

WHAT IS AMERICAN DANCE? BY MARTHA ULLMAN WEST

A shuffle of buckskin on a pueblo plaza; the riff of taps on a city street; a woman grieving; a cowgirl roping; a hula; a Charleston; a climb down a water tower; a pirouette on pointe to a popular song; ballets set in bayous, bars, mill towns and the wild west; the Lindy hop, hip hop, tango, flamenco—all are hallmarks of American dance.

Whatever form it takes, from Fred Astaire's blend of ballroom and tap to José Limón's passionate storytelling, American dance emanates from national experience, imagination and character.

From the pioneer experience came Martha Graham's *Frontier* and *Appalachian Spring*, and several ballets including Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid* and George Balanchine's *Western Symphony*.

As a whole, American ballet is as pluralistic as the society. Jerome Robbins mixed the rumba with classical steps in *Fancy Free*. Balanchine combined jazzy hip thrusts with pure classical dancing in *Agon*. Twyla Tharp put modern and ballet dancers on stage together in *Deuce Coupe*, in a wild swirl of social and theatrical dancing to music by the Beach Boys. Agnes de Mille included horse-riding movement and square dancing in *Rodeo*. Thus did choreographers make an art form originating in the courts of Europe an expression of a democratic culture, capitalizing on American versatility, athleticism, speed and spirit.

Tap dancing evolved from an 18th century prohibition against slave drumming and 19th century migration to cities. On gritty urban

pavements, freed slaves, who had substituted feet and earth for hands and drums, were influenced by Appalachian clog dancers and the two forms blended. Improvisational, competitive, with increasingly intricate rhythms, street performers laid the foundation for the challenge dances of the Nicholas Brothers in night clubs and musicals, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson's extraordinary tapping in the movies and Savion Glover's innovations for the proscenium stage.

Americans have a "can do" attitude toward life and a sense of possibility that permeates their dancing. Ted Shawn created dances for groups of men only, borrowing from many different cultures, including Native American. Merce Cunningham stripped his choreography of all narrative content, collaborating with visual artists to make works about dancing itself, using chance procedures like casting the Chinese I Ching to make artistic decisions and eliminating any relationship between music and movement. Modern choreographer Paul Taylor, on the other hand, makes dances propelled by a musical range that goes from Bach to the Andrews Sisters.

Americans dance anywhere they want to, whatever the form might be. Native American tribal dances happen out of doors, but also on opera house stages. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, post-modern dancers like Anna Halprin and Trisha Brown took to the streets, the parks, and construction sites to show that dancing is for ordinary people. Today, non-professionals dance with the stars on television, as they used to on American Bandstand.

WHAT IS AMERICAN DANCE? - PAGE 2

Americans dance about who they are and where they came from. Alvin Ailey made *Revelations*, a joyous piece about the black churches of his Texas youth, accompanied by spirituals and easily the most frequently performed modern dance. The Dance Theater of Harlem's *Giselle* takes place in a Louisiana bayou, not a German forest.

Americans dance in many ways for many reasons, for celebration and for fun, to express themselves in movement, to make art, to say who we are without words.

Martha Ullman West is a West Coast-based dance historian and critic. This essay was commissioned in 2008 as a companion piece for the Dance Heritage Coalition's traveling exhibition ***America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100***. For additional information about the exhibition or the Dance Treasures, contact Imogen Smith, project manager, at 202/223-8393 or email her at [ismith \[at\] danceheritage \[dot\] org](mailto:ismith@danceheritage.org).

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