

# THE HISTORY OF BALLET



BALLET  
*Austin*

## INTRODUCTION

Numerous reasons lead people to participate in dance as dance students, performers, and patrons. Dance students experience the satisfaction of finally conquering a difficult dance combination. Performers live for the thrill of stepping out into the bright lights and exciting an eager audience. Dance patrons enjoy the exquisite expression of the well-conditioned body through movement. It is then no wonder that dance itself is found in the roots of every culture, and that dance is a celebrated artform throughout the world.

Clayton Sydnor, Ballet Austin II dancer, 1999-2001  
Michelle Martin, Associate Artistic Director  
Pei-San Brown, Community Education Director

Cover: Ballet Austin's Aara Krumpe, photo by Hannah Neal

# HISTORY OF BALLET

## Early Court Dances



Humans expressed thoughts and emotions through movement long before the development of speech. However, for our purpose, we will begin at the point where dance was relied upon as a form of entertainment. The origins of ballet can be traced back to the Renaissance period and the early court dances in France and Italy. Any celebratory occasion, such as the birth of an heir or an influential marriage would call for social court dancing. All ladies and gentlemen of the court learned these rather intricate dances as part of their grooming for society.

## Ballet Masters and Choreographers



King Louis XIV as the Sun God in *Le Ballet de la Nuit*

Around the 1400s, as the court dances became more detailed and complicated, it became necessary to formally codify these dances to maintain consistency. Special dance instructors or “Ballet Masters” began to appear. These men were highly revered and considered to be the finest dance teachers. They also served as dance makers or **choreographers**, creating dances that were used throughout Europe. King Louis XIV had a profound influence on the progression of ballet. Not only was he an avid supporter of dance, he was also a beloved performer. In fact, King Louis XIV is commonly referred to as the Sun King, a name he received after appearing ornately adorned in gold as Apollo, god of the sun, in *Le Ballet de la Nuit* (*The Ballet of the Night*).

## First Ballet School



Pierre Beauchamps

In 1661, King Louis XIV established the world's first ballet school, the Academie Royale de Danse (Royal Academy of Dance). Pierre Beauchamps, a Ballet Master at the school, is credited with developing the five basic foot positions of ballet. These positions are still the basis for all classical ballet steps, and are universally understood even though their names are in the French language. Another prominent dancer of this time was Jean-Baptiste Lully, responsible for starting what is today known as the Paris Opera Ballet. Lully not only began distinguishing professional dancers from courtiers, he also included women. Previously, ballet was almost exclusively performed by males.

## The Pre-Romantic Period



Marie Taglioni in *La Gitana*

As the Pre-Romantic period began in the early 1800s, much of the dance vocabulary (codified steps and positions) used today was already in place and women's skirts had been shortened to unheard of lengths (just above the ankle).

The Pre-Romantic period is most noted as the origin of pointe work. The Italian dancer Marie Taglioni, who was eighteen years old at the time, is generally considered to be the first ballerina to dance **en pointe**, balancing and moving on the ends of her toes.

## The Romantic Period



Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*

The period from 1830-1870 is considered the Romantic Period of classical ballet. **Romantic** is now used to refer to a specific style of movement that was popular during that era. Ballets from this period utilize a very specific, soft line of the body and arms. Marie Taglioni performed in the Romantic ballet *La Sylphide* (choreographed by her father), wearing a fitted bodice with a bell shaped dress – a predecessor of the tutu yet to come. As women’s pointe work reached new levels, the Romantic period marked a shift in gender roles, as women stole the spotlight.

## The Russian Classics



Ballet Austin’s Inga Lujerenko in *Swan Lake*

Following the Romantic Period, Russian classical ballet took off in St. Petersburg in the late 1800s with the choreography of Marius Petipa and his associate, Lev Ivanov. As the technical abilities of the dancers increased, Petipa created very challenging, full-length classic ballets for them to dance. These classic ballets always included a **pas de deux** (dance for two) for the male and female lead dancers followed by a difficult solo for each one of them and a **coda** (a short quick finale). Women’s costumes became shorter, and the classical tutu (short, stiff skirt) became popular. This allowed the dancers to move more easily and also enabled the audience to see the dancers’ legs and feet as they executed the difficult steps. Many of the ballets choreographed at this time, including *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* are still performed today and are some of the most beloved ballets of all time.

## The Ballet Russes



Ballet Russes' Vaslav Nijinsky in  
*Le Spectre de la Rose*

In 1909, an **impresario** (a person who produces ballets, operas, and concerts) named Sergei Diaghilev created the Ballets Russes in Paris. This influential company had both strong Russian and French influences and was responsible for introducing such choreographers such as Vaslav Nijinsky, Enrico Checchetti, and Georgi Balanchivadze (or George Balanchine, who eventually put American ballet in the spotlight). This ensemble of dancers traveled throughout Europe bringing with them innovative new choreography as well as costumes and scenery designed by master artists.

## Ballet in Europe



Sir Frederick Ashton, Dame Margot Fonteyn,  
and Robert Helpmann

In 1926, the Royal Ballet opened in England, with Sir Frederick Ashton as the choreographer. This was home to one of the most famous ballerinas of all time, Dame Margot Fonteyn. Ashton and Fonteyn's great contributions to dance in England were recognized by Queen Elizabeth II with the titles of honor from the British Empire.



Dame Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev in  
Sir Frederick Ashton's *Sleeping Beauty*

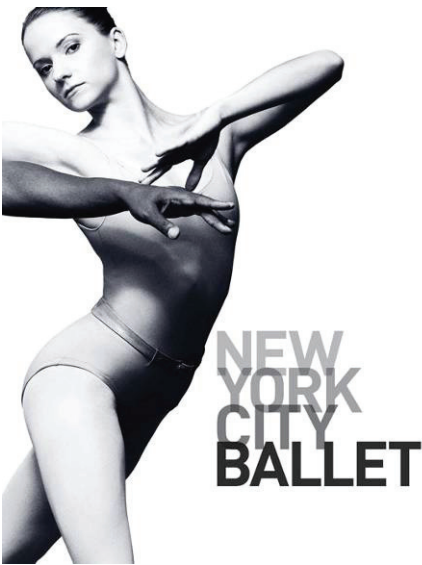
In 1934, the former Mariinsky Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia, was renamed the Kirov Ballet. The Kirov Ballet is still recognized as one of the world's greatest ballet companies, and has produced some of the world's most influential dancers and choreographers, including Mikhail Fokine, Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina, Natalia Makarova, Rudolf Nureyev, and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

After graduating from the Kirov Academy and dancing with the Kirov Ballet for several years, Rudolf Nureyev began a legendary partnership with Dame Margot Fonteyn.

## Ballet in America



Ballet in America began in New York City with the formation of the Ballet Theatre (presently the American Ballet Theatre) and the New York City Ballet. Anthony Tudor choreographed many great works for the Ballet Theatre, whose repertoire included a mix of classical and contemporary (more modern) ballets. Adored dancers, such as Eric Bruhn and Rudolph Nureyev, often performed with the Ballet Theatre, boosting ticket sales.



Simultaneously, the partnership of Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine was revolutionizing ballet with innovative choreography and nonrestrictive rehearsal costumes for the New York City Ballet. Today, local and regional ballet companies are found in most major cities offering an array of opportunities for eager participants.



Ballet Austin and Ballet Austin II in George Balanchine's *Serenade*

## Contemporary Dance

What is called contemporary dance actually includes a wide range of dance styles. Most professional contemporary dance companies base their dance techniques in ballet or modern technique, or a combination of the two, and their repertoires are usually reflective of this diversity. Contemporary dance allows choreographers and dancers an even wider range of movement vocabulary for creating and performing work.



Ballet Austin's Ashley Lynn, Edward Carr, Allisyn Paino, and Paul Michael Bloodgood in *Liminal Glam*



Ballet Austin's Ashley Lynn, Frank Shott, and Allisyn Paino in *Kai*



Ballet Austin company dancers in *One/The Body's Grace*