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Modern French Ballet

Singaporeans are fortunate that international bands or dance troupes of international standard perform here from time to time. We need only pay a minimal fee to enjoy these performances. One of these was a modern French ballet that was performed at Victoria Theatre for four consecutive nights last week.

For the all-rounded citizen who wishes to cultivate a taste for the elegant and elevate the purity of his thoughts, the best way is to watch such performances frequently. Artists should all the more approach such performances with an analytical eye. This is because ballet is a combination of the essences of literature, music, painting, sculpture, and dance. It is also a general expression of artistic conceptions and rhythm, and is thus closely related to artists.

The numerous gouache paintings of ballet scenes by the famous Impressionist artist Edgar Degas come easily to mind. They are unforgettable portrayals — vivid, energetic, and enduring, with a tinge of sadness. We are also aware that the great Cubist master Pablo Picasso designed for the ballet in his middle age, and set many revolutionary precedents in complementing the development of modern dance. Indeed, dance and art are closely related.

In ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt, dance was used as a way of expressing religious beliefs. However, the ballet that we know today originated under the seventeenth-century reign of Louis XIV. He was a remarkable ruler with a grand vision and an eye for the art of enjoyment. Proficient in dance himself, he often gave dance demonstrations during royal balls, earning praise and envy from the upper social class. In order to nurture talented individuals in this area, Louis XIV founded the Académie Royale de Danse. The academy employed experts near and far, organised classes, and conducted extensive studies. From then on, ballet was formally accepted as a proper form of art. This is the reason French terminology is used today for many dance techniques.

Dance steps then were adapted from aristocratic social dance. The costume was cumbersome and inevitably caused the dance postures to look hindered and heavy. Other dance steps imitated folk dance or fast acrobatic movements that had more graceful postures. Subsequently, the costume was transformed and became shorter. Leg movements became more important. The traditional use of masks was abolished and facial expression, which had to be coordinated with body movement, became a major factor in dance.

In the early 19th century an Italian, Carlo Blasis, wrote a monograph on ballet which established a system of training and learning for future generations. Ballet developed rapidly and travelled from France to Italy and then Russia, where it flourished. The Russians merged French gracefulness with Italian robustness and varied the forms to create a perfect representation of ballet, such as in Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty. Worthy of mention is the grand Russian ballet teacher of the turn of this century, Sergei Diaghilev. He founded a dance company which performed in various parts of Western Europe and became the fad of the day. Diaghilev had several outstanding modern artistes working for him, such as the composer Igor Stravinsky, the painters Pablo Picasso and André Derain, the artistes Michel Fokine and George Balanchine, as well as many world renowned dancers like Anna Pavlova.1 He revived the then fledging art and gave it a new lease of life. Owing to Diaghilev's efforts, ballet troupes that had always relied on royal or government patronage became self-sufficient. This set a precedent for other subsequently established dance troupes, as seen in the freedom they exercised over their ballet activities. The modern ballet troupe performing in Singapore now is the new face of such self-sufficient troupes.

Unfortunately, with the Russian Revolution all impetus for cultural art came under the strict control of the party, and composers were unable to display their talents. Thus, Russian ballet in the past few decades has shown no sign of breakthrough. It has been locked in tradition — a true-to-life portrayal of Sleeping Beauty. On the contrary, Western Europe and the United States have flourished under the influence of freedom of thought and democracy. With daily life as subject matter and folk art as nourishment, modern music and art were amalgamated to create an entirely new school of thought. The performance by the French ballet company this time is the result of this development.

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The dance company Ballet Théâtre Contemporain has been established for less than five
years. Yet it has travelled the world to high acclaim. The dancers’ mastery of their art is thus evident. The members are young men and women, both French and non-French, who are able to observe strict discipline and devote themselves entirely to art. Most of them come from famous academies and possess excellent dancing skills and experience. Their coordination on stage was seamless. From the spectator’s seat, the stage seemed to display countless ever-changing compositions—a series of moving dots, a chain of darting lines, a ring of expanding and contracting circles. All the performers were in tight-fitting leotards. The men were naked to the waist, showing off their masculine form. There was no trace of the skirts that were often seen in the past, which were as gauzy as the wings of a cicada. They have been replaced by brightly coloured tights. In this way, the dancer’s body is hardly hidden from view. A simple hand gesture or lifting of the foot requires greater artistry than before. When a male and female dancer perform together, they exercise control over their anatomies and unite their bodies to create graceful, nimble and rhythmic movements. Many of the dance steps today are derived from Oriental or primitive African art. They are simple, sometimes humorous, but not frivolous. Nevertheless, the audience can still feel the steadiness and power of the art of traditional dance, which is the basis of a performance.

Illumination is a central part of modern ballet. It enhances the depth of the stage and creates a mysterious atmosphere, in the same way a painting is imbued with a special mood. Sometimes, a single spotlight reveals the strong lines of the human body—amazing! At the start of every performance, a white light shines directly on the character for at least a few minutes to encourage the audience to focus visually and to clear their minds of distraction. The story then unfolds slowly, tugging at their heartstrings.

Undoubtedly, this performance emphasises Stravinsky’s work. Stravinsky is highly respected in the world of modern music, like Picasso is in art. He was richly creative and strongly revolutionary in character. Although his dance pieces were composed mainly to complement dance movements, they still possess the excellent quality of pure music. Just like the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, Stravinsky enjoyed the pure and simple style of folk music. Many of his outstanding compositions were inspired by them. The Firebird, The Rite of Spring, The Nightingale, The Wedding, and The Dance Concert, which was performed this time, are most enjoyable. He and Picasso were colleagues and good friends. They shared almost similar artistic views and communicated much with each other—the only difference was that one focused on music, while the other focused on art and colour.

France has carefully nurtured the graceful and beautiful ballet and brought it to various nationalities, popularising it worldwide. Today, Paris is still a temple of this art. Hence, should we not salute these men and women who have travelled the long way here to present their art?

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1 In the original text, the author also mentioned a composer named Long Bo (龙勃), who may be the choreographer Léon Bakst.
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