**Page, Ruth (b. 22 March 1899, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA; d. 7 April 1991, Chicago, Illinois)**

**Summary**

Ruth Page was a Chicago-based dancer, choreographer and director of ballet companies whose experimentalism, disregard for genre boundaries and affinity for collaboration led her in directions at once cosmopolitan and modern. Her theatrical inventions were urbane and often risqué, leading to clashes with censors despite the popular appeal of her works. Regardless of their mixed critical reception, her ballets combined eclectic tastes with her unique sensibility as a woman drawn to the unconventional and offbeat for the greater part of the twentieth century.

Page is best known for her 1938 Americana ballet *Frankie and Johnnie*, which she choreographed with Bentley Stone. A closer look at Page’s works over a lifetime reveals how she incorporated modernist currents: futurism, abstraction, primitivism, African-American jazz and vernacular dancing, popular entertainments (circus, Broadway revue, floor show), cityscapes, syntheses of voice and movement in danced poems and dance-plays, and re-creations of operas as ballets.

**Training and Apprenticeship**

As a teenager, Ruth Page studied with Jan Zalewski and later Adolph Bolm, both at Anna Pavlova’s suggestion. Within a few years, the Indianapolis-born ballerina was touring South America with Pavlova’s company (1918–19) and the United States as première danseuse of Bolm’s Ballet Intime (1920–22). In 1925, she married attorney Thomas Hart Fisher, agreeing to live and work in Chicago in return for her freedom to travel wherever her career took her. This included curtailing her honeymoon in Paris for a brief stint with Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo, where she studied with Enrico Cecchetti and commissioned a solo from George Balanchine. Page soon left to resume working with Bolm, notably with Chicago’s Allied Arts (1924–26), and to create her first piece of ballet Americana, *The Flapper and the Quarterback* (1926).

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

The visual artists Nicolai Remisoff, Pavel Tchelitchev and Isamu Noguchi influenced Page’s early modernist work in futurist and abstract directions. In *Ballet Scaffolding* (1928), taken on tours to Tokyo and Moscow, Remisoff’s architectural cones, tubes and rectangles framed the dancer’s depiction of the modular elements of ballet’s structure. In the early 1930s, she created two dances in jersey sacks designed by Noguchi: *Expanding Universe* and *Night Singing through Space* (1932). A third series in this vein, *Variations on Euclid* (1933), designed by Tchelitchev, added poles and cords to her repertory of bodily extensions in space. Such structural experiments prompted John Martin to remark, approvingly, that Page had ‘gone modern’ (1933: 10). In this period she also created primitivist solos, such as *Tropic* (1932) and *Possessed* (1932), before embarking on a series of concerts with the German expressionist dancer Harald Kreutzberg, essentially replacing Yvonne Georgi as his partner in tours across the United States (1933–36). Page and Kreutzberg collaborated on a number of duets, including a futuristic evocation of sensuality, *Bacchanale* (1934).

As the 1930s progressed, Page shifted to themes of Americana, which, for her, African-American jazz and vernacular dancing symbolized most potently. She wrote her first ballet libretto, *La Guiablesse* (1933), commissioning William Grant Still to compose the musical score, and engaging a twenty-four-year-old Katherine Dunham and her troupe to perform opposite Page’s she-devil of the title. Page’s *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* (1934), to Aaron Copland’s first commissioned ballet score, replayed a nightclub murder according to three different accounts, with Page and her partner Bentley Stone, plus a chorus line in a floor show, shifting from tango-apache to baroque, to blues–hot jazz styles of performance. In *Americans in Paris (*1936), set to George Gershwin’s jazzy Impressionistic score, an American Girl (Page) nostalgically dreams of an American Boy (tap dancer Paul Draper) and four African-American Charleston dancers amid the hustle and bustle of a Paris street scene. Jerome Moross composed the score for *Frankie and Johnny* (1938), based on the African-American ballad of life in the St. Louis underclass, and Page and Stone created its title characters, performing dances like the stomp, blues, rags, foxtrot, and one-step with erotic earthiness.

During the Second World War, Page devised an innovative vehicle for solo touring: a concert programme she called *Dances with Words and Music* (1943–6). She spoke the words of modern poets – Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, e. e. cummings, Federico García Lorca, Langston Hughes and others – while embodying a parade of wistful, antic, parodic, and even tragic personae, impelled by the nonlinearity and sensuous sounds of poetry. After the war came *The Bells* (1946), based on Edgar Allan Poe’s poem. Darius Milhaud’s dissonant score and Page’s choreography, including a homoerotic duet between Frederic Franklin and Nikita Talin (of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo), registered a sense of postwar anomie. *Billy Sunday* (1946) took the shape of a dance-play in which the baseball-player-turned-Prohibition-preacher gave a series of sermons, conceived by Page in the form of a ‘Bible revue’.

The 1950s saw Page returning to cosmopolitan projects with a series of operas-into-ballets, for which she had been well prepared by her many years as ballet director of the Chicago Opera. Her first notable work in this genre was *La Revanche* (*Revenge*, 1951), which recreated Verdi’s *Il Trovator*e (*The Troubadour*) – a Romantic drama of gypsy persecution and revenge, resonant for a post-war Europe – with vivid sets and costumes by the Catalan painter Antoni Clavé, on Boris Kochno’s financially strapped Ballets des Champs-Élysées company. The London Festival Ballet performed her next effort along these lines, *The Merry Widow* (1953), based on the Franz Lehár operetta, with scenery and costumes by Georges Wakhévitch. A double-bill run of these two works at the Broadway Theatre in 1955 led to thirteen years of national tours for Ruth Page’s Chicago Opera Ballet managed by Columbia Artists Management.

**Legacy**

Page’s collaborative approach to ballet making resulted in unconventional works for their time – highly theatrical – embedded with genre crossing and mixed arts media. A ballet renegade, she preferred the incongruous to the seamless; synthesis and mélange to purism and formalism. Her legacy may be best measured by her iconic status on the Chicago arts scene; the opportunities she provided for collaborators and for generations of dancers in Chicago (and which the Ruth Page Foundation continues to provide); and the exposure to ballet she brought to a wider public; in this, she anticipated the regional ballet movement. Page’s published writings (she styled herself an overseas newspaper correspondent) offer slices of life from the dance world (portraits, dance travelogues, classes of the masters) and convey the spirit of a witty, self-reflective, indefatigable woman.

Joellen Meglin

**Selected List of Works**

*The Flapper and the Quarterback* (1926)

*Blues* (1928)

*Ballet Scaffolding* (1928)

*Oak Street Beach* (1929)

*St. Louis Blues* (1929)

*Iberian Monotone* (1930)

*Tropic* (1932)

*Possessed* (1932)

*Expanding Universe* (1932)

*Variations on Euclid* (1933)

*La Guiablesse* (1933)

*Bacchanale* (1934)

*Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* (1934)

*Americans in Paris* (1936)

*An American Pattern* (1937)

*Frankie and Johnny* (1938)

*Dances with Words and Music* (1942–44)

*The Bells* (1946)

*Billy Sunday* (1946)

*Revenge* (1951)

*The Merry Widow* (1953)

*Camille* (1959)

*Mephistofela* (1963)

*The Nutcracker* (1965)

*Alice in the Garden* (1970)

**References and Further Reading**

Martin, J. (1977) *Ruth Page: An Intimate Biography*, New York: Marcel Dekker. (An authorized biography by the venerable *New York Times* critic that draws heavily on Page’s diaries and letters)

Martin, J. (1933) ‘Ruth Page Hailed in Modern Dances: Her Experiments in Abstract Form Win Attention of a Professional Audience’, *New York Times*, (30 January): 10. (Martin favorably reviews a concert Page presented at the John Golden Theatre.)

Meglin, J. (2009) ‘Blurring the Boundaries of Genre, Gender, and Geopolitics: Ruth Page and Harald Kreutzberg’s Transatlantic Collaboration in the 1930s’, *Dance Research Journal* 41 (2): 52–75. (Analyzes the permeability of genre and gender boundaries in the Page-Kreutzberg collaboration in the context of shifting geopolitics in the 1930s)

Meglin, J. (2012) ‘Victory Garden: Ruth Page’s Danced Poems in the Time of World War II’, *Dance Research*, 30 (2): 22–56. (Analyzes how Page inscribed her subjectivity as a modern, cosmopolitan American woman into this innovative touring vehicle during wartime)

Page, R. (1978) *Page by Page*, ed. Andrew Mark Wentink, Brooklyn: Dance Horizons. (A collection of Page’s published and unpublished essays which reveal her wit and graciousness as a conversationalist as well as her insight into people, places and her own work)

Page, R. (1984) *Class: Notes on Dance Classes around the World, 1915–1980*, ed. Andrew M. Wentink, Princeton: Princeton Book Company. (Includes Page’s notes of modern dance classes by Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg, illustrated by André Delfau, and ballet classes of a ‘Chicago School’ – Edna McRae, Bentley Stone and Walter Camryn)

Wentink, A. M. (1980) ‘The Ruth Page Collection: An Introduction and Guide to Manuscript Materials through 1970’, *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 83 (1): 67–162. (Detailed finding aid for the vast collection of Page materials, including correspondence, manuscripts, notebooks and business records, housed at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts)

**Moving Image Material**

*American Patterns: Three Decades of Dance* (1982) Directed and produced by David W. Hahn (an Otter production). (Excerpts of Page’s Americana ballets, including *An American Pattern*, *Americans in Paris*, and *Frankie and Johnny*, interspersed with the choreographer’s discussion of the works with Studs Terkel)

*Billy Sunday: Baseball, the Bible, and Ballet* (1984) WCET–TV/Cincinnati. (A made-for-television restaging by Frederic Franklin of Page’s *Billy Sunday* for the Cincinnati Ballet/New Orleans Ballet, preceded by a documentary on the life of Billy Sunday)

*Frankie and Johnny* (1978) WTTW–TV/Chicago (A made-for-television version of Page and Stone’s *Frankie and Johnny* restaged by Frederic Franklin and performed by the Chicago Ballet)

*Ruth Page: Once upon a Dancer* (1988) Produced and written by Thea Flaum, WTTW–TV/Chicago. (A documentary with clips from a large cross-section of Page’s ballets as well as commentaries from critics and dancers who worked with Page in her Chicago-based companies)

*The Merry Widow* (1983) Produced and directed by Dick Carter, WTTW–TV/Chicago (West Long Branch, N.J.: Kultur, 1983). (A made-for-television version of Page’s *Merry Widow* with Patricia McBride in the title role, Peter Marins as Prince Danilo, Rebecca Wright as Baroness Popoff and George de la Peña as Count Jolidon)

**Paratextual Material**

*Film*

Joffrey Ballet or Dance Theatre of Harlem may be willing to permit a brief video clip from their productions of *Frankie and Johnny*. The 1976 Pittsburgh Ballet Theater production is available at NYPL–PA, so among these possibilities, one should work out.

*Photographs have been sent in separate files via Dropbox.*

1.  DSC 6700 is Ruth Page and Harald Kreutzberg in *Bacchanale*, circa 1935.  Photograph by Maurice Seymour.  A license fee for reproduction must be paid to Ron Seymour ([rons@ronseymour.com](https://mail.uvic.ca/owa/redir.aspx?C=Q-GEF8BCFkO-4c1pPhXZ1ecIBmvAINEIkPsoFiAzkW3nusINDFWoKAUdPN2qj5RqjyxlJzJ-rnE.&URL=mailto%3arons%40ronseymour.com" \t "_blank)).

2.  DSC 6703 is Ruth Page in *Variations on Euclid*, circa 1935.  Photograph by Maurice Seymour. (Again Ron Seymour is the rights-holder.)

3.  Ruth Page and Bentley Stone in *Frankie and Johnny*, 1938.

Courtesy of the Ann Barzel Dance Research Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

4.  Ruth Page and Bentley Stone in *Frankie and Johnny*, 1938.

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