

Choreography: GEORGE BALANCHINE

Staged by: VICTORIA SIMON

Music: IGOR STRAVINSKY

Premièred 1 December 1957 by New York City Ballet, City Center, New York. The stage première was preceded by a preview at a benefit performance in New York on 27 November 1957.

The name *Agon* is Greek and means 'a gathering or assembly especially for public games' and by extension 'contest'. The music for the ballet – a commissioned score – was inspired by a seventeenth-century manual of French court dances. But *Agon* is neither Greek nor French. It is purely and simply a suite of dances.

There is though a strong feeling of a contest about *Agon*. It may not be a contest with winners and losers but, with its complex musical score and its physically demanding choreography, it is definitely athletic dancing of the most challenging kind. In fact Joseph Mazo, a former New York City Ballet dancer, has remarked that dancing *Agon* is 'like trying to run the four minute mile while doing your calculus homework'. In *Agon* dancers come together and display to the assembled audience feats of strength, control and virtuosity, which they do with skill, clarity, wit and humour.

Agon is also a watershed work in the history of ballet. 'Some people found the ballet set their teeth on edge', wrote one critic, but with its combined musical and choreographic inventiveness *Agon* redefined the look of ballet. After *Agon's* world première performance in New York in 1957 the Dada artist Marcel Duchamp commented that he felt the same way as he had at the opening of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*. That opening night in Paris in 1913 changed the face of dance forever. *Agon* has had a similar effect, although without the scandal that accompanied *Rite of Spring*!

Balanchine made *Agon* to a very tight choreographic structure. The ballet is in three parts danced without interruption. The whole consists of fifteen different sections arranged for various combinations of dancers. Some of the sections have French names, such as Sarabande, Gaillard, and Bransle, reflecting the inspiration Stravinsky drew from the ancient dance manual. The names of other sections reflect more closely the choreographic structure. The opening section, called Pas de Quatre, is set on four men. The Double Pas de Quatre, which follows on immediately, is for eight women, and the next section, the Triple Pas de Quatre, is for four men and eight women.

Nestled towards the end of the work is a pas de deux that is structured according to classical tradition. Just like a grand pas de deux from works such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Agon's* pas de deux has an entrance, an adagio, variations and a coda. But in the *Agon* pas de deux we see just how flexible, exuberant and athletic the balletic vocabulary can be.

The feel of *Agon* is uncompromisingly honest. With the dancers dressed in black and white practice clothes nothing can be hidden. Rhythmic invention and an exploration of the unlimited potential of the dancer's body prevail.

Agon was first performed in Australia in Melbourne on 21 October 1995 by Pacific Northwest Ballet as part of the tenth Melbourne International Festival of the Arts. This is its première season for The Australian Ballet.

Michelle Potter, Curator of Dance, National Library of Australia.