**Dance Marathons**

**Summary**

In a modernizing society undergoing rapidly increasing mechanization, industrialization, urbanization, commercialism and consumerism, dance marathons of the 1920s and 1930s reflected social developments of the era. Initially competing dancers, working-class females in particular, wore out multiple partners over the course of a day or two. This practice altered the purpose of social dancing from being about the pleasure of the couple to being about the achievements of the individual. These females also demonstrated their physical abilities through a leisure endeavour at a time when Prohibition sought to control embodied leisure activities. Later, dance marathons involved male-female couples dancing to beat other couples. Dance marathons became events during the Great Depression that offered an embodiment of hope by creating the possibility of financial gain for contestants. They rewarded endurance, suffering, and survival. In them, competing dancers struggled to continue dancing, similar to so many who struggled to survive everyday life. Dance marathons allowed distressed working-class individuals to sometimes feel like winners. Marathons were used to create and enhance local and national celebrities as well. At the same time, promoters created opportunities for themselves to earn profits by commercializing and theatricalizing a new leisure activity. Dance marathons thrived until the U.S. economy began to recover and the job market soared, in large part due to Second World War.

The English dance instructors Olie Finnerty and Edgar Van Ollefin launched the dance marathon fad when they danced for seven hours on February 18, 1923. The popularity of dance marathons in America, where they gained their biggest following, exploded after Alma Cummings danced for twenty-seven hours in New York City on March 30-31, 1923, just six weeks later. After exhausting six different partners, and becoming a focus of publicity, *The Star Spangled Banner* rang out as Cummings claimed the record for nonstop dancing. This represented a physical achievement for women in the U.S., and many working-class women followed Cummings’ lead into the world of dance marathons during the 1920s.

The principles of and reasons for participating in dance marathons in America changed significantly by the end of the decade. Initially, nonstop dancing by individuals with a series of partners defined dance marathons. Admission was not charged and no steadfast rules existed. Friends and family simply came to watch someone they knew set a new record that the press might document. This formula failed to be highly entertaining on a mass scale. Toward the end of the 1920s a more successful format materialized based on drama and standardization. This format carried on into the 1930s. Marathoners now maintained the same partner for the duration of the event but were allowed fifteen minutes per hour to attend to personal needs. As the length of marathons grew, promoters included live big-band music and vaudeville entertainers to break up the monotony of watching marathoners. Promoters crafted fictional narratives about participants to engross observers. Audience members learned their stories through printed ‘dope’ sheets, verbal commentary by promoters and emcees, and conversations with dancers over the dance floor railings. Promoters made up stories about contestants falling in love, exaggerated injuries, and even hosted fake weddings for the sake of business and entertainment. They felt they had to keep increasing the drama of the competition to keep the public interested and sell tickets.

Standardized dance marathons became especially important during the Depression, which began in 1929. People enjoyed watching dancers struggle to succeed because it resonated with the everyday struggles of the Depression life. Dance marathons blurred performance and everyday life for entertainment purposes. Winners inspired hope as they demonstrated that success was possible. Participants often included local working-class men and women facing financial hardships and unwanted free time due to unemployment, although some were professional competitors who travelled from marathon to marathon to earn money. Dance marathons became a way to ease the suffering brought about by the Depression.

Despite the waning of dance marathons by the end of the 1930s, owing to the end of the Depression and beginning of the Second World War, these competitions contributed to the rise of new forms of popular entertainment that continue today, like roller derbies. Marathons were also precursors to the reality television shows of the current era, such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *American Idol*, and *Survivor*. Audiences continue to be entertained by the combination of competition with constructed storylines and drama. People enjoy watching ordinary people test the limits of the physical body in hopes of attaining money and fame, however temporary. Such theatricalizations of survival of the fittest remain incredibly popular today.

**References and Further Reading**

Calabria, F.M. (1993) *Dance of the Sleepwalkers: The Dance Marathon Fad*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press. (Calabria analyzes dance marathons through multiple lenses to reveal marathons as business endeavors imbued with escapism, the success of which relied upon the staff as well as the contestants.)

Martin, C. (1994) *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. (Martin analyzes dance marathons as theatrical events that thrived on drama.)

------ (2009) ‘Reality Dance: American Dance Marathons’, *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (This essay analyzes dance marathons as events that unfolded as both fictional and nonfictional spectacles.)

**Paratextual Material**

<http://www.dancespirit.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Screen-shot-2012-07-23-at-11.50.55-AM.png> (Dance marathon couples)

<http://www.historylink.org/db_images/DanceMarathonDancers1935.jpg> (A marathon couple wearing matching sweaters advertising their sponsor)

<http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2737/4472157688_82e2dc4d40.jpg> (Exhausted female marathoner supported by her male partner while dancing)

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