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# A Brief History of American Ballet

SUSAN YUNG

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUSAN YUNG

Susan Yung, publications manager at BAM, produces programs, editorial content, and various projects, and edits and contributes to the [BAM Blog](#). She was associate editor on *BAM: The Complete Works*, the extensive book celebrating the institution's 150th year, and contributed a number of essays on iconic artists, including Pina Bausch and Bill T. Jones. As a freelance writer with a focus on dance and visual art, she blogs at [Ephemeralist.com](#), and has contributed to numerous publications and websites including *Dance Magazine*, WNET's Sunday Arts blog, *Pointe*, *Village Voice*, *Ballet-Tanz* (Berlin), *Brooklyn Rail*, and many others. Yung served for eight years on the Bessie Awards committee, and has adjudicated for several cultural grant- and award-giving organizations.



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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN BALLET

### INTRODUCTION

Ballet in America developed from roots in Russia and Europe, primarily France and England. Early major companies that remain vital and important include [American Ballet Theatre](#), founded in 1939 by Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith; [San Francisco Ballet](#), which became its own entity in 1942 under William Christensen after parting from the city's opera company; and [New York City Ballet](#), officially founded in 1948 by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine. Many of America's significant ballet troupes over the last half century were founded by choreographers and dancers who moved through these organizations.

### GEORGE BALANCHINE AND NEW YORK CITY BALLET

The single most influential figure in American ballet is [Balanchine](#) (1904—1983), born in Russia. As a youngster, he studied ballet and piano and began choreographing in his teens. He joined the Mariinsky Ballet in 1921, and left Russia in 1924 for the Ballets Russes in Paris, for which he choreographed, among other places. In the 1920—30s, he made several ballets which remain among his finest, including *Apollo* and *Serenade*, still in the New York City Ballet's repertory today. In 1933, impresario Lincoln Kirstein lured him to New York to begin the School of American Ballet, where he trained dancers who would eventually comprise the company. He also worked as choreographer and/or ballet master at the Metropolitan Opera, Paris Opera Ballet, Ballets Russes, on Broadway, and on Hollywood films. [New York City Ballet](#) was based at New York City Center until 1964, when it moved to its current home, the Koch Theater at Lincoln Center. Its core repertory remains Balanchine's oeuvre, overseen by the Balanchine Trust.

Balanchine created many ballets based on myths or stories while forging a historic path for modernist and plotless ballets, in part because of his affinity with Igor Stravinsky's radically modern music. They include some of his best loved, such as [Agon](#), [Rubies](#), [Symphony in Three Movements](#), and [Duo Concertant](#). In many, production elements are minimal; the dancers often wear simple black and white leotards. Balanchine's movement can be appreciated for its musicality, movement and spatial invention, beauty, and humanity.

Acclaimed American Broadway choreographer [Jerome Robbins](#) became associate director of NYCB in 1949 and created many beloved ballets, often with a jazzy, theatrical flavor, such as [Fancy Free](#), [Afternoon of a Faun](#), and [West Side Story Suite](#). He and Danish-born (and former principal dancer) [Peter Martins](#) were co-artistic directors after Balanchine's death; Martins became head of the company in 1990, and has created numerous ballets for NYCB such as [Calcium Light Night](#). New works in the classical idiom form the heart of NYCB's repertory, and since 1992, NYCB's Diamond Project and New York Choreographic Institute have supported and commissioned dozens of contemporary ballet choreographers in the creative process. The last decade has seen the emergence of [Christopher Wheeldon](#) (*Carousel*, *After the Rain*) and [Alexei Ratmansky](#), who ran the Bolshoi prior to moving to New York (*Concerto DSCH*, *Namouna*; and now ABT's artist-in-residence), [Benjamin Millepied](#) (who founded the [LA Dance Project](#), and who will be artistic director at Paris Opera Ballet), and in recent seasons, [Justin Peck](#), a NYCB soloist.

Renowned organizations in the US that trace ties to NYCB include:

\* [Dance Theater of Harlem](#) (New York) begun by Arthur Mitchell in 1969 (it was recently revived under Virginia Johnson after a hiatus)

\* [Miami City Ballet](#), founded in 1985 by Edward Villella, and now led by Lourdes Lopez, former NYCB principal dancer; she is also director of Morphoses

\* [Suzanne Farrell Ballet](#) (Washington, DC) since 2001 led by the ballerina who was one of Balanchine's legendary muses

\* [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) (Seattle), now under Peter Boal who took over after a long tenure by Franca Russell and Kent Stowell, is renowned as well for its diverse repertory and outstanding technique

\* [Vail International Dance Festival](#), organized by Damian Woetzel, where interesting collaborations take shape between artists from different companies and genres

### AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE

[American Ballet Theatre](#) began in 1940 as a source of new works and classics, but evolved to present primarily theatrical ballets that tell stories. The grand classic narrative ballets comprise a



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large part of its repertory: [Swan Lake](#), [Romeo & Juliet](#), [Giselle](#), and [La Bayadère](#). Additionally, choreographers with distinctive voices who have contributed repertory include Agnes de Mille, Anthony Tudor, Frederick Ashton, Twyla Tharp, and Mark Morris. Artist in Residence Alexei Ratmansky has created significant ballets on ABT in recent seasons, including a new production of [The Nutcracker](#) performed at [BAM](#) since its premiere in 2010, a revival of Dimitri Shostakovich's infamous [The Bright Stream](#), and the [Shostakovich Trilogy](#). While some of the troupe trained at the company's Onassis School, many of its principals are foreign-born stars. (This contrasts with NYCB, where many rise through the School of American Ballet.) Russian ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov led ABT for a decade; American Kevin McKenzie has been artistic director since 1992.

## STRONG INDEPENDENT VOICES

Some talented ballet choreographers have moved between running companies and working on commissions and projects on a freelance basis. [Twyla Tharp](#) founded her company in 1965; it performed her innovative, loose, jazz-infused work, and also excelled at crafting technically challenging ballets. She has had great success in many genres of dance, including on Broadway ([Movin' Out](#)) and in film, and famously worked with Baryshnikov in [Push Comes to Shove](#) and other dances. In the 1970-80s, ex-Merce Cunningham dancer [Karole Armitage](#) choreographed "punk ballet," set to rock 'n' roll. Her distinctive voice has been seen on Broadway and on her own company, [Armitage Gone!](#), which re-formed in New York in 2006 after she returned from a stint in Italy.

## NOTABLE COMPANIES AND TRENDS

Other notable companies in the US include:

- [San Francisco Ballet](#). Helgi Tomasson, artistic director since 1985, has built the diverse repertory to include classics and contemporary work, notably by Mark Morris and Yuri Possokhov, choreographer in residence.
- [Ballet Hispanico](#), founded by Tina Ramirez in New York, emphasizes choreography by Hispanic artists such as Anabelle Lopez Ochoa.
- [Joffrey Ballet](#), founded by Robert Joffrey in 1956, now based in Chicago. He introduced the style of Denmark's August Bournonville to the US, and revived Diaghilev-era ballets, in addition to creating works.

- [Houston Ballet](#), led by Stanton Welch, who has choreographed numerous ballets in addition to performing repertory by many contemporary artists.
- [Aspen Santa Fe Ballet](#), with an innovative business model, dual home bases, and a wide-ranging, popular repertory.
- [Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet](#), in New York, which in a decade has commissioned or acquired an impressive selection of contemporary ballets by international, renowned artists.
- [Alonzo King Lines Ballet](#), based in San Francisco, performing primarily King's modernized, athletic take on ballet.
- [Boston Ballet](#), with a classics-to-contemporary repertory; Jorma Elo is resident choreographer.
- [Morphoses](#), originally built around choreography by Christopher Wheeldon, but in recent years has featured an annual artist in residence
- [Hubbard Street Dance Chicago](#), which in recent years has moved toward an eclectic repertory including contemporary ballet; Alejandro Cerrudo is resident choreographer and former Joffrey Ballet principal Glenn Edgerton is artistic director.
- [Pennsylvania Ballet](#), established in 1963 by Balanchine protégé Barbara Weisberger. Under Artistic Director Roy Kaiser, the Company has expanded its Balanchine-based repertoire.
- [Washington Ballet](#), founded by legendary ballet teacher Mary Day in 1944 and currently under the artistic direction of Septime Weber.

In New York in recent years, there are many smaller ballet companies that focus on the work of one choreographer ([Pam Tanowitz Dance](#), with a highly contemporary approach) or feature chamber-sized or scaled-down repertory ([New York Theatre Ballet](#), founded by Diana Byer, which revives classics, including by Tudor, and commissions new story ballets, often shorter in length). Others include: [Ballet Collective](#), a collaboration of dance, art, music and poetry begun by NYCB's Troy Schumacher; [Ballet Next](#), founded by Michele Wiles of ABT; and [Ballet NY](#), begun by Judith Fugate and Medhi Bahiri, performing contemporary repertory, and [Ballet X](#), founded by former Pennsylvania Ballet principals Christine Cox and Matthew Neenan.

American ballet's strong lineage began from foreign roots, but it has asserted itself in the history of dance with its strong modern repertory and diversity of dancers of all nationalities, as well as home-grown talent.



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