

## Why study dance history at all?

by Sharon Butler

“Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies, ed. Geraldine Morris and Lorraine Nicholas (Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2018) is a collection of essays by scholars, teachers and dancers from across Europe and America. It tackles the question of the importance of dance history head on, addressing itself to a post-modern critical climate that challenges attempts to construct “history” at all. In her opening chapter, Lorraine Nicholas concludes however that “a useable dance history...gives meaning to individual experience as part of wider historical forces” (p, 17).

Sadly, most UK dance institutions don't bother much with dance history. No academic institution in the UK offers a coherent study of dance before the classical ballet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Few opportunities to learn any dances of the previous 400 years of recorded dancing are available. One dance student encountering historical dance flatly stated, “Technically these dances are dead.” How can a dance die when we know its steps, its patterns, its music, its costumes, its staging? Sadly, all dancers, and even choreographers, die; arguably such dances never do. It seems strange that young dancers should react this way, when artists, writers, musicians, even *fashionistas*, constantly return with gusto to the revival of their earliest traditions. Why is the historical study of dance so disregarded?

### A change in the cultural climate for dance history?

Recently, attitudes to dance history have shown signs of change. A concern for legacy can be seen emerging in *Network of Pointes*, from **Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies** (Society of Dance History Scholars, 35, 2015) and again in *Teachers Imprint – Rethinking Dance Legacy* (SDHS, 2017). A more recent, and fuller, example of this is the new edition of **Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies** (Routledge, 2018).

Its editors stress the “increasing importance of performing dances from the past as a route to historical knowledge”, something those engaged in the study of historical dance have supported since the 1950's. Granted scholars of early dance move much further back than the contributors to this current volume, which concentrates on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century dance. In common with historians of earlier periods, however, Geraldine Morris and Lorraine Nicholas feel that dance history should be a living experience shared across time and space and embodied in dance practice. They emphasise the importance of sources as routes into this storehouse of dance material and also discuss the perennial issues of reconstruction vs re-imagining vs re-staging etc. Again, like the best practice in historical dance, they are open to experimentation and to a variety of interpretations.

Henrietta Bannerman's contribution, “Making dance history live—performing the past” (pp 94-106), stresses the importance of “learning repertoire from knowledgeable practitioners.” This gives welcome support to the practice of learning historical dance from the best teachers available. With sophisticated digital technologies now available, this is an important area crying out for development.

Like Bannerman, many dance historians adopt a broad approach to “performing the past”, one that involves attention to the “philosophy, intention and artistic environment of the choreographers”. In her view, the aim is to achieve a “living archive”. The many conferences and publications devoted to historical dance bear witness to the breadth of approaches to it that have been offered over the last 20 years. But dancing is a living art that must come out of the lecture hall and onto the dance floor. Bannerman believes that “the history lecture is better understood when it is augmented and concretised by performing the choreographer’s work” and concludes that “dancers at various points in their careers benefit from acquiring knowledge about their heritage and perhaps even more importantly embodying this knowledge through performance on stage for present and future audiences”. In Chapter 16 (pp 197-209), Moira Siegal speaks of the “porous” nature of history and argues that the dance of the past can still speak to us now.

For much of European dance history, however, dancing was more than a “performance on stage”. It was a social “performance” just as much if not more than a theatrical one. Helen Thomas’s essay “Reconstruction and dance as embodied textual practice” (pp 69-81) emphasises the need “to build a substantive tangible tradition,” but warns of the dangers of constructing a “canon”, when so much has been written out of history in the past, the non-white, the non-European etc. More attention to the whole sweep of historical dance, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>, immediately widens our perspective beyond the theatre to include the dance practices of earlier societies in which dancing played a much more central role in the lives of English people and encompassed whole worlds of difference in approach. The blind spot that obscures the European dance inheritance covers four centuries.

Early dance is indeed a truly international art form that opens doors to the styles of the great dancing masters of England, Italy, France & Spain, connecting us with people across the divides of language, faith, race, gender and generation. Britain has a secure historical place in this tradition and the opportunity to benefit from it. We are home to one of the very earliest of historical dance collections and John Playford’s English country dances have literally dispersed across the globe, evolving and stimulating change and development as they went.

**Rethinking Dance History** is a welcome and thought-provoking volume. Its 19 essays cover a stimulating range of topics and traditions, though none (as I have noted) is earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These writers do not have 15<sup>th</sup> century dance, or even baroque or Regency dance, in mind. However, the theoretical probings here build a strong case for reclaiming the early networks of dance cultures that thrived in the UK and the rest of Europe over many centuries. Like artists, musicians and writers, dancers have a right to learn the story of their passion.

For anyone interested in exploring a little of what is known about early or historical dance, the Early Dance Circle website is a good starting point, with its “Dance Through History” period-by-period resource and its Publications section.