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| Dance Marathons |
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| In a modernising society undergoing rapidly increasing mechanisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, commercialism and consumerism, the dance marathons of the 1920s and 1930s reflected social developments of the era. Initially, competing dancers (working-class women in particular) would dance with and exhaust multiple partners over the course of a day or two. This practice altered the purpose of social dancing from being about the pleasure of the couple to being about the achievements of the individual. These women demonstrated their physical abilities through a leisure endeavour at a time when Prohibition sought to control embodied leisure activities. Later, dance marathons involved male-female couples dancing in competition with other couples. During the Great Depression, dance marathons functioned as a source of financial and symbolic opportunity for contestants. While dance marathons rewarded endurance, suffering, and survival, they also offered opportunities for financial gain (winners received cash prizes). What’s more, the competing dancers’ struggle to continue dancing mirrored the widespread struggle to survive everyday life. Dance marathons created local and national celebrities as well, thus creating opportunities for promoters to earn profits by commercialising and theatricalising this new leisure activity. Dance marathons thrived until the U.S. economy began to recover during and after the Second World War. |
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While dance marathons rewarded endurance, suffering, and survival, they also offered opportunities for financial gain (winners received cash prizes). What’s more, the competing dancers’ struggle to continue dancing mirrored the widespread struggle to survive everyday life. Dance marathons created local and national celebrities as well, thus creating opportunities for promoters to earn profits by commercialising and theatricalising this new leisure activity. Dance marathons thrived until the U.S. economy began to recover during and after the Second World War.  The English dance instructors Olie Finnerty and Edgar Van Ollefin launched the dance marathon fad when they danced for seven hours on 18 February 1923. The popularity of dance marathons in the U.S. (where the activity received its largest following) exploded after Alma Cummings danced for twenty-seven hours in New York City on 30-31 March 30-31 1923, just six weeks after Finnerty and Ollefin’s feat. After exhausting six different partners, Cummings received significant publicity, and ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ was played as she claimed the record for nonstop dancing. This feat was considered a great physical achievement for American women, and many working-class women followed Cummings’ lead into the world of dance marathons in the 1920s.  The principles of and reasons for participating in dance marathons in America changed significantly by the end of the decade. Initially, nonstop dancing by individuals with a series of partners defined dance marathons. There was no charge for admission, no steadfast rules existed, and friends and family of the dancers came to watch attempts at a new record that the press might document. This event structure, however, failed to entertain on a mass scale. Toward the end of the 1920s a more successful format materialised based on drama and standardisation, which carried over into the 1930s. Under the new format, marathoners maintained the same partner for the duration of the event, but were allowed fifteen minutes per hour to attend to personal needs. As the length of marathons grew, promoters included live big-band music and vaudeville entertainers to break up the monotony of watching marathoners, while promoters also crafted fictional narratives about participants to engross observers. Audience members learned their stories through printed ‘dope’ sheets, live commentaries by promoters and emcees, and conversations with dancers over the dance floor railings. Promoters made up stories about contestants falling in love, exaggerated injuries, and even hosted fake weddings for the sake of business and entertainment.  Standardised dance marathons became especially important during the Great Depression. The struggles of dancers resonated with audiences, who struggled themselves to survive and persevere through everyday Depression-era life. Dance marathons blurred performance and the concerns of everyday life for the purposes of entertainment — winners inspired hope as they demonstrated that success was possible despite great hardship. Participants often included local working-class men and women facing financial hardships and unwanted free time due to unemployment, while others were professional competitors who travelled from marathon to marathon to earn money.  Despite the waning popularity of dance marathons by the end of the 1930s (owing to the end of the Depression and beginning of the Second World War), dance marathons contributed to the rise of new forms of popular entertainment that continue today (roller derbies, for example). Dance marathons are also considered as precursors to the reality television shows of the 21st Century, including *So You Think You Can Dance*, *American Idol*, and *Survivor*. Audiences continue to be entertained by the combination of competition with constructed storylines and drama. Audiences continue to be entertained by the testing or physical and emotional limits in hopes of financial gain and celebrity, and it is difficult to ignore the parallels between the structure of contemporary reality shows and the dance marathons of the 1920s and 1930s. |
| Further reading:  Calabria, F.M. (1993) *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. (Calabria analyzes dance marathons through multiple lenses to reveal marathons as business endeavors imbued with escapism, the success of which relied upon the staff as well as the contestants.)  Martin, C. (1994) *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. (Martin analyzes dance marathons as theatrical events that thrived on drama.)  ------ (2009) ‘Reality Dance: American Dance Marathons’, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (This essay analyzes dance marathons as events that unfolded as both fictional and nonfictional spectacles.) |