**Precision Dancing**

Precision dancing epitomizes industrial production lines in the modernist era. The genre previewed the precision and formalism that is more associated with graphics and decorative art of the 1920s. Both a mass choral movement and a popular entertainment specialty, it symbolized good and bad aspects of American culture, and referenced militarism and mechanization to audiences in theaters, picture palaces and motion pictures on both sides of the Atlantic. The moving of large numbers of people in unison can be traced historically to both military maneuvers and ballet, but the stage specialty is popularly associated with the Tiller Girls, troupes of six to eight short female dancers trained at John Tiller’s studio in Manchester, England in the 1890s. They appeared in extravaganzas, burlesques and pantomimes, as lines of jewels (in Aladdin’s cave) or flowers. A team of Tiller girls appeared in New York as The Original English Pony Ballet in *Dolly Dollars* (1905), and inspired the inclusion of short dancer precision lines in Broadway and vaudeville musicals and revues. Spurred by the popularity of twin and tandem acts in vaudeville, precision line dancing emerged as a popular, American genre in the 1920s, as vaudeville gave way to Prologs, the short shows that alternated with feature films in the “picture palaces.” In the latter format, precision lines became associated with the tallest dancers, whose long legs emphasized unison kicks. They often appeared in newsreels and were featured as aural components of the radio broadcasts emanating from the theaters.

Although precision dance lines can be seen as the ultimate objectification of female performers, it was an excellent career specialty for woman dance directors. Broadway’s Gertrude Hoffman and Albertina Rasch, and Prolog’s Fanchon Woolf and her protégé, Gae Foster, all thrived in the genre. Precision lines were especially popular in Western Europe, where they were seen as typically American. The Gertrude Hoffman Girls and Allan K. Foster Girls (as they were known) frequently travelled to Western Europe to headline Graumont Theatre chain shows in Paris and London. Louis Douglas, who moved to Paris as a performer/dance director for Josephine Baker’s vehicle, *La Revue Negre* (1925), remained to stage precision lines and revues at the Casino de Paris until returning to New York in 1937.

The dance directors and their production teams developed multiple geometric variations on straight lines in the three dimensions of the stage house. They invented different ways of placing dancers on the stage through diagonals, perpendiculars, and windmills, usually climaxing with a kick line straight across the footlights. Choreographers claimed movement innovations as if they were major discoveries. Dave Bennett declared himself the inventor of the toy soldier effect, also known as the domino fall, in an interview with Nanette Kutner in *The Dance* (December 1925, 16, 23).

In an interview with Margaret Lloyd, The Capitol Theater’s Chester Hale listed his precision line techniques as: “jazz, tap, modern work, classical ballet, Spanish heel work, and character dancing.” (*Christian Science Monitor*, 24 October 1942) “Musical Comedy,” the basic dance technique associated with precision line dancing, included variants of tap and stepping, and kicking, characterized by exaggerated directional positions for face, torso and limbs. Visual and aural precision was paramount. The visual aspects were emphasized through casting, costuming, and identical make up and wigs. Occasionally, even the slight individuality of faces was obscured. Clarence Robinson put the fifty dancers in his *Cotton Club* *Parade* chorus in masks of Bill Robinson, “made of rubber so that their expressions may be changed at will.” (*NY Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1937)

Chester Hale (1899-1984), an American gymnast trained by Enrico Cecchetti while touring with the Anna Pavlova troupe, maintained a dance studio on the roof of the Capitol Theater, where he served as dance director. The Chester Hale Girls were known for their precision toe tapping, rhythmic line dances in pointe shoes supplied with taps. Albertina Rasch, from the Vienna State Opera Ballet, focused on the exceptional balance and ability to hold poses by her ballet-trained dancers.

Other active troupes were choreographed by well-known dance directors, in techniques un-related to their personal performances. The Gertrude Hoffman Girls and Allan K. Foster Girls were famous for integrating circus techniques in their routines. Independently, they developed “living curtains” for revues. Through creative uses of rigging, when the curtains were raised, the dancers rose with them.

The most versatile group was led by Gae Foster, at one time an Albertina Rasch dancer. She had been trained by Fanchon Woolf to become the manager of Fanchon & Marco troupes for the Mid-West before relocating to New York to stage weekly revues for the Roxy Theatre, which had two precision teams and a ballet company. In contrast to the Russell Markert’s stage-bound Roxyettes, her troupe because famous for precision line work in any form of dance, circus or sports-based movements, from roller skates to stilts. (E. J. Kahn, Jr. “A Reporter at Large: The Kids” *The New Yorker*, 21 January 1939)

The fad of precision lines faded in the 1930s, although eight-twelve member choruses could be seen at large nightclubs, such as New York’s Copacabana and Paris’ Lido into the 1960s. Dance directors, such as Busby Berkeley, staged multiple precision lines in musical films, which were popular in the 1930s and rediscovered as ‘camp’ in the 1970s. The last precision line standing is, of course, the Rockettes (descendants of the Roxyettes) who perform in the Radio City Music Hall Holiday show and as a specialty act elsewhere. The team still features a kickline and the domino fall.

**Barbara Cohen-Stratyner**

**References and Further Reading**

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Vernon, Doremy. *Tiller’s Girls*. London: Robson Books, 1988.

**Suggested Images**

Nypl.org/digital gallery

Tiller Girls

Image ID: th-57997

Chester Hale

Image ID: hale\_0008v

Roxyettes

Image IDs: psnypl\_the\_5014,\_5015, \_5021, \_5023, \_5049, \_5050

Allan K. Foster Girls

http://www.picking.com/vitaphone111.html

**Media**

The Victoria Girls’ Perfect Doll Dance (De Forest Photofilm, 1928)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvKv-ONnLgo