

**Ballet:** French, from Italian *balletto*, diminutive of *ballo*, to dance.

by Michelle Potter

That great pioneer of modern dance, the vibrant and flamboyant Isadora Duncan, found ballet distasteful. Her writings, which she produced over many decades, are full of comments about what she believed was the inability of ballet to have any relevance in the contemporary world. She called it 'a school of affected grace and toe walking'. She spoke of 'the servile coquetry of the ballet'. She believed that ballet produced 'a sterile movement which gives no birth to future movements, but dies as it is made'.

Duncan's legacy to the dance world is inestimable. She influenced the future direction of dance in a way that few others have done. She was truly a pioneer and is one of the few dance artists widely known outside the dance community. But her dislike for ballet was intense and fervent.

Distaste for the art form continues to be prevalent in some circles. Ballet is still often sneered at and made fun of. It is 'dumbed down' with remarks about tutus and tiaras, and generally dismissed as frivolous or conservative or lacking depth. And only recently Germaine Greer, as an arch feminist, called ballet a 'cultural cancer'. She saw it as the epitome of a sexist culture, a culture that stems from a patriarchal society.

Why is ballet scorned in this way? Can the sneering and the distaste be justified? In a fast-paced, contemporary world is ballet really backward-looking and conservative? Does it have a future as a contemporary art form?

Often, when people think of ballet, the most common images that spring to mind are those of ballerinas in white tutus, and princes, fairies, witches, swans and village maidens. They are the images of the well-known works of the 19th century ballet repertoire. Often people are also aware that ballet developed as an aristocratic art form. It emerged in the courts of France and Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries. It grew as a means of displaying the wealth and power of those in the upper levels of society. It was noble and cultivated with a formalised technique, but distant from everyday life. Perhaps too they may remember that ballet was at one stage associated with the music hall, that female dancers were little more than the playthings of rich gentlemen, and that people went to the ballet either to be seen themselves or to ogle at the young dancers.

The art form has a long and varied history and, looking back at how it grew and developed, it is certainly possible to see why Duncan, Greer and countless others have adopted the attitudes they have. But such views betray a lack of understanding of the very nature of ballet. Ballet has been part of the fabric of the Western world's artistic and social life for over five centuries. It has always reflected society's values. But across

the centuries those values have changed just as society and culture have changed. The great works of the 19th century are not all there is, as much as we would never want to lose them. The social and sexual hierarchy that gave ballet certain distinctive features at one stage in its history is not the society of the 21st century.

Today's choreographers respond to the world they live in, to the ideas and values that are part of the fabric of 21st century life. It is impossible for it to be otherwise. They are of their time. Today's dancers reap the benefits of a changing society. Looking at old ballet photographs from even a few decades ago it is clear that dancers' bodies look very different now. Today's dancers have sleek, streamlined bodies with long rather than bulky muscles. Ballet has taken on board the latest discoveries in science and medicine and dancers now use their bodies more efficiently. And their artistry flourishes. Today's best artistic directors also look outward. They challenge accepted views, and audaciously seek new ways of staging old works.

Ballet has survived for so long, and has grown into the rich and diverse art form that it is today, by responding to change and by being open to new ideas. It has always been a contemporary art form, an art form of its time, and it continues to be so.

Contrary to what Duncan suggested, ballet is far from a sterile movement. In fact, just looking at how its vocabulary is constantly changing, it is clear that ballet's great strength is its inherent ability to absorb the new. It has been responding to change since its aristocratic beginnings. In the mid-19th century the Romantic ballerina Marie Taglioni made use of what was then a radical new shoe. It allowed her rise on her toes. In this way she was able to express the newest ideas of the choreographers of the day. In the 20th century George Balanchine, drawing on his love of Hollywood musicals, choreographed sequences in some of his most classical ballets that resemble chorus lines. The ballet vocabulary lends itself easily to all kinds of interpolations. Today's choreographers also stretch the classical vocabulary to extraordinary limits. William Forsythe pushes dancers' bodies off centre, out of classical alignment, and creates precariously balanced movement. The vocabulary of ballet absorbs all these changes. Like a sponge. New movements have always merged with old. No-one is restricted by an outmoded code of steps from the 17th century.

Ballet has every reason to celebrate its five centuries of achievement and to look forward to five more centuries, at least, of growth and change. It has no reason to be daunted by ill-conceived judgments that it is old fashioned, boring and lacking contemporaneity. What it does need, of course, is astute men and women of the 21st century to keep leading it forward. This living, breathing art form needs choreographers, directors, dancers and teachers who are bold and courageous enough not to be drawn backwards; people who can envisage the future and who know that change is absolutely right and totally inevitable.