

THE FOUNDING OF AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE ON THE EVE OF WAR, 1939–1944: DEPRESSION, MODERNITY AND THE HOLOCAUST

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Abstract

Founded by Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith in 1939/1940 on the eve of Germany's invasion of Poland, and renamed "America's National Ballet Company" by the US Senate in 2005, American Ballet Theatre has played a vital role in the construction of American civic life and political consciousness. Its ballets and myriad artists articulated a complex artistic and social iconography reflective of European notions of classicism in ballet transformed into something contemporary and laced with American themes. A safe haven for political and artistic refugees fleeing fascism, totalitarianism and artistic duress from the 1940s to the present day, Ballet Theatre has both inherited and affected the cultural identity and social geography of big cities and small towns throughout the US since its inception.

Keywords

American Ballet Theatre; war; political consciousness; historical experience; émigré European artists; Mikhail Mordkin; Anthony Tudor; *Pillar of Fire*

Prologue

There is a famous story of Picasso in the archives of the Musée Picasso. He and Matisse remained in France during Vichy Nazi-occupied France. One day the Gestapo came to his studio on the Rue des Grands Augustins. They saw a study of *Guernica* sitting upright on the floor, leaning against a chair, its terrifying gray, white and black lines merging into the cacophonous rendering of war and death. They asked him: "Mr. Picasso, what inspired that painting?" And he answered: "Why you, of course."

Introduction

American Ballet Theatre was born, unmistakably, at a cruel time in history that we now refer to as World War II and the Holocaust. Founded on the eve of World War II, just two months before the

German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Ballet Theatre,¹ as it was then known, consisted of mostly foreign-born artists – choreographers, dancers, composers, scenic and costume designers, conductors, musicians and dancers – well-versed in the brutality of global conflicts: World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the rise of Fascism in Europe.

Ballet Theatre artists, themselves refugees of these many conflicts, enriched American art, seeding its seasoned modernist spirit with a visual imaginary that contained a latent consciousness about violence, displacement and forced exile. Most, if not all, of the company's members were stateless; most would never return home. Some lacked nation, even citizenship. They had fled countries that would no longer exist after 1945. And, tragically, they understood this.

Ballet Theatre artists' rootlessness – homelessness – became a shared consciousness of loss. A rupture characterized not only their lives but choreographic tracings of the company's war-time repertory.

These ballets, unlike other moments in dance history, no longer articulate a shared history of Russian classical with global contemporary dance. They no longer provide, in the words of Walter Benjamin (2007, p. 268), an "eternal [or stable] picture" of history. Rather, they "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger [...] a single catastrophe which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble".² Their performative efficaciousness lies, thus, in their fleeting memorialization of the terrain of historical experience, a sudden and stunning statement of the moment.

Between 1939 and 1945, Ballet Theatre became a significant cultural force in the shaping of American civic society as US citizens and non-citizens alike struggled to contend with the evils of Fascism and the complex roles at home and abroad played by the American government in its defeat of Nazi Germany and allies of the Third Reich. While most of the company's early work fed into a government-sanctioned desire for patriotic-minded works of art, the global diaspora characterized by its stateless artists fed a nuanced sense of urgency, angst and determination heretofore absent from European classical ballet. It is this uniquely existential, empathic quality of the company's wartime repertory that distinguishes Ballet Theatre. Had Ballet Theatre emerged at another time in history, perhaps its influence as a major force in shaping an intellectual and aesthetic discourse about late modernist, early abstract expressionist languages of the body would have been less profound.

Ballet Theatre, while founded with surprising optimism at the end of the Great Depression and, sadly, at the start of World War II, became one of the fundamental channels through which escaping European émigré dancers fleeing either Stalinist Russia, Francoist Spain, Vichy France,

1 Ballet Theatre was the original name of the American Ballet Theatre.

2 Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History", from "Theses on the Philosophy of History", was written in Paris and Lourdes between February and May of 1940, just four months before Benjamin died fleeing the Nazis in the town of Port Bou, in the Pyrenees, on his way to Spain, hoping to reach the US at the invitation of Dr. Max Horkheimer, 6 August 1940.

or the aggressive, swift advance of Nazi armies, made their way to America. Ballet Theatre also became the first American company to go abroad after the War. (They went to England in 1946.)³ That is to say that consciousness about war (however distant) pervaded the company and the nation from its inception.

If we consider the resounding issues of trauma and memory, of exile and art, of fascism and communist totalitarianism, as powerful forces that shaped the aesthetic and ideological philosophy of Euro-American artists working for Ballet Theatre between 1940 and 1945, might we read these ballets differently? Might we see them differently, thereby coming closer to other meanings? If we place the War at the center of how we read Ballet Theatre's repertory – as the engine that drove its early work – might we excavate from Ballet Theatre more meaningful connections to larger historical currents and, therefore, might we understand these remarkable artists thrown together by the winds of war and their unique contributions to world history? Can we, must we, for example, read restagings of *Les Sylphides* in 1942 differently from in 2015? What ultimately becomes the genealogy – the historiography of our writing on ballet when read against time this way?

Let us add to these broader, theoretical ideas the internal trauma of war: the US had already lived through one war, albeit on other people's land – in a faraway geographic space (Ballet theatre press release, 1963).⁴ Americans retained a latent consciousness about war and the distant understanding of what war meant: loss of loved ones, lost limbs, lost minds. Few US citizens and European (im)migrants who went to see Ballet Theatre in its nascent years would not have themselves experienced or had a parent or grandparent untouched by World War I.

As we consider together possible aesthetic and ideological ties between Ballet Theater and the tragic revelation of Hitler's Final Solution, we might take into consideration that many of the company's first dancers were Jewish: Nora Kaye (born Nora Koreff, daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants to Brooklyn), Miriam Golden (born Miriam Ziegler – parents were Oscar [pharmacist] and Freda Goldstein), Annabelle Lyon, Jerome Robbins (born Jerome Milton Rabinowitz, the son of Russian immigrants who owned a corset factory), Harold Lang, Alicia Markova (born Lillian Alicia Marks), Michael Kidd (born Milton Greenwald, the son of refugees from Tsarist Russia), and Muriel Bentley (born Rebecca Siegal, the daughter of Russian refugees). And there were others.

Lastly, Ballet Theatre's émigré European choreographers arrived in the US on the heels of Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Fascism, the encroaching storm, was *the*

3 In 1960, before the New York City Ballet toured the Soviet Union, Ballet Theatre had danced already in 142 countries and, at the behest of the US State Department, throughout the East Bloc, earned the title "America's No. 1 Cultural Export".

4 We must also consider the trauma caused by the American Civil War, 1861–1865, which almost split the nation into two parts and resulted in the Jim Crow Laws of the Reconstruction period that effectively legalized racial segregation in the US for the next century.

reason for yet another departure from yet another European land. This philosophy – of being on the run, of living in exile, of not knowing where your next dollar is coming from, of leaving yet another home or another theater – pervaded the ranks of Ballet Theatre for the following decade. Any ballerina entering its ranks would have become profoundly aware of this *mentalité*, and, thereby would have had a deeper understanding of the roles she played: Nora Kaye as Hagar in *Pillar of Fire*, Alicia Markova as Zamphira in *Aleko*, etc. Jews especially filling the ranks of the *corps* and soloist positions came with yet another set of eyes because they knew what was happening to the Jews of Europe. As the postmodern dance pioneer Anna Halprin recently confirmed in an interview: “We knew about the Holocaust, our parents knew, we knew, everybody knew what was happening to the Jews of Europe. It’s just that people didn’t always speak about it; it was too painful.”⁵

The Mordkin Ballet Company: Ballet Theatre’s beginning

Ballet Theatre was born in 1939 out of “the collapse of the Mordkin Ballet Company and the financial difficulties of Lincoln Kirstein”. George Amberg argues in his 1949 book, *Ballet in America. The Emergence of an American Art* (p. 94), that the American Ballet emerged, to some extent, as Ballet Theatre.⁶ Mordkin had been Anna Pavlova’s partner on two world tours in 1910 and 1911, performing a full-length *Giselle* and a series of divertissements to sold-out houses at the Metropolitan Opera House. Pavlova dismissed Mordkin as her partner after he dropped her and, according to a 1912 *Times* article, this was just the beginning of Mordkin’s triumphs and troubles that included a \$50,000 libel suit brought by him against another Russian Imperial dancer, Ekaterina Vassilyev Geltzer (*The New York Times*, 1912). Mordkin had returned to the US several times from Bolshevik and Soviet Russia in 1922, 1924 and 1926 respectively, having risen within Soviet ballet ranks to the position of Director of all ballet productions in the newly formed Soviet Opera House in Moscow. On his first day, Mordkin fired twenty-eight dancers “whose figures he considered not sufficiently sylph-like” (Duranty, 1922; Sayler, 1924). Despised by the dancers, his impulsive decisions led to his dismissal.

Mordkin, his wife, Pajitzkaya, also a ballet dancer, and their eight-year old son, Mikhail Mordkin Jr., fled to the woods of Tiflis in the Caucasus, where, starving, they contracted typhus and came close to dying. This was the second time Mordkin had been forced to flee – the first was after the October Revolution. Eventually, Mordkin began dancing in the Municipal Theatre at Tiflis for the

5 Conversation between the author and Anna Halprin, University of California, Santa Barbara, April 27, 2015.

6 Mikhail Mordkin’s ballet company was called Advanced Arts. Richard Pleasant came to work for Mordkin as a secretary and office manager. Almost overnight, he took over as company manager and, slowly as Mordkin’s financial woes grew, he moved to overthrow Mordkin as the sole company director and choreographer, and create a major repertory company with himself at the helm. Mordkin was removed as director by Pleasant and given the sole opportunity of choreographing new ballets and staging older ones; his dancers were contracted as part of the new company. He was never consulted.

equivalent of fifty cents/month (*The New York Times*, 1944). Luckily, arts manager Morris Gest received word of his plight in 1924 and sailed to Riga to get Mordkin and his family out of the Soviet Union and safely to New York, where he was engaged to dance at the Metropolitan Opera House and as a featured artist in the Greenwich Village Follies (*The New York Times*, 1922, 1924). He had obtained permission from the Soviet authorities to perform in America and chose not to return, residing in New York City until his death in 1944.

Mordkin founded his first company in 1926 and a second, the Mordkin Ballet Co., in 1937, which became one of the forerunners to Ballet Theatre. The company was small. It gave sporadic performances on Sunday nights in New York City and sometimes out of town (Hurok, 1953, p. 147). By 1937, the Mordkin Ballet was formed with Mordkin's student and patron Lucia Chase in the role of *prima ballerina* where she debuted as a complete novice as Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* (Martin, 1937). "Toward the end of the company," Sol Hurok (1953, p. 148) remembered,

Mordkin had an associate, Richard Pleasant, who had also acted as supernumerary in de Basil productions. Pleasant had an idea that has lurked in the minds of a number of young men I know: to form a ballet company. In this case, idea and money came together for the Mordkin School and Company had Lucia Chase, with ambitions and interest as well. Chase had money – a great deal of it (her husband had owned Chase Steele and had died, leaving her everything) – and she wanted to dance. She had substantially financed the Mordkin Company. Pleasant went ahead with his plan for a grandiose organization with his ideas and Chase's money. The Mordkin Company was closed up and a new company, on a magnificent scale calling itself Ballet Theatre, was formed.

The new company, Ballet Theatre, was staged as the greatest collaboration in ballet history and comprised: eleven choreographers, twenty-two principal dancers, fifteen soloists, fifty-six *coryphées*, eleven designers, three conductors, eighteen composers' works. Pleasant desired an inclusive United Nations of representation for each influence on ballet and asked Eugene Loring to head up the American "wing", alongside Agnes de Mille, niece of filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. Antony Tudor became director of the British wing; his partner Hugh Laing and Ms Andrée Howard were included as members of the choreographic team, alongside Anton Dolin, who was put in charge of the Classical Wing. Bolm, not Mordkin or Fokine, was asked to head the Russian wing, alongside Bronislava Nijinska and Michel Fokine. Two more wings were initiated, a Negro wing of fourteen dancers, pioneered by de Mille, who had been working with Katherine Dunham. The second wing was a Spanish wing of nineteen dancers that was supposed to have been directed by Carmelita Maracci. Maracci, always financially strapped, was concerned about leaving her students in Hollywood for a long sojourn in New York City. She passed the job over, giving it to Mexican-born Spanish Classical/Flamenco dancer, José Fernandez.⁷

7 De Mille was extremely influential in convincing Pleasant and Chase of the necessity of two more wings representative of African American and Spanish dance culture.

There is no question that the works of European choreographers (and dancers) who left Europe for America at the start of World War II – Antony Tudor, Hugh Laing, Bronislava Nijinska, Léonide Massine, Michel Fokine, Adolf Bolm and George Balanchine – were inspired by prescient themes of violence, injustice, absurdist humor and mental suffering – none more than Tudor with works like *Dark Elegies* (1937), created in response to Franco's aerial bombings, Fokine with his restagings of *Petrouchka* (1909) (the psychically torn puppet whose murder we witness) and *Russian Soldier* (1942), in which a Russian soldier lays dying on stage. And finally Massine premiered *Aleko* (1942), a restaging of the Carmenian tale of violent sacrifice, which carries as profound a consciousness about war's psychic and physical wounds transliterated into a gestural language of stoicism, pain and suffering.

The founding of American Ballet Theatre

According to John Martin (1937), chief dance critic of *The New York Times*, "a new organization absorbed the cast of Mordkin Ballet". Four months after Hitler's invasion of Poland, Ballet Theatre premiered on January 11, 1940 at Radio City's adjacent sister theatre, the less grandiose Centre Theatre. It had been an old movie house, an ice skating rink and was converted into a 3,500-seat theater for big extravaganzas before being the only building at Rockefeller Center to be demolished. The immense house was sold out. Eighteen works were presented in the space of two weeks.

After Ballet Theatre's successful three-week premiere season, the company bumped along in a wartime economy, at times on hiatus. By the summer of 1941, Sol Hurok (born in the Ukraine, Solomon Isaievich Gukov), recently engaged to manage the company, could not afford to keep the company in New York, sending them by train to Mexico City for three months, where escaping Europeans and political artists had taken refuge. There, the company rehearsed and realized a number of significant works. Among them were *Aleko* and *Pillar of Fire*.

***Pillar of Fire* (1942)**

Antony Tudor's *Pillar of Fire* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House on August 8, 1942, several months after newspapers began to reveal the millions of people who were dying in concentration camps. Set to the disturbing serial score of Viennese refugee composer, Arnold Schoenberg's⁸ *Transfigured Night* (*Verklärte Nacht*), *Pillar* is the story of three sisters trapped within a cruel world; its incisive movement vocabulary repeatedly enacts its characters' suffering. This is an architectural space in which dancers produce movements that lead to their own demise:

8 Schoenberg, the inventor of the twelve-tone method, was also a painter, music theorist and composition teacher to John Cage. After Hitler's election as Chancellor to the Reichstag, Schoenberg and his family fled Europe, arriving in the US in 1934.

an expressive gesture is met with coldness and complicity; a revelation of desire and love brings no human response.⁹

The ballet's corporeal language is based loosely on a story: its central figure is Hagar who loves the Friend, yet loses him to the selfish scheming of the Younger Sister. Her desire is met with loss and mental harassment as she is forced to accept her loss over and over again. Hagar, feeling inadequate, tells herself that she is incapable of competing with her sister for the love of the Friend and she fears the wrath of her heartless older sister, cast as a spinster, i.e. a woman who has no place in society. Desperate for love, for some reaction to her desire, Hagar gives herself secretly to the experienced Young Man. But she is left feeling sullied and unworthy of the Friend who eventually returns to be with her. Hagar's desperate, frantic movements are choreographed in sharp contrast with the Friend's, whose motions are slow, calm and reassuring. Ultimately, she walks into the future with him, releasing the ballet and those who watch from a crystalline, modernist hell. But she leaves the stage, having forced us to bear witness to her suffering.

Pillar's iconography – its geographic map – reveals Tudor's debt to both modernist and abstract expressionist modes of production: ways of producing meaning in movement, aestheticization and yet basic control that serves to sever the dancer from the fruits of her labor. Its meaningfulness is one of psychic wounds – of a war against women's bodies, against freedom and against expression. Rather than exerting the physical and psychic control over one's own subjectivity, each movement executed by Hagar – her expressive capacity / her contribution to the visual culture of the stage – falls on deaf ears, as no one moves toward her as if having listened. Tudor's is a frigid world of those who suffer – the ritual sacrifice of Hagar – the system that produces and condones that suffering – the lurking, present invisibility of a patriarchal world in the face of physical (the gestural movements that she makes seem to indicate that she has been seriously damaged) and psychic tears. She feels desperate for peace of mind. The complicity born of the audience's quiet gaze (we sit there with our quiet decorum) intensifies the cruelty of her suffering.

Tudor constructed the existential hell of *Pillar*, using a number of devices: the materiality of the stage – the surface upon which the dancers come to life – a collision of abstraction – Tudor's classic signature played through controlled and stoic lines and total lack of virtuosity achieved by him as he drives movement into the floor, defying Russian ballet's love of a more decorative, at times superficial use of a modern subject-body. His work has a psychologically-generated, vs. physically generated, use of gesture, bodyline and actual flow of movement created ironically by a dancing body encased within a frigid stoicism. He leaves the tortured soul – she, who generates her own misery repeatedly, the labor of her movement becoming

9 Schoenberg's 1899 score is a string sextet in five movements set by the composer to a poem by Richard Dehmel of the same namesake, *Transfigured Night*. The poem tells the story of two lovers who, on a dark night, wander through a forest where the woman reveals a painful secret to her new lover: that she carries the child of another man.

a repetitive, masochistic device over which the dancer appears to have no control. She is torn from the production of her own emotional and iconographic being, thereby forcing the audience into an empathic relationship with characters on stage, as they are born before our very eyes. All of these ingenious, architectural devices, enacted repeatedly by the performers' bodies, serve to distance the dancers (and the audience) from a humanistic space. Theirs is a tortured visceral web of their own making.

Pillar's guts – her body parts and organs – reveal Tudor's debt to a hard-edged, crystallized aesthetic of modernist intention born out of the Great Depression of the 1930s combined with an encroachingly existential world of the mid-to-late 1940s world of abstract expressionism. Tudor's modernist discourse, however, is not that of Graham or Balanchine. Rather, his crossover aesthetic (from modernist to abstract expressionist) reveals a closer link to the mythopoetic world of images generated by the surrealist filmmaker Maya Deren, where inner experience is revealed through shadowplay and visual restraint.¹⁰ Tudor's formalist aesthetic is revealed in the way he places Hagar and her mental state at the core or center of the work. This is a modernist formalist tool that engages the viewer in the mental suffering of the protagonist. However, Tudor then goes on throughout the ballet to remove Hagar as the central subject of the work, to recuse himself from her subjectivity. Hagar is like Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar Named Desire* written five years later. Like Ines in Sartre's *Huis Clos (No Exit)*, Hagar is trapped. Whilst she explores every part of the room, there is no opening, no exit, and no space through which she can slip to salvation.

Of the ballet dance critic Edwin Denby (1986, pp. 93, 94) wrote:

The audience watched *Pillar of Fire* almost breathlessly. The moving effect of the piece is that all this real complexity and power seem barely able to cope with the shadowy, immense space of the stage above them that becomes, as you watch, vast and real as the doom of fate. It seems to shut down from all sides on the dancers. Tudor is a master in negative space. It gives the movement a peculiar privacy, as if it took place in an immense silence. [...]

In point of dance style, *Pillar* is a work of originality and precision. The devices used are dramatic ones: brief pauses, urgently interrupted they reemerge and amplify; gesture that tends in or braces itself against a direction, an imperative direction in which the dance is driving, urgently into an imminent future.

Ultimately, Hagar lives in a sadistic world, a kind of repetitive, existential hell from which there is no escape.

10 Other choreographic references embedded within *Pillar of Fire* may be drawn from class-conscious modernist dances of the 1930s: Eve Gentry's *Tenant of the Streets* (1934) and Martha Graham's "Steps in the Street" from *Chronicle* (1936), where the intimate sound of bare feet dragging along the floor and bodies hunched over in pain illustrate the pain and suffering of homeless, hungry, desperate souls.

Like his Russian counterparts – Michel Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska and Léonide Massine – Antony Tudor went on to radically transform classical ballet into a political form of contemporary art whose look and shape moved in tandem with the tragic events of the day. His female characters, in particular, suffered many blows, some psychological, at times the result of a cruel, seemingly non-human environment; at other moments, the existential pain they suffer, much like the women in Spain's martyred poet García Lorca's plays, spills over into our laps, forcing us into a tragic complicit silence. Through these female figures Tudor reveals his sensitivity to the violence that surrounded his working life in Europe, both as a gay man and as an artist. His ballet works from this period, housed within the repertory of Ballet Theatre, symbolize a kind of history book, an embodied record bearing witness to the surrounding global tragedy of war and its resultant human tragedy and displacement. Guilt or responsibility, ultimately, resides within the mind of the prescient viewer, who, while thousands of miles away, through Hagar or the anonymous women in *Dark Elegies*, is brought directly to the battleground.

As an émigré artist whose life before coming to the US was very much shaped by the haunting memory of World War I and the recent civilian violence of the Spanish Civil War, Tudor's penetrating grit told through an uncannily familiar realism hit hard. Audiences left the theater having seen *Pillar of Fire* (1942) or restagings of *Dark Elegies* (1937) with the enigmatic feeling that they had just witnessed something dreadful that was about to happen.

Tudor was by no means alone in deciding that contemporary ballet had to resonate with the surrounding environment. In Tudor's mind, modernist art could not sit still. Rather, it had to confess, to bear witness, to educate and, eventually, to heal. As such, the echo of the world told through female characterization was woven into an American idiom of pre- and post-war dance that, like any archeological site, awaits excavation.

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