However, historical sensibility from the choreographic viewpoint is less likely to excite a general audience. In this regard, what is actually interesting in *La Bayadère* is strictly choreographic: "The Kingdom of the Shades" section for the corps de ballet. Rather than being a star turn, it is a turn for the star choreographer (Marius Petipa) and the true calling card of *La Bayadère*. So, is it really necessary to see the entire ballet to appreciate "The Kingdom of the Shades"? I think not. Like Anton Dolin's reconstruction of *Pas de Quatre*, much of what is meaningful in ballet history, still capable of exerting fascination today, exists in the form of fragments. When such fragments bring together choreographic, stylistic, and historical meaning, they are truly irresistible—if and only as long as the performers are able to embody the insight audiences crave.

Are we then justified at wondering why ballet companies are so reluctant to react to demands for more cultural sensitivity in performances of so-called classics? When the contemporary public becomes sensitive to gross convention that has embedded prejudice within art forms that are otherwise deeply appreciated, their reaction is analogous to a voyage into the past: it brings to the surface the historical bases of these works that detract from their ability to occupy the classical niche. The revelation of the technique of Russian dancers from the sixties and seventies has seen its day, and these works can no longer be justified as vehicles for sheer technical display alone.



Pennsylvania Ballet was preparing a production of *La Bayadère* for its spring 2020 season.[11] Last-minute efforts were made to mitigate *La Bayadère*'s Orientalism through several coaching sessions with Kathak dancer and dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty.[12] Don't misunderstand me here: I am in no way trying to criticize the company or accuse it of insensitivity. What they did points in the right direction for the future. That a ballet choreographer might collaborate with a dancer/scholar of Indian dance on an Indian-themed, nineteenth-century ballet would hardly be a new idea. La Meri choreographed a *Swan Lake* as an Indian Legend in 1944, and she herself was an expert movement ethnologist.[13] In her recent book, *Dancing the World Smaller*, Rebekah Kowal describes La Meri's intent as "an exercise in lexical compari-

son and/or adaptation" foregrounding pantomime from a different tradition.[14]

Although they have lately come in for serious critique, such intercultural theater practices have been around for some time.[15] There is much to puzzle out here before we fully understand what constitutes an even exchange between cultures, especially when one is providing the movement language and the other the narrative representation, as in *La Bayadère*. How much does the technique and staging have to change, and how much do the story and the conception of character have to change? What happens to the pantomime, which so often links ballet vocabulary with storytelling in nineteenth-century ballet? It is worth noting that a very comprehensive and vibrant literature on the Indian temple dancer—devadasi or bayadère—exists and thus forms a basis of knowledge with which to support collaboration in restaging *La Bayadère*. Much of this literature is written by dance scholars who, like Chakravorty, are themselves practitioners of the classic Indian dance forms.[16]

In Engelhardt's discussion of *La Sylphide*, the dance scholar notes that "if elements of Indian dance—modesty, gracefulness, emotional expression, affinity with nature—did inspire the idea of romanticism, Western choreographers paid no heed to the actual gestures and bodily moves of Indian dancers . . . ."[17] Engelhardt provides some compelling evidence of a cross-cultural influence on *La Sylphide* that could be considered appropriative and require acknowledgment as such. Yet this kind of influence also eludes representation, so that correcting it choreographically might be impossible or unnecessary, since it opens upon a more complex question that needs to be dealt with in discourse. How is it that Western Romanticism in dance actually derives from Indian art? Perhaps one day there will be more complex forms of staging able to function at this discursive level.

Be that as it may, it does seem clear that the present controversies offer opportunities for exciting developments in the art of ballet—just so long as company directors do not have a misplaced sense of what constitutes a classic.

Please click here to watch a video clip of "The Kingdom of the Shades," performed by the Paris Opera Ballet.

MARK FRANKO*'s The Fascist Turn in the Dance of Serge Lifar: French Interwar Ballet and the German Occupation* has just been published by Oxford University Press.

# Notes

[1]Russian émigré Victor Arnautoff painted *The Life of Washington* at George Washington High School in San Francisco in the 1930s. Carol Pogash, "San Francisco Board Votes to Hide Murals," in *The New York Times* (August 15, 2019), C1.

[2]I am concerned about the fate of the Diego Rivera mural in SFAI, which has already been the object of some controversy.

[3]This phenomenon of endemic decontextualization has most likely played a role in the traditional view of dance as immoral.

[4]If films of dance from the 1930s today can appear to come from a different world one can only imagine the impression earlier periods of dance would make had they been filmed.

[5]Puchner also points out that adaptation is a foundational notion of post-dramatic theater. See his "Drama and Performance: Toward a Theory of Adaptation," in *Common Knowledge* 17/2 (Spring 2011): 292-305.

[6]Although this has been changed by post-dramatic theater which in some ways blurs distinctions between theater and dance.

[7]Lincoln Kirstein spent much of his early career in the 1930s railing against the Russian influence over American dance.

[8]Molly Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42 (2014): 513.

[9]Isabelle Launay, *Poétiques et politiques des repertoires: les danses d'après, I* (Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2017): 55.

[10]See, for example, Frédéric Pouillaude, *The Unworking of Dance* translated by Anna Pakes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Anna Pakes, *The Disappearing Work of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[11]The season was unfortunately cancelled by the coronavirus pandemic.

[12]See the thoughtful review by Colin Murray of a forum held on this: https://thinkingdance.net/articles/2020/03/12/3/Confronting-Ugliness-in-Ballets-Beauty/

[13]See Uttara Coorawalla, "La Meri, *The Mirror of Gestures* and memes," in *Indian Theatre Journal* 3/1&2 (2019).

[14]Rebekah J. Kowal, *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 104.

[15]Pallabi Chakravorty, "From Interculturalism to Historicism: Reflections on Classical Indian Dance," in *Dance Research Journal* 32/2 (Winter 2000-2001): 108-119.

[16]See Chakravorty's important discussion of the consulting work she did with Pennsylvania Ballet. Pallabi Chakravorty, "La Bayadère and the Footprint of the Indian Temple Dancer," in *Dance Journal*: https://philadelphiadance.org/dancejournal/2020/03/15/la-bayadere-and-the-footprint-of-the-indian-temple-dancer/

[17]Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère," 513.