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| Levinson, André (1887-1933) |
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| Summary  A critic and theorist, André Levinson continued the nineteenth-century continental tradition of dance and ballet criticism as part of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry: dance as the embodiment of ideas. He supported classical dance as it had evolved out of the French and Russian schools, which he considered technically and therefore aesthetically superior to most other movement forms and genres. His scathing reflections on modern dance, particularly that of the German persuasion, revealed a distaste for emotive expression on the part of the individual performer as well as what he considered clichéd and superficial movement. Levinson hailed the aesthetics of classical ballet as the ultimate pinnacle of dance. Modern dance should aspire to the principles of classical training, its structural and technical clarity and the narrative power of Romantic and late nineteenth-century ballet. Modernist approaches, such as those of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, were futile attempts to transform ballet from within. Though he admired Isadora Duncan, he viewed the purpose of modern dance as inspiring and ultimately re-enforcing ballet.  Background  Levinson came from an affluent professional Russian-Jewish family. He studied at the Imperial University of Saint Petersburg where he joined the Faculty of History and Philology as a lecturer in French in 1910. From 1908, his art and literature reviews and biographical sketches regularly appeared in the press. He wrote for *Rech’* (*Speech*), the newspaper of the Liberal party; *Apollon* (*Apollo*), St. Petersburg’s avant-garde art and poetry journal; *Zhizn' iskusstva* (*Life of Art*), a theatrical weekly; and *Sovremennyi Mir* (*Contemporary World*), the literary monthly. In 1911, Levinson began to publish essays and reviews on ballet with reflections on art and literature. Along with his fellow Russians, the philosopher and art historian Akim Volynsky (1861-1926) and Joseph Lewitan (1894-1976), Levinson made ballet a subject of serious consideration. All three writers placed dance criticism within a larger context of artistic and historical contemplation. While he lived in Russia, Levinson focussed his attention on the Maryinski Theatre in St Petersburg as the cradle of classical style and neglected the performances of the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow. He rejected Michel Fokine’s (1880-1942) reforms and considered him ‘vain’ and impulsive. He claimed that Fokine no longer practised an autonomous art form. His dances depended on the other arts and overemphasised rhythm to exploit modish trends. For Levinson, Fokine could never live up to the great ideal of Marius Petipa (1818-1910); his attempts to reform the great master’s work were ill-informed and, by questioning classicism, bound to fail.  Contribution to the Field and to Modernism  By the 1910s Levinson was securely established as a member of the Russian intelligentsia. However, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 destroyed his bourgeois academic and cultural world; he despised Communist ideology and left Soviet Russia in 1921 to settle in Paris. (He received French nationality in 1932.) He continued writing reviews as a freelance journalist and became part of the French intellectual and critical establishment. He wrote for magazines such as *Le Temps*, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires, L’Art Vivant* and *Comoedia* but also for the American *Theatre Arts Monthly*.  He also continued to develop a theory and aesthetics of ballet as pure, abstract movement expression. The incarnation of his ideal was Marie Taglioni (1804-1884) who danced, so he wrote, what the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) thought. That, for Levinson, was the absolute power of beauty in movement. Dance, through Marie Taglioni’s creation of the sylph, turned into a ‘transcendental language’. It became the ‘classical dance’, with a ‘classical technique’ and thus a perfect combination and summary of European civilisation and intellectual as much as physical ideals. When ballet became classical, it turned itself into a tradition with a formal codex; Levinson interlinked and reinforced the two aspects. Romanticism paved the way for the classical tradition as the sublimation of the corporeal human being: the concept of the white ballet symbolised the purity and sanctity of flesh as thought, a language of ‘celestial calligraphy’.  His theory skewed ballet towards the past and made the evaluation of contemporary dance practices only possible in relation to that past and not relevant as approaches with independent modern aesthetics. When he assessed performances of contemporary dancers he always positioned them within the framework of an idealised notion of the transcendental classicism of ballet. Modern dancers could be applauded if they fulfilled the formal categories of tradition and classicism: Anna Pavlova (1881-1931), for Levinson, took up and continued in the tradition which Marie Taglioni’s had introduced; thus she deserved applause.  According to Levinson, Spanish dance was interesting as an ancient (i.e. traditional) movement culture with categories comparable to ballet. Though its true origins had been lost, enough of its ‘essential dynamic’ and ‘plastic characteristics’ were still visible to demonstrate its Eastern origins. Levinson saw in Spanish dance the living ‘antithesis’ to Western movement forms and sensibilities. La Argentina (Antonia Mercé [1890-1936]), a dancer whom Levinson admired, bridged the gap between Eastern and Western dance, thus revealing its beginnings. She transposed ‘primitive’ folklore into style; passion was contained by noblesse, sensuality lifted above carnal desire. Even Javanese dance, cultivating ancient, millennia old notions, was accorded its own classicism, albeit one which relied on a ‘static’ concept of motion: a ritualistic procession-like transition dependent on constant creation of equilibrium. In addition, it emphasised an inflected, ‘concentric’ movement, without elevation or extension, the body retracted from the line of gravity. However, dancers like Mas Madjadjawa (dates unknown) or Raden Mas Jodjana (1893-1972) achieved nobility and style in their traditions, and thus Levinson granted them high artistry.    Levinson also wrote on new art media; his essay on a poetics of film was included in a volume *L’Art cinématographique*, edited by Félix Alcan in 1927. Levinson recognised that cinema created a different point of view and a new perspective on space. With its own technique it channeled creative imagination towards a different reality; its aesthetic principles needed to be analysed to understand the power of the new medium. As Levinson was only familiar with silent films, his discussion concentrated on the idea of chains or frames of images which, like paintings, achieved abstraction of reality and stylised it into something fascinating. Film as a sequence of moving images could therefore teach the modern observer of dance much about the interaction between dance technique and film technology. The human body on display – on stage or seen through the camera lens – invited a debate on the real and the projected body. The aesthetic and technological processes which imposed ideas onto bodies and enabled bodies to integrate philosophical principles could be see either through film or dance. It is no coincidence that Levinson’s thoughts on film appeared at a time when other cultural critics were also discussing theories of the moving body on screen and viewing movement as a vital means to comprehend social developments. Unlike Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) or Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), who argued within a left-wing, even Marxist, political framework, Levinson opposed the politicisation of dance and the arts. His criticism and writings reflect the unity of the arts, which is why his publications on literature or film are as informative in relation to the establishment of a general aesthetic theory as those on dance or ballet.  How much his insight went beyond the narrow confines of a descriptive assessment of dance became clear in Levinson’s review of the German dance congress in 1928. This article revealed the peculiar racial zeal of the German modern movement, well before the National Socialists came to power, and as such was a political statement as much as an aesthetic condemnation. He would have had to reject the aesthetics of this particular modern dance in any case as it did not fulfil his basic requirements of movement grounded in ‘classical technique’ and an art which defines itself in relation to the past. His analysis, however, went further: he connected the ideology of German dance to the ideology of a political group which was in the process of destroying the foundations of the Weimar Republic. Few saw with such clarity the core message of German dance and its racist orientation. In this case, Levinson analysed the principles of German movement modernism and juxtaposed it with his own understanding of modern dance. His favourable reviews of Josephine Baker, a performer who would have been considered ‘degenerate’ by the German modernist, should act as a counterpoint to the essay on German modern dance.  Though Levinson demanded that ballet develop and incorporate reform, in practice he preferred a conservative approach. He imagined an ever evolving art within the limits set by the late nineteenth century – not its repetition nor its rupture – a goal impossible to achieve. He found it difficult to condone experimentation as this subverted his strict classical ideals and thus threatened the tradition. His attitude towardsGeorge Balanchine’s (1904-1983) early works demonstrated his ambivalence. On the one hand, Balanchine had the gift to invent graceful movements anchored within the classical tradition, or the ‘heritage’, as Levinson called it. On the other, he knew no boundaries: Balanchine’s movement inventions were either interpretations and acceptable, as in *Pastorale* (1926), or deformations and unacceptable, as in *Apollo* (1928). The choreographer should have remained more strictly within the treasured classical canon to find approval with Levinson.  Levinson was elected to the Légion d'Honneur in 1928.  Legacy  Levinson’s books on dance history and representatives of ballet past and present left a deep mark on the scholarly debate on dance. There are several reasons for his ongoing influence: as a critic he closely followed dance performances and assessed them in a rigourous as well as sophisticated way. He took sides and articulated his likes and dislikes very clearly. His evaluation of his contemporaries reflected his political as well as his aesthetic perspectives. As a scholar he developed theories as a means to understand dance history, an approach particularly powerful in his assessment of Marie Taglioni and Romanticism in dance. His theory of the Romantic ballet as a form of idealised thought and his periodisation of Romantic ballet in France are still acknowledged. Many of his articles are relevant today, not only as historical documents of a bygone era but also as examples of aesthetic interventions in the public sphere. His works contributed to an ongoing public debate, first in Russia, then in France, in which writing on the arts contributed to the making of a ‘spirit of an age’ and helped to shape a civic sense of the importance of high culture. He thus has to be placed in the continuum of enlightened philosophical and aesthetic discourse of Western thought. His essays on classical dance established trajectories which explained the necessity of tradition; his essays on Asian dance reflected the fascination with non-European customs as a means to invigorate old conventions. This fascination was shared across all the arts and can be traced in Claude Debussy’s (1862-1918) music, the paintings of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) or the debate concerning the ‘primitive’ as a means of tapping into primordial powers of creation. Levinson’s study of La Argentina credited her with the revival of true Spanish dance and the renaissance of its creative power and dignity, rescued from cheap oblivion. Most of his essays and reviews, read today, demonstrate a worldview in which the high arts were the most essential and prized possession of a cultivated nation. Selected List of Works Levinson, A. (1914) *Mastera baleta: Ocherki istorii i teorii tantsa* (*Ballet Masters: Essays on the History and Theory of Dance*), St. Petersburg: N. V. 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Destin d'un Danseur* (*Serge Lifar: Destiny of a Dancer*), Paris: Bernard Grasset.  ----- (1991) *André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties*, ed. Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. |
| Further reading:  (Garafola and Levinson)  (Cook) |