

Factsheet Denmark

DECEMBER 2003

BALLET, DANCE AND THEATRE

Danish ballet, dance and theatre are all of international standard and especially The Royal Danish Ballet has become famous outside the country through world-wide touring activities.

Other companies which have been successful abroad include The Peter Schaufuss Ballet, the performance theatre Hotel Pro Forma and the experimental Odin Teatret from Holstebro. However, because of the language barrier, Danish theatre has generally found it difficult to make its mark abroad.

Danish Ballet

The fact that The Royal Danish Ballet enjoys international renown is due primarily to August Bournonville (1805-1879), whose works are performed by The Royal Danish Ballet on various international tours and have also been included in the repertory of many foreign companies.

However, Danish ballet also nurtured a number of the greatest dancers and choreographers of the 20th century, and several have made a name for themselves outside Denmark.

Danish Ballet before August Bournonville

French court ballet was fashionable at the Danish court from the mid 17th century, but actual theatre dance did not appear until a national theatre was founded in the 18th century.

When The Royal Theatre opened in 1748 on Kongens Nytorv in Copenhagen, a 'corps de ballet' was gradually established, initially led by Italian or French ballet masters. The Royal Theatre Ballet School was founded in 1771, and in 1775 the Italian Vincenzo Galeotti (1733-1816) came to Copenhagen to fill the post of ballet master and choreographer.



Mads Blangstrup and Silja Schandorff in August Bournonville's *La Sylphide* (1836), The Royal Danish Ballet 1999. Photo: Martin Mydtskov Rønne.

He was the real founder of The Royal Danish Ballet. Of his many works, only *The Whims of Cupid* and the *Ballet Master* (1786) remains in the repertory. It is the world's oldest ballet retaining its original choreography.

The August Bournonville Period

Despite his French-sounding name, August Bournonville was Danish and his works reflected the thoughts and ideas of his age in much the same way as, for instance, the writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805- 1875), who was a close friend of Bournonville's. With a few gaps, Bournonville was artistic director at The Royal Theatre from 1830 to 1877.

His training in Paris had taught him the demands and standards of the world of international ballet and he did much to improve the quality of Danish ballet. He made it both international in ability and national in style and repertory, with the special quality that remains typical of it to this day.

Bournonville choreographed some fifty ballets, of which just under ten have survived. They include the major works *La Sylphide* (1836), *Napoli* (1842), *The Kermesse in Bruges* (1851) and *A Folk Tale* (1854). The keyword in Bournonville's works is harmony, both in terms of philosophy and style. Like the other Danish

Golden Age artists, Bournonville advocated a view of life characterised by faith in a meaningful world.

After August Bournonville, Danish ballet went through a quiet period. His successors upheld the tradition, especially Hans Beck (1861- 1952), who in the 1890s brought together training steps from Bournonville's classes and variations from his ballets to create what is still known as the Bournonville schools and continues to form the basis of ballet training when introducing today's dancers to Bournonville's style.

The Harald Lander Renewal

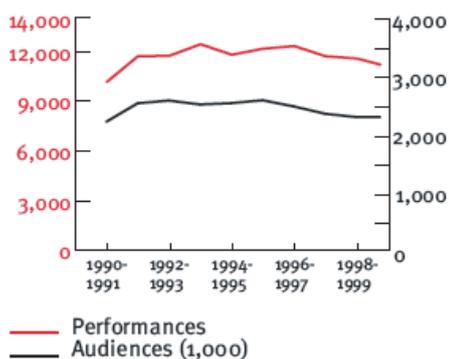
The renewal of Danish ballet came in the 20th century. Guest appearances by Mikhail Fokin (1880- 1941) in 1925 and George Balanchine (1904-1983) in 1930-1931 provided great inspiration, but it was Harald Lander (1905-1971) who gave new life to the ballet, whose backbone was the interplay of contrasts between a modern repertory and loyalty to the Bournonville tradition.

With a repertory built up around the prima ballerina Margot Lander (1910-1961), Lander, who was artistic director from 1932 to 1951, achieved unparalleled popularity for ballet. The culmination was *Etudes* (1948), which later brought him international fame.



SUBSIDISED THEATRES 1990-2000

Performances and Audience Figures



Source: Statistics Denmark.

During the Lander era, ballets by Nini Theilade (b.1915), Niels Bjørn Larsen (1913-2003) and Børge Ralov (1908-1981) attracted critical acclaim. Together with the writer Kjeld Abell (1901-1961) and the composer Bernhard Christensen (b.1906), Ralov in 1934 created *The Widow in the Mirror*, which was Denmark's first modern ballet.

Harald Lander trained a strong group of young dancers, several of whom made their mark internationally: Erik Bruhn (1928-1986), Toni Lander Marks (1931-1985), Kirsten Simone (b.1934), Henning Kronstam (1934-1995) and Flemming Flindt (b.1936).

The Russian-English dancer Vera Volkova (1904-1975), who taught at The Royal Danish Ballet from 1951 until her death, also made a considerable contribution to the company.

Progress towards International Status

Throughout the 1950s, The Royal Danish Ballet continued its rise to international fame. There were annual summer festivals and the company toured internationally, making its breakthrough in the USA in 1956.

Many of the best choreographers of the day came to Copenhagen to work with The Royal Danish Ballet: George Balanchine, Birgit Cullberg (1908-1999), Ro-

land Petit (b.1924) and Frederick Ashton (1904-1988), who in 1955 created the first Western version of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* for the company.

Niels Bjørn Larsen, the greatest Danish mime artist of the 20th century, was artistic director in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. He was replaced for a couple of seasons (1956-1959) by Frank Schaufuss (1921-1997).

The New Era

In 1966 Flemming Flindt took over as artistic director and introduced modern dance into the repertory. He had made his choreographic debut in 1963 with *The Lesson*, based on a play by Eugène Ionesco (1912-1994), with whom he also collaborated on the greatest success of the time, *The Triumph of Death* (1972).

The Danish company danced barefoot in Paul Taylor's (b.1930) ballet *Aureole* (1968) and a number of other modern works also found their way into the repertory.

Nonetheless, the school continued to produce fine classical dancers with a reputation for excellence, especially for male dancers, such as Niels Kehlet (b.1938), Peter Martins (b.1946), Peter Schaufuss (b.1949), Arne Villumsen (b.1952), Ib Andersen (b.1954), Nikolaj Hübbe (b.1967) and Alexander Kølpin (b.1965).

As guest dancers or permanent members of foreign companies, these dancers made Danish ballet and the Danish school famous.

Similarly, several Bournonville experts have acted as teachers and producers throughout the world: Hans Brenaa (1910-1988), Kirsten Ralov (1922-1999), Fredbjørn Bjørnsson (1926-1993), Flemming Ryberg (b.1940), Dinna Bjørn (b.1947), Eva Kloborg (b.1948), Anne Marie Vessel Schlüter (b.1949) and Frank Andersen (b.1953).

Tradition and Renewal

Henning Kronstam was artistic director from 1978 to 1985 and during this period

the company's international reputation was confirmed through extensive touring and events such as the 1979 Bournonville Festival, which marked the centenary of August Bournonville's death. It was an occasion demonstrating that through its legacy dating back to the Romantic age, Denmark occupies a special place on the world map of ballet.

Frank Andersen, who was artistic director in the period 1985-1994, continued the Bournonville tradition. Thus, in 1991, he persuaded Queen Margrethe II to create costumes and sets for *A Folk Tale*, and in 1992 he organised a second Bournonville Festival.

Of the international choreographers, John Cranko (1927-1973) and John Neumeier (b.1942) were particularly successful

Danish Ballet Dancers Associated with Foreign Companies

Several Danish ballet dancers with a background at The Royal Danish Ballet have made a career abroad, including:

Harald Lander: international choreographer 1951-1971, maître de ballet at the Paris Opera 1952-1963

Erik Bruhn: international guest star from 1951, artistic director at the Stockholm Opera 1967-1971 and the National Ballet of Canada 1983-1986

Flemming Flindt: principal dancer at London Festival Ballet 1955-1960 and at the Paris Opera Ballet 1960-1966, artistic director of Dallas Ballet 1981-1989

Peter Martins: principal dancer at New York City Ballet 1970-1983, since then artistic director of the company

Peter Schaufuss: principal dancer at London Festival Ballet, New York City Ballet and National Ballet of Canada 1970-1979, artistic director of English National Ballet 1984-1990 and Deutsche Oper Berlin 1990-1994

Nikolaj Hübbe: principal dancer at New York City Ballet since 1992

Dinna Bjørn: artistic director of the National Ballet of Norway 1990-2002 and the National Ballet of Finland from 2001



Jens Jørgen Spottag and Kaya Brüel in Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1878) directed by Robert Wilson, with music by Tom Waits, at the Betty Nansen Theatre, Copenhagen 2000.
Foto: The Ocular One.

in giving rein to the Danish dancers' sense of psychological drama. Danish contemporary choreographers are in short supply, but notably Anna Lærkesen (b.1942) has found her own way of developing the neo-classical style, and Denmark has found its latest choreographic talent in the British Tim Rushton (b.1963), who works with both classical and modern dancers in performances ranging from the serious and sensitive to the comic.

The Royal Danish Ballet in the 1990s

In the 1990s The Royal Danish Ballet went through a turbulent decade with changing artistic directors. Peter Schaufuss was artistic director 1994-1995, followed by Johnny Eliassen (b.1949) 1995-1997, Maina Gielgud (b.1945) 1997-1999, Aage Thordal-Christensen (b.1965) 1999-2001 and Frank Andersen, who returned in 2002.

At the beginning of the 21st century, The Royal Danish Ballet stands as a modern, classical company with a repertory which in addition to Bournonville ranges from Balanchine to the great Tchaikovsky ballets.

The company is in a transitional phase, where a balance needs to be found between the national and the international element. During the last thirty years, many foreign dancers have been taken into the company; today it numbers around 90 dancers, of which a third did not train at the theatre's own school.

Renowned Danish dancers who trained at the school and have a sense of the Bournonville style include Johan Kobborg (b.1972), Thomas Lund (b.1974) and Gudrun Bojesen (b.1976). Like Finnish Sorella Englund (b.1945) before her, American Caroline Cavallo (b.1969) has proved that foreign dancers also master Bournonville.

Dance outside The Royal Danish Ballet

For a long time, there was little dance outside The Royal Theatre. Since 1844

the Pantomime Theatre in the amusement park Tivoli has cultivated a pantomime form deriving from the Italian commedia dell'arte combined with the Danish ballet tradition.

Modern dance arrived late in Denmark. In the late 1960s small companies began to work with dance inspired by contemporary American artists such as Martha Graham (1894-1991) and Merce Cunningham (b.1919).

Among the most important of these were the all-female group Living Movement, established in 1971, and the group established in 1974 and led by former Royal Danish Ballet principal Eske Holm (b.1940).

However, none of the 1970s initiatives lasted very long. By contrast, New Danish Dance Theatre, founded by the Norwegian experimental choreographer Randi Patterson (b.1948) around 1980, has survived.

With Patterson, the American Warren Spears (b.1954) and Danish Anette Abildgaard (b.1951) as choreographers, Denmark finally got its own modern company of high standing, today led by the choreographer Tim Rushton.

Interest in dance has also been fostered by major summer events such as the Festival of Fools and Dancin' City, which have brought cutting edge international dance to Copenhagen.

The Present Dance Scene

At the beginning of the 21st century, the dance scene is characterised by a number of small companies, often centred around a choreographer, such as Palle Granhøj (b.1959) in Århus and Kenneth Kreutzmann (b.1964) in Copenhagen.

In 1997 Peter Schaufuss established his own company based in Holstebro; he mostly employs foreign dancers, and aims for powerful, energetic performances.

A number of initiatives have created a positive environment and new opportunities for dance outside The Royal Danish Ballet.

In 1985 the training establishment

The House of Dance was set up; in 1992 the Danish National School for Contemporary Dance provided Denmark with formal training for modern dancers and finally in 1993 Copenhagen acquired a venue dedicated to modern dance with Dansescenen.

Since 1977 Billedstofteatret, which later changed its name to Hotel Pro Forma, has occupied the borderland between dance and theatre.

Its leader Kirsten Dehlholm (b.1945) creates performances springing from a bizarre, surrealist, vibrant and visual imagination, and Hotel Pro Forma has successfully performed these shows abroad.

Finally mention should be made of the company Cantabile 2, which likewise transcends existing boundaries of genre.

Theatre in Denmark

Obviously theatre in Denmark is national in scope. However, the repertory has always consisted of a mixture of Danish and foreign plays (performed in translation) and occasionally Danish theatre events attract international attention.

Thus, in autumn 2000, the American stage director and visual artist Robert Wilson (b.1941) staged a magnificent production of Georg Büchner's (1813-1837) *Woyzeck* at Betty Nansen Teatret in Copenhagen and since 1966 Eugenio Barba's (b.1936) experimental Odin Theatre, based in Holstebro, has been performing all over the world, bringing international fame to the company.

Theatre in the 18th Century

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, Denmark had both school drama and visits by foreign troupes of strolling players.

In 1722 Copenhagen acquired a permanent theatre performing in Danish with the playhouse in Lille Grønnegade. Molière was performed in translation and Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) wrote a number of original Danish comedies with the aim of castigating the population and

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Factsheet Denmark. Published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

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Published December 2003.

ISBN 87-7964-906-8

raising its moral level. *The Political Tinker* (1722) was the first in this series of unique comedies, which were also inspired by the Italian commedia dell'arte and are still performed today.

From its inception, The Royal Theatre, which is still located on Kongens Nytorv in Copenhagen, now in a building from 1874, housed the three art forms, drama, opera and ballet, accompanied by The Royal Orchestra. This triad is still maintained, although the rationale behind keeping the art forms together has been hotly debated in recent decades.

Theatre in the 19th Century

During the second half of the 18th century, dramas with a new moral sensibility dominated, and in the early 19th century National Romanticism was introduced with Adam Oehlenschläger's (1779-1850) *Earl Hakon the Mighty*, premiered in 1808.

The Romantic cultivation of passion contrasted with the Biedermeier repertory favoured by, among others, Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860) in satirical, musical portrayals of the bourgeoisie in the centre of Copenhagen.

In the Golden Age period, it was very prestigious to write for The Royal Theatre, which played a key role in the cultural life of the time.

After the end of Absolutism in 1849, The Royal Theatre was transferred to state ownership and artistically a new realism with new themes of a social and political nature was introduced.

Several plays by the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen (1828- 1906) were first performed at The Royal Theatre, including *A Doll's House* in 1879; and in 1886 a drama school was established, which trained young actors in a detailed, realistic-psychological acting style that survived well into the 20th century. The Royal Theatre dominated the scene, but around 1850 other, to some extent more popular, theatres were established, starting with the Casino in 1848.

Theatre in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, professional theatres were established in the large cities Århus, Odense and Aalborg, but Copenhagen also got several new theatres (such as Betty Nansen Teatret in 1869) which became genuine artistic competitors to The Royal Theatre and remain so to this day.

Just as in other countries, the 1930s saw a revolt against naturalistic drama, one example being Kjeld Abell's (1901-1961) revue-style *The Melody That Got Lost* in 1935. Other important playwrights were Kaj Munk (1898-1944) and Carl Erik Soya (1896-1983).

After the Second World War, the repertory at Danish theatres became more international. Thus the 1950s were dominated by French absurdism and English social realism, while Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) did not make it on to the Danish stages until the 1960s.

Small venues, starting with Fiolteatret from 1962, created a new proximity between actors and audience, while radio and television drama to a large extent set the agenda.

Leif Panduro's (1923-1977) television plays from the 1970s about the life and traumas of the middle class showed that naturalistic drama still had the power to grip an audience.

Danish Theatre Institutions

In 1968 The Royal Theatre Drama School was closed and The Danish National Theatre School was established. As well as actors, it also trains directors, designers and technicians.

In addition to the National Theatre School in Copenhagen, Denmark has two other state-accredited acting courses outside Copenhagen, the Theatre School at Aarhus Theatre (opened 1949) and the Theatre School at Odense Theatre (opened 1941). During the 1980s The Royal Theatre lost its special status. Danish theatre life was decentralised, affording other theatres the opportunity to assert themselves.

In addition to providing state subsidy

for The Royal Theatre and the regional theatres in Århus, Aalborg and Odense, the Danish Theatre Council under the Ministry of Culture also subsidises a number of other theatres.

Theatre at the Beginning of the 21st Century

In the 1990s Danish theatre realised that a renewal was necessary, as it was undergoing a crisis as a medium of significant content. Since then, it has managed to play itself out of this crisis in two ways.

On the one hand, it has been inspired by other countries to extend its activities as events organiser and to invest in sure box office successes, especially big, imported musicals such as *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

On the other hand, its investment in a series of young Danish playwrights has borne fruit. They have managed to re-establish the theatre as a place for self-reflection and self-criticism and thus renewed reality and power to Danish drama.

An amazing number of playwrights and dynamic producers – sometimes one and the same person – have appeared, such as Astrid Saalbach (b.1955), Peter Asmussen (b.1957), Peter Langdal (b.1958), Staffan Valdemar Holm (b.1958), Nikolaj Cederholm (b.1963), Morti Vizki (b.1963), Lars Kaalund (b.1964), Henrik Sartou (b.1964) and Line Knutzon (b.1965).

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