

# HAS BALLET BECOME TRACK AND FIELD ?

by Gus Dick Andros

Watching athletes, on TV, perform astonishing feats of strength and skill at track and field meets is impressive, but it does not involve me emotionally. However, I do understand that the athlete who jumps the highest or comes in first is the winner.

Today, throughout the world, there are many ballet competitions designed to determine the best ballet dancers. I see perfect bodies creating remarkable movements yet, like watching track and field, I remain unaffected emotionally. When ballet becomes an event that can be compared to a 100 yard dash, the art ceases to exist.

As a teacher for the New York International Ballet Competition, I saw that talent alone was not part of the judging. Judges rated dancers on their ability to perform technical steps. Their ability to engage an audience didn't count. The girl, in my opinion, who should have won didn't even place. Her performance had technique, taste, and beauty. At the Gala, when she stepped on stage, the audience gave her the only standing ovation of the night. I felt that I had been vindicated when the audience agreed with my judgment. They knew what was good, but the judges told them they were wrong. Like the Olympics, where the winners receive offers of big money, the winners of the ballet competitions receive offers from major ballet companies.

A great actress once defined technique as "what you fall back on when you don't feel like acting." Vladimir Horowitz, the renowned concert pianist, taught master classes to pianists, that he said, were better technicians than himself. After hearing them perform, he would ask, "When are you going to play music?"

I had the pleasure of working with Maria Tallchief when she and Andre Eglevsky were the stars of the New York City Ballet. In one of the ballets, the choreography called for her to execute a double attitude turn followed by a supported promenade. With ease she performed this movement flawlessly with Eglevsky. However, one day Tallchief asked the choreographer if she could try a single turn instead of a double. Of course, since she was the star of the company, the choreographer readily agreed. When I watched Tallchief and Eglevsky preparing to do this movement, I wondered what would be the results. Instead of seeing a spellbinding technical feat, I saw an enthralling movement of a beautiful butterfly. Maria was willing to give up the bravos for pure line and beauty. That was a great lesson. "That less is more."

Art should tell us something about ourselves and the world we live in and to stimulate us emotionally. Looking at a painting, do we check the brush strokes or do we look at the overall beauty of the artist's work? When I go to the ballet, I need to feel love, joy, humor, sadness. I don't go to see acrobatics.

Some of my students might question those remarks because I have a reputation for giving difficult classes. It's true, I will do everything in my power to get my students to execute one extra turn or to jump an inch or two higher. What I am trying to convey is that technique allows the dancer to emote feelings of love or joy without fear of falling. Daily my students hear from me, "The priority in dance is line and musicality." I was lucky to have studied with many of Diaghilev's dancers. The Russians taught me technique and the power to engage the audience, and as a ballet teacher I try to pass on what I was given. A young teacher told me that I taught like it was 1927. My answer to him was, "If it was good enough for Pavlova and Nijinsky--it is good enough for my students." I also tell my students, "If anyone asks what kind of ballet I teach, tell them I teach pre-historic ballet."

Today, people often believe, if a critic says something is good, it must be good. After all, critics must know more than we know. Not so! Many critics have never seen such ballerinas as Alicia Markova, Mia Slavenska or Nana Gollner at their peak. Some have no reference to use as a yardstick. To know the art, one should have experienced it. Some critics have never danced and many more have never performed professionally. They have a right to their opinions, but their opinions should not be able to make or break a dance company or the dancers. A critic remarked that the New York City Ballet was his favorite. "No other company could compare to it." How can this critic, without bias, fairly judge other companies?

Another critic hates Cecchetti technique, because when she was my student she could not think or move that fast, she became so frustrated that it had to be the fault of the technique--not hers! An English critic, prefers the coldness of the English dancers to the exuberance of the American dancers. Also, when asked to contribute money, I feel I should have a choice, PBS does not give me that choice. *Dance in America* is produced by a lady that believes Peter Martins is the choreographer of our time. He may have some talent, but it is minimal. She does not make the effort to see companies other than the New York City Ballet. Why do we give these people in power the right to dictate to us? Why not be our own judge?

What has happened to ballet since I was a dancer? Although the change was gradual, it was accelerated with the arrival of Rudolf Nureyev. Audiences came to the ballet for the first time to see his athletic ability, his turns and jumps. Nureyev could act and make you feel the emotions he was dancing. He set the goal for all male dancers. Unfortunately, many young dancers neglected to see his emotional power, and some neglect to convey the character of their roles by depending on technical tricks instead relying on the emotional content. Many ballets have become nothing more than circus performances.

When I saw Nora Kaye in *Fall River Legend*, I felt the pain and fear she portrayed. When she ran toward the audience with her arms outstretched and her mouth opened wide in a silent scream. I gripped the arm rests and crouched in my seat. Nora didn't do thirty-two *fouettes* or double *sauté basques* to achieve this effect. How can anyone forget the laughter she gave us in *Gala Performance* or the frightening spider in *The Cage*. She

certainly could do the tricks, but she didn't get the title "Duse of the Dance" by startling audiences with her virtuosity.

Sally Wilson was a brilliant technician. She also was a dancer/actress, who chose to use dance to tell a story. Her mentor, Antony Tudor told stories through his choreography, his ballets made you laugh, cry and think. There were no tricks in his dramatic *Pillar of Fire* or his sensitive *Romeo and Juliet*.

Today's ballets would have held no interest for me when I was a young dancer. I believe it is the public who is the blame for the lack of new choreographers. As long as the audience wants to see turns, extensions, jumps, and run the gambit of the ballet vocabulary without feelings and emotions, that's what the choreographers will create. It doesn't take much talent to choreograph a musical sporting event. People who pay for the tickets, should dictate what they will see. It is the public's job to insist on good ballet by boycotting ballets that look like sporting events.

Many dancers would agree that dance is no longer the art they loved. Frederic Franklin (former premiere danseur with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo) quoted his former partner, the legendary ballerina Alexandra Danilova, as saying, "Freddy, aren't you glad we stopped when we did?"

Some time I feel like Don Quixote fighting windmills. Nevertheless, I will fight until my last breath to educate the public to the difference between ballet and track and field.