Canada’s History of Dance in the early Nineteenth Century

Research Paper

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As we move through the twenty-first century, classical dance is slowly becoming less appreciated by the public as a form of entertainment. People are becoming less interested in watching the art in motion, and even fewer are willing to participate in it. However, during settlement before Confederation in Canada, dance played a large part in many aspects of Canadian lifestyle. While Canada was still trying to discover its identity, dance was already influencing the development of Canadian civilization as well as its interests as a society. These influences blossomed from the origin of dance styles that were brought into Canada. Canada’s society was shaped by its people, and those people were from a variety of countries – all with completely different cultural backgrounds. Many people have been discovered in this time period that made a large impact on the dance community, and there are still countless names who are yet to be recognized for making dance so well-known and loved throughout society. Not only was it one of the largest forms of entertainment, it was also a large aid in bringing together citizens at times of celebration. My research paper will expand on the most popular dance styles in the nineteenth century, the dancers and choreographers who contributed most to the success of dance in that time period, as well as what dance said for Canadian society and the lifestyle of Canadians in the Pre-Confederation era.

**Cultural Influences in Canadian Dance; Common Dance Styles in the Nineteenth Century**

Dance styles in Canada in the nineteenth century were similar to the growth of Canada’s culture in terms of influence. That is, dance and theatre came into Canada with its settlers. Each country brought in their own renditions of certain dance styles; other dances were known only in that specific country before being introduced to Canadians. Seeing as there were new settlers from many different countries that came to Canada at this time, there were many different dance and cultural influences. The countries that contributed the most to dance in Canada were France and Great Britain, both bringing in dance styles and techniques suited to their cultures. While the English brought in national dances such as hornpipes and Highland flings as well as dances including minuets, gavottes and other old court dances, the French were best-known for acquainting Canada with ballet, quadrilles, and waltzes[[1]](#footnote-1) – even though the waltz originated in Germany.[[2]](#footnote-2) Other nations such as Scotland, Ireland, Italy, and Germany also introduced their own traditional styles of dance. “Around 1800, cotillions, quadrilles and, to a lesser extent, polkas and mazurkas were in vogue, while in Upper Canada and the Maritimes square dances, reels, jigs, and hornpipes were danced. In the towns, waltzes, menuets, schottisches and quadrilles gained special favour.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The unique thing about dance as a performing art is the fact that it does not require a language to portray the message behind it. “French and English Canadians each had their favourite dances. But as dances usually have no text, they are not restricted by language barriers and migrate from one nation to another more easily than do songs.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As for theatrical dances, ballet was the most popular. Each country that danced ballet had its own variation of style and technique. In the nineteenth century, the Romantic and Classical ballet forms were the most prominent. From 1810 to 1830, English-style ballet was all that Canadians knew.[[5]](#footnote-5) After that, French ballet took the stage and piqued everyone’s interest as a refreshment from English ballet– until Spanish performers arrived in 1860 and stole the show with their Spanish interpretation of ballet.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Important People that shaped the World of Dance**

Anne Fairbrother performed small acting and dancing parts in numerous shows at the Surrey and Sadler’s Wells theatres in London.[[7]](#footnote-7)In 1826 she married her husband, Charles Hill, who was an actor in the Convent Garden area in Great Britain.[[8]](#footnote-8) After touring Britain together, Anne becoming a principal dancer at Brighton’s Theatre Royal in London, and Charles becoming the actor-manager for the company, the Hills were forced to flee to America after the company’s bankruptcy.[[9]](#footnote-9) They eventually made the move to Montreal, making their Canadian debut in 1843.[[10]](#footnote-10) They secured jobs with the Theatre Royal run by their friend, John Nickinson, where Anne was given many positive reviews, calling her the most graceful and elegant dancer Montreal had ever seen.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the off season, the Hills organized a dance academy each winter when the theatre was closed, where amateur actors and playwrights were taught new skills from Charles and dance lessons were given by Anne.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In 1849 the Hills went on a tour of what was then called Canada West with the Lyceum troupe, giving most of their performances in Toronto and Hamilton.[[13]](#footnote-13) The three Kendall sisters became stars with the Lyceum troupe in 1850, and were highlighted for their French style of ballet to contrast the Hills English-ballet talents.[[14]](#footnote-14) Anne had roles both dancing and acting, while Charles was their manager as well as actor when needed.[[15]](#footnote-15) Their three children came with them. “[Their] son Charles John Barton played romantic leads, daughter Rosalie was second dancer and *ingénue,* and younger son Robert Herbert was box-office manager.”[[16]](#footnote-16) On top of the families playing large parts in their shows, they also included local amateurs to fill supporting roles.[[17]](#footnote-17) Joining them for a majority of the touring season was Sallie St. Clair, a young dancer from America who studied French-based ballet, rather than Anne’s English influence.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Ravel Brothers were a popular troupe in Toronto; they were mostly focused on circus entertainment, but also highlighted dance talents.[[19]](#footnote-19) Staged pantomime adapted from the French boulevard theatres. Charles Mazurier, French dancer-pantomime who appeared frequently in the Ravel Brothers’ shows, was a crowd favourite, and shows featuring him were most popular. The Ravel Brothers put on several shows in Toronto, many featuring the Dominique Checkinis – ballet and pantomime performers.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Dominique Checkinis introduced and piqued the interest of a new style of dance for the Toronto audience: English-style ballet. Eventually, the Checkinis opened a dancing and fencing academy when they left the Ravel Brothers’ troupe to reside in Toronto.[[21]](#footnote-21) They gave lessons on “Quadrilles, Mazurkas, Gallopades, and Waltzes”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Unfortunately, their academy proved unsuccessful in the first season, seeing as there was no advertisement for any more seasons after the first.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Gwinne and Elsworth troupe, created in 1839, introduced a continuing trend in the performance world – one that is still seen in today’s shows. This trend is called the “star system,”[[24]](#footnote-24) which is hiring guest stars to perform with the company for one to three shows. A popular guest star was Emma Ince, an American ballet dancer who studied the French-style ballet[[25]](#footnote-25) – a style of ballet that was very new to Canada, and eventually took precedence over English-style ballet.[[26]](#footnote-26) Two regular performers with the Gwinne and Elsworth troupe were Constance and Rosetta Clarke, two sisters from England who – evidently – performed English-style ballet.[[27]](#footnote-27) The three dancing together made for a very intriguing performance, allowing the audience to see and compare the two different styles of ballet.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In 1849, the first company dedicated to ballet performances was formed.[[29]](#footnote-29) The troupe was from Italy, and was called the Italian Ballet Company.[[30]](#footnote-30) The company was directed by Signor Coppa, and starred Signora Giovanna Ciocca, from Milan, along with her partner, Gaetano Neri. Gaetano was “a principal dancer and aspiring choreographer who had performed in Spain, Italy, and Portugal.”[[31]](#footnote-31)Although the company was called the Italian Ballet Company, Signora Giovanna Ciocca and Gaetano Neri were the only two in the company who were actually Italian. One was from New York, another from London but was working in Philadelphia at the time he was recruited, and another in Toronto.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Henri Bouxary was trained and performed in France before moving to America in the 1840’s.[[33]](#footnote-33) He went on tour with another French-trained dancer, ballerina Hermine Belangy.[[34]](#footnote-34) It was touring America that Henri acquainted with his second wife, Julia Vallee, a dancer who was made popular performing with her three sisters in Philadelphia.[[35]](#footnote-35) The two moved back to America in 1855, after a five-year stint of living in Europe.[[36]](#footnote-36) Upon their return, they joined John Nickinson’s troupe in Toronto, performing alongside the Cook sisters (and quickly outshining them with their talents).[[37]](#footnote-37)

The showcasing of Spanish dancers to Toronto began in the late 1850’s.[[38]](#footnote-38) Senora Ysabel Cubas, along with Senor Juan Ximenes were of the first Spanish performers to appear in theatres Toronto.[[39]](#footnote-39) They brought a new light to ballet, introducing the Spanish-influenced ballet styles to the stages and refreshing the audience from the English and French ballets that they were used to for so many decades.

**Dance’s Influence on Pre-Confederation Canadian Lifestyle and Society**

Dance can say a lot about a country’s society or it’s people’s lifestyle. It can determine aspects of their social life, their favoured forms of entertainment, and the lightness or seriousness of their culture. “Dancing was an integral part of Canadian life for all levels of society. Visitors remarked on the frequency and numbers of participants.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Dance was proved to be a very large part in the social lives of Canadian citizens of that time. Aside from them going to shows to watch dance, Canadians often held gatherings in their homes where dancing occurred as a way to celebrate their quality of life.[[41]](#footnote-41) These gatherings most often occurred in the winter months, when frigid weather conditions put working outdoors to a halt.[[42]](#footnote-42) “The clear frosty weather no sooner commences, than all thoughts about business are laid aside, and every one devotes himself to pleasure. The inhabitants meet in convivial parties at each other’s houses, and pass the day with music, dancing, card-playing, and every social entertainment that can beguile the time.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Winter was a time for festivities and celebrations, and there is no better way to partake in the joy than dancing; or so it seems from the amount of dancing that was done at such gatherings in a social, cheerful aspect.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Non-traditional forms of dance were introduced to Canada by settlers from all countries. Each style of dance varied from country to country depending on their culture and lifestyle. Ballet was especially influenced by England, France, and Spain; each country’s interpretation of ballet heavily altered the style and technique within its respective variation. From the early 1800’s to Canada’s confederation, there were many people that strongly impacted the face of entertainment in Canada. From troupe directors to small parts actors, all that were involved in theatre played a major part in helping shape the society that Canada is today. In the nineteenth century, social dancing as part of festivities was just as relevant to society as theatrical dance in performances. Although there is very little research done about dance in Canada before Confederation, the documents that have been found show just how important dance was to society in that time period. In the future, any further research I choose to endeavour on dance in the nineteenth century will regard the other styles of dance that were common, as well as more on the performing aspect of dance. My questions I will intend to answer will be: what did dance performances consist of, how long were they, and what did they have for costuming? Dance had a huge impact on the revelation of Canada’s identity. It is deserving of more recognition, as it helped shape Canada in such a positive, symbolic way.

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