

The presence of ballet technique in Porto Alegre and its relation to european culture

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■ ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study is to examine ballet technique and its presence in Porto Alegre exploring the relationship to European culture. This study includes the trajectory of ballet teaching in the city of Porto Alegre in the 20th century and the relation to the influence of European culture in southern Brazil. The research is characterized as qualitative with the use of bibliographical sources for historical research and interviews with dance teachers for oral history development. The study could detect the predominance of an esthetic ideal and mentality, which originated in the European ballet methodology (especially through the Russian Ballet method), inherited in Brazil through European colonization as well as other migrations.

■ KEYWORDS

Dance, history, european culture.

■ RESUMO

O principal objetivo deste texto é investigar a técnica do ballet e sua presença em Porto Alegre, explorando sua relação com a cultura europeia. Este estudo inclui a trajetória do ensino do ballet na cidade de Porto Alegre, no século XX, e sua relação com a influência da cultura europeia no sul do Brasil. A pesquisa se caracteriza como qualitativa com o uso de fontes bibliográficas e da história oral, onde foram realizadas entrevistas com professores de ballet. O estudo detectou uma predominância de um ideal estético e uma mentalidade originados na metodologia de ballet europeia (especialmente através do método russo de ballet), herdado, no Brasil, através da colonização europeia e outras migrações.

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■ PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Dança, história, cultura europeia.

1. Introduction

In most of the municipal or state dance companies around the world, a similar phenomenon regarding the use of ballet technique could be observed. Despite artistic and structural differences, many of these companies have important factors in common, including classical dance in their history. Such companies maintain ballet as the main technique for instrumentation and maintenance of body abilities of their cast, while their choreographic production has wandered contemporary roads. Thus, contemporary choreographers working with these companies come into contact with dancers who hold many diverse backgrounds, but most of them with a predominance of ballet as the basis of their technical training. The principles and contents that direct this technique make it a valuable tool in the training of these dancers. However, the development of dancers' physical and mental abilities, favoured through ballet, can make it difficult for them to be fluent in other techniques.

There are many and recurrent concerns of dance professionals on the use of ballet as a technique by contemporary choreographers. Even today, Porto Alegre, similar to many other capitals of Brazil, exhibits the strong influence and presence of ballet in its history of dance, a fact that contributes to the education of local dancers, besides being an inheritance that interferes in the contemporary dance scene of this city.

In this sense, the main goal of this study is to examine ballet technique and its presence in Porto Alegre exploring the relation to European culture. To reach a critical view on the subject, this study includes the trajectory of ballet teaching in the city of Porto Alegre in the 20th century and the relation to the influence of European culture in Southern Brazil. We chose to focus on Southern Brazil in view of its closeness to us as well as the resulting accessibility to oral history development. However, it is important to denote that our exposed trajectory and the issues that we have discussed are pertinent at least in the main cities of Brazil with strong European influence, where the Europeans were attracted to the natural richness of those areas, such as gold, sugarcane, rubber, and coffee. Although we had grown with strong base in ballet technique, when looking into our background, we were able to find meaningful connections among the mentality accompanying the teaching of ballet in Brazil and our relation to European culture, inherited in our country through a few different moments and origins of colonization. By mentality we mean the philosophy of dance that emerges from social experience within a certain technique.

Thus, to answer the above-mentioned questions and goals of the present study, we have permeated the theoretical discussion with ideas from authors who had examined dance history (CARDOSO, 2009; BARRETO, 2007; CUNHA and FRANCK, 2009; DANTAS et al., 2013; SERRONI, 2002; SUCENA, 1988) and classical ballet (ALBA, 2002; SINGER, 2013; TAPER, 1984).

While observing our own experience with the learning of ballet technique, many facts could be perceived to be in common with the trajectory of ballet in Europe. In an attempt to raise the trajectory of the teaching of ballet in Porto Alegre with reference to our dance education in this city and faced with contradictory information found in the existing literature on the history of dance in Southern Brazil, we chose to research this trajectory ourselves. Accordingly, we interviewed our ballet teachers and asked them to narrate their history and the history of their ballet teachers. In addition, the work of Cunha and Frank (2004) was also referred, which presents a complete and thorough coverage of the subject.

2. Methodological paths

This study is characterized as field research of descriptive type with qualitative analysis. According to Gil (2007) the primary goal of descriptive research is the description of a phenomenon by raising opinions, attitudes and beliefs of a certain group.

Therefore, we interviewed two subjects, Maria Cristina Fragozo and Victoria Milanez, who were chosen because of their relation to the history of ballet in Porto Alegre, as well as their strong relation to the Russian ballet method and their experience and recognition in the area. These subjects participated in the research voluntarily and signed consent forms authorizing the use of their names. We believe that by registering the names of those that participate in the history of ballet in Porto Alegre one contributes to the research on this area within the academic universe, as well as cooperates to its development. Thus, we consider that by naming the masters that participate in this study we recognize their trajectory and contribution to the development of ballet in Porto Alegre.

We used a personal semi-structured interview with open questions elaborated to consider the goals of the study as the starting point. The interviews were taped and later transcribed with fidelity, without altering the used vocabulary. After the transcription of the interviews they were given back for checking and approval by the interviewee.

The data collection phase occurred during the month of July, when interviews took place in various settings, usually in the workplace of the interviewees and in times scheduled by the researcher. The interviews took 90 minutes and started as an informal conversation, which led to specific questions. The interviews occurred naturally without any difficulty of understanding among the interviewees, all of whom turned out to be very accessible and open about their reports.

After the data collection, the gathered information were classified, categorized, and interpreted to analyze their content. Bauer and Gaskell (2002) state that for qualitative analysis and immersion of the researcher into the text, by reading and re-reading it is necessary, always considering the finality and goals of the study as well as looking for patterns and connections among the data.

At the final stage of the research, data analysis was completed and closed data were discussed and related to the literature, leading to the final considerations of this study.

3. The trajectory of *ballet* in porto alegre: european culture influences

In Rio Grande do Sul, the most Southern state of Brazil, there were large Jewish, German, and Italian colonies. These immigrants, who came to Brazil between the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century, brought with them the habit of including artistic practices in education, regardless of the consequences of this initiation into dance via ballet.

When we asked our subjects, who were ballet teachers in Porto Alegre, about their methodological choices in ballet teaching, we could find a strong influence of the Russian Ballet School. Both our interviewees were instructed under Vaganova's Method and have used it once they started teaching. Victoria Milanez was a student of Marina Fedossejeva, a former Russian dancer with the Kirov Ballet, who established her school in Porto Alegre in the early 1950s. Our other interviewee, Maria Cristina Fragoso, was a student of Salma Chemale, who studied ballet with Lya Bastian Meyer, a native of Porto Alegre, whose German origin enabled her to spend a couple of years in Berlin studying ballet with a Russian dancer. Considered as the great precursor of dance in Porto Alegre, Lya Bastian Meyer studied dance with Mina Black and Nenê Dreher Brecht (CUNHA and FRANK, 2004). Upon her return to Brazil, Lya Bastian Meyer founded her ballet school in Porto Alegre in the early 1930s. Before her return no Brazil, even though she had a few experiences with Modern dance while in other countries of Europe, she felt ballet would have better acceptance in the Porto Alegre environment. Other influences in our city came from the constant visit of the Argentinean native, Mabel Silveira, and the Uruguayan, Walter Arias, both trained under the Vaganova method in their places of origin and were widely accepted in the Brazilian community. In the subsequent part of this study, we have exposed that the end of Diaghilev's company also had a strong influence in the

choice of the Russian method of teaching ballet, not only in Porto Alegre, but also in almost every large city in Brazil.

Through discussion and interpretation of these data, we could conclude that this choice occurred due to the historical aspects in Southern Brazil, namely the arrival of European and Russian émigrés and the closeness to Argentina and Uruguay. In addition, some exchange also took place due to the traveling of southern Brazilians to study dance in Europe. However, history alone is not the primary reason for the strong presence of ballet in Porto Alegre. Southern Brazil is somewhat conservative and traditional, with a large colonization of Portuguese and Germans, in the beginning of the 19Th Century, Italians, in the end of the 19Th Century, and Russians, in the beginning of the 20Th Century. We also notice that the Brazilian mentality and social context are derived from this European colonization, creating an environment in which ballet could be established as the main dance education option.

A few other aspects captured our attention. Both our interviewees mention esthetic issues and present an overruling of the beauty ideal carried by ballet in their teaching. The reason for their choice of this method was detectable in their speech. They both admit that they fell in love with ballet because it felt so enchanting, playful, and that they would teach it based on tradition, in the same way as they have learned it. However, we criticize this reproduction of a teaching method. We see a necessity to find ways of bringing this method to meet the needs of a dancer. Our interviewees state “The Russian School is so beautiful” admitting how they love the use of arms and upper body. The critical issue here is to point out that the choice of method or technique for dance education should not be based mainly on aesthetics, but should be adequate to the student and the context of this education.

Arts inheritance is evident even in predecessors who are closer to our time. By going back a bit further in history, one can observe that this European colonization had already started with the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil. In 1808, the Royal family of Portugal came to colonial Brazil, bringing with them great influence on the architecture and arts of Brazil (BARRETO, 2007).

We propose that in Rio Grande do Sul, the European colonization that occurred later, between the 19th and 20th centuries has reinforced this first European colonization, particularly that of the Portuguese. During the reign of D. Jose I (1750–1777), the metropolitan tradition was exported to the colonies where one would try to reproduce it, mainly with assistance from local governors. The law from January 17, 1777, advised the building of public theaters, because, at that time, they were considered as schools where the people “learned the sane maxims of politics, morals, love of their home country, of value, care and fidelity with which they should serve their sovereign” (SALLES apud CARDOSO, 2009, p.11-14).

On the topic of European colonization, another aspect that calls our attention refers to the presence of theaters built after European models in Brazil. The São Pedro Theater was built in 1858 with authorization from the president of São Pedro Province, today called Porto Alegre. The central chandelier, the velvet fabric of the seats, and the curtain’s fringes were donated by the French government and served as a model for the architects for the creation of the architectural design project conducted by *Phillip Von Normann* (SERRONI, 2002). This theater is of Italian typology, similar to more than 90% of the performing rooms in our country. By Italian typology, we meant that the stage of the theater is of Italian type. This kind of stage became

permanent around 1640, and was the first kind of stage to form a frame for dance which, up to then, was presented in the court only, in an arena or semi-arena format. This type of stage, together with other factors, such as the social relation to the king, determined frontal stage orientation for dance, because the audience started being placed facing the stage only. The first Italian type stage ever heard of was built in 1581 at *Teatro Olímpico* de Vicenza in Italy. This type of theater was inherited in the mid-18th century, and until today, it is predominant in all of Brazil. We propose that the São Pedro Theater is not an exception because all colonial or neoclassical theaters built from 1700 until the end of the 19th century serve as a testimony of the power of thought and an unshakable cultural wish. We point to the fact that this unshakable wish is permeated by:

unquestionable criterion of the visibility of the spectacle axis resultant from the application of perspective laws, the so called prince's point of view. As with all good colonized people the Brazilian project designers subordinated technical criteria to the social character demands of a compartmentalized society (SERRONI, 2002, p.122-125).

We remember, since childhood, that dancing at the São Pedro Theater was the apex of good-quality artistic work. Every good and respectable spectacle premiered at the São Pedro Theater, and was considered good even before it was presented. By occupying that space, the theater already carried the idea of being of good quality, counting with the participation of professionals with excellent technical qualities. This reinforces the statement of Serroni (2002) on how theatrical buildings design the hierarchy of spaces in their forms of use and symbolic existence, and become a mirror of how we represent our relations with the city as well as with the representations that we make of it. In addition, we should observe their internal spaces, independent of the style, which, in Brazil, “vary starting from baroque, with hierarchical audiences, in which the rich sit in the friezes, boxes and cabins, the wealthy on the floor and the poor, up in the galleries and amphitheater” (SERRONI, 2002, p.13)

The aforementioned quote reminds us of going to São Pedro Theater and observing the Central cabin always remained empty, waiting for the governor or someone worth of it enough to occupy that privileged space. We also remember receiving directions to look up while taking bows during performances to reverence those who, probably, were really interested in the art of dance and made up most of the audience, but, because of their social condition, were left to occupy the “perches”, the term we pejoratively used to denote the top galleries.

The first theatrical spectacle put together in Porto Alegre, in the 1920s, was presented by an artistic amateur named *Troupe Regional*, and was entitled *Contos de Fadas (Fairytals)*. Nenê Brecht was in charge of the staging, costume design, and artistic direction. Mina Black took care of choreography. “This was really the core booster of a movement which grew in quantity and quality transforming Porto Alegre, at some point, in the city with the largest number of dance schools in all of Brazil” (CUNHA and FRANCK, 2004, p.15). Black and Bercht were the visionaries of the movement called cult dancing, which got sedimented by Lya Bastian Meyer, as already mentioned, a pioneer in dance in the southern capital.

Prior to the funding of Meyer's school, Black and Bercht were founders and directors of the Physical Culture Institute (1928-1937), where various disciplines were taught, such as Acrobatic Gymnastics, Dalcroze Rhythmic, and Animated Aesthetic. Animated Aesthetic were a practice that aimed the representation of greek statues, developing body expression through certain representations of the helenic culture and pursued the promotion of movement fluency. This term brought the activities of the Physical Culture Institute closer to the of field of arts, specifically the fine arts and dance, because it indicated the existence of esthetic elements such as lines and forms in the body practices cultivated at the Institute (DANTAS et al., 2013). The main goal of this Institute was to develop the female body integrally, reach the perfect esthetic balance, and exercise complete control of all movements. In addition, it aimed to prepare a beautiful healthy body in its physical energy plenitude, making it a fine-tuned instrument that could be easily managed by the intellect to serve clear expression. "The esthetic element could not be excluded. Dance thus became a corollary, an apex of esthetic expression to which, the evolution of the rhythmic gymnastics would lead to" (CUNHA and FRANCK, 2004, p.16). In this origin, we can perceive the primacy of esthetic for dance.

Black, being aware of the fact that her student Meyer would go to Europe accompanying her parents, encouraged her to study ballet technique, which Meyer did during 1931. Upon her return to Brazil, Meyer opted for teaching ballet in her school. While in Europe, Meyer had also studied Modern dance with disciples of Mary Wigman, the precursor of German expressionistic modern dance. Interestingly, Meyer chose to teach ballet in her school in Porto Alegre, leaving her modern dance experience behind, maybe because modern dance was still very recent at that time, or as Fragoso suggests, "because classical dance seemed more appropriate to the cultural era in Porto Alegre".

Subsequently, Meyer opened her dance school in 1930. In Europe, she studied ballet with Eugenie Eduardowa (former prima ballerina at Maria Theater of San Petersburg), Rita Poskt from Opera of Wiesbaden, and Tatiana Gsovski (SUCENA, 1988). Certainly, her dance studies in Europe have contributed much to the teaching method in Porto Alegre. Similar to other capitals in Brazil, the dance taught has often been ballet and it has been taught according to European models and methods. In Porto Alegre, the Russian method has been inherited, and in the whole of Brazil, the model of dance schools and their way of teaching dance in the old continent has been adopted.

It is important to add that the presence of the Russian ballet method in Porto Alegre was reinforced by the establishment of Walter Arias and Marina Fedossejeva in this capital, in addition to the constant visit of Mabel Silveira to the city.

Walter Arias, a ballet dancer from Uruguay's Solis Theater, came to Porto Alegre to dance at a city named Pelotas, at the school of Dicléia, a dance teacher who studied ballet at Maria Olenewa's school in Rio de Janeiro. Being already contaminated by a taste for the Russian school, Arias went to Japan to dance with Dicléia's daughter, where he had very close contact with the Vaganova method, which he started teaching in Porto Alegre. In Southern Brazil, the proximity with Argentina and Uruguay has always influenced dancers towards the Russian ballet method, facilitating its use by many dance teachers in Porto Alegre.

The history of Ballet in Europe is very close to the establishment of this technique in Southern Brazil. After Diaghilev's death, in 1929, the company named *Ballets Russes* fell into decline and dispersed. A few years later, Colonel de Basil, together with René Blum, then director of the Monte Carlo Theater, tried to resuscitate the company. In the last years of World War II, de Basil brought the company to perform in Latin America. The three long seasons presented in Brazil in 1942, 1944, and 1946 are important in the history of dance in Brazil and Argentina. Among the groups that came were important ballerinas, such as Tatiana Leskova, who later settled in Rio de Janeiro and opened a dance school, where she continued to work for many years, strongly influencing the history of dance in that capital and Brazil. On the other hand, dancer and teacher Marina Fedossejeva settled in Porto Alegre and established a school that much contributed to the teaching and advertising of ballet, mainly through the Russian method, because Fedossejeva had studied in Russia with Agrippina Vaganova (ALBA, 2002).

Another important contribution to the proliferation of ballet in Porto Alegre is from Victoria Milanez, a teacher who returned to Porto Alegre at the beginning of the 1990s after studying ballet in Cuba. In Porto Alegre, she was a student of Marina Fedossejeva. Similar to Maria Cristina Fragoso, she had great admiration for Mabel Silveira, a master from Argentina who utilized the Russian method. In Cuba, Milanez had contact with the Cuban school of Ballet, which, contrary to common sense, is "based on the teachings of various New York based ballet teachers, including some of the School of American Ballet", founded in the United States of America by the Russian choreographer George Balanchine in the 1930s (TAPER, 1984).

Possibly because of political issues, there is a common association of Cuba with the Soviet Union and, consequently, with the Russian method. However, the truth is that Alicia Alonso, the great Cuban dancer, studied dance in the United States of America and danced professionally at the *American Ballet Theatre*. Back in Cuba, her husband, Fernando Alonso, also a dancer, created the *Cuban School of Ballet*, adapting the American technique to the Cuban body type. While living in the United States, Fernando Alonso worked with several choreographers and teachers in New York City including, Eugene Loring, Agnes de Mille, George Balanchine, and Antony Tudor (SINGER, 2013). The curriculum he developed in Cuba, together with other Cuban dance professionals was influenced by his experience in the U.S. Victoria Milanez mentions his words denoting this American influence and denying the common association of the Cuban ballet with the Russian school: "nothing is Russian here, the Cuban School has nothing of the Russian method. I hate all of that, Fernando Alonso said to me in his office.... This you will not find in any book" Victoria has studied under Fernando Alonso's tutelage during several months each year between 1988 and 1992. Her close acquaintanceship with this master offers an interesting insight from an oral history point of view of the Cuban Ballet.

4. Final considerations

This study could detect the predominance of an aesthetic ideal and mentality, which originated in the European ballet methodology (especially through the Russian Ballet method), inherited in Porto Alegre through European colonization as

well as other migrations. The construction of European model theater buildings also contributed to the insertion and acceptance of this dance form in the south of the country.

We realize it is important to give attention to issues related to aesthetic ideals, values and rules of conduct that were pre-established by the classical technique (beauty, ideal, obsession). In addition, it is necessary to understand and critically analyse the dance philosophy proposed by each technique, since we understand that any technique when well utilized, comprehended and mastered, will positively instrumentalize its practitioners allowing them to act free from influences that can hinder a creative artistic practice.

Thus, we realize one can find more use for classical dance in the present day, making the most of what this technique has to offer from a structural and body organization point of view. We also point out to the relevance of the study of ballet technique as a way to comprehend modern and postmodern dance, which, in the course of the 20th century, have somehow contested or transformed the principles of classical dance one way or another.

In addition, we believe this research will allow a critical look and a contextualized understanding about the presence of ballet in Porto Alegre and its influence on the local dance education, keeping in mind that the cultural traces of a dance technique originated in another historical place and time will influence its local practice.

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