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| Borlin, Jean (1893-1930) |
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| As principal choreographer and dancer for the 1920s avant-garde troupe Les Ballets Suédois (Swedish Ballet), Jean Börlin contributed greatly to the modernist cauldron that was interwar Paris. Founded by the wealthy Swedish arts patron Rolf de Maré in 1920, the Ballets Suédois expanded upon the model of avant-garde collaborative dance theatre established by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes a decade earlier. In the five years until their disbanding in 1925, the Swedes rivalled the better-known Russian company for artistic creativity with such signal works as the 1921 *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower*), the 1923 *La Création du monde* (*The Creation of the World*), and the 1924 *Relâche* (*Theatre Closed*). With twenty-three original choreographies, some 900 performances, and international tours throughout Europe and the United States, Börlin and his company played a significant role in the development and propagation of innovative modernist work, which grew from the interplay amongst the visual and performing arts. In collaboration with such artists as Jean Cocteau, Darius Milhaud, and Fernand Léger, Börlin helped change the face and forms of dance theatre. |
| Summary  As principal choreographer and dancer for the 1920s avant-garde troupe Les Ballets Suédois (Swedish Ballet), Jean Börlin contributed greatly to the modernist cauldron that was interwar Paris. Founded by the wealthy Swedish arts patron Rolf de Maré in 1920, the Ballets Suédois expanded upon the model of avant-garde collaborative dance theatre established by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes a decade earlier. In the five years until their disbanding in 1925, the Swedes rivalled the better-known Russian company for artistic creativity with such signal works as the 1921 *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower*), the 1923 *La Création du monde* (*The Creation of the World*), and the 1924 *Relâche* (*Theatre Closed*). With twenty-three original choreographies, some 900 performances, and international tours throughout Europe and the United States, Börlin and his company played a significant role in the development and propagation of innovative modernist work, which grew from the interplay amongst the visual and performing arts. In collaboration with such artists as Jean Cocteau, Darius Milhaud, and Fernand Léger, Börlin helped change the face and forms of dance theatre. Early Training Börlin studied with Gunhild Rosen at the ballet school attached to the Stockholm’s Royal Theatre, joining the corps de ballet in 1905. In the early 1910s, he came under the influence of the Ballets Russes choreographer Michel Fokine, who staged some of his works on the Stockholm company and selected Börlin to perform solo roles even though he was still in the corps de ballet. His performances with Fokine and subsequent study with the choreographer in Denmark after the First World War nourished his artistry while also introducing him to the aesthetic of Fokine’s ‘New Ballet’. His romantic relationship with de Maré, begun as early as 1918, solidified his future role at the head of the Ballets Suédois. Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Börlin made his Paris début in March 1920, in a recital of solo works which drew on disparate artistic traditions from African sculpture to Swedish folklore. The concert took place less than a year before the opening of the Ballets Suédois’ inaugural season and presaged many of the themes the troupe would explore during its five-year existence. Börlin drew upon his sympathies for the visual arts, crafting works charged with principal expressions of Parisian interwar modernism, from primitivism through Dadaism to a machine-driven Futurism. Indeed, Börlin’s skill in choreographing works with such eclectic range anchored the company’s reputation for continuing to surprise Parisian audiences already habituated to artistic audacity. His *La Création du monde* (*The Creation of the* World) not only contributed to the modernist allure for the fantasies sparked by and in *l’art nègre*, for example; it also offered an early example of the *objet-spectacle*, in which the human performers were conceived as pieces of a moving décor. Putting repetitious motions into play, *Skating Rink* both informed and was informed by the era’s fascination with objects and machines. *L’homme et son désir* (*Man and His Desire*) by contrast exposed a Börlin marked by fluid grace as he performed near naked to Darius Milhaud’s Brazilian-influenced score, while his *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower*) showed his comedic side as a choreographer and dancer with its surreal depictions of a wedding party. His explorations of Surrealism found perhaps most complete form in his work for *Relâche*, which included two ‘acts’ of dancing intercut with an ‘interval’ of René Clair’s film tellingly entitled *Entr’acte*. In this spectacle, Börlin performed live as a gentleman in top-hat and tails and also on film as a recently deceased man who pops out of his coffin much to the surprise of his mourners. Open to the myriad expressions of his day and desirous of exploring non-balletic forms of movement, Börlin may have found himself sometimes criticized for not having developed any one particular technique for himself or his troupe. His many supporters saw in him, however, a vibrant creativity in his choices of expression for the shape, tone, and direction of his works.  In 1925, de Maré decided to disperse the company. Now without the troupe that had demanded so much of his creative energies for five years, Börlin turned to film, playing the lead role in Clair’s 1925 *Le Voyage imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Voyage*). He opened and ran a dance institute in Paris, embarked on a solo tour in 1929, and was engaged in creating a ballet for the Metropolitan Opera at the time of his death in New York. These later undertakings, however, never achieved the significance of his creations for the Ballets Suédois. Legacy With his multiple choreographies that propagated innovative interplay amongst the arts, Jean Börlin helped create some of the significant works that set the direction of modern art. Scores by the ground-breaking group of musicians known as Les Six, for example, as well as noteworthy costumes by Fernand Léger and décors by Francis Picabia, took shape with Börlin’s collaboration. Although his legacy long remained in the shadow of the reputations built by the Ballets Russes, Jean Börlin is now seen as a principal contributor to the development of twentieth-century artistic expression.  File: L’HommeDesir.jpg  Figure 1 L'Homme et son désir, 1921. (Borlin in one of his most celebrated roles)  Source: Owner: Dansmuseet, Stockholm  File: SkatingRink.jpg  Figure 2 Jean Börlin in *Skating Rink*, 1922. (Borlin in one of his most iconic roles.)  Source: Owner: Dansmuseet, Stockholm List of Works:Paris Solo Recital, 1920 *Arlequin* [Harlequin]  *Danse céleste* [Celestial Dance]  *Sculpture nègre* [Black Sculpture]  *Danse suédoise* [Swedish Dance]  *Danse tzigane* [Gypsy Dance]  *Devant la mort* [Before Death]  *Derviche* [Dervish] Works for the Ballets Suédois *Iberia* (1920)  *Jeux* [*Games*](1920)  *Derviches* [*Dervishes*](1920)  *Nuit de Saint-Jean* [*Midsummer Night’s Revel*](1920)  *Maison de fous* [*Madhouse*](1920)  *Le Tombeau de Couperin* [*The Tomb of Couperin*](1920)  *El Greco* (1920)  *Les Vierges folles* [*The Foolish Virgins*](1920)  *Chopin* (1920)  *La Boîte à Joujoux* [*The Toybox*](1921)  *L’homme et son désir* [*Man and His Desire*](1921)  *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* [*The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower*](1921)  *Dansgille* [*Dance Feast*](1921)  *Skating Rink* (1922)  *Le Marchand d’oiseaux* [*The Bird Seller*](1923)  *Offerlunden* [*The Sacrificial Grove*](1923)  *La Création du monde* [*The Creation of the World*](1923)  *Within the Quota* (1923)  *Le Roseau* [*The Reed Player*](1924)  *Le Porcher* [*The Swineherd*](1924)  *Le Tournoi singulier* [*The Singular* Tournament] (1924)  *La Jarre* [*The Jar*](1924)  *Relâche* [*Theatre Closed*](1924) Archives: The Dansmuseet, Stockholm, houses the largest collection of material about the Ballets Suédois.  http://www.dansmuseet.se Moving Image Material: *Skating Rink*  <http://www.hodsonarcher.com/Hodson_Archer_-_Ballets_Old_%26_New/Films.html>  Reconstruction by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer performed by the Zurich Ballet.  *Entr’acte* (René Clair’s film in *Relâche*)  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnXdYxvBHf8>  *A Great Adventure: Les Ballets Suédois, Paris, 1920-25* (1995) Gava 1 Musik, Sveriges Television (Sweden).  A documentary by Viola Aberlé and Gerd Andersson featuring interviews with former members of the company, designs and musical excerpts as well as archival footage of *Entr’acte* and *Nuit de Saint-Jean*. Paratextual Materials: Fernand Léger, *La Création du Monde,* 1922. (A reproduction of the set and costumes for one of Börlin’s most celebrated ballets from the collection of the Dansmuseet, Stockholm)  <http://www.dansmuseet.se/english/index.html>  Click on ‘Exhibitions’, then ‘The Collections’. |
| Further reading:  (Batson)  (Dorris)  (Häger)  (Näslund)  (Van Norman Baer) |