

Ruth Page: Early Architect of the American Ballet

by Joellen A. Meglin

Ruth Page (1899–1991) was a Chicago dancer, choreographer, and artistic director whose innovative choreographies helped to launch ballet Americana in the 1930s and to bring recognition to Chicago as an early center of ballet in the United States. Her experimentalism not only placed her in the ranks of choreographers who “invented” the American ballet ([George Balanchine](#), [Agnes de Mille](#), [Eugene Loring](#), [Lew Christensen](#), and Katherine Littlefield), but also, in Page’s case, may be viewed as oddly prescient in light of contemporary postmodernism. Her ballets mixed genres (modern dance, jazz dance, and tap); absorbed elements of popular culture (e.g., African American dance idioms); incorporated spoken texts; and, in an approach that was often satirical, burlesque, campy, or humorous, addressed gender issues. They frequently provoked controversy and sometimes censorship, and her situation off-center (not in the cultural mecca of New York City), as well as her status as a woman attempting to achieve authority in the ballet world, worked against her. But she never failed to find new venues and vehicles for her work, and she understood the value of collaboration as she pursued modernist ballet with a keen sense of the *au courant*.

Growing up in Indianapolis, improvising dances to the classical strains of her mother’s piano playing, she met [Anna Pavlova](#), who encouraged her to study with Jan Zalewski in Chicago. After further study with former [Ballets Russes](#) star [Adolph Bolm](#) in New York City, Page toured South America with Pavlova’s company in 1918–19. Before and after this tour, she attended Miss McClellan and Miss Williams’ French School for Girls in New York, cultivating a love of this language and culture that stood her in good stead in later years. Soon, Bolm engaged her to perform opposite him in *The Birthday of the Infanta* (his adaptation of

the Oscar Wilde story, with music by John Alden Carpenter) at the Chicago Opera, for which she received rave reviews. She would tour London and the United States with Bolm’s *Ballets Intimes*, and, after starring in an Irving Berlin *Music Box Revue* on Broadway and in a touring company (1922–24), she worked with Bolm again, this time under the aegis of the Chicago Allied Arts, developing important artistic friendships there (1924–26). In 1925, during the honeymoon of her marriage to Chicago attorney Thomas Hart Fisher, she successfully auditioned for Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in Monte Carlo, continuing her private studies with Enrico Cecchetti and commissioning a solo from Balanchine. But this last adventure infuriated Diaghilev. Realizing that this company would have become a dead-end for her, as her ambition exceeded that of becoming a mere rank-and-file member of a world-class ballet company, Page accepted Bolm’s invitation to dance the role of the Queen of Shemakhan in *Le Coq d’Or* at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires.

In 1926, Bolm’s protégé, recommended by the master, was appointed the premiere danseuse and ballet director for the Ravinia Opera, a post she held for six years, staging ballets at this outdoor summer music festival and learning her trade as an artistic director of ballet. Later that same year, she created her first work of ballet Americana, *The Flapper and the Quarterback*, using the rich vocabulary of the [Charleston](#). Invited to perform for the coronation ceremonies of Japan’s Emperor Hirohito in 1928, she did a series of concerts in Tokyo with partner Edwin Strawbridge, from there touring Asia with her mother and father, performing, filming the dances she saw, taking classes and notes, and collecting artifacts—in short, fashioning herself as a student of world dance. In 1930, Page gave a series of concerts for the Sophil Society in Moscow,

meeting on the sea voyage Harald Kreutzberg and his pianist Friedrich (Fritz) Wilckens and becoming close personal friends with both. Two years later the American ballerina commenced study with the Austrian master of Expressionistic dance.

In 1933, Page teamed up with Kreutzberg, with Wilckens as their pianist-composer, creating a joint program of avant-garde duets and solos for the purposes of touring the United States. A year later Kreutzberg appeared opposite Page in a sold-out Chicago production of her choreography to Maurice Ravel's *Bolero (Iberian Monotone, 1930)*, which toured the Midwest under the aegis of the Chicago Grand Opera. This partnership lasted through 1936, when their commitments diverged, although they remained life-long friends.

Meanwhile, for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, A Century of Progress, Page found the opportunity to use the score she had commissioned, seven years earlier, from African American composer William Grant Still for a new ballet based on the Lafcadio Hearn story "La Guiablesse." Engaging a twenty-four-year-old [Katherine Dunham](#) to direct the crowd scenes, Page herself rendered the role of the Martinique She-devil opposite an otherwise all-black cast. This was the first of a series of ballets that reflected the Chicago choreographer's attraction to African American culture and her liberal views on integration of black and white performers on the stage.

By 1934, newly appointed ballet director of the Chicago Grand Opera, Page moved on to her next large-scale work, *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!*, a "courtroom ballet" focusing on the seedy ambiance of a nightclub or speakeasy, where a murder takes place (well over a year before Balanchine's "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" ballet with similar tabloid ingredients in the Richard

Rodgers–Lorenz Hart Broadway musical *On Your Toes*). Page and her designer, Nicolai Remisoff, wrote the scenario, whose plot anticipated Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*, with three witnesses giving three different accounts of the murder. She and her partner, Bentley Stone, played two adagio dancers who danced a tango-apache, a sentimental gavotte, and a blues number climaxing in "red hot jazz"; their passionate duets alternated with a chorus line's sensual tableaux, minuet, and acrobatic "jungle jazz" floor show—wildly divergent variations neatly contrived to reflect the discrepant testimonies from the witnesses.¹ Page commissioned [Aaron Copland](#) to write the jazz-inflected score for the satirical ballet: the commission was one of the many firsts for which she later claimed credit.

Page's next ballet of note was set to George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. In a savvy rendering of the music score, which mingled elements of French impressionism and American jazz, she incorporated the tap dancing of the debonair Paul Draper and four African American Charleston dancers to suggest the nostalgia an American girl in Paris feels for an American boy and "ghosts of Harlem," amid a parade of French street characters (*Americans in Paris, 1936*).²

Continuing her focus on themes of ballet Americana, Page devised a scenario (again with Remisoff) about a woman's struggle to find meaning as she rebels against middle-class domestic mores and the standardization of marriage in industrial-capitalist society. The plot of *An American Pattern* (1937) was reminiscent of Sinclair Lewis's immensely popular 1920 novel of gender and class tensions in American society *Main Street*. Jerome Moross wrote a jazzy, propulsive score for the ballet, and Stone contributed choreography for his own role as a Militant Idealist as well as for the street scenes of class struggle. The

ballet's excitement derived mainly from Moross's dynamic score, the thrilling group choreography, and the unusual perspective, highlighting a woman's desires and search for meaning, embedded in the story.

Frankie and Johnny, also choreographed with Stone and based on the African American ballad from turn-of-the-century St. Louis, was Page's most famous work. In 1938, when it premiered under the auspices of the Federal Theatre, it caught the mood of Depression-era theater, with its street scenes, bar and bawdyhouse, teaming demimonde, and triumph of female justice. Page and Stone played the lovers with an earthiness and eroticism heretofore unknown, and the ballet was a great success, running nightly for six weeks at the Great Northern Theatre in Chicago. When it was remounted on Sergei Denham's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, John Martin pronounced it the best ballet of the 1944–45 New York season. Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, the [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#), and the Joffrey Ballet have restaged *Frankie and Johnny* (1976, 1981, 1999) with success.

During the lean years of World War II, Page created a novel solo concert in which she simultaneously embodied and vocalized poems of Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, e. e. cummings, Ogden Nash, Archibald MacLeish, Federico García Lorca, and Langston Hughes, as well as droll cautionary tales and limericks for children. She toured this program extensively throughout the Midwest and the South (1943–46). This experiment with words, and particularly the goal of finding a distinctly American voice in the ballet, led her in the late 1940s to two other experimental ballets, *The Bells* (1946) and *Billy Sunday* (New York, 1948). Based on Edgar Allan Poe's ominous poem imitating the chiming of bells in a life cycle—from silver sledge bells, to golden wedding bells, to alarming bronze bells, and finally the

death-knell of iron bells—and with a dissonant and polytonal score by Darius Milhaud, *The Bells* evoked postwar angst and disillusionment as a couple's marriage unraveled. A church-and-steeple sculpture, designed by Isamu Noguchi, collapsed at the end (signifying the disintegration of society), and this, perhaps along with the undertones of homosexuality in the choreography, brought protest from New York's religious community when the ballet was performed there by Denham's Ballet Russe. *Billy Sunday* focused on the baseball-player-turned-evangelist who championed Prohibition. It was a ballet in four sermons—a “Bible revue” (Page, 1978, 103) of sorts, with clever juxtapositions of biblical sins and burlesque. Audiences roared when ballet stars [Alexandra Danilova](#) and Frederic Franklin spoke lines and performed with a good deal of camp, but the great ballerina was advised that such a role was beneath her and she eventually refused to perform it.

In the 1950s, Page found a new direction: “opera-into-ballet” (Page, 1978, 115). Her years as a ballet director for the Chicago Opera under its various names and directorships, as well as her love of drama and opera music, propelled her. She set *Revanche* (Revenge, 1951), a thirty-six-minute, five-act condensation of Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (with music arranged by Isaac Van Grove) on Boris Kochno's financially floundering Ballets des Champs-Élysées in Paris, with vivid settings and costumes by Antoni Clavé. The ballet was a triumph, a result of Clavé's designs and Page's effective encapsulation of the story and full-bodied dramatic rendering of the characters. Another gem in this genre, *The Merry Widow*, with music from Franz Lehár's operetta (again arranged by Van Grove) and scenery and costumes by Georges Wakhévitch, was originally set on the London Festival Ballet (as *Vilia*, 1953). *Merry Widow*'s title character perhaps best

captures Page's personality: witty, clever, inventive, and determined—a woman who made her way through the cosmopolitan world and gritty practice of ballet, and nine plus decades of life, with élan and verve.³

Among Page's many gifts was her skill as an impresario. The list of composers from whom she commissioned new works is impressive: in addition to Still, Copland, Moross, and Milhaud, it includes Louis Horst, Marcel Delannoy, Lehman Engel, and Remi Gassmann. Designers and fine artists who created costumes and/or set designs for her ballets, besides Remisoff, Noguchi, Clavé, and Wakhévitch, include Pavel Tchelitchew, Paul du Pont, and André Delfau, who became her second husband after Fisher's untimely death from Lou Gehrig's disease. Page's collaborations with other dancers, particularly Stone and Kreutzberg, and her setting of roles on Franklin, Danilova, Ruthanna Boris, Leon Danielian, Sonia Arova, Alicia Markova, and many other luminaries, including [Rudolf Nureyev](#), reflected her discerning taste and canny production sense.

In 1956, Page's Chicago Opera Ballet began a thirteen-year stint of extensive touring throughout the United States, under the auspices of Columbia Artists Management. The grand dame of Chicago ballet continued to choreograph into her seventies, winning, among many other awards over a lifetime, the *Dance Magazine* Award in 1980. Her production of *The Nutcracker* (1965) for McCormick Place's Arie Crown Theater was a yearly event in Chicago until the late 1990s. Her advocacy for dance in Chicago survives to this day in the Ruth Page Foundation, which subsidizes students at the Ruth Page School of Dance, a black box theater and a residency program at the Ruth Page Center for the Arts, and an annual Ruth Page Festival of Dance at Ravinia.⁴

Martin best grasped Page's essentially theatrical impetus, but [Edwin Denby](#) dismissed her.⁵ She found favor with Chicago critics, although on occasion they roundly criticized her. Recent critics have tended to echo earlier discourses, with the notable exception of Anna Kisselgoff.⁶ Page's role in the history of ballet in America—particularly as a woman choreographer, residing in Chicago, who sought the offbeat and experimental and eschewed the conventional—needs to be reassessed not only in light of feminist scholarship, but also with renewed interest in dance Americana as a genre in the 1930s and 1940s, transatlantic crosscurrents and ballet cosmopolitanism, and intersections between European American and African American idioms and aesthetics.

NOTES

1. Ruth Page and Nicolai Remisoff, *Hear Ye! Hear Ye!* [scenario, 1934], folder M29, RPC, JRDD, NYPL-PA. [Return to essay.](#)
2. Cincinnati Summer Opera Association, Inc. 1936 [program], Aug. 2, 5, 7; Chicago City Opera Company 1936–37 Season [program], Nov. 13, 1936, Ruth Page Scrapbooks, vol. 8 [microfilm], RPC, JRDD, NYPL-PA. [Return to essay.](#)
3. A high-quality color videotape of Page's *The Merry Widow*, staged by Larry Long and produced by WTTW/Chicago in 1983, features Patricia McBride as the Widow, Peter Martins as Prince Danilo, Rebecca Wright as Baroness Popoff, and George de la Peña as Count Jolidon; it is available for viewing at the JRDD, NYPL-PA. [Return to essay.](#)
4. The Ruth Page Center for the Arts, http://www.ruthpage.org/the_ruth_page_legacy.php (accessed October 6, 2011). [Return to essay.](#)

5. Compare, for example, John Martin, "'Frankie, Johnny' Revived by Ballet," *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 1945, 26 and "'Frankie, Johnny' Leads Dance Bill," *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1947, 16 with Edwin Denby, "Frankie and Johnny, an Indecent Ballet?" (Mar. 4, 1945) in *Looking at the Dance* (New York: Popular Library, 1968): 103–05.
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6. Anna Kisselgoff, "Ballet: Harlem's 'Frankie and Johnny,'" *New York Times*, Jan. 28, 1982, C17; see also Jack Anderson's obituary of Page, "Ruth Page, Dancer, Is Dead at 92: Proudly American Choreographer," *New York Times*, April 9, 1991, D19.
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