**Spencer, Penelope (b. 30 December 1901, London, England; d. 3 October 1993, Cranleigh, England)**

**Summary**

The career of the English ‘creative’ dancer, choreographer, teacher and dance writer Penelope Spencer spanned the period between the First and Second World Wars. Spencer’s versatile training and career encompassed diverse British theatre genres, including ballet, drama, mime, modern dance, musical comedy, opera, pantomime and revue. She practised consecutively as a freelance artist and under the auspices of enlightened cultural institutions, including the Arts Theatre Club, British Broadcasting Corporation, British National Opera Company, Camargo Society, Glastonbury Festival, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Royal College of Music. Her published articles explored the relationship between dance and music, the importance of dance to actors and musicians and dance as a collaborative art form, promoting the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk.*  During the interwar period, Spencer made significant and pioneering contributions to British theatre dance and wider cultural heritage, while incorporating progressive philosophies into her choreography and teaching.

**Training**

As a child, Spencer was influenced by the Canadian barefoot dancer Maud Allan (1873-1956) and the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881-1931). She commenced ballet training around 1912 with Aimee Phipps, a British teacher who studied with Enrico Cecchetti (1850-1928), and also studied with the Russian ballerina Alexandra Baldina (1885-1977) and at the Italia Conti School. In 1916, she became a pupil of Margaret Morris (1891-1980), who developed and taught a more natural dance technique than that of classical ballet, learning costume design ‘as Margaret Morris taught her – costumes echo shapes of scenery’, and how to choreograph and perform solo and group dances to songs, chamber music, voice and music of a diverse range of British and foreign composers, from Ethel Smyth, a rare British female composer in the 1920s, to Igor Stravinsky. In 1918, Spencer began to study with the Russian teacher Serafina Astafieva (1876-1934), who was celebrated for her mime and whose influence on Spencer was profound.

**Contributions to British Dance and Modernism**

A ‘creative dancer eager for experiment’, Spencer choreographed several dances influenced by African-American culture of the period: *Cake-Walk* (1920), a jazz-style dance to Debussy’s *Golliwog’s Cake Walk;* *Nigger Heaven* (1927), based on Carl Van Vechten’s 1926 novel of the same title; and *Elegiac Blues* (1928), composed for her by Constant Lambert in memory of Florence Mills (1896-1927). Through dance, Spencer promoted an awareness of social and racial prejudices, incorporating this awareness into solo and group recital work, making audiences ‘think, laugh, cry, without the intervention of a word’.

Spencer often expressed social and political satire utilising mime. *General Lavine Eccentric!* (1921) was a ‘grotesque dance’, a ‘satirical Toulouse-Lautrec’, considered as ‘not the sort of dance a woman could do!’. *The Death of Columbine* (1921), a dance-play, featured *commedia dell’arte* characters using satire to communicate a serious anti-war message. In 1924, Spencer choreographed *Dance of Death* in Ernst Toller’s German expressionist drama, *Man and the Masses* (1919), treating choral movements as dramatically rather than decoratively important for this ‘grimly expressionist ballet’. The work was given under the auspices of the Incorporated Stage Society, founded to produce plays unpopular with commercial theatre managers and to protest the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship laws. The *Angels Ballet* was created for a politically charged production of Rutland Boughton’s 1915 music-drama, *Bethlehem*, which was performed during the 1926 General Strike. In this ballet, Christ was born in a miner’s cottage and Herod was guarded by armed soldiers. A further spirit of political rebellion in 1926, *The Midnight Follies*, a ‘Dinner-Time Revue’, was ‘an entirely new note in cabaret’, causing controversy by avoiding the Government’s entertainment tax.

Spencer collaborated with numerous avant-garde British opera and dance organisations of the interwar years. Between 1921 and 1927, she choreographed music-dramas for the Glastonbury Festival, whose founder, Rutland Boughton, made an early attempt at arguing for a ‘National Theatre for the production and development of British music-drama’. She re-choreographed Morris’s dances for Boughton’s *The Immortal Hour* (1914), featuring the symbolic use of the chorus to represent waves, a castle and tree spirits. In 1922, she joined the newly-founded British National Opera Company (BNOC), staging indigenous and foreign operas in English until 1929. Spencer choreographed the Bacchanale and Venusberg scene from *Tannhauser* in 1923 for a cast of fifty at the London Coliseum, ‘the first time a scene from a Wagner opera has been given in a London music hall’, as an approving critic noted. In 1926, she choreographed Jean-Georges Noverre’s *Les Petits Riens* (1778), the BNOC’s first complete ballet, emphasising the company’s high regard for dance evidenced by the re-titling of its publication *Opera* to *Opera and the Ballet* in 1924.

Spencer established a ballet class for Royal College of Music (RCM) students in 1923 and during the next sixteen years choreographed RCM productions of works by notable British composers, including Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Hugh the Drover* (1924) and *Sir John in Love* (1930), and Lord Berners’ *Funeral March on the Death of a Rich Aunt* (1924). Spencer performed *Funeral March* and *Laideronette* (1929), to music of Ravel, on BBC television in 1932, thus becoming one of the first British dancers to appear in the new medium. In 1930, she reprised one of her RCM dances for the inaugural performance of the Camargo Society, of which she was a founding member, and two years later contributed *The Infanta’s Birthday* (with Rex Whistler’s first theatre designs) to the Society’s repertoire. In 1926, Spencer contributed to the first (and only) performance of the Cremorne Company, ‘one of many early attempts to form a British ballet company’.

**Legacy**

Spencer led a diverse career in British theatre between the First and Second World Wars, influencing the development of British dance in forward-looking cultural institutions of the inter-war period. Many of her contributions were innovative. Her recital dances often incorporated social and political satire and racial content, and challenged conventions of the time. She established dance classes for music and drama students and professionals, and choreographed ballet and opera productions in collaboration with both well-known and aspiring British composers and designers. She taught classes specialising in dance composition, focussing on the arrangement of steps, mime, music and design. Spencer’s writings provide a valuable understanding of her contribution to the relationship between choreography and music, articulate the importance of dance to non-dancers and the power of dance as a collaborative art form, and promote the theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

**List of Works**

The complete chronology of the choreographic works of Penelope Spencer is available online at [www.euppublishing.com/journal/drs](http://www.euppublishing.com/journal/drs).

**Selected Writings**

Spencer, P. (1922) ‘The Complex Art: What a Dancer Should Know’, *Pall Mall & Globe*, 7 July. (An early observation of the importance of music and design to dance composition)

------ (1924) ‘Dancing Should be Made Compulsory’, *Opera and the Ballet*, 2 (8): 26-28. (An explanation of the importance of dance to non-dancers in the theatre)

------ (1928) ‘Solo Competitions: Miss Penelope Spencer raises an important musical point’, *Dancing Times*, (218): 191, 193. (A valuable understanding of Spencer’s contribution to the relationship between choreography and music)

------ (1929) ‘Dance Composition’, *Dance Journal*, 2 (9): 353-55. (A discerning consideration for the formation of a National Ballet)

------ (1929) ‘Dance Composition’, *Dancing Times*, (230): 146-47, 159. (An important look at the collaborative artistic elements of music, design and drama required for choreography)\

------ (1984) ‘Touring in the Twenties’, *Dancing Times*, 74 (883): 587. (An entertaining recollection of touring Britain by train with the BNOC in 1922)

**Reference and Further Reading**

Haskell, A. (1930) *Penelope Spencer and other Studies*, London: British-Continental Press.  (An early study of Spencer’s work with useful insights)

Robinson, A. (2010) ‘Penelope Spencer (1901-93) Dancer and Choreographer: A Chronicle’, *Dance Research* 28 (1): 36-89. (A detailed history of Spencer’s wide-ranging and often pioneering achievements in British theatre dance supplemented by a complete online chronology of Spencer’s choreographic works)

Spencer, P. (1979) ‘Penelope Spencer and Glastonbury’, in programme of the Sylvia Spencer Commemoration Concert, 7 March 1979, Royal Northern College of Music. (Reminiscences of the Glastonbury Festival and Royal College of Music in the inter-war period)

**Paratextual Material**

1. *Hornpipe* (1922), choreographed for the League of Arts, composed by Rutland Boughton. Photograph by Bertram Park, London.

Source: Penelope Spencer Family Collection

2. *Funeral March on the Death of a Rich Aunt* (1924), composed by Lord Berners. Photographer unknown.

Source: Penelope Spencer Family Collection

3. *Fete Galante* (1925), composed by Ethel Smyth. Photographer unknown.

Source: Mrs Gotch Collection, Department of Portraits and Performance History, Royal College of Music, Prince Consort Road, Lodon SW7 2BS

4. *The Sirens of Southend* (1926), choreographed for *The Midnight Follies*, music arranged by Alfred Reynolds. Photograph by Bertram Park, London.

Source: Penelope Spencer Family Collection

Note: All four photographs appear in the author’s article (Robinson, A. [2010] ‘Penelope Spencer [1901-93] Dancer and Choreographer: A Chronicle’, *Dance Research* 28 [1]: 36-89.). For permission to reproduce, contact: Edinburgh University Press, 22 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LF.

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