**Dance Directors**

**Summary**

The term Dance Director was used in the first three decades of the twentieth century for stage and film work. At first, it simply meant the person who set movement, in contrast to the stage director, who was responsible for dialogue. The term became associated with popular dance – musical comedy, tap and stepping, character specialties, and social dance-derived production numbers – in contrast to ballet and modern dance, where the term ‘choreographer’ was favoured. The terminology was maintained in Prologs and early musical film, but is seldom used today.

The job of dance direction was similar in the three major twentieth-century genres – vaudeville, musical comedy and revues. Most performers had defined performance specialties that the dance director was expected to showcase and, if in a plotted musical, blend into the whole. Most dance directors could work in any technique and genre, and some also maintained their own ballet or precision dance choruses that could be integrated into a production. The principal distinction was between those who were also featured performers, such as the pioneering women Gertrude Hoffman and Aida Overton Walker, or chorus or specialty dancers who segued into directors’ roles, among them George White, Jr. and Busby Berkeley, and those non-performers who specialized in staging the production numbers, such as Julian Mitchell and Ned Wayburn. But all were expected to develop exciting opening and closing sequences, chorus numbers, and structures that enabled performers’ existing specialties. Mitchell and Wayburn were especially adept in working with the choruses, divided by height and technical specialty, in their own numbers and as frameworks for the principals.

Two popular forms of musical theatre required the use of social dance as both a technique and plot device. For lavish operetta productions, both European imports and American originals, dance directors developed contemporary stagings based on the historical social dances appropriate to the plot. Ballet-trained Albertina Rasch and Chester Hale were especially adept at creating waltzes and other period dances for huge choruses, although each also had successes with contemporary shows. At the other extreme, the more intimate modern-day musicals, introduced by the Princess Theatre, used the most up-to-date social dances to emphasize that the dating characters on stage were just like the ones in the audience. The dance directors used the Trots, Glides and Charlestons to move the plot action and romances, while confirming the audiences’ identification with the characters. The dance directors who became known as ‘The Big Four’ after they moved to Hollywood for sound film – Larry Ceballos, Seymour Felix, Sammy Lee, and Busby Berkeley – won fame and studio assignments for their skill in these assignments.

The African-American musical theatre, on and off-Broadway, required the same skill in both production numbers and social dance-derived staging. Major figures in that parallel milieu included Laurence Deas, dance director for *Shuffle Along* (1922) and other Eubie Blake shows, Lyda Webb, who staged *Runnin’ Wild* (1924) and in it ‘The Charleston’, and Billy Pierce who, like Wayburn, maintained a dance studio where he developed individual specialties in musical and vaudeville performers. Outside of Broadway, dance directors sustained the job of balancing specialties with chorus work, especially in revues, picture palaces and cabarets. For the Cotton Club revues, Clarence Robinson balanced the movement specialties of the fifty-woman chorus and six Cotton Club Boys with small ensembles of specialty tap dancers, such as the Chocolateers, Tip, Tap and Toe, and The Nicholas Brothers, all in the October 1927 edition.

The term ‘dance director’ was eventually replaced by the more prestigious ‘choreographer’. The styles of dance associated with dance directors, however, remains an important ingredient of American popular culture.

**Barbara Cohen-Stratyner**

**References and Further Reading**

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Pierce, Lemoine DeLeaver. *Billy Pierce: Dance Master, Son of Purcellville*. Leesburg, VA: Friends of the Thomas Balch Library, 2007.

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**Paratextual Material**

Albertina Rasch

[www.nypl.org/digitial](http://www.nypl.org/digitial) gallery

Image ID: 489303, 489311, and 409332 (dance sequences from *The Band Wagon* (1931)

Media:

Albertina Rasch

Sequence from Wild Violets (London, 1930 on Pathetone),

www.britishpathe.com/video/albertina-rasch-dancers

Gae Foster

[www.criticalpat.com/video/65675028780\_Roxys-Gae-Foster-Girls-practice-dance-routines\_City-theater-rooftop-initiation-rite](http://www.criticalpat.com/video/65675028780_Roxys-Gae-Foster-Girls-practice-dance-routines_City-theater-rooftop-initiation-rite)