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Review: Sowing the Seeds of Contemporary American Ballet: Immigrant Artists and Their Pedagogies

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SOWING THE SEEDS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BALLET: IMMIGRANT ARTISTS AND THEIR PEDAGOGIES

Linda Caruso Haviland

Title: *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training Before Balanchine*

Author: Jessica Zeller. Illustrated

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Perhaps you've seen the photographs or caught glimpses in Fred Astaire movies of Harriet Hctor, floating *en pointe* and backwards across the stage in tiny *bouffées*, arching gracefully and sensuously into an impossibly deep backbend. As years passed and contexts faded, this iconic image often elicited snickers usually reserved for kitschy ballet. It also belied Hctor's training and talent, transforming this dancer, whom Lillian Moore once claimed brought "the more perfect beauty of artistic creation to the dance," into little more than a joke.¹ Little wonder then that, nowadays, those who taught Hctor and others of her generation are as frequently forgotten. In her recent book, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training before Balanchine*, Jessica Zeller aims to remedy this myopia. Her research provides a context for ballet training in the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century and highlights the philosophies and practices of seven immigrant teaching artists who, she argues, contributed substantially to the bedrock on which American ballet,* as it was termed, was established.

* Throughout the first three decades chronicled in this book, "America" was commonly used as a synecdoche for "United States," as reflected in the names of ballet companies, as well as in the titles of books and essays.

While scholars have given some attention to the relationship between dance pedagogy and the aesthetics and practice of performance,[†] Zeller is correct to remind us in her introduction that the history of ballet, particularly in the United States, has too often been told through its choreographers and star dancers, largely ignoring the importance of the studio instructor's role in shaping technique and style. Researching the period from 1900 through the 1930s, her study of immigrant ballet teaching artists reclaims the legitimacy and influence of their pedagogies and also challenges what she takes to be the pervasive narrative that Balanchine single-handedly invented American ballet.[‡] Zeller

[†] See, for example, Susan Foster's analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century teaching practices in *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), and Ruth Page's descriptions and anecdotal accounts in *Class: Notes on Dance Classes Around the World, 1915–1980* (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1984).

[‡] Balanchine can legitimately be aligned with the Americanization of ballet, owing to factors as much related to timing and shrewd publicity as to any philosophical stance or to his brilliance as a choreographer and training of dancers to meet his aesthetic demands. While there is good reason to chafe at this monolithic narrative, there are writers, then as now, who acknowledge the more pluralistic origins of American ballet. Edwin Denby, for example, noted that the work of Balanchine did not occur in a vacuum and that acclimation to ballet in the U.S. had begun at least as early as the 1930s, "with local semi-student companies in New York, Chicago,

introduces a multidisciplinary consideration of immigration as one theoretical anchor, framing the development of American ballet as parallel to the contemporaneous forging of an American identity in the wake of both the Great Migration within the U.S. and massive migrations from Europe. Her analysis of the impact of American capitalism on artists, particularly immigrant artists, is another anchor. The book's structure divides it neatly in half: the first three chapters address related historical, sociocultural, and economic factors that shaped the development of ballet at this time, and the remaining three chapters examine seven ballet masters categorized according to their receptivity or resistance to the forces they encountered in bringing "Euro-Russian" (p. 2) ballet to the U.S.

Examining the dynamics produced by and affecting the waves of immigrants traveling into or through early twentieth-century America, Zeller both describes and validates the immigrant artists' efforts to balance pressures to assimilate with their desire to retain the artistry and pedagogies of their native national aesthetics. Exploring the changing notions of American ballet, she analyzes the reciprocal relationship between audience demands and the development of new teaching and business strategies. For example, Zeller suggests that, owing to several factors, Americans were attracted to a more expressive and physically expansive style. These factors included the influence of the Delsarte System of Expression, variations of Duncanesque dancing, and an appetite for the hyper-virtuosity of high-kicking and drop-splitting "eccentric" dancers, an aesthetic emerging in large part from often invisibilized African American artists and entertainers.

Philadelphia, and San Francisco" ("The American Ballet," *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Autumn, 1948): p.640)

Zeller argues that this predilection for action, taken together with other familiar reasons for America's negative or neglectful attitudes towards ballet,[§] created barriers of misrepresentation and resistance that immigrant artists had to negotiate as they brought ballet to this new context.

Focusing on New York City, Zeller briefly delineates how the performance demands and aesthetics of its varied dance venues and the popular forms they showcased both impeded and contributed to the gradual emergence of ballet in America. She creates a vivid picture of the European artists, not just as immigrants but as orphans without company or school, struggling to establish their legitimacy, and performing as second-class citizens of the opera or in short vaudeville excerpts of ballet. In considering economic factors, Zeller also makes cogent arguments for the profound impact of the U.S. market economy and capitalist policies on the developing identity and pedagogies of these newly arrived artists.

For a generation of aspiring American dancers, the myth of attaining stardom through spunk and a few weeks' instruction combined with an urgency to become professionally adept as quickly as possible to cover the considerable costs of training and auditioning and the ongoing demands of everyday survival. Some immigrant instructors read their students' lack of understanding about dance training and their pressing financial exigencies as a lack of commitment or a skewed focus on fame and fortune. Others, more

[§] These include a dearth of quality performers and choreographic outlets; a puritan/voyeur double standard shaping attitudes toward bodies, particularly women's bodies, on the stage; and the absence of established ballet academies to provide consistent and extensive training (pp. 59–61).

cognizant of the impact of the market economy on themselves and their dancers, changed their curricula to attract and meet the needs of both amateur and professionally ambitious students. Many teachers also developed new entrepreneurial skills—publishing manuals, selling choreographies, or starting mail-order instruction businesses. Zeller provides a context within which the motives of her selected dance masters can be seen not as hucksterism but, instead, as efforts to survive financially while also preserving and codifying the core notions of ballet training and educating an audience for the form itself.

Zeller's research in the book's second half focuses on specific immigrant dance artists. She updates, corrects in some cases, and augments their existing professional biographies and examines the teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices of each selected instructor in detail, analyzing both their approaches and their impact on ballet students and audiences of the period.

Rather than proceeding chronologically, Zeller groups her representative instructors in three categories. The "ballet traditionalists," Malvina Cavallazzi and Luigi Albertieri, with their connections to established opera companies, were more able than some other immigrant teachers to successfully resist the pressures of an uninformed public and a market economy, insisting on a pure Italian style of ballet and its pedagogic practices. Stefano Mascagno and Mikhail Mordkin, "nostalgic revisionists," labored to retain and preserve the Italian or Russian ballet traditions that had fully informed their dancing and teaching, but each, nevertheless, responded to cultural pressures on the art of ballet as well as to the economic struggles of ballet aspirants. Mordkin was even open, to some degree, to the prospect of "Americanizing" the form. The "pragmatic revisionists," Louis Chalif, Veronine Vestoff, and Sonia Serova, developed pedagogies that embraced a broader range

of genres—and, thus, potential pupils—while preserving sound ballet training for serious students. They more fully embraced the socioeconomic realities of the U.S. in the twentieth century, increasing accessibility for amateurs and audience alike and taking full advantage of opportunities offered by print, mail, and national and regional dance organizations.

Zeller offers many details about the development and teaching of each master's ballet curriculum. These are best appreciated by turning to the book itself. For all seven, however, the sacrosanct discipline and traditions of Euro-Russian ballet served as primary training for this early generation of serious ballet students in America and remained core even in curricula softened for amateurs or condensed for those pursuing more eclectic and marketable stage training.

As Zeller revives appreciation of these seven artist-teachers, she speculates about why they were forgotten in the first place. The lack of supporting institutions made the teaching of ballet a financially unstable occupation that necessitated entrepreneurial ventures, the motives for which, in later decades and out of context, could easily be misread. Likewise, without relevant social and historical data, their early efforts to adapt to American culture could later be framed as valiant but ineffectual. Zeller also views these teachers' insistence on maintaining Euro-Russian styles as a retardant in developing more uniquely American styles of ballet. There is the timing factor, as well; all seven worked before American audiences were quite willing or able to identify or support ballet as an American art form. Zeller's book fills in valuable information and analysis, provides the missing context, and succeeds, as she says, in "historically reposition[ing]"(p. 133) the importance and significance of these teaching artists and their work.

There are a few problems with this otherwise valuable account. Narrowing the scope of her research to New York City is problematic as it undermines, to an extent, her project to reveal the history of ballet pedagogy in the U. S. as diverse and pluralistic and to debunk the myth of a single, Balanchine-generated American style. The inclusion of Mordkin is also a bit of a puzzle, given his performance career: If Mordkin, why not Michel Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska, or others who were also noted performers as well as master teachers? Too briefly mentioned is the role of social dance studios in establishing the legitimacy and value of dance instruction among the middle and upper classes in the U.S. Decades of dancing masters who taught as well as choreographed for society balls and opera companies alike contributed to the normalization of ballet as an art form and as an acceptable hobby or even profession for modern American girls.

There are also some structural problems with the book. I found myself frequently searching online for important dates not included in the text or notes. Also, while I found Zeller's approach to categorizing the artist immigrants conceptually fruitful, an appended chronology would have been helpful. The index could have been more complete; for example, Cecchetti technique in America necessarily implies Margaret Craske, and though she is mentioned in the book, there is no hint of her in the index. This is true as well for others listed in the text—Hazel Wallack, Rochelle Zide-Booth (one of the author's instructors), and others. The last structural element I note is Zeller's repetition of material from chapter to chapter. On the plus side, every chapter can function as free-standing. If you are teaching a course in which you assign essays, articles, and book chapters rather than entire volumes, this is useful, because she provides enough prior material and

background to enable students to tackle that chapter without supplementary information. However, this can become tedious if one is doing a full-through reading of the book.

Despite those relatively minor issues, in *Shapes of American Ballet*, Zeller synthesizes and analyzes historical material that fleshes out the timelines comprising American ballet. She provides enough detail to get a feel for the pace, structure, and objectives of classes taught by these immigrant artists. Her recovery of their pedagogical philosophies and styles, and of the relationship of these to performance, helps us to better understand the nature of classes today and our own personal histories within the form. Zeller successfully counters the stated assumptions against which she is arguing: that these first three decades of the twentieth century were “barren ground”² for American ballet. She convincingly argues that these seven teaching artists, and others whom they represent, were effective in introducing Americans to classical ballet and to the training regimens necessary to produce quality dancers. Making ballet training accessible to amateurs and professionals alike, these teachers created an appreciation for the physical, educational, and aesthetic benefits of ballet that generated audience attendance at ballet performances as well as occupational opportunities in dance and related fields. And, most important, they helped to produce a generation of professional dancers in the United States who constituted the critical mass necessary to launch ballet as an art form and serious profession.

Zeller’s use of the immigrant metaphor reminds us that ballet is a form in constant process, sensitive to such powerful dynamics as transplantation, cultural shifts, and dominant economic systems. Her work further underscores the fact that history often marginalizes or defines as passé those who bridge those periods that make the historical

cut. Understanding ballet during this period as a multi-pronged attempt to adjust, assimilate, and work toward an American style or styles that had integrity and uniqueness gives us a clearer view of the contributions these ballet masters made and of their lasting impact on dance instruction in the U.S. This kind of understanding serves as a model for considering ballet as a form that, today, continues to respond to economic, cultural, and artistic pressures. How ballet will maintain its identity *as* ballet and, more particularly, how or if it will continue to maintain its identity as "American ballet" remain ongoing questions.

NOTES

¹ Lillian Moore, "American Premiere Danseuse," *The Dancing Times* (Dec. 1930): 256–57. Cited in Ginnine Cocuzza, "An American Premiere Danseuse," *Dance Scope*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1980): 22.

² Here, Zeller (p. 1) is citing Jennifer Dunning, in *But First a School: The First Fifty Years of the School of the American Ballet* (NY: Viking, 1985), viii.