**Ashton, Frederick, William Mallandaine (b. 18 September 1904, Guayaquil, Ecuador; d. 19 August 1988, Suffolk, England)**

**Summary**

Frederick Ashton was a British choreographer and dancer whose work significantly contributed to the development and identity of The Royal Ballet. Along with its founder, Ninette de Valois, and music director, Constant Lambert, he is regarded not only as one of its main architects but also as a major creator of British ballet style. From 1935 to 1970, he was the company’s principal choreographer and from 1963 and 1970 its director. Inheriting the avant-gardism of the Ballets Russes, he pushed and moulded it to suit his own purposes. Concentrating chiefly on one-act works, his main stimulus was dance itself; ballet movement was central to his work. Even when he used narrative, he did so largely to explore dance. As a frequent collaborator with other modernist artists, he created works which were innovative and occasionally challenging. In 1934, he made the dances for Gertrude Stein’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* and, in 1937, her ballet *A Wedding Bouquet*, while in 1950 he choreographed *Illuminations* for the New York City Ballet to Benjamin Britten’s setting of Arthur Rimbaud’s poems. Despite the reservations of Constant Lambert and the English music press, he used four of Stravinsky’s scores, two of which were in mixed media: *Persephone* (1961) and *Le Rossignol* (*The Nightingale*, 1981).

**Dance Training and Background**

Ashton’s upbringing in South America exposed him to social dance at an early age, but attending a performance by Anna Pavlova when he was just ten changed his life. It was a formative moment, inspiring his future choreography and leading to a lifelong infatuation with ballet. Arriving in London in 1922, Ashton sought a teacher to instruct him in the rudiments of ballet technique. Chance led him to Léonide Massine who, by the 1920s, was a highly acclaimed modernist choreographer.

Before leaving London a few months later, Massine recommended Ashton to Marie Rambert, a Polish dancer and follower of Isadora Duncan who had also studied with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze in Hellerau. Engaged by Serge Diaghilev to help Vaslav Nijinsky with the music of *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913), Rambert joined the Ballets Russes. She began taking class with the Ballets Russes ballet master Enrico Cecchetti, and later, in her London studio, she taught a version of his syllabus. One of the earliest pedagogical systems to be codified, it encouraged fluidity in the upper body and generated a strong central torso. Its syllabus employed prolific use of *terre á terre* footwork, joined to form complex, multi-directional phrases, and much of Ashton’s choreographed movement draws on this technique. Besides being an enthusiastic teacher, Rambert had a particular gift for encouraging young choreographers, and she stimulated Ashton’s talents. As a well-read woman with a circle of avant-garde artistic friends, she was ideally placed to educate and inspire the unformed Ashton, who blossomed in this modernist milieu.

In 1928, Ashton was accepted by Bronislava Nijinska into Ida Rubinstein’s newly-formed Paris ballet company. From Nijinska, Ashton later claimed to have learned everything. She inspired him, and he responded by forging a creative dialogue between her works and his own. She had developed a new, even revolutionary, approach to ballet, experimenting with both training and choreography during her years in Soviet Russia, 1917 to 1921. Critical of the increasing tendency in ballet to give priority to static poses at the expense of action, she taught her dancers to thread movements together by omitting preparations and encouraged them to create an impulse at the start of a movement rather than making an impact at the end. So, for example, in a grand jeté, the dancer should emphasise the take-off rather than the ending, creating a buoyant movement as opposed to a split in the air. Absorbing this approach, Ashton’s movement is usually generated from the torso; it starts with an impulse, and is, above all, dependent on motion. It requires the body to twist, turn, curve, bend, swoop and stretch and combine all of this with swift, intricate footwork. The opening phrase of Natasha’s dance in *A Month in the Country* (1976) is a good example.

An equally significant strand is the movement he absorbed from both working in and choreographing for London revues of the 1920s and 1930s. There he encountered the African-American choreographer Buddy Bradley with whom he collaborated in several Cochran revues. It was from these eclectic experiences that Ashton drew his dance material, and the dancers he worked with, who also contributed to his dance style, had equally diverse backgrounds. They came from a range of different training systems, Imperial Russian, Cecchetti and the Royal Academy of Dancing, and, because there were only fledgling ballet companies, providing little more than six to nine months paid work, the dancers also had to be equipped to perform in other dance genres, such as tap and revue-dancing.

**Major Contributions to Ballet in Britain and to Modernism**

Ashton was a supreme craftsman as well as an innovator. His choreography defined British ballet, placing it within a historical context by layering it with allusions both to his own work and that of others. Sometimes these are comical as when he parodies George Balanchine’s *Apollo* (1928) in Tuesday’s Child in *Jazz Calendar* (1968) or when Aurora’s pas de deux from Act III of *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) is mocked by the two piglets in *Tales of Beatrix Potter* (1970). At other times his quotes are referential, citing dances by Pavlova, Duncan and Nijinska. Ashton’s works were also infused with human qualities, and his parodies are more affectionate than wicked, more humorous than mocking. Drawn from an eclectic range of dance styles, his choreography rarely appears athletic, tending more towards restraint and subtlety. These are regarded as particularly British qualities and considered central to British ballet, certainly during the Ashton years. Indeed such qualities still lurk in the training syllabuses of The Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD).

From the 1930s, *A Wedding Bouquet* (1937) stands out as a supremely modernist dance. It was the result of an alliance between Ashton, the composer Lord Berners and Stein. Stein’s words, taken from her play *They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife* (1931), were set to music by Berners, who also designed the sets and costumes. The loose subject of the ballet is a wedding set in a French provincial town, and the words are central both to the attributes of the characters and to the way those attributes are expressed in dance. For example, when the character Julia is ‘forlorn’, her emotional state is evident in her sudden collapses and despondent *pas de bourrée couru*. Sometimes, Ashton literally responds to the words. Multiple repetitions of verbal phrases are matched by multiple repetitions of step phrases. In many ways the ballet is an essay on the *pas de bourrée*, a rhythmic movement with a triple change of weight. Just as Stein drew on cubism to inform her work, deconstructing the words and changing their function so as to make the writing more abstract, so Ashton deconstructed ballet’s codified steps. He changed their function and made linking steps the main focus, often giving them prominence over major steps.

In the years after the Second World War, Ashton created a number of plotless ballets. Both *Symphonic Variations* (1946) and *Scènes de ballet* (1948) were experiments in pure dance. The former, a work for three men and three women, was performed on a bare stage with a striking abstract backcloth by Ashton’s frequent collaborator, Sophie Fedorovitch. Giving a significant nod to modernist tenets, the work’s finely pared- down choreography drew on a limited range of steps, and the opening motif, in which the arms draw elliptical patterns around the body, anticipates the spare economical choreography which follows. Inspired by Ashton’s readings of the mystic saints, St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, the ballet concerned divine love and ecstasy. Despite this, there is no narrative; the theme is expressed wholly through movement.

*Scènes de ballet*, choreographed to Stravinsky’s music, is a dance for five men, twelve women and a female soloist. Dominated by geometric patterns, adapted from Euclid, the first section is danced mainly by the twelve women. Their sharp, sparkling footwork and piercing arm patterns send sparks into the surrounding space, setting the tone. Here Ashton abandons the lyricism of *Symphonic Variations* in favour of a colder, more hard-edged approach to movement. Inspired by the Stravinsky music, originally made for a Broadway revue, the ballet is probably one of Ashton’s most abstract works.

Ashton was opposed to ballets with complex narratives and frequently reduced stories to a single narrative thread. The story in *A Wedding Bouquet* is slight. A wedding takes place, but as in Nijinska’s *Les Biches* (1924, performed in England as *The House Party*), the work hints more at sex and the earlier conduct of the characters. None are quite what they seem, and the Sapphic couple from *Les Biches* re-emerges as two Bridesmaids. During the war, he made several quasi-narrative works, such as *Dante Sonata* (1940) and *The Wanderer* (1941). Themes of light and darkness and the futility of war pervaded *Dante Sonata*, which was performed in bare feet. The theme of *The Wanderer* was equally elliptical, centring on a Traveller’s struggle to choose between worldly glitter and the spirituality of the inner life.

Although the later Ashton is best known for narrative ballets such as *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1960) and *The Dream* (1964), he never entirely abandoned his earlier modernism. In *La Valse* (1958), a plotless work to the music of Maurice Ravel, he revisited a ballet first choreographed by Nijinska, using the grand swooping movements of the waltz to evoke the decadent atmosphere of Vienna before World War I. In *Monotones I & II* (1965-66) Ashton returned to the spare, pared-down choreography of his earlier pure dance works. Finally, *Jazz Calendar* (1968) was another work that looked back – this time to the dances and sounds of the Jazz Age, even though Derek Jarman’s scenery and costumes were perceived as the epitome of swinging London.

**Legacy**

Although Ashton’s work did not make a complete break with the past, it owes little to earlier English choreography. Ashton developed his own dance language, liberating the humble linking step and giving it a prominence that no other choreographer dared to do, except perhaps Nijinska and later George Balanchine. Despite the centrality of pure dance to his works, he created dances and phrases which gave prominence to expressivity over technical bravura. Bringing the whole body into play, his dance movement is not just expressive but complex, innovative and demanding to perform. His dances are virtuoso dances without virtuoso movement.

While music was often the genesis for Ashton’s works, his choreographic *oeuvre* includes narrative, thematic and wholly plotless works. His chosen narratives are slight, though as the dance writer Edwin Denby pointed out, the ‘more trivial the subject the deeper and more beautiful is Ashton’s poetic view of it’.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Some of his works have notional themes around which the choreography is created, but others are completely plotless, and several are genre hybrids. Ashton’s task was to establish a British style of ballet, and he did this by allying his art with the strategies and approaches of modernism.

**Selected List of Works**

*A Tragedy of Fashion* (1926)

*The Fairy-Queen* (1927)

*Leda* (1928)

*Capriol Suite* (1930)

*Pomona* (1930)

*La Péri* (1931)

*Façade* (1931)

*The Lady of Shalott* (1931)

*Foyer de Danse* (1932)

*Les Rendezvous* (1933)

*Pavane pour une enfante défunte* (1933)

*Mephisto Valse* (1934)

*Le Baiser de la Fée* (1935)

*Apparitions* (1936)

*Nocturne* (1936)

*Les Patineurs* (1937 )

*A Wedding Bouquet* (1937)

*Horoscope* (1938)

*The Judgement of Paris* (1938)

*Cupid and Psyche* (1939)

*Dante Sonata* (1940)

*The Wise Virgins* (1940)

*The Wanderer* (1941)

*The Quest* (1943)

*Symphonic Variations* (1946)

*Les Sirènes* (1946)

*The Fairy-Queen* (1946)

*Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1947)

*Scènes de ballet* (1948)

*Don Juan* (1948)

*Cinderella* (1948)

*Le Rêve de Léonor* (1949)

*Illuminations* (1950)

*Daphnis et Chloé* (1951)

*Tiresias* (1951)

*Sylvia* (1952)

*Picnic at Tintagel* (1952)

*Romeo and Juliet* (1955)

*Rinaldo and Armida* (1955)

*La Péri* (1956)

*Birthday Offering* (1956)

*Ondine* (1958)

*La Valse* (1958)

*La Fille Mal Gardée* (1960)

*Persephone* (1961)

*The Two Pigeons* (1961)

*Marguerite et Armand* (1963)

*The Dream* (1964)

*Monotones* (1965)

*Jazz Calendar* (1968)

*Enigma Variations* (1968)

*Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* [*The Creatures of Prometheus*] (1970)

*Lament of the Waves* (1970)

*The Walk to the Paradise Garden* (1972)

*Five Brahms Waltzes* (1975)

*A Month in the Country* (1976)

For a full list of Ashton’s works, please see *The Ballets of Frederick Ashton: A Chronology* (<http://www.ashtonarchive.com/>).

**References and Further Reading**

Garafola, L. (2011) ‘An Amazon of the Avant Garde: Bronislava in Revolutionary Russia’, *Dance Research* 23 (2): 109-67. (Gives a detailed analysis of the changes Nijinska made to classroom training in ballet)

Jordan, S. and A. Grau (eds.) (1996) *Following Sir Fred’s Steps: Ashton’s Legacy*, London: Dance Books (also available on line at: [www.ballet.co.uk/followingsirfred/home.htm](http://www.ballet.co.uk/followingsirfred/home.htm)). (A useful collection of essays on different aspects of Ashton’s works, including excellent material from dancers with whom he worked)

Jordan, S. (2000) *Moving Music: Dialogues With Music in Twentieth Century Ballet*, London: Dance Books. (An excellent source on Ashton’s music style)

Jordan, S. (2007) *Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions Across A Century*, Alton: Dance Books. (Isolates the works Ashton made to Stravinsky’s music and demonstrates a difference in his musical style)

Kavanagh, J. (1996) *Secret Muses: The Life of Frederick Ashton*, London: Faber and Faber. (A thorough biography dealing mainly with Ashton’s private life)

Macaulay, A. (1987) *Some Views and Reviews of Ashton’s Choreography*, University of Surrey: National Resource Centre for Dance. (Thoughtful reviews of some of Ashton’s most important works from a critic whose writing is both poetic and accurate)

Morris, G. (2012) *Frederick Ashton’s Ballets: Style, Performance, Choreography*, Alton: Dance Books. (The most recent book on Ashton which not only examines his choreographic style in six works but also explores ballet training in Britain during the 1930s 1940s and 1950s)

Vaughan, D. (1999, rev. ed.) *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets*, London: Dance Books. (An excellent biography of Ashton’s choreographic career, with a short, detailed discussion of individual works)

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**On-line Sources**

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**Paratextual Material**

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the internet (or even for academic books!)

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1. Denby Edwin (1986) *Dance Writings*, London: Dance Books: 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)