Chapter 7
Modernizing Dance

In 1892, the year the first cakewalk contest was held in a New York ballroom, a woman named Loïe Fuller created a sensation at the Folies-Bergère in Paris, dancing what she called her "serpentine dance." The thirty-year-old Fuller, a native of Illinois, had been performing in burlesque and vaudeville since childhood. Her serpentine dance owed its inspiration to a prop; a few years earlier she had received from an admirer a voluminous skirt of transparent white silk. Playing around with the sensuously pleasing fabric in front of a mirror, Fuller had a vision: With dramatic lighting, she could create fantastic, evanescent, suggestive shapes onstage by agitating swaths of silk from underneath with a pair of hand-held wands.

Fuller was a born impresario with a gift for technical stagecraft. Whirling around on a glass platform, lit by as many as fourteen electric spotlights whose colors kept changing and blending, she kept yards and yards of fabric billowing around her in three-dimensional evocations of flowers, butterflies, and flames. Her music tended toward the dramatic, like Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." To her audiences, she was a living manifestation of Art Nouveau, the decorative style that was just coming into vogue in Paris.

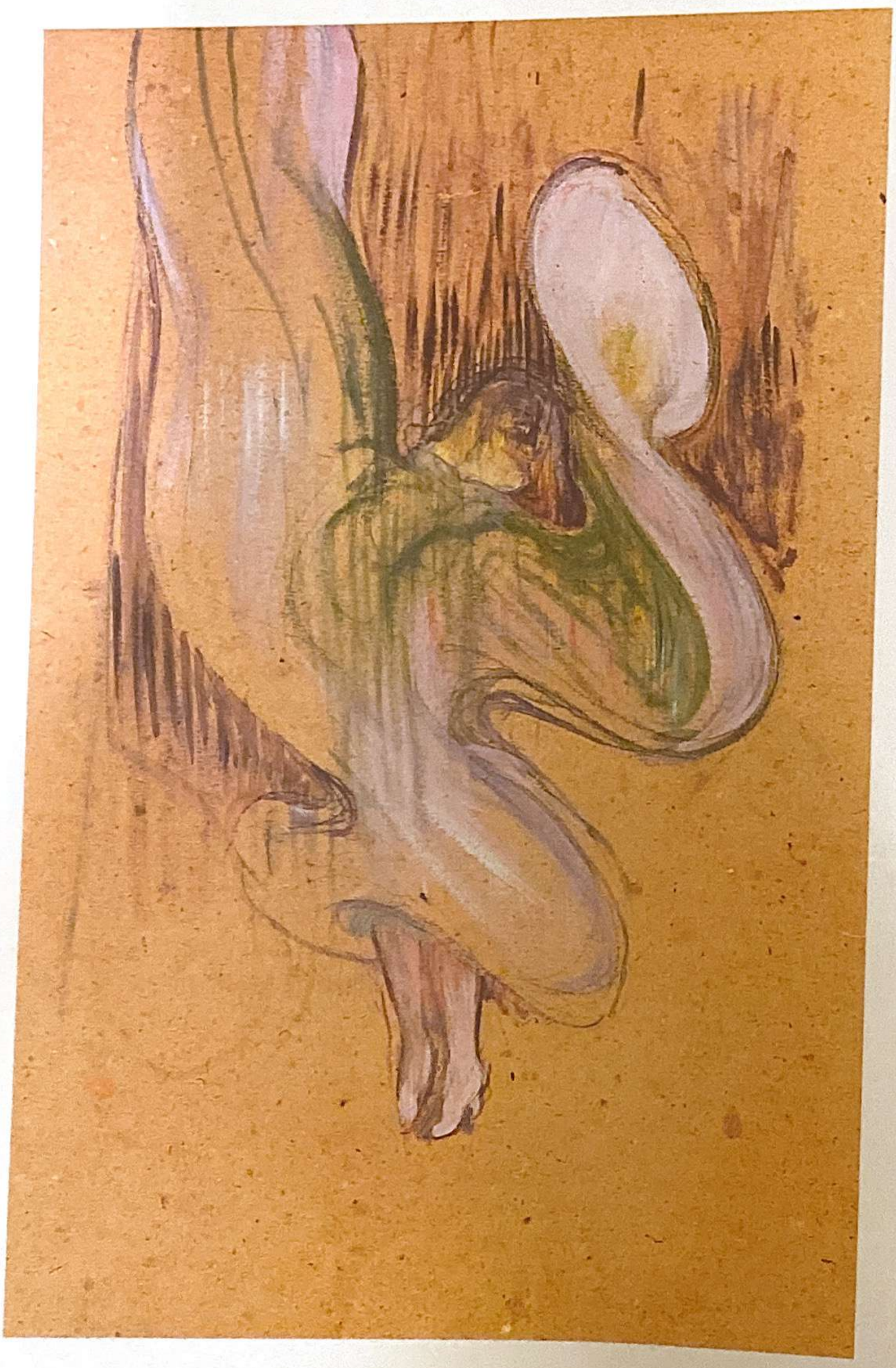
None of Fuller's many imitators came close to matching her technical wizardry or her theatrical sense. Her fans included poets (Mallarmé and Yeats), painters (Toulouse-Lautrec and Whistler), and scientists (Pierre and Marie Curie). In her hypnotic hold on her audience, in her ability to epitomize the taste of an entire generation, she was a successor to the Taglionis and Elsslers of the earlier nineteenth century. But unlike those ballerinas, whose careers had been formed within a long-established artistic tradition, Fuller was a self-made artist who ran her own show, literally as well as figuratively. She was not only the star dancer, she was the dance maker and the business-savvy entrepreneur. As such, she served as

precursor to a whole generation of dancers—mostly young women from America—whose fresh ideas and attitudes would prove to be as revolutionary a force in the theater as the incursion of African-American dance forms had already become in the ballroom.

The revolution we call "modern dance" was not just about how to move; it was also about how art should be made and by whom. In the West, as we have seen, dance as a serious theater art had always been a group endeavor, requiring the contributions of hundreds of individuals (from dancers and musicians to carpenters and stagehands) and substantial outlays of money. There was virtually no way to practice the art of dance, either as a dancer or a choreographer, outside the large ballet companies. Like most large enterprises, especially those that rely on the support of the wealthy and powerful, ballet companies tended to resist change. Ballet was unique in one way; although its dominant institutions (like those of the other arts and indeed European society in general) were in the hands of men, the stars of the ballet stage were women. In no other nineteenth-century enterprise, artistic or otherwise, did women play so significant a role as they did in classical ballet. Behind the scenes, it is true, men remained in charge. Even the most acclaimed ballerinas danced, quite literally, to the tunes of men. With rare exceptions, men composed the music and the librettos, devised and staged the dances, collected and disbursed the money, and, as ballet masters and critics, set the standards and shaped the images that the dancers embodied onstage and off. A ballerina might express her personality in her dancing—the ethereal Taglioni, the pagan Elssler—but that personality was filtered through vessels crafted by men. Nevertheless, dance was one area of public endeavor in nineteenth-century Europe where women's talents were not only prized but idolized. The ballerinas whom audiences cheered were well rewarded; they had both money and fame. They had no reason to separate themselves from institutions and traditions that had nurtured them, to strike out on their own by creating dances of a purely personal inspiration under conditions of their choosing. When agitation for this kind of freedom began, it came not from within the ballet establishment, but from women who set up shop, on their own, as self-proclaimed artists; their goal was unfettered self-expression through body movement. The freedom they won for themselves has invigorated theatrical dance in the West, including ballet, ever since.

The women who created modern dance were asserting for themselves something that poets and painters in the West had come to take for granted by the end of the nineteenth century: the right to follow personal inspiration without catering to the tastes of some private or institutional patron. This prerogative was inherent in the cultural phenomenon known as Romanticism.

The French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was often obsessive in his quest to capture the essence of a popular performer's style and personality, and he was enchanted by Loïe Fuller. In 1893, he painted Loïe Fuller in the Dance of the Veils, *a work that reveals more about the kinetic vitality of her dance than do contemporary photographs and engravings.*



Although Romanticism meant different things at different times to different people, common to all its manifestations was an emphasis on the individual as opposed to society, on feelings and intuition as opposed to rationality and calculation, on an almost mystical faith in the ability of an inspired artist to perceive universal truths and to communicate those truths to others. While genuinely inspired individuals formed a kind of natural elite, Romanticism had a built-in bias against the status quo; the artist needed no official sanction for his or her genius, and could expect incomprehension and resistance from the institutions that society had set up to monitor "good taste" in the arts. William Wordsworth, who challenged accepted taste in English poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century, urged would-be poets to look within for their justification: "You feel strongly, trust those feelings, and your poem will take its shape and proportions as a tree does from the vital principle that actuates it." Change the word "poem" to "dance," and you have the recipe that Isadora Duncan followed in her seminal career as a pioneer of modern dance.

Duncan was born in San Francisco on May 26, 1877. The city had a verve that set it apart even in a California that was still largely frontier. The Gold Rush of '49 had left a permanent heritage of wealth, cultural aspirations, and a sense of adventure that some found intemperate: Rudyard Kipling, after a visit to California, noted, "San Francisco is a mad city, inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people,

Isadora Duncan, not yet barefoot at twenty-one, dancing in a gown she fashioned from her mother's lace curtains, 1898.

whose women are of remarkable beauty." Duncan's mother was a strong-willed woman who divorced her husband for his philandering and financial irresponsibility; she supported her four children by taking in boarders, sewing, and giving piano lessons. As a lapsed Catholic who read atheistic tracts to her children, she believed in self-improvement through self-education, and elevated art to the status of religion; a print of Botticelli's *Primavera* became a veritable icon in the family. By fifteen Isadora was teaching ballroom dancing to Californians in need of social polish; she and her siblings also toured the state in a variety show of their own devising. Her reading ranged from Walt Whitman to Charles Darwin. Money was always a problem, and in 1895 Duncan left San Francisco to seek her fortune on the "open road" that Whitman had written about.

Duncan ended up in a New York theatrical company that toured America and England doing everything from musicals to Shakespeare. But the more she saw of the theatrical dance of the time the less she liked it. She probably saw some ballet and may have taken a few ballet lessons as well, and she liked that even less. "I am an enemy of the Ballet, which I consider a false and preposterous art, in fact outside the pale of all art," she wrote. Ballet was beyond the pale because it was unnatural; it required a "deformed skeleton" and "sterile movements" whose "purpose is to create the delusion that the law of gravitation does not exist for them." To uncover what she called "the real source of dance," she went to three places: to nature, to the art of classical Greece, and inside herself.

In Greek sculpture and vase paintings depicting figures in motion—a plump little cupid treading the ground, a gamboling satyr, a winged Hermes "with the ball of his foot resting on the wind"—she found a conformity to "natural forces" that would become the touchstone of her efforts to create what she called "the dance of the future." The Greeks only confirmed her intuition that people responded naturally to every experience with spontaneous movements of the body. Observing her own body for hours at a time in a mirror, she concluded that "the central spring of all movement" was the solar plexus, not "the center of the back at the base of the spine" as the ballet masters taught. She wasted no time informing the world of her discoveries. "I have discovered the dance. I have discovered the art which has been lost for two thousand years," she told a theatrical producer. She was not yet twenty years old.

Duncan's claims were no more extravagant than those made by the defiant poets and painters of the nineteenth century, the Wordsworths and the Shelleys and the Baudelaires, the Van Goghs and the Monets, who had sought to reshape artistic experience (and therefore human experience itself) in their own image. But for a young woman—a woman with no credentials, no institutional backing, and no money—to challenge the artistic establishment was unheard-of. Her options were limited. There was no stage, either on Broadway or in an opera house, where she could put her theories to the test. So she turned to the only arena available to her: the salons of society

women who enlivened their leisure time by supporting Art with a capital A.

A favorite pastime in these salons was the recitation of poetry accompanied by gestures based on a system that linked specific physical movements to specific mental and emotional states. The system had been devised by François Delsarte (1811–1871), a French pedagogue with a passion for classical Greece, who was given to statements like, "Art is the telescope of the supernatural world." An American disciple, Genevieve Stebbins, codified his teachings into a regimen of what might be called aesthetic calisthenics, in which literary texts could be interpreted, line by line and even word by word, through an encoded pantomime not unlike the hand-language of Indian classical dance. The grand ambition of this form of Delsartism was satirized in the lyrics of a 1910 hit tune that proclaimed: "Every little movement has a meaning all its own/ Every thought and feeling by some posture may be shown."

Duncan's gestural vocabulary showed the influence of Delsartism, but even more important to her development was

Duncan dancers in an undated publicity photograph for a concert at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York performing Duncan's dance based on Sandro Botticelli's painting Primavera *(c. 1482). A print of this work hung in Isadora Duncan's house when she was a child and seems to have made a strong impression on her. The resemblance between the postures and costumes of the Three Graces in the painting (opposite below) and the Duncan dancers is obvious.*

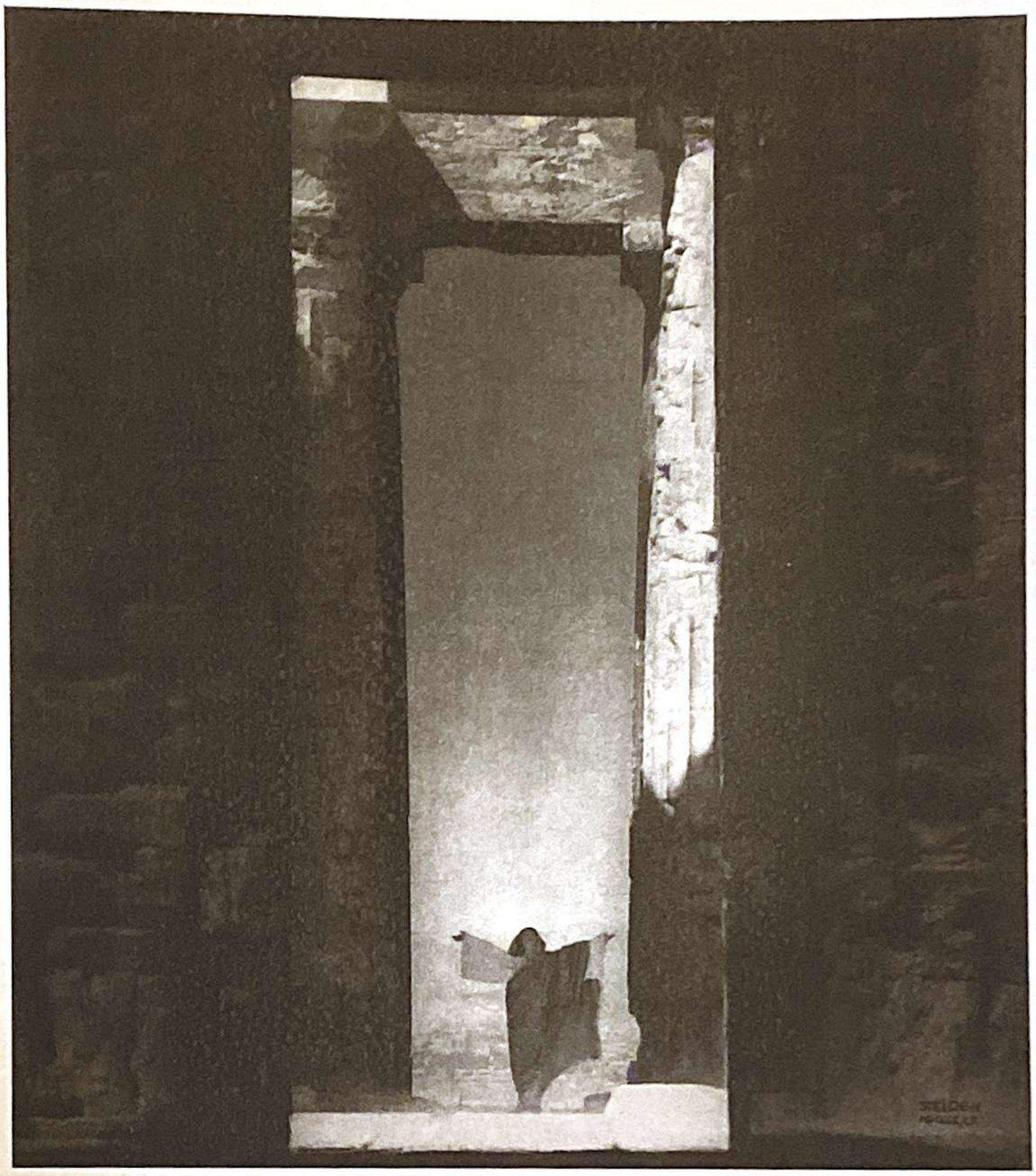
the fact that Delsarte's summons to free the body from all unnecessary constraints had already been heard in the salons of New York and Newport. So her wealthy patrons were in a receptive frame of mind when Duncan put on a Greek-style tunic made from her mother's old lace curtains and, to the lilt of Strauss waltzes, danced her interpretations of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and Botticelli's *Primavera*. Her costume, antique in its associations, was also deliciously modern. Feminists and hygienists had been campaigning for years against the painfully and even dangerously constricting clothes that fashion decreed for respectable women in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the age of three or four, girls were bound into tightly laced corsets that prevented them from lifting their arms above the head. What with corset, drawers, petticoats, dress-skirt, over-skirt, and dress-waist, the typical turn-of-the-century woman wore as many as sixteen layers of garments folded, buttoned, and belted tightly around her midriff. To such women, the loosely clad Duncan, striking poses from quattrocento paintings and Greek sculpture, must have seemed an incarnation not just of Art and Beauty but of Freedom itself. Her dancing did not come across as erotic; "pure and sexless" is how someone later described it. She saw herself as a "Pagan Puritan, or a Puritanical Pagan."

With the money she raised at salon recitals, Duncan gathered her family and in 1899 sailed to Europe on a "cattle boat" to get in touch with the roots of her art. In London she stood "in adoration" before the British Museum's Elgin marbles and danced for the city's artistic and literary elite; among her sponsors were Henry James, the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison. On the advice of music critic J. Fuller Maitland, another sponsor, she "elevated" her choice of music from the waltzes of Strauss to the compositions of Gluck, Chopin, and Mendelssohn. For a subscription concert in an avant-garde art gallery she left off her dancing slippers and, apparently for the first time, performed barefoot for an audience. While a few expressed shock at this gesture of emancipation from the conventions of European art dance, dancing barefoot became her trademark—and the defining characteristic of all "modern dance" in the first half of the twentieth century.

From London, the Duncan family moved on to Paris, where Duncan was enthralled by the Greek collection at the Louvre and by the performances of Loïe Fuller in a theater that had been built to her specifications on the grounds of the 1900 Exposition Universelle. When Fuller in turn saw Duncan dance, she invited the young American to join her on a tour through Germany. In the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Duncan found a view of Greek art that attributed its greatness to a dynamic balance between measured Apollonian beauty and irrational Dionysian frenzy; she adopted Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* as her bible.

Wherever she went, Duncan was taken seriously not only as a dancer but as a creative artist of a revolutionary kind. On a pilgrimage to Greece she paid her respects to the origins of her

Modern artists found modern dance inspiring; their goal of freeing Western art from constricting aesthetic conventions coincided with the ambitions of modern dancers in the realm of movement. The American artist Abraham Walkowitz made expressionistic figure studies of Isadora Duncan before World War I in this spirit.

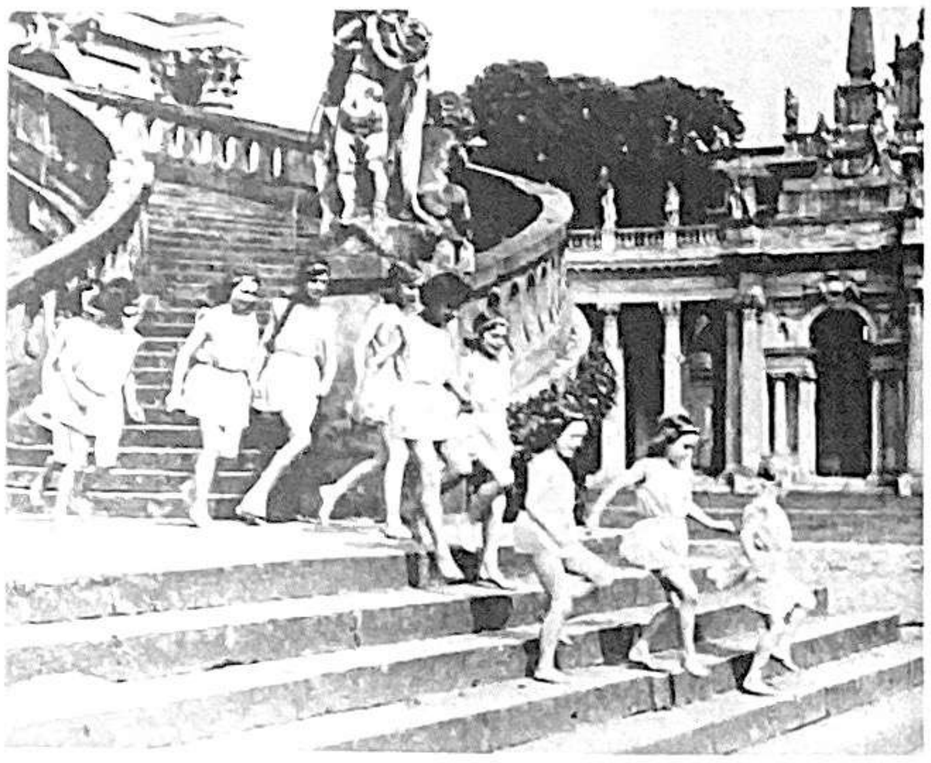


The American photographer Edward Steichen made a well-known series of images of Duncan on the Acropolis in Athens, including this one at the Parthenon. Steichen's photographs affirmed the association, so important to Duncan, of her art with the culture of classical Greece.

art by dancing ecstatically through the ruins of Athens. In the winter of 1904–5 she was in St. Petersburg, where political reformers, revolutionaries, and supporters of the tsar clashed almost daily in the streets. Her recitals, danced to a selection of Chopin preludes and polonaises, galvanized the forces of artistic reform in the Russian capital. In one of her characteristic pieces, she ran across the stage like the Winged Victory of Samothrace come to life, with her upper body and head bent backward and her arms extended behind her; some people in the audience swore they could hear the wind blowing through her hair. At the apartment of ballerina Anna Pavlova, Duncan met many of the rising stars of the Imperial Ballet, including the twenty-five-year-old Mikhail Fokine, a promising choreographer who would be the first to put barefoot ballerinas on the classical stage; she also argued about dance with a brilliant critic and promoter of the arts named Serge Diaghilev who, four years later, would astonish the ballet world with an innovative company of Russian dancers brought to Paris under the banner of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

Although she certainly worked out many of her movement sequences ahead of time, Duncan liked to give the impression that she was improvising onstage. None of her dances were notated during her lifetime; with the exception of a few grainy frames of dubious provenance, no film documentation exists and the still photography of her time could capture only stagy poses, not the fluidity of pantomimic movement she was famous for. She did leave behind students and disciples who handed down her dances in what we are assured is something approximating their original form. Even more evocative are the many drawings of Duncan by artists who thrilled to her embodiment of all that was fresh and daring in the imagination of the new century. "When she appeared," recalled one art student in Paris, "we all had the feeling that God —that is to say Certainty, Simplicity, Grandeur, and Harmony—that God was present [in] the magic of her movements."

Rodin declared: "It can be said of Isadora that she has attained sculpture and emotion effortlessly." Art historian Elie Faure confessed: "Yes, we wept when we saw her. . . . From deep within us when she danced there arose a flood that swept away from the corners of



When Isadora Duncan died in 1927, an international Isadora Duncan School was established in Potsdam, Germany, as a memorial. The school, on the grounds of Sans Souci, the former palace of Frederick II of Prussia, foundered, like other Duncan schools that had been started in her lifetime.

our soul all the filth which had been piled up there by those who for twenty centuries had bequeathed to us their critique, their ethics, their judgments. . . ."

Duncan usually danced barefoot on a soft carpet, lit by colored spotlights, against a neutral background of long draperies, wearing a light silk tunic gathered only at the breasts and hips so that her powerful legs were unencumbered. Her movements, based on the natural rhythms of walking, skipping, jumping, and running, were matched to the dynamics of the music she had chosen: familiar concert pieces by Bach, Chopin, Schubert, Beethoven, even Wagner. To dance to such music was daring in itself; before her, the works of the major classical composers were considered too "serious" to be used as mere accompaniment for any kind of dance, even ballet.

New York critic Carl Van Vechten described her interpretation of Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave* as follows: "[Her dance] symbolizes her conception of the Russian moujik rising from slavery to freedom. With her hands bound behind her back, groping, stumbling, head bowed, knees bent, she struggles forward, clad only in a short red garment that barely covers her thighs. With furtive glances of extreme despair she peers above and ahead. When the strains of *God Save the Czar* are first heard in the orchestra she falls to her knees and you see the peasant shuddering under the blows of the knout. . . . Finally comes the moment of release and here Isadora makes one of her great effects. She does not spread her arms apart with a wide gesture. She brings them forward slowly and we observe with horror that they have practically forgotten how to move at all. They are crushed, these hands, crushed and bleeding after their long serfdom; they are not hands at all but claws, broken, twisted piteous claws!"

Before Duncan came onstage to dance the "Liebestod" from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* before a full house at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1911, conductor Walter Damrosch warned the audience: "As there are probably a great many people here to whom the idea of giving pantomimic expression to the 'Liebestod' would be horrifying, I am putting it last on the program so that those who do not wish to see it may leave." No one left, and her performance was greeted with sustained applause.

Despite her rhetoric about midwifing a new music and dance "that would express America," Duncan had no ear for ragtime or for any African-American rhythms that appealed to what she called "the appetites." She expressed a strong distaste for "the tottering, ape-like convulsions" of the Charleston. "Jazz rhythm . . . rhythm from the waist down" was alien to her, the expression, as she saw it, not of her Whitmanesque America but of "the South African savage."

Like the Romantic poets who had troubled the proprieties of the previous century, Duncan made her own rules in life as well as art. Disdaining marriage as a form of slavery, she had two children by two different lovers; her young daughter and son were drowned in a freak automobile accident in 1913. When she decided to marry Sergey Yesenin, a Russian poet seventeen years her junior, she was reviled in America as a Bolshevik sympathizer; after several stormy years of marriage, he returned alone to Russia, where he committed suicide in 1925. By this time her dances had taken on a somber, autumnal tone; grief and suffering, not the joys of springtime or the glories of the Russian Revolution, increasingly became her themes. The girls' schools she founded in several countries to train a new generation of free-spirited, barefoot dancers failed one by one; her financial situation became precarious; she began to eat and drink to excess. In 1927, while she was riding in an open car near her home on the French Riviera, a long scarf she was wearing caught in a rear wheel and snapped her neck, killing her.

With all her misfortunes and disappointments, Isadora Duncan's achievement was epic. She defined herself and her art, controlled her own career, and forced the world to accept her on her own terms. In the history of Western culture, no woman since Sappho has been so identified with a major artistic genre. Although she left behind no institution to carry on her work, she served as a catalyst for a whole new art form—the dance known as modern. The task of securing the advances she made and of training the next generation of modern dancers fell to her contemporary, Ruth St. Denis.

St. Denis was born Ruth Dennis on a New Jersey farm in the late 1870s. Her mother was an intellectually restless woman with a strong mystical bent. Young Ruth was a natural dancer

who taught herself splits and cartwheels in imitation of circus sideshows she had seen; she also took some lessons in ballet and ballroom dancing, and her mother instructed her in the rudiments of Delsarte's "expression." One of the happiest memories of her childhood was going with her mother to a lecture-demonstration by Genevieve Stebbins, the American popularizer of Delsartism. Before she was out of her teens, she was working as a show girl in vaudeville, doing what were known as "skirt dances," a free-form mix of clog dancing, ballet steps, and acrobatic kicks performed in a flouncy skirt with just enough leg showing to keep the interest of male spectators. She attracted the eye of Stanford White, the New York architect who fancied himself a patron of the arts, and of David Belasco, the Broadway impresario, who saw in her a potential musical-comedy star.

In 1900, while touring Europe with a Belasco production, she visited the Paris Exposition and saw Loïe Fuller dance; she also saw a theater troupe from Japan that Fuller was sponsoring. The star of this troupe, Sada Yacco, made a great impression on Western audiences in her role as the homicidal dancing girl in an adaptation of the kabuki classic *The Dancing Maiden at Dojo Temple*. Ruth Dennis stayed with Belasco for four more years, metamorphosing into Ruth St. Denis, a name which both her mother and her producer thought more suited to her rather refined stage presence. Then one spring afternoon in Buffalo, New York, she experienced a spiritual awakening while sipping an ice-cream soda with a friend in a drugstore. Opposite her on the wall was an eye-

According to Ruth St. Denis, a poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes seen in a Buffalo, New York, drugstore in 1904 inspired her spiritual awakening as a dancer. This photograph, taken in San Francisco later that year, shows her in a costume and pose suggested to her by the poster.

St. Denis (above) in a scene from the 1906 production of Radha *that reveals her "unusually supple upper torso." Right, a publicity photograph of St. Denis in* The Incense, *1916.*

catching poster advertising Egyptian Deities, a popular brand of cigarettes; the poster showed a bare-breasted woman, who was supposed to be the goddess Isis, seated in state amid pillars and lotus blossoms. Years later Ruth St. Denis described her reaction to the poster in terms appropriate to a religious conversion:

"Here was an external image which stirred into instant consciousness all that latent capacity for wonder, that still and meditative love of beauty which lay at the deepest center of my spirit. . . . I identified in a flash with the figure of Isis. She became the expression of all the somber mystery and beauty of Egypt, and I knew that my destiny as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. I would become a rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation rather than a personal actress of comedy or tragedy. I had never before known such an inward shock of rapture."

Trying to shape her vision into a dance suitable for the stage, she recast the Egyptian goddess as Radha, Indian milkmaid and consort of the Hindu deity Krishna. A loosely defined Orientalism was in fashion during the early years of the century, and St. Denis's creation had just the right blend of sensuality and spirituality to appeal to a broad audience. In 1906 she danced as Radha in a New York variety theater and in the same society salons that had welcomed Isadora Duncan six years earlier.

A beautiful, big-framed woman with an unusually supple upper torso, St. Denis appeared as Radha wearing a gauze skirt, a bejeweled jacket that exposed more flesh than it concealed,

and some bracelets and anklets; her feet were bare. Her music was from Léo Delibes's opera *Lakmé*. According to the program notes that St. Denis wrote to explain the symbolism of her dance, Radha manipulates a series of props—ropes of flowers, a string of pearls, tinkling bells, a cup of wine—to demonstrate to the temple priests the dangerous lure of the senses. After succumbing to a transport of sinuous body movements, high kicks, and acrobatic back bends, she swoons, renounces the life of the senses, and returns to the meditative lotus position with which the dance began. Like Duncan, St. Denis had found a model for her personal approach to the dancing body in the tradition of a culture far removed from her own experience. "As I see it," she wrote later, "the deepest lack of Western cultures is any true workable system for teaching a process of integration between soul and body."

Americans had inherited from Western Europe a set of attitudes toward dance that distinguished between ballet as a serious art and other kinds of dance as popular art. This distinction was embedded in a two-tiered institutional structure: Ballet was appreciated by a relatively small group of connoisseurs and supported by a wealthy social elite, while popular dance lived or died at the box office. Convinced that what they were doing was serious art but unwilling to accept the package of cultural and aesthetic assumptions that came with ballet, modern dancers looked beyond Europe for justification and inspiration. They were hardly alone. The international expositions and world's fairs that were so popular from the latter decades of the nineteenth through the early decades of the twentieth century fed a widespread curiosity about the cultures of non-European societies. Encounters with the art of Africa and the music of Southeast Asia helped painters like Picasso and composers like Debussy break free from the conventions of their own history. Encounters with Greece and India did the same for Duncan and St. Denis.

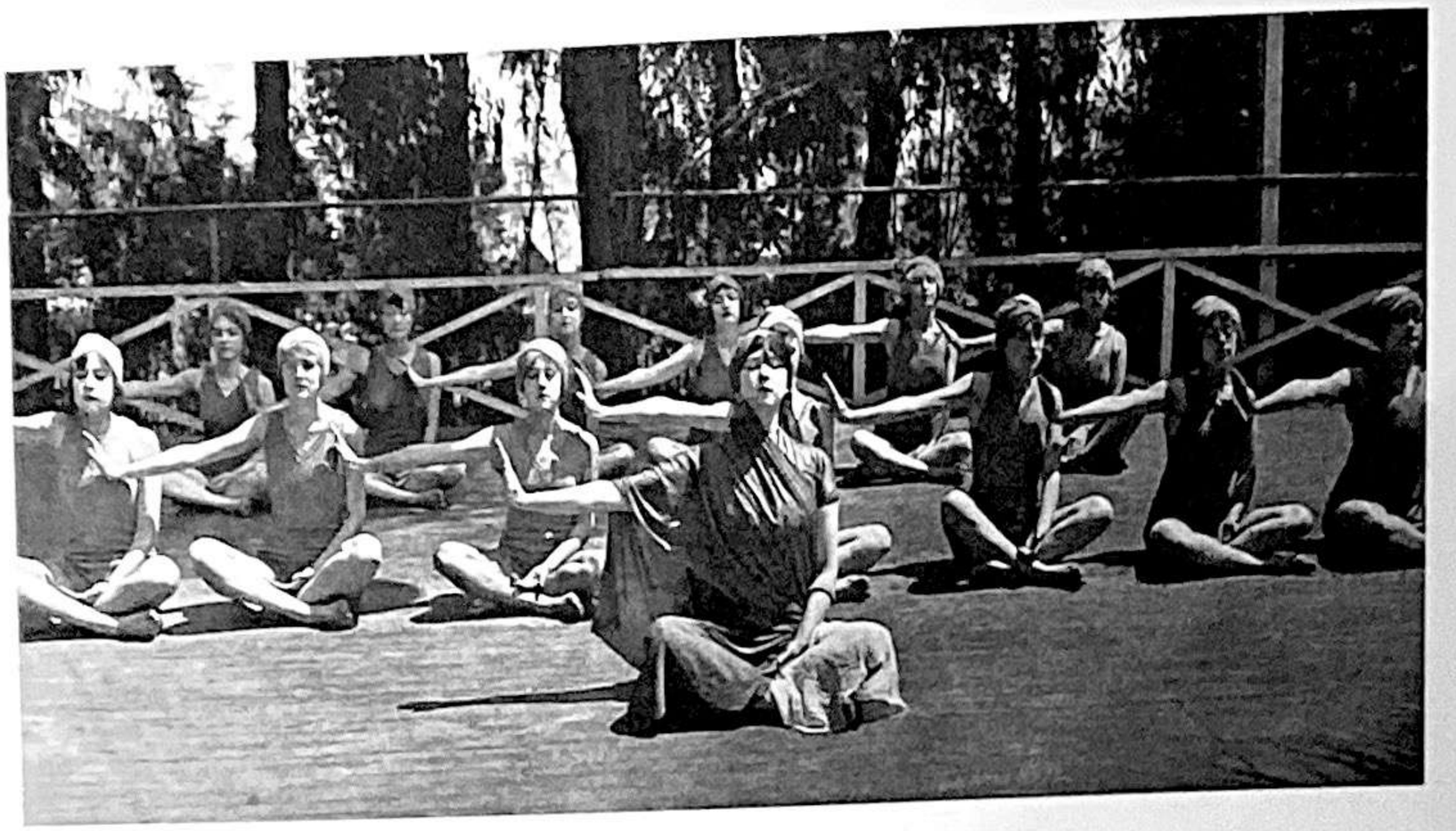
The fact that renunciation plays no part in the Hindu texts about the union of Radha and Krishna did not trouble St. Denis; she was not after ethnological authenticity but a way of bringing together onstage the two sides of her own personality—the spiritual and the sensual. Whether such selective cultural borrowing is legitimate and to what extent artists should acknowledge the cross-cultural roots of their work are questions that did not arise until much later in this century. The reverence that St. Denis showed for her Indian sources was certainly genuine.

With the money she earned dancing Radha in New York, St. Denis followed in Duncan's footsteps and embarked on a three-year tour of Europe. She was well received in France and Germany, but unlike Duncan, she became homesick for the United States. She returned to great acclaim, touring the country in a grand spectacle called *Egypta*, and performing "Radha" and other Oriental-flavored solos for smaller audiences. Her imagination was essentially pictorial. Among her earliest dances was one called "The Incense," in which she mimed the rippling rise of smoke with a graceful spiraling motion of one arm; in "The Cobras," her arms coiled around her neck and body like charmed serpents.

To expand her repertoire she decided in 1914 to join forces with a male partner and form a small dance company. The partner was Ted Shawn, a former divinity student from Kansas City whom she married in 1915; the company grew into the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts in Los Angeles (with branches around the country), which became the center of the modern dance world for the next ten years.

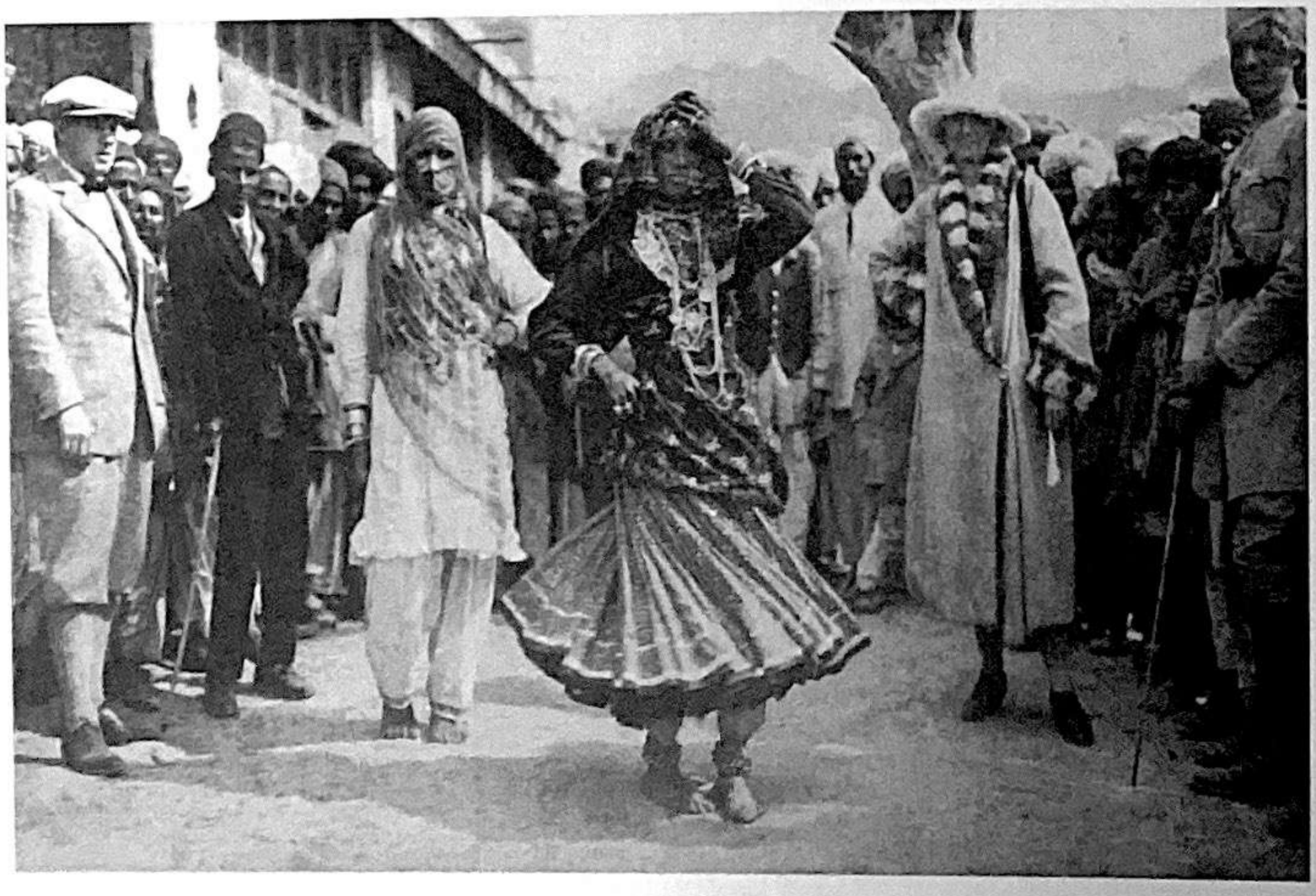
Shawn, twelve years younger than St. Denis, had even more eclectic tastes and a keener commercial sense. The Denishawn School offered a uniquely varied curriculum; among the types of dance taught were ballet, Spanish, Oriental, Egyptian, Greek, American Indian, geisha, creative, Delsarte, primitive, and folk. During the school's heyday Denishawn graduates danced to music by composers ranging from Bach and Brahms to Erik Satie and Vaughan Williams; toured the country performing everything from danced "myths" to the latest ballroom steps; and appeared in early silent movies and in the *Ziegfeld Follies* in New York. It was through its more commercial activities that Denishawn supported the serious artistic endeavors of the founders and their students. The school also trained silent-movie actors to move expressively for directors like D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, and staged colossal costume spectacles, like the 1916 *Life and Afterlife in Egypt, Greece, and India*, which succeeded in looking exotic and wholesome at the same time.

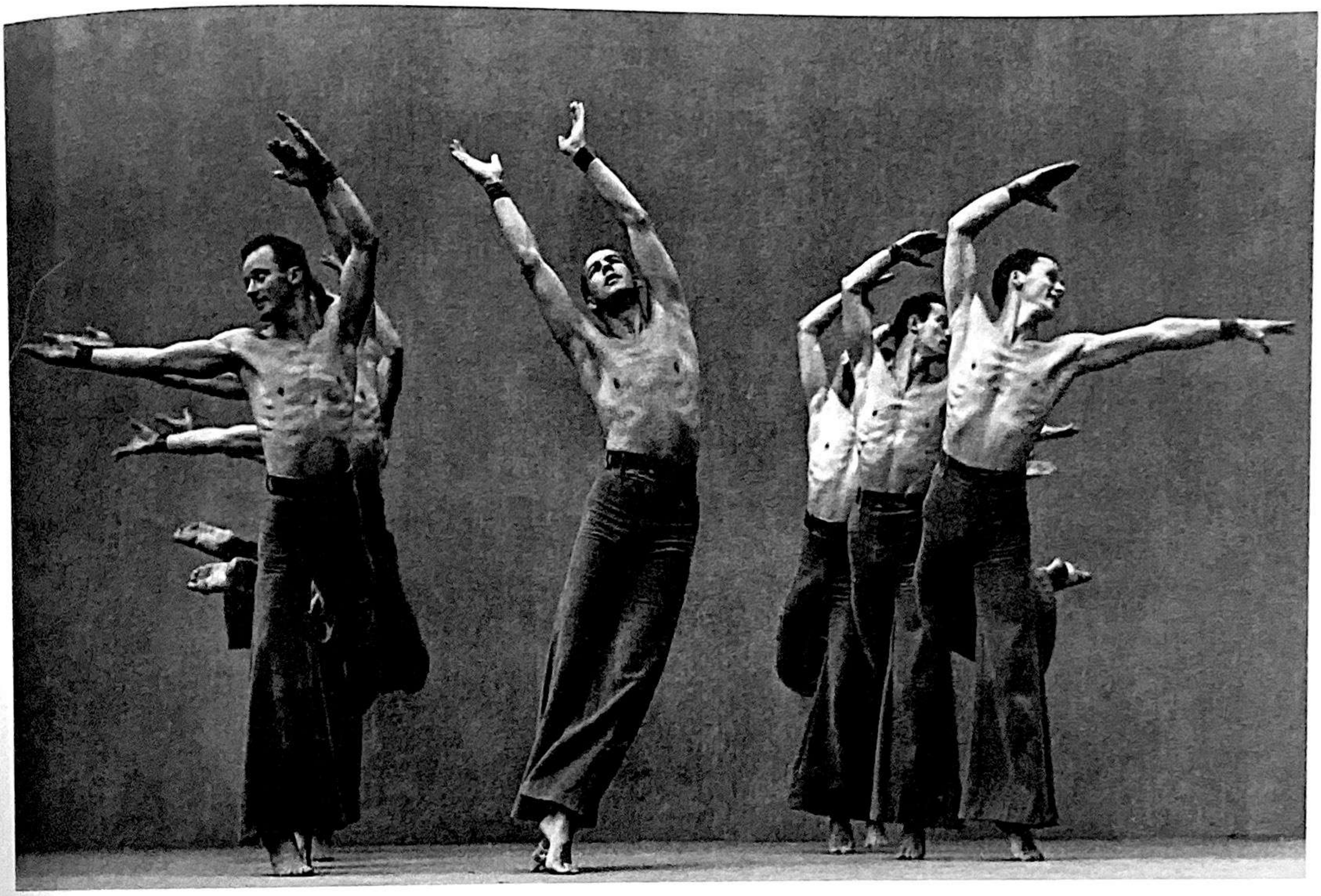
After fifteen years of a tempestuous, on-again–off-again relationship, Shawn



Ruth St. Denis's various activities in the dance world had a strong entrepreneurial side. These pursuits found her teaching at the Denishawn schools (top) and coaching dancers in the movies (center). In the 1920s she traveled to India with Ted Shawn to see first-hand the dance tradition that had inspired her early concert dances (bottom).

Opposite: Ted Shawn's all-male dance company helped further the acceptance of men as dancers in America. Here, he performs Kinetic Molpai (1935), choreography by Shawn and music by Jess Meeker, with his troupe in 1936. Kinetic Molpai was a ballet about masculine power. Its eleven sections were called Strife, Oppositions, Solvent, Dynamic Contrasts, Resilience, Successions, Unfolding and Folding, Dirge, Limbo, Surge, and Apotheosis.





and St. Denis went their separate ways in 1931. He put together an all-male dance company to embody his lifelong conviction that "dancing is a manly sport, more strenuous than golf or tennis, more exciting than boxing or wrestling and more beneficent than gymnastics"; later he founded the Jacob's Pillow dance festival in Massachusetts. She was drawn more and more to the idea of dance as devotion, as liturgy, as "a living mantra"; she began performing in churches and founded the School of Spiritual Arts. Looking back on her career, she wrote: "I had to be an Indian—a Japanese—a statue—a something or somebody else—before the public would give me what I craved." Yet she never renounced the solos that had made her famous, continuing to dance a "Radha" well into her eighties.

Until its demise in 1931 the Denishawn School served as a magnet for a second generation of modern dancers, first attracting them with its open-minded attitudes, then repelling them with its eclecticism and what one of its most illustrious graduates called the "weakling exoticism of a transplanted orientalism." This illustrious graduate was Martha Graham, who came to Denishawn in the summer of 1916 and left in 1923, ready to begin her own career which would take her—and modern dance itself—into uncharted realms of personal symbolism. Although she based many of her works on incidents from the world's storehouse of myths, the truths she sought were not abstract or universal

Ted Shawn and Martha Graham in Xochitl *(1920; left). She was twenty-six years old when Shawn chose her to star opposite him in this ballet, which one critic described as "a series of barbarically gorgeous pictures."*

Martha Graham, in white, with her company in Heretic *(1929; below). The music, a ten-bar Breton folk song, was played on the piano by Louis Horst, her music director.*

but personal; each of her dances, she once said, was "a graph of the heart."

Graham was born in 1894 in a Pennsylvania town that is now a part of Pittsburgh. Like Isadora Duncan, she experienced the conflicting pulls of Puritanism and paganism. Her upbringing in Pennsylvania was sedate; but when she was fourteen her family moved to California in search of a healthier climate for a younger sister who had asthma. The brilliant sunlight and open spaces around her new home in Santa Barbara had an intoxicating effect on the adolescent Graham. She heard her father, a physician who treated mental cases, say that he based his diagnoses on the way his patients moved: "The body never lies" was his maxim. The young Martha persuaded her father to take her to see Ruth St. Denis dance. She found the performance so exhilarating that she decided then and there to become a dancer, although she could not put this resolve into practice until the death of her father, who did not approve of the theater as a career.

A year after the Denishawn School opened, Graham enrolled. She was already in her early twenties, a late bloomer by dance standards, but her intensity, intelligence, and taut, lean body caught the attention of Ted Shawn. In 1920 Shawn created a ballet called *Xochitl*, in which Graham played a "Toltec" maiden who ferociously defends her honor against a drink-maddened emperor. Critics called it "the first native American ballet," but its exotic costumes and sets identified it as a close cousin to Denishawn's trademark "Oriental" spectacles.

A more important influence on Graham was Louis Horst, the school's music director, whose interests lay in the work of contemporary European composers like Erik Satie and Zoltán Kodály. He introduced Graham to more challenging scores and encouraged her to strike out on her own as a dancer and choreographer. By the time she left Denishawn in 1923, she had acquired a thorough grounding in crowd-pleasing stagecraft. Moving to New York she got a job in a Broadway revue called *Greenwich Village Follies*, dancing what she later referred to as "sexy little things." Meanwhile, she was refining her own ideas about dance, rejecting not only the "rigidity" of classical ballet but also the movement styles of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. She felt the need for a new vocabulary of movement that could "make visible the interior landscape" in a rapidly changing world: "Life today is nervous, sharp, and zigzag. This is what I aim for in my dances."

Graham's first New York concert in 1926 still showed traces of Denishawn exoticism (one dance featured three of St. Denis's former students as Krishna's milkmaids). But with the aid of Horst, who had come east to be her music director, she was soon showing "sharper" stuff like *Danse*, a 1929 solo in which she did not move her feet at all but contorted the rest of her body to music by Arthur Honegger, and *Heretic*, a piece for her newly formed all-female dance company, set to a marchlike Breton folk song arranged for piano and played by Horst. The song kept repeating, and, with each repeat, Graham, as the title character dressed in white, "pleaded her case" with simple but eloquent gestures to a menacing "jury" of twelve women wearing long, dark dresses. Each time the women rejected her plea, they thumped their heels on the floor to emphasize their unwillingness to listen, then threw themselves into new postures of stiff-legged condemnation; at the end the "heretic" sank to the floor in defeat, surrounded by the triumphant conformists.

In *Lamentation*, a landmark 1930 solo to a Kodály Piano Piece, Graham was seen sitting on a wooden bench, shrouded in a tube of stretch jersey with only her face, hands, and bare feet showing. Rocking stiffly from side to side, she tugged and pulled and pushed at the confining fabric with her hands, elbows, knees, and shoulders, not so much trying to break free as to carve out a place of rest for her grief-wracked body in a comfortless world.

Over the next few years, Graham gave a series of recitals that drew appreciative notices from both inside and outside the dance community; in 1932 she became the first dancer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her manner was resolutely modern in a socially conscious, Depression-era way: no sets, no fancy costumes, nothing soft or pretty. "Like the modern painters and architects," she declared, "we have stripped our medium of decorative unessentials." Her themes came from Native American rituals, from a mythologized American history, from her own responses to newspaper headlines and machine technology, from her own struggles as a creative artist, from her relentless exploration of the "potential

Just as Isadora Duncan is firmly associated with the photographs of Edward Steichen, so is Martha Graham with those of Barbara Morgan. Her best known image of the dancer shows Graham in Letter to the World *(1940), choreography by Martha Graham and music by Hunter Johnson. The ballet is based on the life of poet Emily Dickinson, and excerpts from her poems are spoken in the performance.*

greatness" of the human body. In classes at her Greenwich Village studio, Graham built up a system of exercises that constituted her answer to the daily class of traditional ballet companies. Students began on the floor with stretches and leg extensions, then stood up for bends, lifts, hip swings, and turns in place, followed by jumping, walking, running, and skipping. Each class concluded with what she described as "a series of falls forward, side, and back. . . . In no fall does the body remain on the floor, but assumes an upright position as part of the exercise. My dancers fall *so they may rise*."

Central to her technique was postural control, which began with close observation of the act of breathing. Dancer Jane Dudley remembers Graham telling her classes: "If you breathe out through your teeth as hard as you can and then notice what's happened to your shoulders and your pelvis and your back, that's what a contraction is. Then if you breathe in and see how the back straightens and centers itself, that is a release."

"Contraction" and "release"—the muscular activity independent of the act of breathing—became the bywords of the Graham technique. Neither had anything to do with relaxation; she believed that movement should always be emphatic, expressive, disciplined. In her opinion it took at least ten years of hard work to make a dancer.

Graham treated her trained dancers as her personal choreographic instrument; with few exceptions, no one else performed her dances. She created new pieces in the studio, demonstrating a movement she wanted and expecting her dancers to pick it up the first time. Rehearsals were long and exhausting. Enlivened by gestures and poses adapted from the dances of Asia, Graham's technique exerted a powerful influence on her movement vocabulary. In time, many of her best dancers left her in search of more creative freedom, as she had once left Denishawn. But Graham herself continued to grow as an artist. After 1934, instead of setting dances to previously written music, she started collaborating with composers like Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith, and Samuel Barber on new works; the next year she began a long collaboration with the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, whose enigmatic sets and props became as much a part of her dances as the dancers themselves.

In the late thirties she hired her first male dancers, the ballet-trained Erick Hawkins and the young and talented but largely untrained Merce Cunningham. With these new resources at her command, Graham fashioned a series of powerful "dance plays," often based explicitly or implicitly on the travails of women in Greek mythology. While more "theatrical" than her earlier works, these were hardly conventional narratives; what happened onstage was best understood as taking place in the mind of a suffering, struggling archetypal figure, who was invariably Graham herself. To expand the possibilities of storytelling through gesture, she borrowed the flexible staging of Asian dance drama forms like Nō, kabuki, and Chinese opera, where a few steps can indicate a journey, a few moments the passage of years.

One way to make sense of the history of modern dance in America is to read it as a family tree of creative parturition: after training in an established company, a dancer or group of dancers with a fresh personal vision moves on to form a new company. A few years after Martha Graham broke with Denishawn, two other mainstays of that school, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, left to create a varied body of work that stressed movement initiated "from the inside out." Humphrey summed up her credo in the phrase "A movement without a motivation is unthinkable." Yet her repertoire ranged from rigorously formal exercises like *Two Ecstatic Themes: Circular Descent, Pointed Ascent* (1931) to humanistic "music visualizations" like *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor* (1938) to socially conscious pieces like *Inquest* (1944). Weidman is best known for his wryly humorous pantomime in autobiographical dances like *And Daddy Was a Fireman* (1943). Mexican-born José Limón, who emerged from the Humphrey-Weidman company after the Second World War, scored a success with his first major work, *The Moor's Pavane* (1949), which compressed the turbulent emotions of Shakespeare's *Othello* into the formal framework of a court dance.

Meanwhile, as modern dance's most prominent spokesperson, Martha Graham openly defied, in words and accomplishments, the primacy of ballet as the institutional center of the dance world. Her students taught the Graham technique to dancers around the world, and dancers and choreographers came

José Limón (right) and Lucas Horning in The Moor's Pavane (1949), choreography by Limón and music by Henry Purcell.

from Europe, Asia, and South America to learn it at the source. Her company was one of the first multiracial dance companies, with black, white, and Asian dancers performing together; from its ranks came an entire generation of outstanding choreographers, including Hawkins and Cunningham. Throughout her career, during which she created more than 170 dances, Graham played for the highest stakes; dancing, she wrote, "had its origin in ritual," which she defined as "the formalized desire to achieve union with those beings who could bestow immortality." She continued to tour and make dances up until her death in 1991. The angular, austere style of her most productive years so dominated the public perception of modern dance that it became almost a cliché: the barefoot dancer in black expressing herself onstage while an audience of insiders tries bravely to figure out what it all means. But her career established once and for all that dance could be a vehicle of personal expression—not just for the dancer but for the choreographer.

The world of ballet was by no means insulated from this revolution of dance-makers. But in a world where dance is made within institutions—a company with a school attached—an innovative dance-maker has no choice but to come to terms with the tradition that the institution represents. The choreographers who figured prominently in the evolution of ballet in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe—men like Jean Georges Noverre, Charles Louis Didelot, Auguste Bournonville, and Marius Petipa—were ballet masters of major companies. They did not have to reinvent dance from the ground up; their innovations rejected some precedents from earlier times while building on others. This was the model envisioned by Mikhail Fokine when, at the time of Isadora Duncan's visit to Russia, he sent an artistic manifesto to the director of the Imperial Theaters. Fokine believed that the great classical tradition that the Russians had inherited from the French and lovingly nurtured for much of the century—since 1869 under the leadership of Marius Petipa at St. Peterburg's Maryinsky Theater—had gone stale. Fokine revered Petipa but he wanted to let in fresh air. His approach to reform was both aesthetic and scientific. In place of a loosely organized succession of "numbers," "entries," and so on, he called for a unified work of art whose performance would be uninterrupted even by pauses for leading dancers to acknowledge applause; in place of "mere gymnastics" and conventional gestures, he called for expressive dancing that would make use of the whole body down to "the last muscle." And, through careful research into the time and place in which each ballet was set, he believed that all elements of a production—"music, painting, and the plastic arts"—could be harmoniously blended to express a single, underlying theme.

The director of the Maryinsky Theater ignored this manifesto but permitted the precociously talented Fokine to dabble in choreography. Fokine had made his debut as a dancer in 1898 on his eighteenth birthday; at the age of twenty-two he was already teaching classical technique to the junior girls at the Imperial Ballet School. In the years following Duncan's visit, he pressed his

Costume sketch of a bacchante (Bronislawa Nijinska) and a young boétienne (Vera Fokina) by Léon Bakst for the Ballets Russes production of Narcisse *(1911), choreography by Mikhail Fokine and music by Nikolai Tcherepnin.*

campaign to reform the Russian ballet tradition. His first efforts to stage ballets with Greek themes and Duncanesque freedom of movement and costume—including bare feet and bare knees for the ballerinas—provoked opposition, and he was forced to compromise: in one ballet the dancers appeared in tights with toes and knees painted on. The radical nature of his ideas can be appreciated from the comments of a ballerina who, a few years later, danced barefoot for the first time in a Fokine ballet: "This gave me a strange sensation of nakedness, like walking in public in a nightgown."

But gradually barriers fell. In 1906 a production he put together for his students won praise from the recently retired Marius Petipa, whose own historical spectacles Fokine had criticized as "unauthentic." In 1908 he presented two precedent-shattering works. In *Une Nuit d'Egypte*, an erotic divertissement featuring Anna Pavlova and himself in the major roles, dancers turned their profiles to the audience in the style of Egyptian tomb paintings, which shocked traditionalists accustomed to the predominantly frontal display of the classical canon; as the hero, Fokine danced with bare knees showing below the border of his striped kilt; and the ballerinas bent and twisted their upper bodies in unconventional and provocative poses. For *Chopiniana* he adopted not only the serious music favored by Isadora Duncan but, according to some accounts, her fluid and expressive arm movements as well. Another possible influence on Fokine's plastic use of the arms was the appearance in St. Petersburg of a troupe of Siamese court

Yet another of those photographs (left) that have become indissolubly linked with a dancer: Anna Pavlova as The Swan, a solo dance that Mikhail Fokine choreographed for her in 1905 to music by Camille Saint-Saëns. Pavlova's tireless touring with her own company did much to stimulate worldwide enthusiasm for ballet. Like many modern dance-makers she had an interest in non-Western dance traditions. In London she met a young Indian art student named Uday Shankar; he helped her stage, and danced with her in, Radha-Krishna *(1923) and other dances (below). Shankar (1900–77) became a forceful popularizer of Indian dance in the West; in his later years he worked to reinvigorate traditional dance forms in India.*

dancers in 1900 . In 1905, he choreographed a brief solo for Anna Pavlova, called *The Swan*, in which her tremulous arm movements represented the last futile efforts of a dying creature to regain the freedom of flight it had once known; when Pavlova began touring the world with her own company after 1910, this became her signature piece.

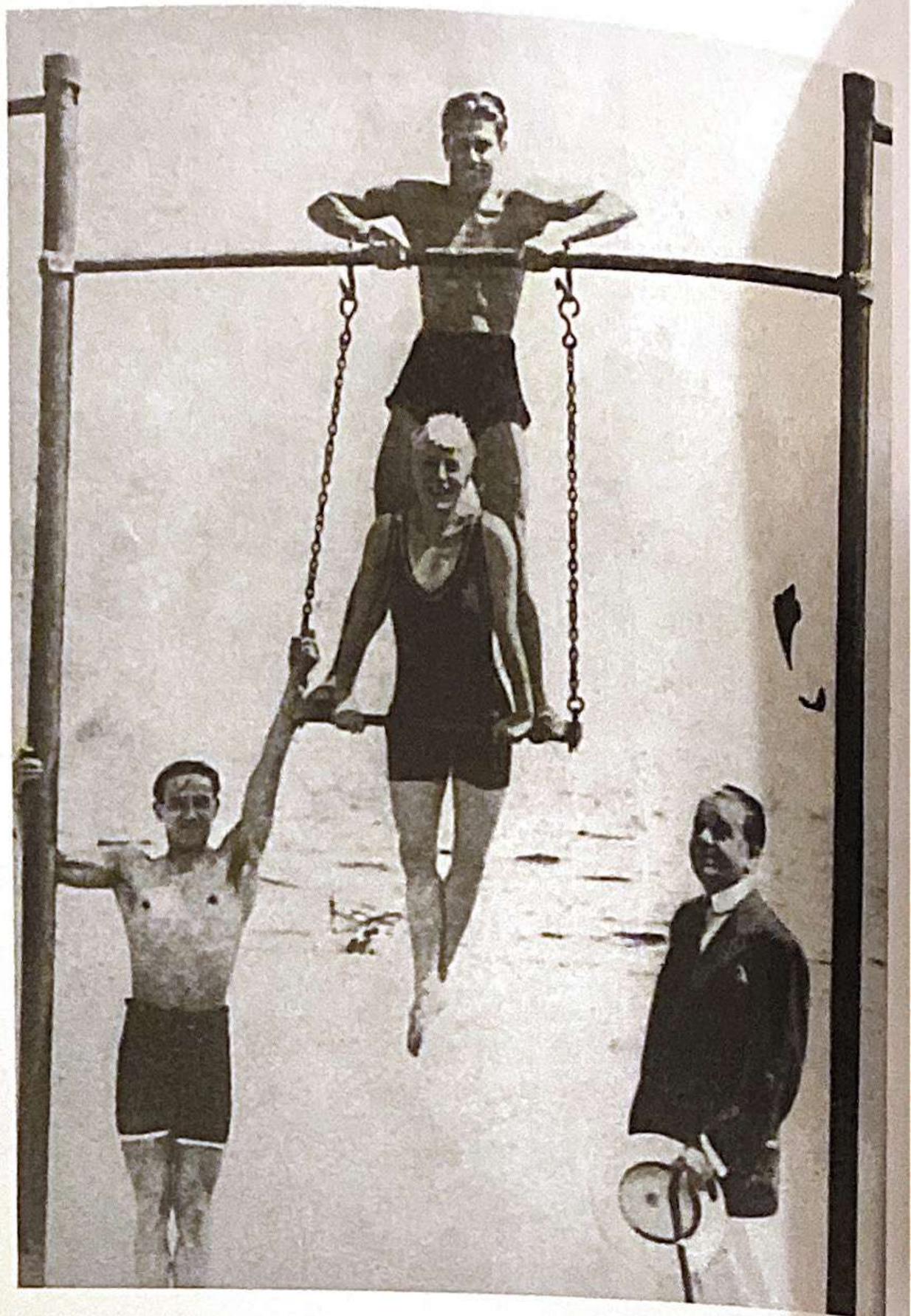
For all the excitement provoked by Fokine's innovations, it is by no means certain that he could have realized the full range of his ambitious reforms within the tradition-bound Imperial Ballet. Serge Diaghilev gave him the opportunity he had dreamed of. As tsarist Russia slipped further into financial and political chaos, Diaghilev received permission to bring a troupe of Maryinsky principals to Paris in 1909, with Fokine as ballet master. Audiences in the West were astonished by the technical facility and expressive power of the Russian dancers, who included Pavlova and the nineteen-year-old Vaslav Nijinsky. The settings and costumes by Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois blazed with color. And the ballets themselves, choreographed by Fokine, challenged preconceived ideas of classical dance.

In *Cléopâtre*, an adaptation of *Une Nuit d'Egypte*, the queen and her paramour made love on stage (discreetly hidden behind veils) while half-naked slaves and attendants cavorted orgiastically. *Schéhérazade* featured an even wilder orgy and a merciless massacre onstage.

For three years, triumph followed triumph, confirming Fokine's dictum that choreographic style should change from ballet to ballet in accord with theme and music. The same audiences that thrilled to Fokine's acrobatic "Tartar" dances set to music from Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* were deeply moved by the abstract Romanticism of *Les Sylphides*, a revised version of *Chopiniana*, which emerged as the first entirely plotless ballet. In 1911 Fokine collaborated with Igor Stravinsky on *Petrouchka*, a Russian folk tale, with Nijinsky in the title role; this character's jerky, mechanical movements and turned-in toes dramatized his helplessness as a puppet of fate.

Fokine broke with Diaghilev in 1912, and although he later returned to the Ballets Russes, he never again equaled

Enrico Cecchetti and Vaslav Nijinsky in the Ballets Russes production of Petrouchka *(1911), choreography by Mikhail Fokine and music by Igor Stravinsky. The ballet, inspired by St. Petersburg Shrovetide Fair puppet shows, revolves around a puppeteer—the Charlatan—and three of his puppets. Here, the Charlatan, played by Cecchetti, kicks the puppet Petrouchka into his desolate room, which is decorated only with a portrait of his master. There, the tormented creature begins to discover his soul.*



Ballet companies work together and play together. Right, dancers Leon Woizikovsky, Lydia Sokolova, and Serge Lifar of the Ballets Russes horse around on a beach in the 1920s, while Diaghilev watches. Below, Woizikovsky, Sokolova, and Lifar together again, this time in rehearsal. The ballet is the Ballets Russes production of Les Matelots *(1925), choreography by Léonide Massine and music by Georges Auric.*

Couturiere Coco Chanel and artist Henri Laurens designed the costumes and set respectively for the Ballets Russes production of Le Train Bleu (1924; below), choreography by Bronislawa Nijinska and music by Darius Milhaud. Picasso painted the curtain.

Seven years earlier, Picasso had created costumes and sets for the Ballets Russes production of Parade (1917), choreography by Léonide Massine and music by Erik Satie, in a vivid application of Cubist principles to stage design. The Ballets Russes poster (top right) features the character of the Chinese Conjurer, danced by Massine, from Parade. This ballet is inextricably entwined with the history of twentieth-century art; in his program note to the original production, French poet Guillaume Apollinaire first used the term "Surrealism." Parade has had a number of revivals, all faithful to Picasso's decor. Right, Gary Chryst dances the role of the Chinese Conjurer in a Joffrey Ballet production.

his innovative achievements during those first three Paris seasons. Diaghilev, whose financially shaky company needed a steady supply of novelties to attract audiences, was neither a choreographer nor a dancer nor a composer nor an artist of any kind. Yet he had a hand in every aspect of the works his company produced. It was his idea to present three short ballets in a single evening, a format which has become standard for ballet companies around the world. He hired, and fired, and rehired the Stravinskys and Saties, the Fokines and Nijinskys, the Baksts and Benoises, the Picassos and Cocteaus whose talents merged in such exciting and often surprising ways that the contributors fought bitterly for years over who deserved credit for which aspect of this or that ballet. All his ballet masters—Fokine, Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, Bronislawa Nijinksa (Nijinsky's sister), and George Balanchine—were extraordinarily talented, and he rarely second-guessed them; but their average age when he took them on was under twenty-three. There was never any doubt about who was in charge. Ultimately, it was Diaghilev's taste that was reflected in the style and the content of the Ballets Russes; his unique company was his instrument of self-expression.

When Vaslav Nijinsky, the most acclaimed male dancer of his day, began creating innovative ballets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1912, it looked for a time as if the young Nijinsky might achieve the choreographic goal that had eluded Fokine: to mold a first-class ballet company into a means of personal expression.

Nijinsky was born in Kiev in 1890 of Polish extraction. His parents headed their own touring dance company in Russia; from an early age he and his younger sister Bronislawa appeared onstage with their father, who was noted for his enormous leaps. At the age of ten, Nijinsky enrolled in the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, where his teachers recognized his natural talent almost immediately. On graduation in 1907 he danced a succession of important roles in such ballets as *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and The *Sleeping Beauty*.

His dancing offered a rare mix of strength and facility. Propelled by powerfully muscled thighs, his leaps were legendary not only for their height but for the impression he gave of pausing in midair at the top of the arc. In the words of critic Edwin Denby: "When he moves he does not blur the center of weight in his body; one feels it as clearly as if he were still standing at rest, one can follow its course clearly as it floats about the stage through the dance." He projected a vitality, a sensuality, that some saw as innocent, others as erotic.

Vaslav Nijinsky in four Ballets Russes productions (from left to right): Schéhérazade *(1910), choreography by Mikhail Fokine and music by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov;* Le Carnaval *(1910), choreography by Fokine and music by Robert Schumann;* Petrouchka *(1911), choreography by Fokine and music by Igor Stravinsky; and* Jeux *(1913), choreography by Nijinsky and music by Claude Debussy.*

Among his admirers was Serge Diaghilev, who sensed that a great ballet company could be built around this young dancer who combined a rigorous schooling in classical technique with an almost palpable emotional intensity.

The roles that Fokine choreographed for Nijinsky in the first three seasons of the Ballets Russes allowed the dancer to display the full range of his powers to wildly appreciative audiences in Paris and London. As the Poet in *Les Sylphides* he embodied an abstract Romanticism seen through the lens of nostalgia; as the Favorite Slave in *Schéhérazade* he was the devotee of sexuality for whom even death is a kind of orgasm; in *Le Spectre de la Rose* his leaping exit from the stage had the sensational finality of a record-setting broad jump; in *Petrouchka* he was poignancy itself. There was, it seemed, nothing he could not do, no role he could not bring to life onstage. He always had trouble communicating in words, but when he danced, he spoke with his entire body. Is it any wonder that, prompted by Diaghilev, he decided to take the next step and try his hand at making dances?

Having mastered technique as few dancers before or since, Nijinsky apparently had no interest in devising ever-more-challenging exercises in the traditional mode. Instead, he took up where Fokine had left off—seeking to express something of himself through the artistic medium of a classically trained ballet company.

In *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (*Afternoon of a Faun*), the subject was sex—adolescent sex. As the Faun, Nijinsky (adorned with a small tail, golden horns, and pointed ears) tried to entice some passing nymphs into joining him for a frolic. Intrigued, frightened, they dallied, then fled. One dropped her

A scene from L'Après-Midi d'un Faune *(1912), choreography by Nijinsky and music by Claude Debussy, from a famous series of photographs of the ballet by the Baron de Meyer. The faun gambols with a nymph, who has dropped her scarf.*

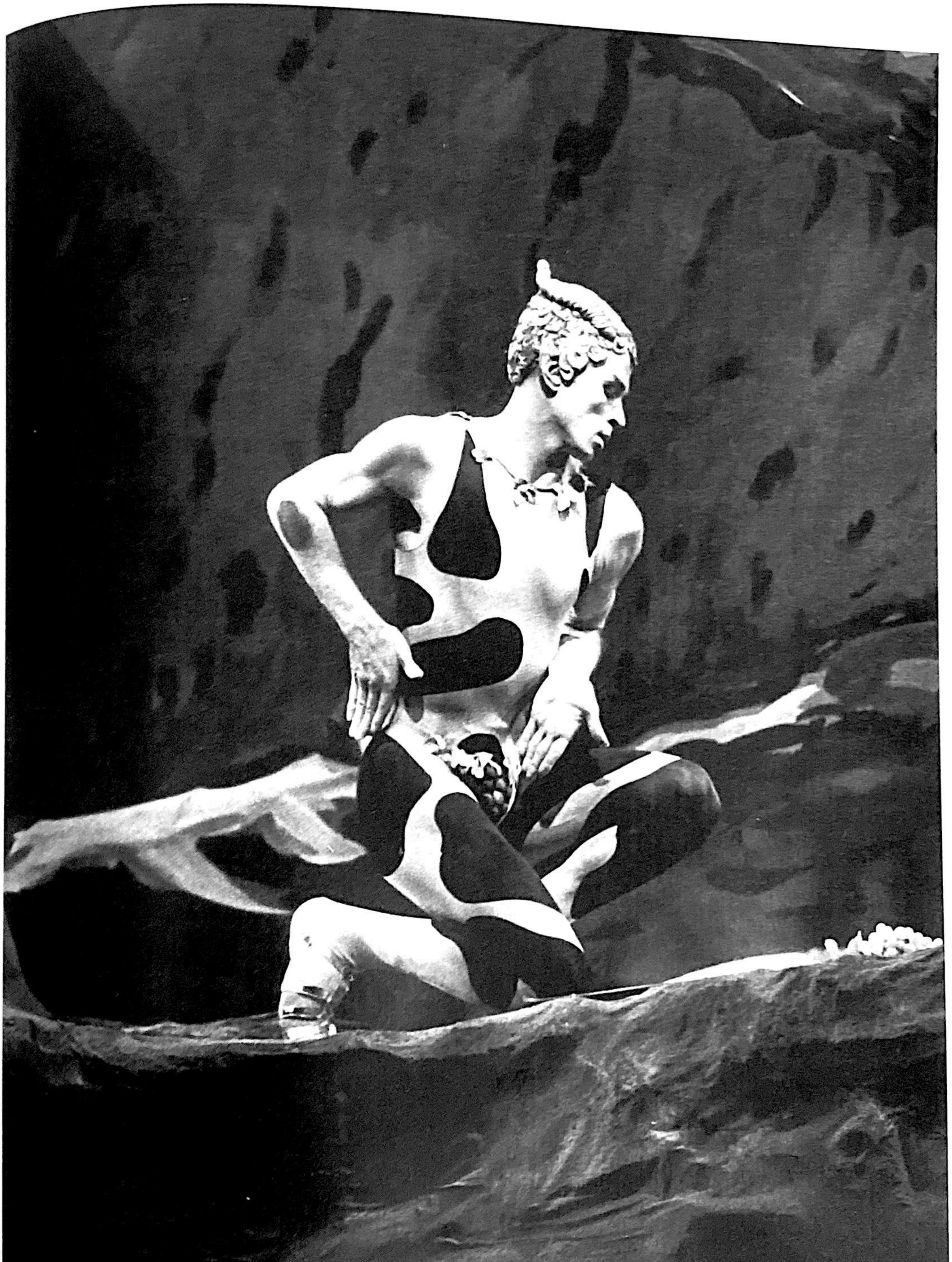
Opposite: Among revivals of L'Après-Midi d'un Faune, *the most faithful to Nijinsky's original was the Joffrey Ballet's of 1980 with Rudolf Nureyev. Nureyev, like Baryshnikov, studied at the Leningrad Choreographic School and made his debut with the Kirov Ballet. He moved to the West in 1961, at the age of twenty-three, and became the leading male dancer of the 1960s and early 1970s.*

scarf. Like an animal playing with its prey, the Faun retrieved the scarf, draped it over a rock, and, throwing his head back in a soundless laugh, pressed out his longing against the smooth fabric. Those in the audience who were not shocked by this explicit mime of masturbation were outraged by the anti-classical movements that Nijinsky had devised for himself and the nymphs. The dancers moved back and forth across the stage like cutouts from a Greek frieze. Ballerinas who had spent years perfecting their turnout found it difficult to keep their feet parallel. Debussy's dreamlike music was no help in keeping time, as one dancer recalled: "[We] walked and moved quite gently to a rhythm that crossed over the beats given by the conductor. At every entrance one made—and there were several—one began to count, taking the count from another dancer who was coming off. For every lift of the hand or head there was a corresponding sound in the score."

Although Diaghilev toned down the ending at the insistence of the Paris police, he relished the outcry that the piece provoked; controversy generated publicity and sold tickets. For Nijinsky, the critical attacks hit closer to home: "The Faun," he said simply, "is me."

It had taken the young choreographer 120 rehearsals to prepare this twelve-minute ballet for its premiere. A year later, in May 1913, he presented two new ballets that set off an even greater furor. Today, the better known is *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) because of its propulsive score by Igor Stravinsky. It was Stravinsky's idea to create a ballet around a savage ritual from pre-Christian Russia, in which an adolescent girl dances herself to death as a sacrifice to the god of spring. Diaghilev turned to Nijinsky as choreographer only after Fokine, his original choice, had backed out over a monetary dispute.

To help Nijinsky set steps to the complex rhythmic structure of the music,



Diaghilev brought in an expert in eurhythmics, a method of matching body movements to musical rhythms invented by a Swiss music teacher, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950). The result was more "counting," as in *Faun*; but because there were many more dancers doing many more things onstage for a much longer time, the counts were much, much more complicated. Nijinsky did not dance in *Sacre*. On opening night he stood in the wings stamping his foot and counting out loud for the benefit of the dancers. But no one could hear him above the din of the orchestra and the disapproving shouts and whistles from the audience that began even before the curtain went up. A near-riot ensued. It was hard to tell which the protesters disliked more: Stravinsky's pounding, discordant music or Nijinsky's frenetic, knock-kneed choreography. Among the words that critics used to describe the ballet: "harsh," "raw," "bitter," "brutal," "undigested," "coarse," "frank."

As a *succès de scandale*, *Sacre* had no equal: It was the avant-garde event of the season, the decade, some might say the century. Within twenty years Stravinsky's music had entered the concert repertoire; its discordances and rhythmic innovations had become part of the musical language of its time. But the ballet itself received only six performances, and Nijinsky's choreography has been preserved only in the uncertain memories of those who were there. Attempts to restage the original work have met with no definitive agreement on whether the reconstructions represent what the original audience saw on opening night.

The other ballet that Nijinsky choreographed that spring, *Jeux* (*Games*), is almost entirely forgotten except by historians of dance. But in its own way, *Jeux* (set to a specially commissioned score by Debussy) was as radical as *Sacre*, and marked an important milestone in the evolution of ballet as an instrument of personal, rather than collaborative, creation. For perhaps the first time in the history of classical ballet the dancers portrayed characters who seemed to live in the same world as the spectators. The theme was sport—a game of tennis—but the subtext was sexual play, a three-way flirtation between Nijinsky and two female partners. All three dancers wore sports clothes only slightly modified from outfits that anyone in the audience might have worn the previous weekend. As in *Faun* the movements were angular, stilted; at times the principals looked more like silent-movie actors than dancers.

To dancers trained in classical technique, the poses and attitudes that Nijinsky specified (to be executed on three-quarter point) were punishing: "I had to keep my head screwed on one side, both hands curled in as in one maimed from birth," said one ballerina. In his diary the choreographer was explicit about the source of his inspiration: Diaghilev had been eager to have a young boy share their bed, an idea that Nijinsky rejected. Audiences were more puzzled than aroused by the encoded ménage à trois they saw onstage, but Nijinsky's artistic courage could not be faulted; in the words of Lincoln Kirstein: "Few dancers before had translated private tension into public parable."

But Nijinsky was unable to follow up on this breakthrough. In August 1913 the Ballets Russes company sailed from Southampton, England, for a tour of South America that Diaghilev, always hard-pressed for cash, had arranged even though he was so terrified of sea voyages that he could not bring himself to go. (He had been told by a fortune-teller that death would find him at sea.) To many in the company, it was startling to see Nijinsky without Diaghilev at his side. What followed was a progression of tragicomic events that played like a darker sequel to *Jeux*. On the voyage Nijinsky spent all his time with Romola de Pulszka, the daughter of a famous and wealthy Hungarian actress, who had recently joined the corps de ballet. Shortly after their arrival in Rio, Nijinsky and Romola announced their engagement; they were married on September 10, 1913. When the news reached Paris, Diaghilev was furious. Seizing on the pretext that Nijinsky had breached his contract by refusing to dance one night in Rio, Diaghilev fired his rebellious protégé and appointed as ballet master in his place the seventeen-year-old Léonide Massine.

After the First World War began, Nijinsky was interned in Hungary as a Russian subject, only to be freed in 1916 by the string-pulling efforts of Diaghilev, who had secured a lucrative engagement for his company at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on the condition that Nijinsky dance. Although Nijinsky himself was already beginning to show signs of mental deterioration, the Metropolitan engagement in the spring of 1916 created a stir, and a second New York season was arranged for the fall of the same year, this time

George Balanchine with Tamara Toumanova and Natalie Shakhova in the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo production of Cotillon *(1932), choreography by George Balanchine and music by Alexis Chabrier.*

with Nijinsky in full charge of the company. For a man who had trouble managing his own life, this was an impossible assignment. In addition, his contract stipulated that he produce two new ballets in three weeks for New York premieres. Only one was produced, a mimed narrative version of the German folk tale *Till Eulenspiegel*, set to Richard Strauss's tone poem. On opening night the second act was in such a raw state that the dancers had to improvise most of their steps.

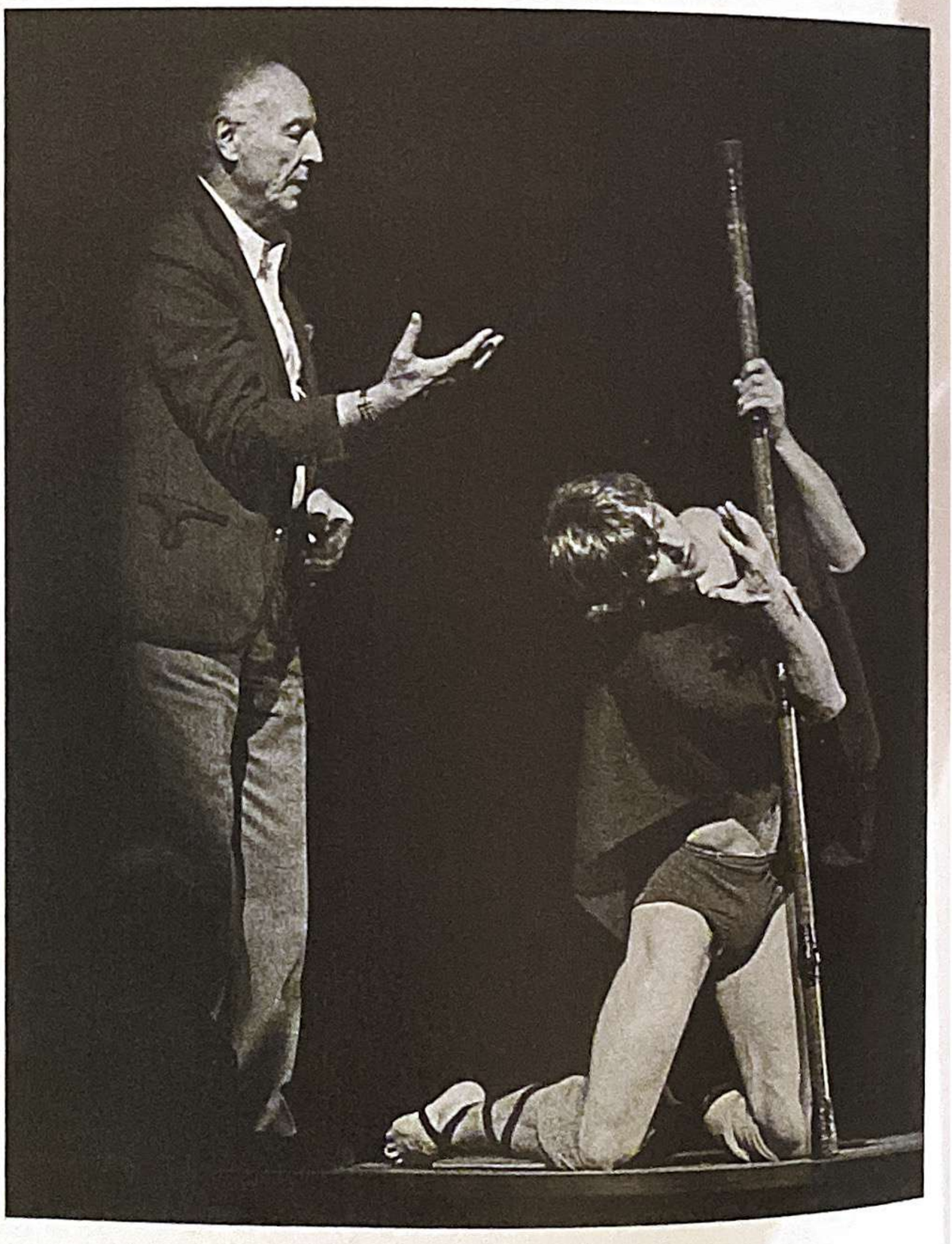
After that, Nijinsky's mental decline was obvious to everyone. His last public appearance as a dancer was in September 1917. Over the next two years he planned a ballet to be set to the music of Bach and worked on an elaborate system of dance notation that he had invented. From 1919, when his condition was diagnosed as schizophrenia, until his death in 1950 he lived for the most part in a series of European asylums. After his departure from the scene, it became the fashion to denigrate his achievements as a choreographer, following the lead of Stravinsky and Fokine who claimed credit for most of Nijinsky's innovations. But other collaborators have testified to his hard work, high standards, and almost oppressive drive in bringing a dance to the stage. Just before his final mental breakdown he confided to a colleague: "I wish to work independently of other troupes of dancers in which intrigue prevents the creation of real art. I am planning to dance alone with a small company and achieve some interesting results."

As dreams go, this seems modest enough. For dancers who eschewed ballet and followed the path blazed by Duncan and St. Denis, it would soon become the norm. But for Nijinsky it was a fantasy bred of madness. Even the greatest ballet masters had not enjoyed anything approaching artistic autonomy. During his four decades at the helm of the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg, Marius Petipa well understood the limitations within which he worked: an easily bored audience that demanded spectacles spiced with divertissements, court politics that often dictated which juicy parts went to certain favorites, and a prohibition (handed down from the sovereign himself) against unhappy endings that might suggest all was not well in the empire.

In the same year that Nijinsky voiced his dream, a young ballet student named Georgi Balanchivadze was trying to supplement his meager stipend playing the piano in silent-movie theaters in Petrograd (the new name given to St. Petersburg in 1914). The son of a well-known composer from Georgia, he had entered the Imperial Ballet School in 1914 (when he was ten years old) and, after a miserably homesick first year, had become a star pupil. When Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in March 1917, the school was closed, and the students were left to their own devices while the Bolsheviks, who seized power in October, decided what to do with such a flagrant symbol of the old regime. Against all odds the new commissar of education, Anatoli Lunacharsky, a lifelong balletomane, managed to get both the school and the theater reopened in 1918 under the auspices of the new Soviet state. With food, clothing, and fuel in short supply, hardship was the order of the day; the students cut trousers out of old draperies and burned chunks of the polished parquet floors to keep warm. But instruction continued without further interruption. In 1921 Balanchivadze graduated with honors and went on to three more years of study at the Conservatory of Music.

Jerome Robbins (above) rehearsing Maria Tallchief for the first New York City Ballet production of The Prodigal Son *in 1950. George Balanchine is standing behind the pianist. Tallchief was a member of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in the 1940s and became one of the first principal dancers of the New York City Ballet.*

Right, Balanchine coaches Mikhail Baryshnikov in the 1979 production of The Prodigal Son.



Although he was a talented enough pianist to consider a concert career, ballet held an even stronger appeal for him. At first it was the spectacle, the theatrical magic exemplified by the Maryinsky production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, in which he had made his stage debut, as one of the first-act garland dancers, at the age of eleven. He never forgot the beautiful garden setting with its "great cascading fountains," the grand coach of the wicked fairy Carabosse pulled by twelve rats, the flames that flared up from the floor when Carabosse was revealed in all her malevolence, the great trees and vines that enveloped the stage when the court fell into its hundred-year sleep. His interest in choreography surfaced early: "I had learned to dance, to move, I loved music, and suddenly I wanted to move people to music, to arrange dances." While still in his teens Balanchivadze composed a short ballet "in the Fokine style" for his fellow students; the students liked it, his teachers did not. To the budding choreographer the lesson was clear: "I saw immediately I should never be able to convince the management of the state theater to become interested in my work. I would have to present it myself."

In 1923 he put together several programs called "Evenings of the Young Ballet" with other recent graduates of the school who were dancing at the state theater; again his superiors expressed displeasure. Nevertheless, he received permission the following year to take a small troupe—four dancers including himself (average age: eighteen)—to Western Europe over summer vacation. After a successful tour of Germany, Balanchivadze and his troupe were invited to Paris, where they auditioned for Diaghilev, who had been cut off from his main source of trained dancers by the Russian Revolution. He promptly hired all four dancers for his Ballets Russes, changed Georgi Balanchivadze's name to George Balanchine, and appointed him ballet master.

Balanchine has acknowledged his debt to Diaghilev as the second great influence on his artistic growth and development, after the training he received at the Imperial (now the Vaganova) Ballet School. Before Diaghilev's death in 1929, Balanchine created ten new ballets for the Ballets Russes. The most important of these were *Apollon Musagète* (*Apollo, Leader of the Muses*), set to a Stravinsky score in 1928, and *Le Fils Prodigue* (*The Prodigal Son*) in 1929, music by Sergei Prokofiev. Both were daring not in their rejection of classical tradition but in their affirmation of it.

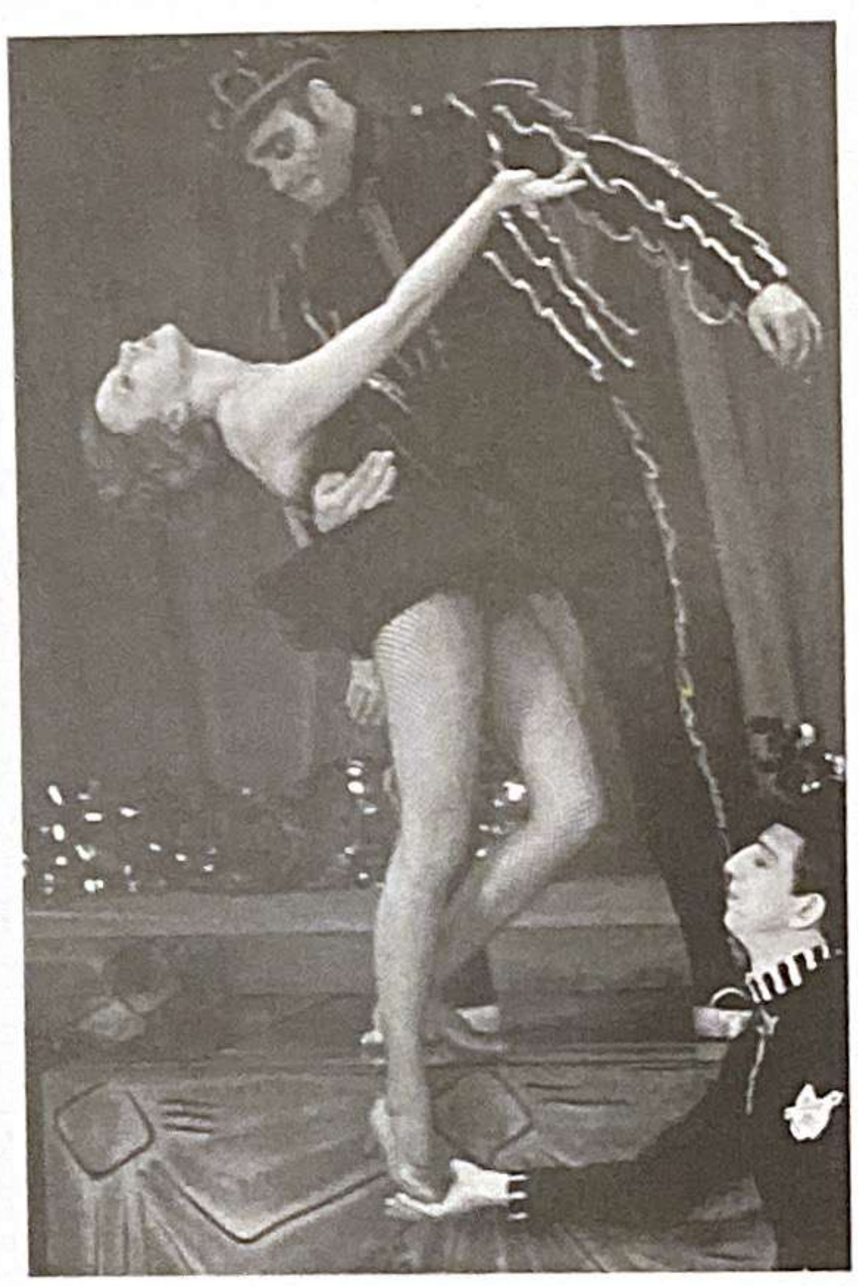
The score for *Apollo* was originally commissioned by the U.S. Library of Congress. Having established a strongly personal, modern idiom, Stravinsky now chose to reassert his connection to the great tradition of European orchestral music. In a melodic piece for strings only, he paid homage to a long line of precursors from Bach and Lully to Glinka and Tchaikovsky. The result, to Balanchine's ears, had "a wonderful clarity and unity of tone" that taught him an important lesson about the making of dances:

"I saw that gestures, the basic material of the choreographer, have family relations, like different shades in painting and different tones in music. Some are incompatible with others; one must work within a given frame, consciously, and not dissipate the effect of a ballet with inspirations foreign to the tone or mood one understands it must possess. . . .

"When I listen to a work by [Stravinsky] I am moved . . . to try to make visible not only the rhythm, melody and harmony but even the timbres of the instruments."

In the suite of dances that he made for Apollo and the three muses, Balanchine paid homage to *his* precursors, especially Marius Petipa. Apollo (danced by Serge Lifar) was an athletic embodiment of the creative principle. The choreography breathed new life into the classical style by treating it as living geometry—orderly, arbitrary, even artificial but, precisely because of that, intensely human. (Geometry, like art, is a human invention.) If Stravinsky's score was "about" music, Balanchine's choreography was "about" dance. Their pedigree notwithstanding, his freshly wrought combinations and permutations of standard steps and poses provoked laughter from some members of the audience.

The Prodigal Son made a different kind of statement about the relevance of the past. It was Diaghilev who suggested that Balanchine, a devout communicant of the Eastern Orthodox Church, base a ballet on the Biblical parable of the wayward son who returns as a penitent to his father and is forgiven for his sins. From the material in Luke 15, Balanchine created a work that showed how "old-fashioned" linear narrative could be reconciled with a modernizing temperament. With Prokofiev's forceful score and a vivid backdrop inspired by the designs of Georges Rouault, *The Prodigal*



Tamara Geva and George Church in the "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" ballet from the musical comedy On Your Toes *(1936), choreography by George Balanchine and music by Richard Rodgers. Ray Bolger is in the foreground.*

Son remains a staple of the New York City Ballet. Among its many memorable moments of choreographic story-telling: the tavern debauchees who pair up, lock arms back to back, and scamper about the stage like four-legged mechanical insects; and the final tableau, in which the returning prodigal climbs up into the arms of his father who stands straight as a pillar of the Temple and lets his cloak fall protectively over his son's body in a majestic gesture of compassion.

After Diaghilev's death, Balanchine worked with the Royal Danish Ballet, helped launch one of the several successor troupes to the original Ballets Russes, and in 1933 founded his own company to put on new works. It was, in a sense, Balanchine's "declaration of independence," his first attempt to realize Nijinsky's dream. The seven ballets premiered by his new company aroused great interest. The financial future, however, was anything but secure. When the twenty-six-year-old Lincoln Kirstein, backed by the twenty-five-year-old Edward M. M. Warburg, met Balanchine in a London hotel room and invited him to come to the United States and form a major ballet company, the twenty-nine-year-old choreographer agreed, with one condition: "But first, a school."

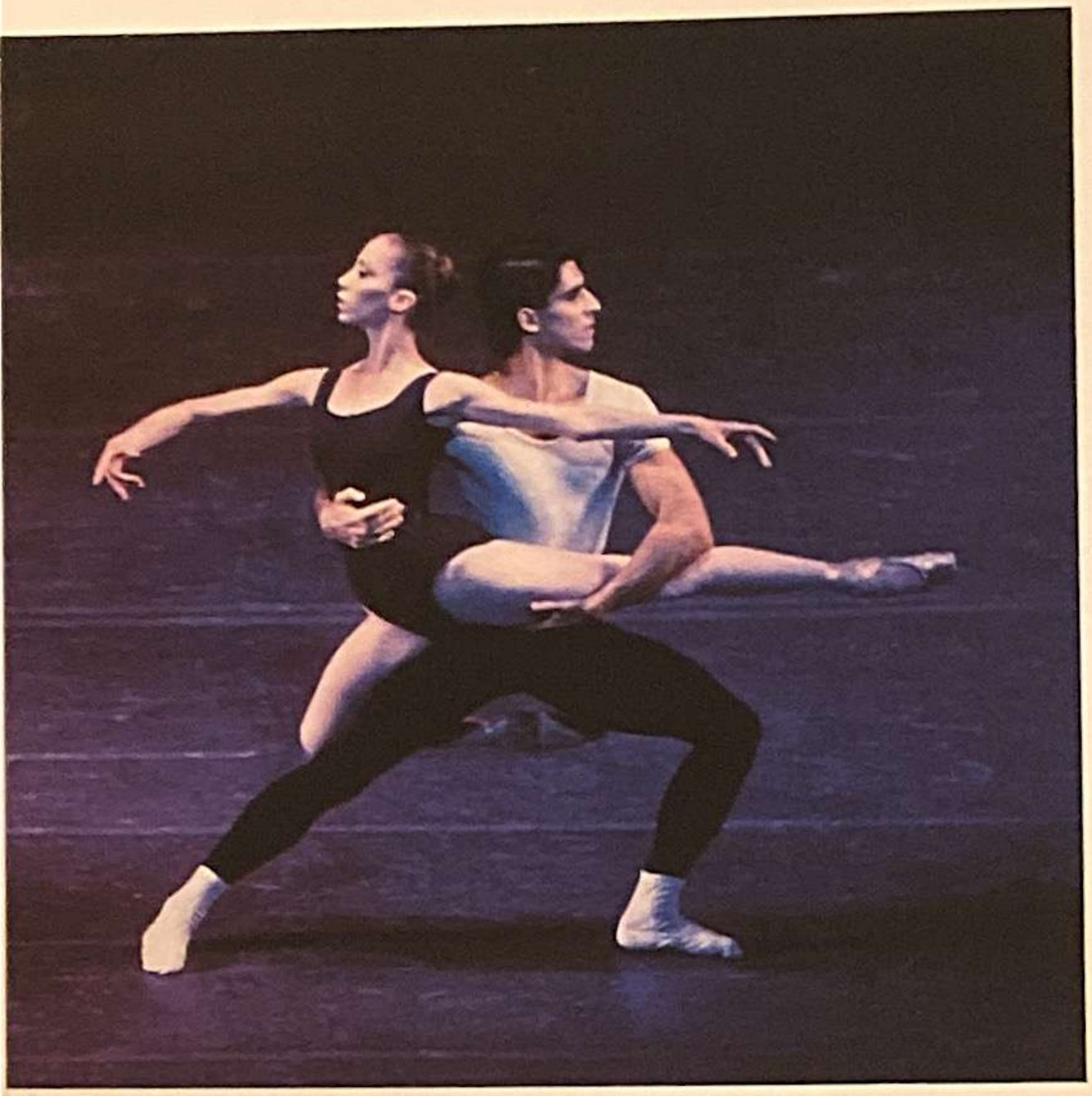
All that Balanchine knew about America he had learned from the movies, but that was enough; he would be happy to visit any country, he told Kirstein, that could produce women like Ginger Rogers. From the beginning, he was in love with American female dancers. He loved their nervous energy, their no-nonsense manner. He liked them young, tall, and skinny ("like toothpick"), with long legs and small heads. On January 2, 1934, the School of American Ballet opened in a loft on Madison Avenue and 59th Street that had once been Isadora Duncan's studio. The production of American ballet dancers to Balanchine's specifications had begun. The creation of a full-fledged company to perform his works took a little longer. An affiliation with the Metropolitan Opera foundered after two years because of artistic differences; conservative operagoers did not appreciate Balanchine's variations on conventional choreography.

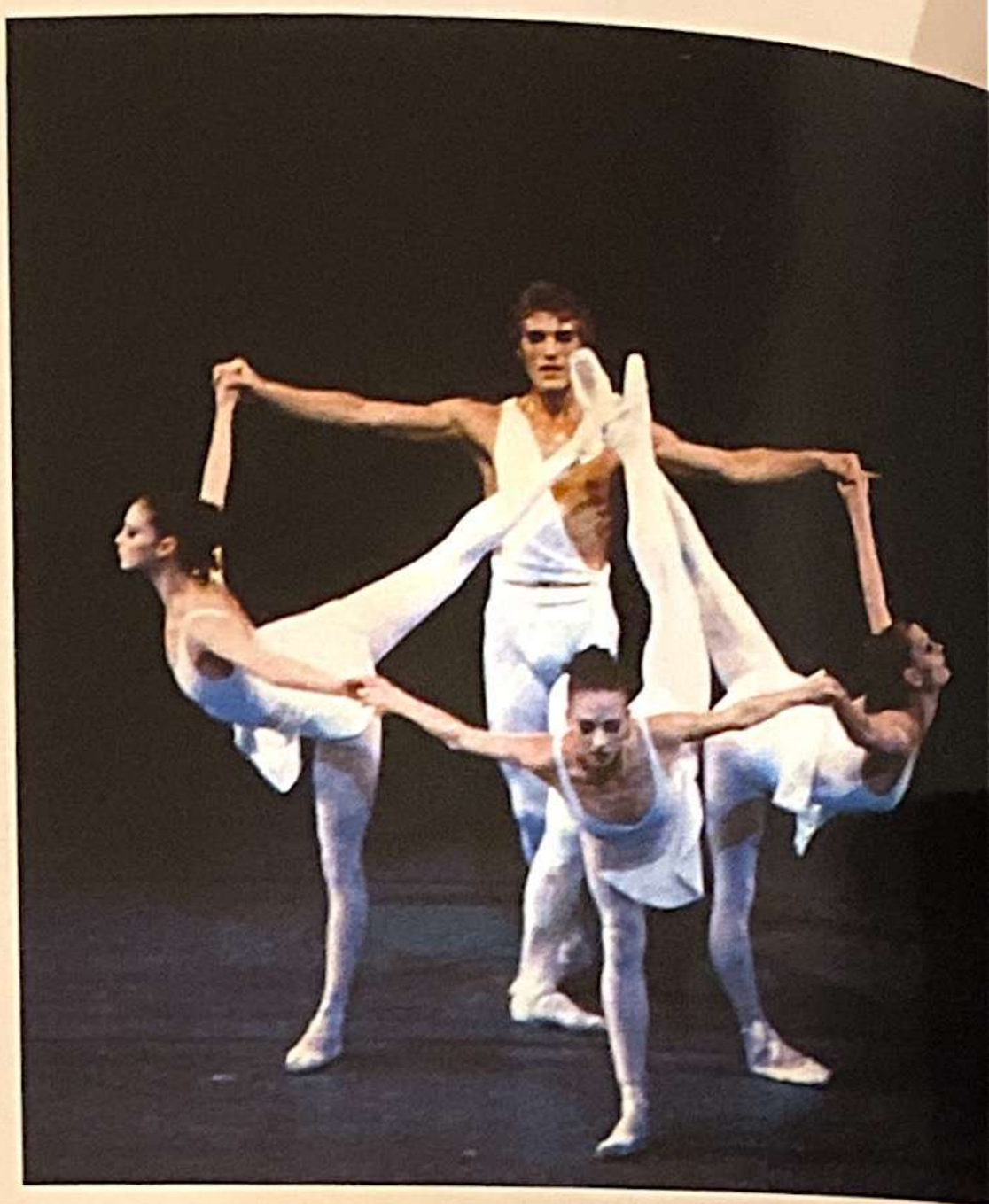
To give heart to the young dancers and choreographers emerging from the school, Kirstein formed a touring troupe that premiered such all-American ballets as Lew Christensen's *Filling Station* (1937) and Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid* (1938). To keep the school going, Balanchine hired himself out to create dance sequences for Broadway shows and Hollywood films; one of these, the jazz ballet "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" for the 1936 musical *On Your Toes*, is now in the repertoire of the New York City Ballet. At a time when the standard onscreen credit for such efforts was "dance director," Balanchine insisted on "choreography by . . . ," to emphasize the creative aspect of dance making.

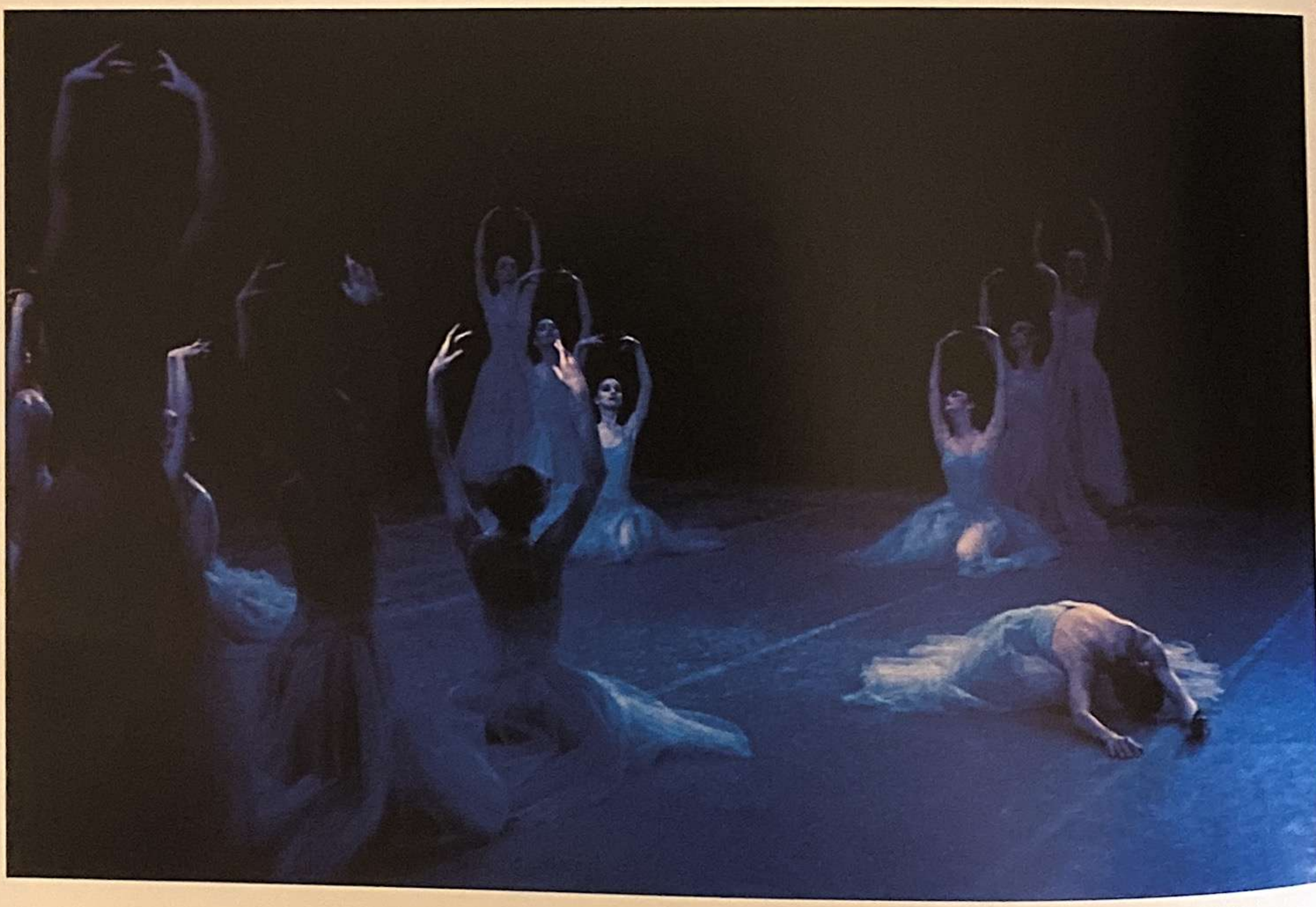
When the Second World War ended, Kirstein resumed his efforts to organize a company worthy of Balanchine's talents. The nonprofit Ballet Society that the two men founded in 1946 struggled along until 1948, when the New York City Center for Music and Drama asked them to establish a resident dance company. It was not quite the end of their

Maria Tallchief and Nicholas Mallames (right) in a pas de deux from The Four Temperaments staged by George Balanchine for photographer George Platt-Lynes in c. 1948. The ballet, as originally performed by Ballet Society in 1946 at the Central High School of Needle Trades auditorium in New York, had these costumes by Kurt Seligmann. When it was revived by the New York City Ballet in 1951, Seligmann's sets were dropped, and the dances wore plain leotards.

Balanchine's most fruitful musical collaborator was Igor Stravinsky. Below, they watch New York City Ballet principal dancers Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell rehearse their ballet Agon (1957). In 1968, Mitchell became one of the founders of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first classically oriented ballet company in the United States with only black dancers.







Almost fifty years of Balanchine ballets performed by the New York City Ballet: Apollo (1928; opposite top right), music by Igor Stravinsky, with Peter Martins and, from left, Suzanne Farrell, Kyra Nichols, and Karin von Aroldingen; Serenade (1934; opposite bottom), music by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky; The Four Temperaments (1946; opposite top left), music by Paul Hindemith; and Vienna Waltzes (1977; below), music by Johann Strauss (the Younger), Franz Lehár, and Richard Strauss.

money worries; the newly christened New York City Ballet showed a deficit in its first year of $47,000, which Kirstein made up out of his own pocket. Balanchine, who was still receiving commissions for his stage and film work, took no salary. But the goal he and Kirstein had pursued for fifteen years was now within reach: an artistic home where, with some assurance of continuity, Balanchine could make dances as he saw fit. What the world could expect from this unparalleled venture had been foreshadowed two years earlier when a subscription audience of Ballet Society saw the first performance of Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*, set to Paul Hindemith's *Theme and Four Variations for String Orchestra and Piano*.

Although Hindemith identified his four variations with the four medieval humors (melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, and choleric), the choreography does not follow this scheme in a literal way. When working with a pre-existing score, like Hindemith's, Balanchine typically spent more time familiarizing himself with the music—trying to understand "what the composer had in mind musically"—than he did working out the steps. He played the piece over and over again on the piano; if no piano transcription existed, he made one himself. By his own testimony, when he came into the studio on the first day of rehearsal he had no definite idea of what steps he wanted. Nor did he ever write anything down. Yet Balanchine always remained in complete command:

"Often I try a step, or a series of movements, on a particular dancer and then I change it to something else. I indicate the steps first and then the dancers repeat after me. . . . Sometimes I arrange the end of a ballet first; sometimes I commence in the middle. Rehearsal time is limited. . . . It has been my experience that dancers drop naturally into their parts; they gradually come to live them. Every detail is given; I show them every precise movement and the smallest mimed gesture and action."

Like most of Balanchine's work, *The Four Temperaments* is open to conflicting interpretations because it makes no attempt to represent anything outside itself and the music. To Suki Schorer, who danced in one of this ballet's pas de deux, the key to the choreography is that the male dancer is "manipulating . . . totally controlling the girl. The boy should appear to be strumming—playing—some sort of harp or cello. The girl is like an instrument."

To one critic, this same pas de deux looked as if the male partner were putting the ballerina "through an extraordinary sequence of precarious moves and off-kilter positions that render her totally vulnerable to his control. It is as if the man were experimenting with how far he could pull the ballerina off her own balance and still be performing classical ballet."

To another critic, the same sequence appeared to be "all about adagio—about where the woman places her legs and where the man holds her. The black and white practice clothes in which the ballet is now being done expose the mechanics of the pas de deux to make it quite sensual. There seems to be an extra weight, a lingering care, in the way the man clasps her waist, her thigh. The woman often has to lean back with her whole body against him, and he carries her off folded against his chest, where she's so secure that she can extend her legs forward as she's carried out."

Still another observer has focused on the angular use of the arms, the syncopated steps, the jazz-inspired hip thrusts that recall Balanchine's work on Broadway with African-American dancers like the Nicholas Brothers, and his collaboration with Katherine Dunham in the 1940 all-black musical *Cabin in the Sky*.

Tanaquil LeClercq, an early product of the School of American Ballet who danced in the first performance of *The Four Temperaments* (and who was later Balanchine's third wife), has summarized the choreographer's instructions to his first cast: "It should look maximum, 100 percent everything: move 100 percent, turn 100 percent, stop dead. Kick legs as much as you can, straight knee, pointed toe. . . . You have certain steps to do in a certain amount of time and the certain steps give it a certain flavor. But you can't interpret because you'll be late, you won't be with the music."

In class as in the studio, Balanchine typically spoke to his dancers in concrete terms. "Hug a tree," he told them when he wanted to see their arms form the fullest possible circle in front of them. If he found they were making too much noise when they landed after a leap, he told them, "Come to ground like mother bird descending on her eggs." To get just the right combination of energy and impassivity in a particular sequence, he once told Schorer: "Let your legs and feet be going like mad, but up here you're just going to be talk-

Katherine Dunham coaches dancers on the set of the Hollywood movie Green Mansions *(1959); the film, based on a romance set in South America by novelist W. H. Hudson, starred Audrey Hepburn.*

ing to me and thinking about a martini with an olive." He hated sentimentality. Dancers who suffered from what he called "Gisellitis"—brooding over the interpretation of a role—were assured that the emotion was already in the choreography: "Don't think about it, just do it." When a dancer showed emotion onstage, he rebuked her: "This is serious theater. Not a music hall." His goal was "purified gesture—gesture with all the bugs taken out." "Be a cold angel," he told one ballerina.

The word most often applied to Balanchine's own temperament was "cool." But the word he preferred was "cold": "Some people are hot, some cold. Which is better? I prefer cold. I have never cried at a ballet. I never cry anytime. I don't have that type of reaction. Actually, when people cry they are only thinking of themselves. They think, I'm poor, I'm unhappy, I'm lonely, why did my girlfriend leave me?"

He disdained the pose of the angst-ridden artist, quipping that his muse worked on "union time." He created the original *Prodigal Son* in just ten days, the 1949 revival of *Firebird* in a week. His style is called neoclassical because the era of Marius Petipa is known in ballet history as the heyday of classicism; while Balanchine slimmed down and speeded up and occasionally turned inside-out the classical idiom, his primary concern, like Petipa's, was a felicitous match between steps and score, between structured movement sequences and musical structure. "The structure of a ballet must be tight, compact, like the structure of a building; good ballets move in measured space and time, like the planets," he said.

He also said that he never put anything of his own life into his ballets. In fact, he was married four times to ballerinas and romantically involved with several others; and those who knew him well said that they could tell the state of his private life from the dances he staged. His famous statement, "Ballet is woman," earned him the wrath of some feminist critics who saw his entire oeuvre as a glorification of the patriarchal order in which men elevate and display women for their own pleasure. Certainly, Balanchine treated his ballerinas as tools of his art; he referred to Suzanne Farrell, perhaps the quintessential Balanchine ballerina, as "my Stradivarius." But then he treated all his dancers, male and female, the same way—which was precisely the purpose for which the New York City Ballet was established: to give Balanchine a set of tools, and the freedom to wield them, that no other dance-maker in history had ever enjoyed.

All dance-makers engage in a creative dialogue between their impulse toward self-expression and the traditional forms of dance they inherit from the past; some reject more of the past than others. As we have tried to show by examining a few seminal figures and their work, Western theatrical dance in the twentieth century has seen an especially vigorous dialogue between individual creativity and tradition. The closer we come to our own time, the more difficult it is to sort out the seminal figures whose work will give rise to the traditions of tomorrow. This is especially true because the dialogue has become international in scope. There is virtually no continent, no country, no culture in which dance-makers are not reexamining their traditions, borrowing from other traditions, and looking within themselves for new ways of using the human body to communicate with other human beings.

The contributions of African-American and Afro-Caribbean dance to the contemporary dance dialogue are perhaps best exemplified by the work and influence of Katherine Dunham, who was born in 1909 in Chicago to a middle-class black family. She began studying dance while in high school and helped put herself through the University of Chicago by giving dance lessons in an abandoned storefront where she also gave recitals; at the age of twenty-two she formed her own dance

company. Early on, Dunham conceived the idea of formulating a dance style that would connect with the roots of the black experience in the Americas. In 1934–35 she spent eighteen months in the Caribbean doing research for her master's thesis in dance anthropology, *The Dances of Haiti*. The dances she observed and participated in during this period formed the basis of the choreography that she developed for her own company on her return: "During the yonvalou we gravitated to partners, outdoing ourselves in undulating to low squatting positions, knees pressed against the knees of someone else without even realizing the closeness, each in his own transported world."

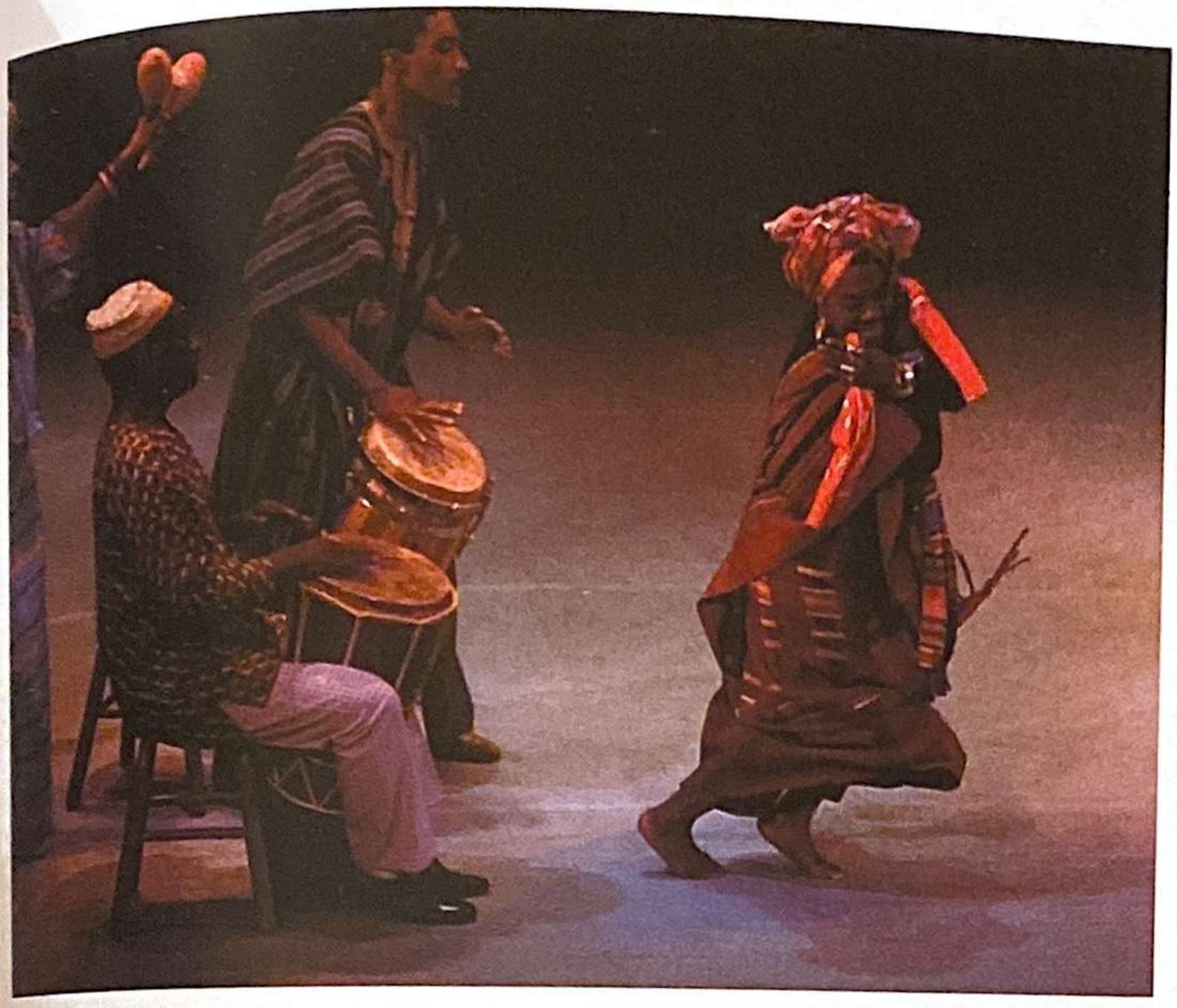
In 1938 Dunham described her long-range artistic goals as follows: "To establish a well-trained ballet group. To develop a technique that will be as important to the white man as to the Negro. To attain a status in the dance world that will give to the Negro dance-student the courage really to study, and a reason to do so." The recitals of her company received increasing attention, both in Chicago and in New York, but her career took a different turn when impresario Sol Hurok offered her the chance to reshape her work for the popular stage. In 1940 she appeared on Broadway in the all-black musical *Cabin in the Sky* (which she choreographed with George Balanchine). Between 1943 and 1965 the Dunham Company toured the United States and fifty-seven other countries in such productions as *Tropical Revue*, *Bal Nègre* and *Caribbean Rhapsody*. The dances in these shows ranged from "Shango," a reenactment of a Trinidadian religious ritual, to a suite of "Plantation Dances" that included "Cake-Walk," "Juba," and "Ballin' the Jack." Among the many Hollywood movies she either appeared in or choreographed, the best known is probably *Stormy Weather* (1943). She became the first black choreographer to work at the Metropolitan Opera, when she choreographed its 1963–64 production of *Aida*.

In 1945 she had realized a long-held dream by opening the Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York, which taught several generations of dancers and actors what scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild calls "the basic aesthetic principles of the African movement vocabulary." These involve the independent articulation of various parts of the torso so that, for example, the dancer "can play the pelvis against the rib cage in different rhythms and then offset that with a different pattern in the feet." To those who have studied it, the Dunham technique ranks with the Graham technique as one of the lasting achievements of twentieth-century dance.

Although Dunham's company made its last professional appearance in 1965, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company revived fourteen of her works, including "Shango," in 1987 with the aid of a $100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation. Ailey himself did not study with Dunham, but his interest in dance was kindled when, as a junior high school student in Los Angeles, he saw a performance of her company. After attending UCLA, Ailey began dancing professionally with Lester Horton (1906–1953), who developed an influential school of modern dance on the West Coast. In New York, Ailey studied with such prominent teachers as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Anna Sokolow, and Hanya Holm, a disciple of the pioneer of German modern dance, Mary Wigman (1876–1973). The multiracial repertory company that Ailey established in 1958 aimed at "providing art and entertainment, as well as institutionalizing modern dance by preserving works of the past and commissioning new ones." Ailey's best-known work is probably *Revelations* (1960), which is based on African-American spirituals. Since his death in 1989, the Ailey Dance Theater has continued under the direction of Judith Jamison.

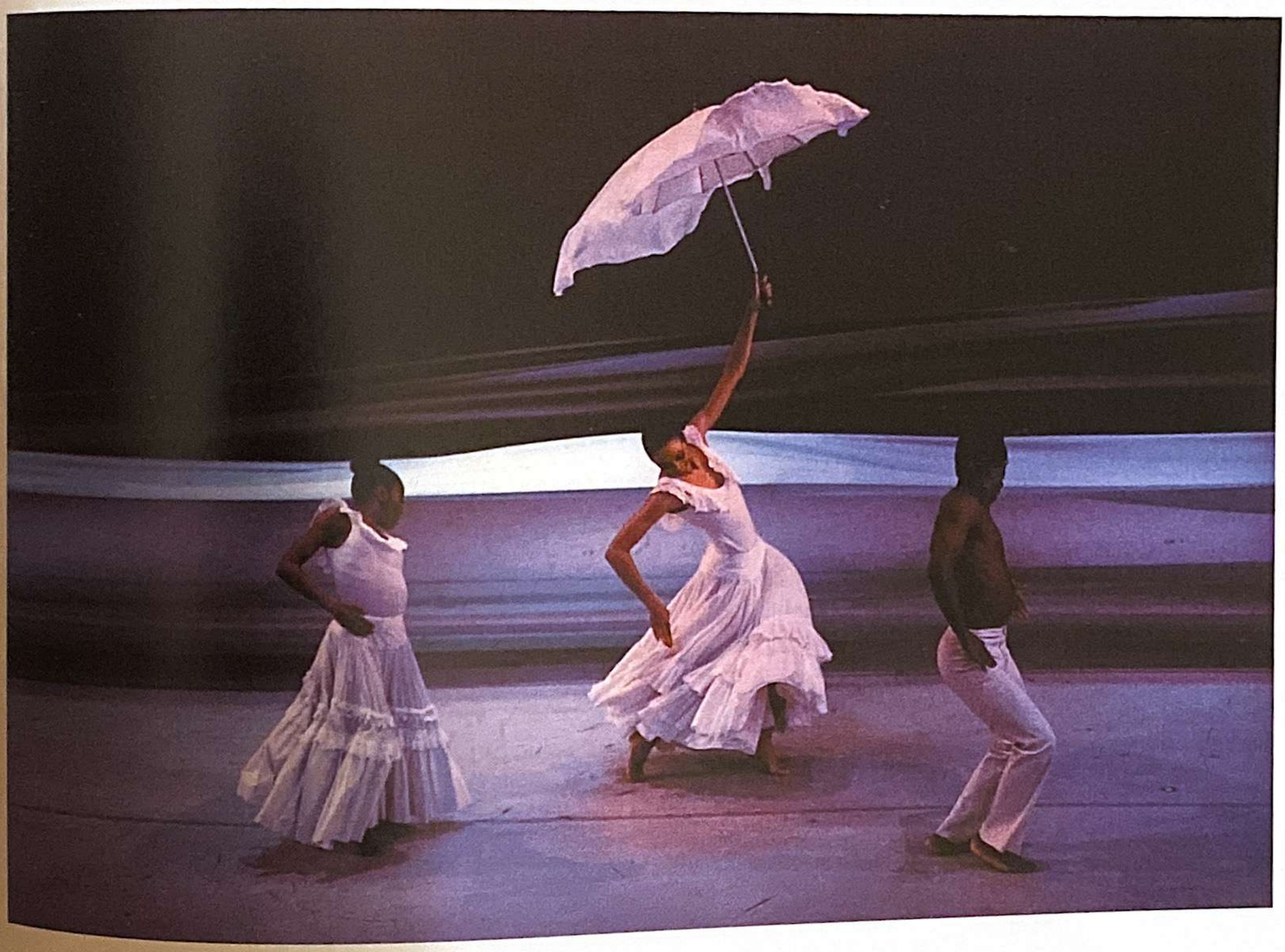
As noted earlier, an important "family" of twentieth-century dance-makers can be traced back to Martha Graham's company. Merce Cunningham left Graham in 1945 to begin his experiments (often in collaboration with composer John Cage) in liberating dance from what he saw as the theatrical trappings that limited its freedom. These trappings include many of the elements that distinguished Martha Graham's later dance dramas: story-telling, character development, emotional expression, musical cues, and what might be called the "tyranny" of the choreographer.

While Cunningham typically works out movement sequences in some detail with members of his company, the order in which these sequences are danced may be left up to the performers themselves or deter-



Like Katherine Dunham, dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Pearl Primus (left) has spent a lifetime exploring African and Caribbean dance and using these forms to create original works of her own. Here, she performs Fanga, based on a Liberian dance of welcome to honor a great chief. The occasion, appropriately, was a gala for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company in 1978. Accompanying her dance are master drummers Alphonse Cimber (seated) and her son Onwin Borde.

Below, a scene from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company's Revelations (1960), choreography by Alvin Ailey and music based on Afro-American spirituals. Here we see Donna Wood in the role that Judith Jamison had made famous: the umbrella-bearing leader of a group being baptised in cleansing waters, represented by billowing cloths of blue and white.



mined by a flip of a coin. Movements, score, and setting are created independently; often the dancers have not heard the music or seen the set before opening night.

As any statistician or gambler knows, the invocation of chance in a human undertaking does not necessarily preclude a sense of order. If a particular mood emerges during the creation of a piece, Cunningham may seal it with a title like *Summerspace* (1958) or *Winterbranch* (1964). Other titles are purely descriptive yet manage to capture some of Cunningham's process-oriented approach to dance-making, as in *How to Pass Kick Fall and Run* (1965). As for meaning, Cunningham has said: "If the dancer *dances*, everything is there. The meaning is there, if that's what you want. It's like this apartment where I live—I look around in the morning and ask myself, what does it all mean? It means: this is where I live. When I dance it means: this is what I am doing."

What the audience does at a Cunningham performance is its own business. In a piece called *Story* (premiered in 1963), an indeterminate number of dancers may perform all or any of eighteen choreographed sections on any given night; sets, costumes, even the choice of instruments is left up to the performers. But the "story" of the title, according to Cunningham, belongs to the audience: "The title does not refer to any implicit or explicit narrative, but to the fact that each spectator may interpret the events in his own way."

To the group of Cunningham-inspired dancers who came together at Judson Memorial Church in New York City in the early 1960s, even Cunningham was too rigid in his approach to dance. While Cunningham's dancers did not move *to* music, there was music of some sort at his concerts, and many of his movements betrayed his familiarity with conventional dance techniques, including ballet and the Graham technique. His work conveyed the feeling that he was making "art," which was something different from life, something just a little bit privileged. At Judson, nothing was privileged—except perhaps the unencumbered human body "doing its thing." Music wasn't necessary. It wasn't even necessary to be a trained dancer. If someone protested that ordinary actions, like walking, standing, and sitting, done by ordinary people off the street, were not dance, the Judson pioneers asked: Why not? On what grounds can anyone say what is and isn't dance?

The experiments of people like Robert Dunn, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Morris, Deborah Hay, Trisha Brown, and others were designed to jolt viewers out of unexamined preconceptions. One dance might consist of prerecorded instructions to move around the room to different locations. Another might begin with a dancer saying, "I've brought a dance and I will read it to you." Some dances were indistinguishable from adult parlor games. Admission to Judson concerts was by contribution. The choreographers were free to experiment in any way they chose. Yet poverty imposes its own limitations: Without a cohesive company of trained dancers to work with, a choreographer has no choice but to focus on dance that does not require any special technique; in the long run, however, virtuosity extends the range of possibilities for dance-making.

This is evident in the career of Paul Taylor, who danced with both Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham while building a company of his own. His early choreography, under the influence of Cunningham and Cage, was resolutely avant-garde. *Duet* (1957) consisted of Taylor standing still while another performer sat motionless for four minutes. As a dancer with the Graham company, he created some of the major male roles in her most important Greek dramas during the late 1950s and early 1960s. For his own company, he has staged carefully structured ensemble pieces like *Esplanade* (1975), in which his dancers run, skip, and jump at such a furious pace and with such virtuosic intensity that they come across as superbly trained athletes oblivious to the physical danger they court at every moment. Some of these dances have entered the repertoires of contemporary ballet companies.

Because Taylor, like the dancers in *Esplanade*, keeps going off in different directions, his work has resisted critical pigeonholing: Is it modern, reactionary, ironic, moralistic, all (or none) of the above? An even greater restlessness marks the work of a former Taylor dancer, Twyla Tharp, whose entire life has been an adventure in eclecticism. A native of Indiana, she moved with her parents to southern California when she was eight years old. From a childhood filled with music, one of her earliest memories is "seeing dances in my head." She studied ballet, violin, baton twirl-

ing, and tap dancing after putting in a full day at school. She also took private lessons in acrobatics, flamenco, viola, drumming, typing, shorthand, French, and German. In her free time, she helped out in her parents' drive-in movie theater, selling tickets and refreshments and watching the films which were, she now says wryly, her only contact with the outside world.

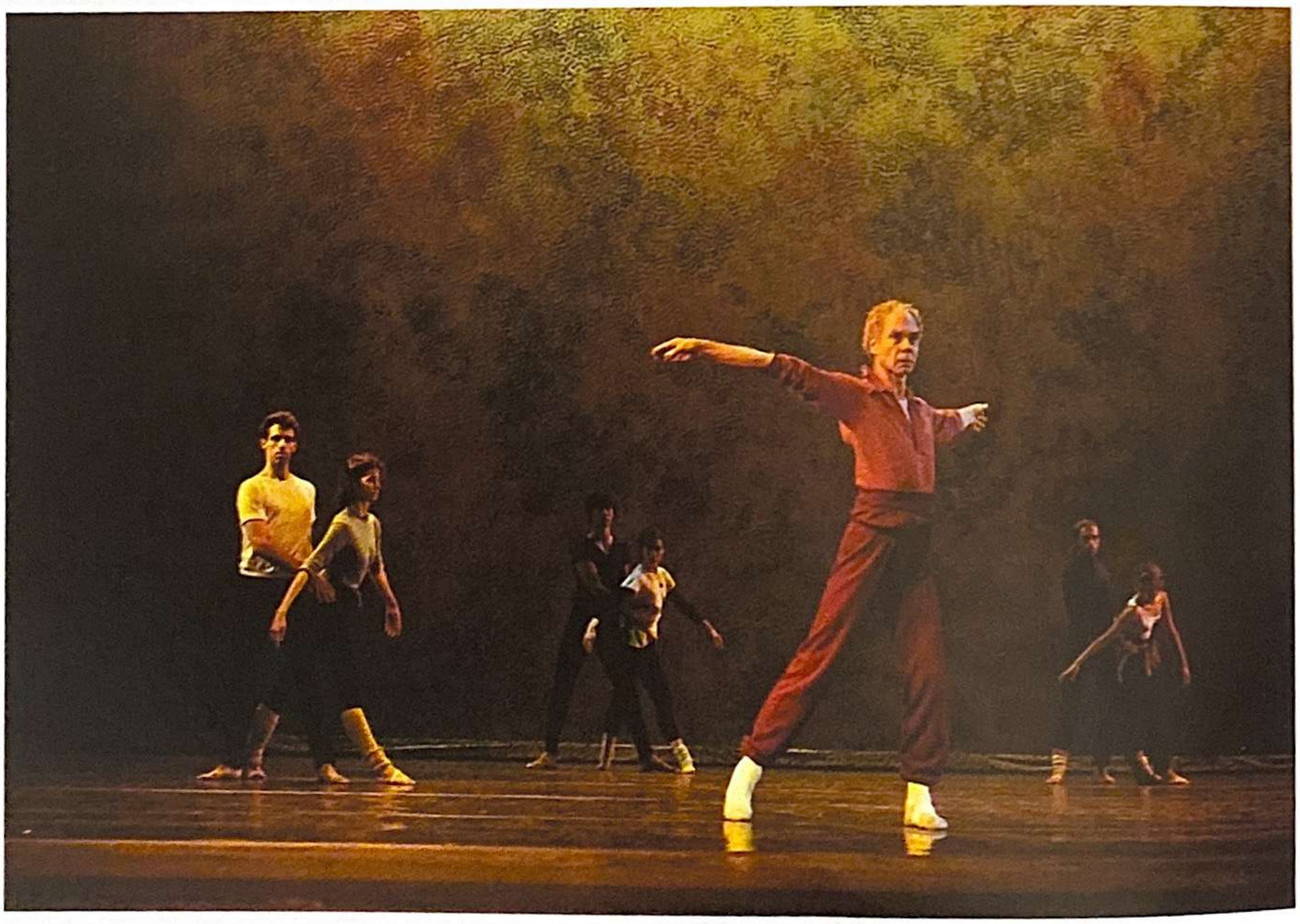
She entered Pomona College in 1959 as a premed student, then switched to comparative literature. But dance was becoming more and more important to her, and in her sophomore year, she transferred to Barnard College in New York, a city where she could study ballet with former Maryinsky dancers, take classes with people like Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins, and Alwin Nikolais, and see as much dance as she liked. What she liked best was the work of Cunningham, Graham, Balanchine, and Taylor. She also fancied "show-biz" dancing, from Broadway musicals to the Rockettes, because the dancers seemed to be having such a good time. After graduating from Barnard in 1963, she joined Paul Taylor's company because his own dancing and his easygoing personality appealed to her. (Her lifelong idol was George Balanchine, but she did not have enough ballet training to even consider trying out for the New York City Ballet.)

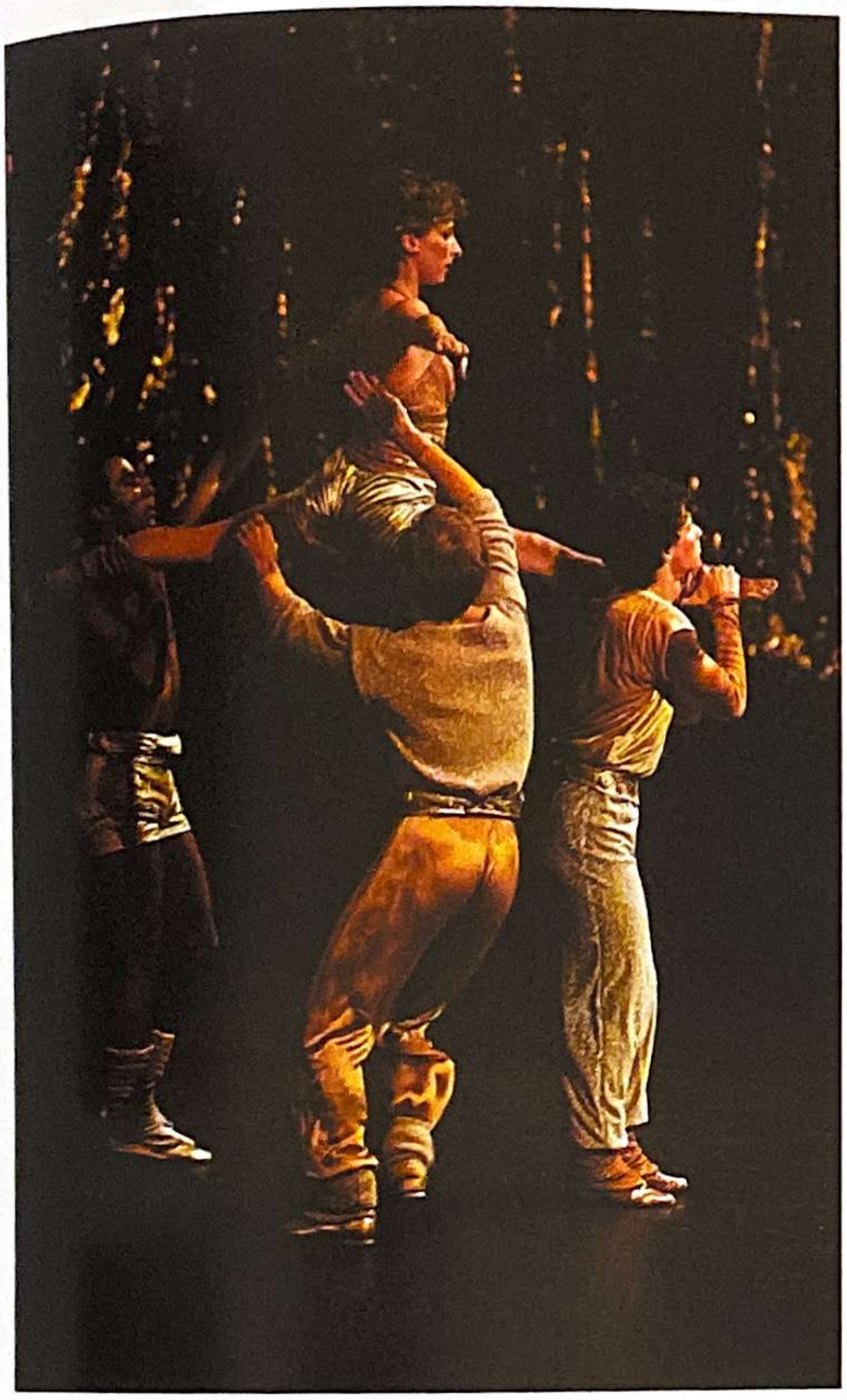
Two years later she left the Taylor company to start making her own dances. In her first solo effort, *Tank Dive* (1965), she combined ballet steps with a head-first slide across the floor that looked like something out of a sandlot baseball game. She spent the next five years doing what most other young choreographers in New York were doing—"reinventing dance" by exploring the fundamentals of bodies moving through space and time. While her experiments paralleled those going on at Judson Church (where she occasionally appeared), her approach was always a bit more theatrical, more open to the allure of emotion, of virtuosity. Together with the small company of dancers she had assembled, she rehearsed and performed in gymnasiums, social halls, schools, art galleries, parks, lofts, even theaters. Despite her lifelong "addiction" to classical music (Mozart, in particular), these pieces were unaccompanied, although they made imaginative use of props, such as the raw eggs that Tharp methodically dropped on the floor in a piece called *Re-Moves*.

One way to understand the agitation in the New York dance community in the 1960s is to compare it to the civil-rights agitation of the same era. The civil-rights activists were impatient to realize society's stated goal of providing equal opportunity for every American—an ideal guaranteed by law since 1868. The dance experimentalists were impatient to realize the long-stated ideal of modern dance: to clear away all rules, conventions, and habits that kept the body from being truly free in its movement. To do this, it was necessary to question not only assumptions from previous centuries—such as the idea that dance must be accompanied by music—but also more recent assertions that linked dance with self-expression or social action. Behind all the experimentation lay a simple hypothesis: Only when there is nothing that you *must* do, are you really free to do what you want—which may include thumbing your nose at the past or paying your respects to it.

In 1971 Twyla Tharp presented *Eight Jelly Rolls*, a dance accompanied by old jazz recordings of Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers. In fact, the dances in *Eight Jelly Rolls* had not been choreographed to the Morton music that the audience heard but to *other* early recordings. Nevertheless, the work represented something of a departure within an avant-garde dance community that was more accustomed to seeing works choreographed to minimalist music, weird sound effects, or unbroken silence. Tharp's newfound determination to please, even charm, her audience was also apparent in a show-stopping solo called *The Drunk*, in which she reeled and staggered around the stage like an inebriated clown, trying to keep up with a high-stepping drill team.

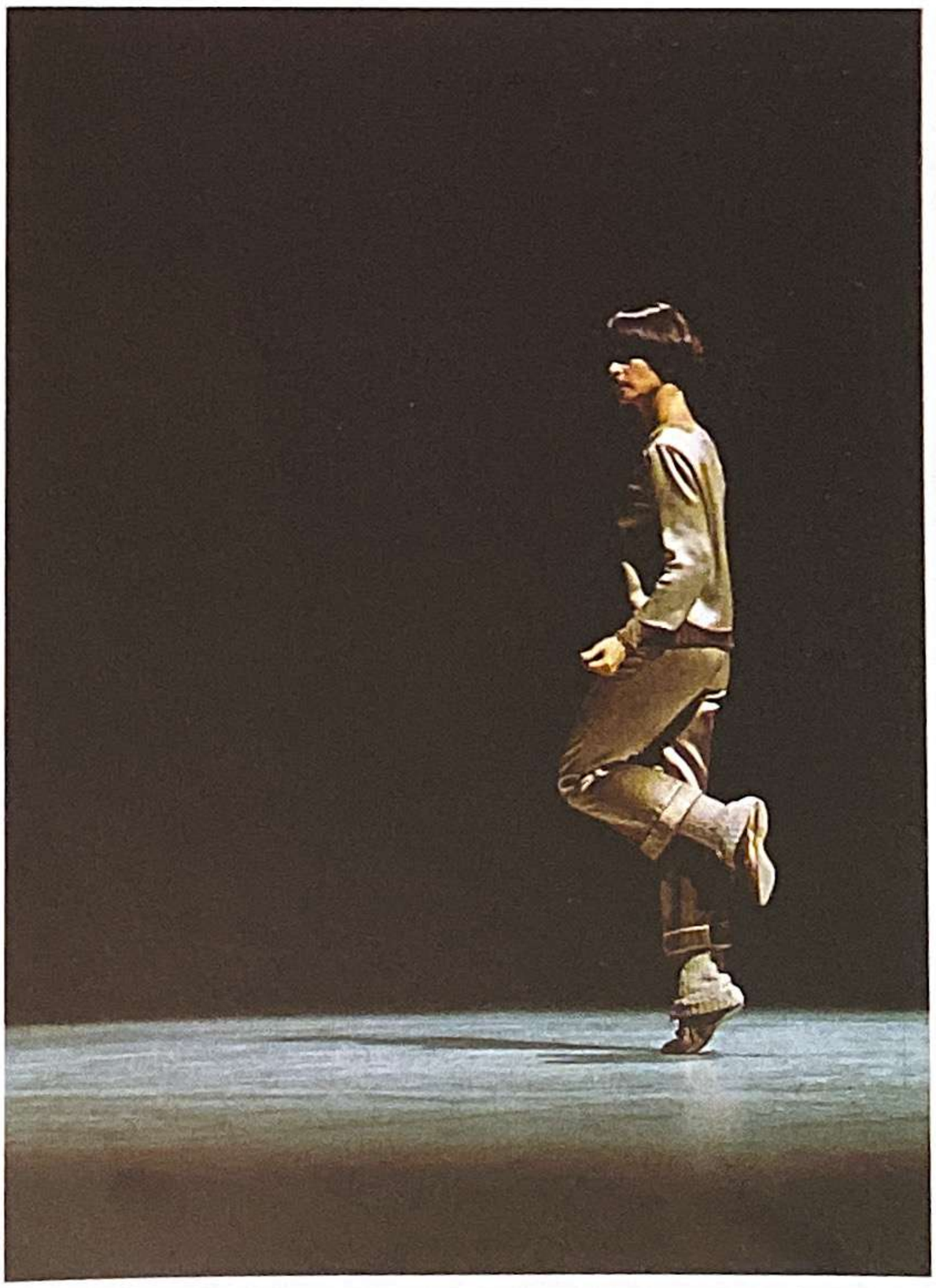
For many experimentalists of the 1960s, the 1970s were a time of reconsideration. When Robert Joffrey asked Tharp to make a dance for his ballet company, she went all out to communicate to a new audience. The music she chose was a medley of tunes by the Beach Boys. The steps she created for six of her dancers and fifteen members of the Joffrey Ballet ran the gamut from burlesque to frug, with references to ballet technique throughout. While subway graffiti artists created a new spray-painted backdrop during each performance, dancers from two different traditions struck sparks from one another on the crowded stage. In the words of critic Marcia Siegel, Tharp's witty maelstrom of nonstop movement was "neither





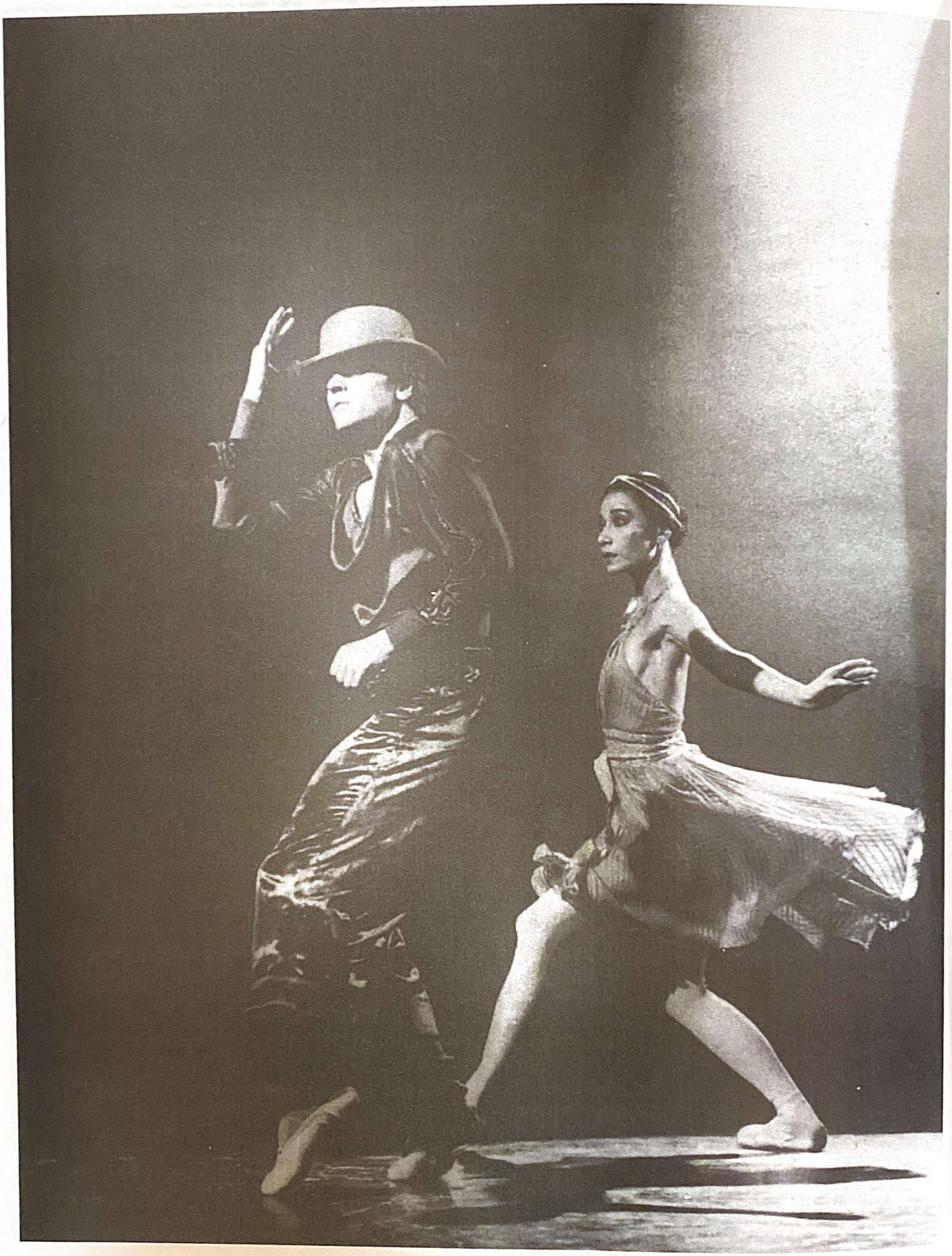
Members of Twyla Tharp's troupe (left) dance the Golden Section, the final segment of The Catherine Wheel (1981), choreography by Tharp and music by David Byrne.

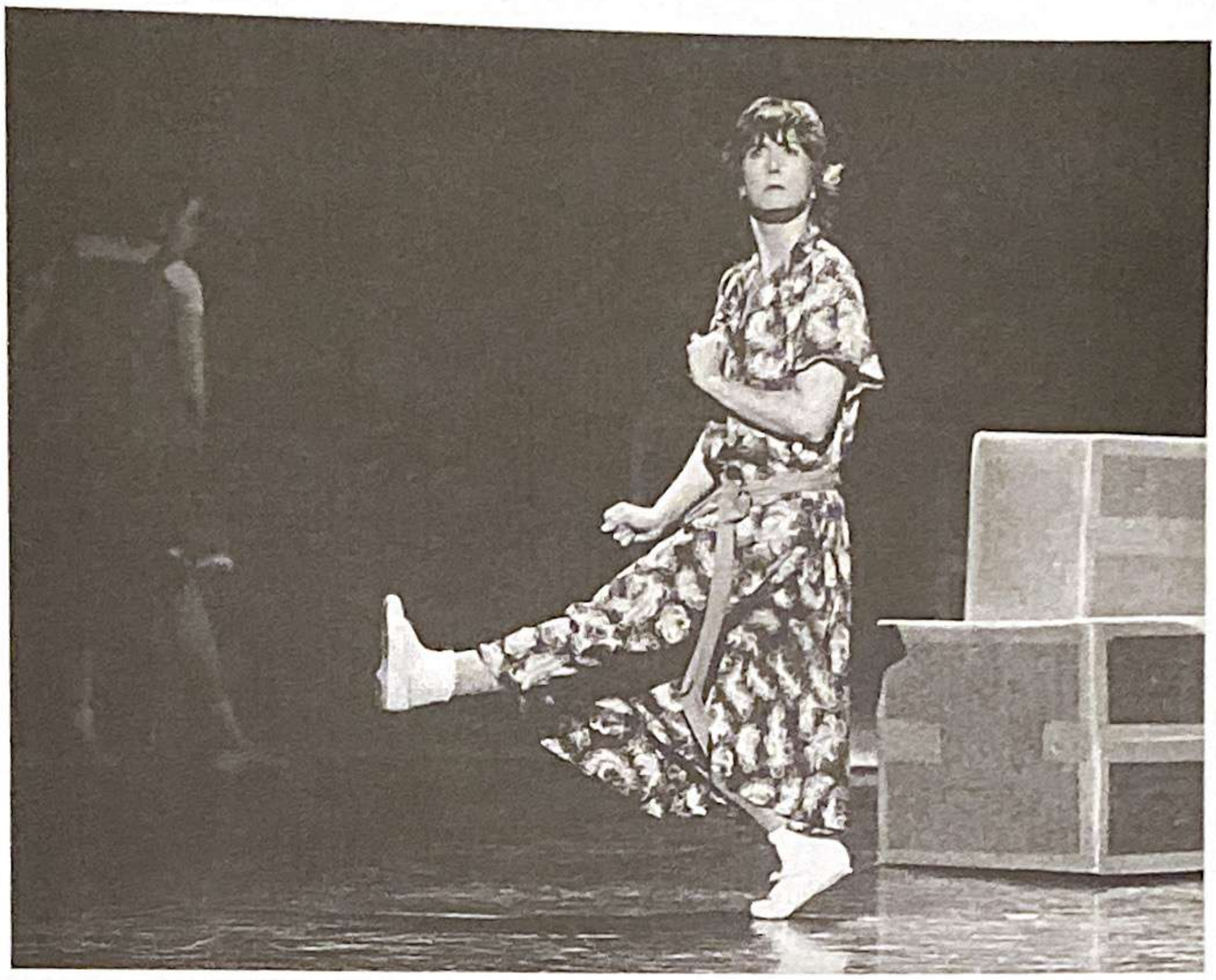
Below, Twyla Tharp in Sue's Leg (1975), choreography by Tharp and music by Fats Waller.



Opposite top: The Paul Taylor Dance Company production of Esplanade (1975), choreography by Paul Taylor and music by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Opposite bottom: Merce Cunningham, seen here with his company in Exchange (1978), has followed in the Ballets Russes tradition of working with important contemporary artists, among them Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol.





Twyla Tharp (right) in When We Were Very Young *(1982), choreography by Twyla Tharp with texts written and recited by Thomas Babe, which was produced on Broadway by her own company on the eve of her fortieth birthday.*

Opposite: Mikhail Baryshnikov and Elaine Kudo in the opening movement of Twyla Tharp's Push Comes to Shove *(1976), music by Joseph Haydn and Joseph Lamb, in which the Russian dancer displayed a facility with movement vocabularies quite different from the classical style he had mastered at the Kirov. This was Tharp's first choreography for the American Ballet Theater, and the first major piece made for Baryishnikov by an American choreographer following his arrival in the United States in 1974.*

modern dance nor pop dance [but] a disciplined free-for-all of dancing that is reserved, competitive, exuberant, and stylistically unique." It was also, at times, sexy and silly and, in its unpredictable juxtapositions of balletic and show-biz conventions, laugh-out-loud funny.

Not at all coincidentally, Tharp's desire to communicate with a larger audience (even while some former colleagues in the avant-garde whispered "sellout") brought her to the attention of the grant-giving agencies that had begun to support dance in America. In 1963 the Ford Foundation had announced a series of multimillion-dollar grants to the School of American Ballet, the New York City Ballet, and other institutions committed to Balanchine-style neoclassical dance. In 1965 government support of the arts, including dance, was put on a continuing basis with the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council of the Arts; both agencies awarded grants to companies like Tharp's on the basis of decisions by panels of dancers, choreographers, and dance presenters.

Tharp went on to set dances to music as varied as that of Franz Joseph Haydn, Frank Sinatra, and Philip Glass. She created a popular and critically acclaimed piece called *Push Comes to Shove* for Mikhail Baryshnikov and the American Ballet Theater; collaborated with Jerome Robbins on a new ballet, *Brahms/Handel*, for the New York City Ballet; and made dances for films, television, and Broadway. All in all, she has been perhaps the most visible manifestation of what is sometimes termed "crossover" dance—dance that rules out nothing, from ballet to boogaloo, from Bach to rock. Her own label for what she does is simply: dance.

The establishment of public funding agencies that support dancers and choreographers on the advice of other dancers and choreographers represents a significant break from the past. Despite the occasional threat of censorship by bureaucrats and legislators unhappy with "controversial" works, the dance world today probably has a greater control over its finances than at any time in history. One result has been a proliferation of small "experimental" dance troupes whose work appeals to a large number of small and diverse audiences. The newest generation of experimenters recognizes no boundaries—geographical or otherwise—in its search for dance that speaks to contemporary audiences. This search is fueled by an unprecedented interplay of cultures and traditions on a truly global scale. Inevitably, most of the new dances that emerge from this creative ferment are quickly forgotten. Twyla Tharp, for one, cannot even remember some of her early works, a loss she characteristically refuses to mourn. She has compared the desire to preserve dances for posterity with the urge to prolong the pleasure from a mouthful of bubble gum: "You can keep on chewing for ten hours but after about a minute and a half you've got all the good out of it."

Despite the long and revered tradition in which he worked, George Balanchine also insisted that there was no sense in creating dances for posterity. He liked to compare ballets to flowers: "A flower doesn't tell you a story. It's in itself a beautiful thing." And as flowers do, he expected his ballets to fade over time: "I think ballet is NOW. Not about what will be. Because as soon as you don't have these bodies to work with, it's already finished. . . . I'm not interested at all that there will be some dancers who could do something of mine in the future. It wouldn't be right because I would have to do it myself."

Butoh is Japan's post–World War II experimental dance. It originated in 1959, when Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–86) resigned from the All-Japan Art Dance Association following an uproar over a performance that made use of a live chicken. With a number of collaborators, including Ono Kazuo, Hijikata developed a style of choreographic extremism designed to startle the Japanese into recognizing unpalatable truths about their society. The name given to their movement was ankoku butoh, *which can be translated as "dance of the dark soul." Butoh has since evolved a more flexible aesthetic that makes room for lyricism and even humor alongside grotesquerie. Ono (above) can be seen in his* Admiring la Argentina, *a choreographic tribute to the Hispanic dancer La Argentina (c.1888-1936), who inspired him to a career in dance. Ono was seventy-nine when this photograph was taken in 1985.*

Opposite: A member of the all-male butoh troupe Sankai Juku (top) is suspended from a rope high above Washington, D.C., in The Hanging Piece *(1985). Bottom, members of Sankai Juku now perform the last segment of* Kinkan Shonen *in homage to Yoshiyuki Takada, a member of the troupe who died during a 1985 performance of* The Hanging Piece *in Seattle, Washington. Sankai Juku, which can be translated as "studio of mountain and sea," was founded in the mid-1970s by Ushio Amagatsu (hanging by his feet in the photograph), a leading member of the second generation of butoh performers.*