

*Southeast Asia on the
American Dance
Stage*

1915–1955

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*d*ance pieces referring to or derived from various Southeast Asian dance traditions have been presented on the concert-theatrical stage in the United States since early in the twentieth century by several Euro-American dance artists for whom Asian or Oriental dances became signature pieces and who became known as propagandizers of Indian and Southeast Asian dance.



Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis "Balinese Fantasy"

The best-known of these artists were Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn (whose collaborative efforts were known by the name Denishawn from 1915 to 1931), La Meri (Russell Meriwether Hughes), Xenia Zarina and Hadassah (Epstein). In all cases, these performers had a considerable measure of involvement with dances of India as well as with those of Southeast Asia. The most frequently presented Southeast Asian dance styles invoked were those of central Java, Bali, Siam and Cambodia.

*d*enishawn

Ruth St. Denis' earliest dances were of Indian inspiration. Her programmes of 1906 included impressionistic pieces such as *Radha*, *Incense* and *Nautch*. She performed these both in Europe and the United States for most of her career. Denishawn, created in 1915, extended its orbit to Southeast Asia in its very first year with *Danse Javanese*, choreographed by Ted Shawn and danced by company member Ada Forman. The choreography had little to do with Java since in earlier versions of the same piece had been 'Indian', then 'Egyptian'. The dance was also performed under the title *Court Dance of Java* and *Javanese Mannikin*.

In 1918 Ruth St. Denis choreographed a solo *Danse Siamese*, following this

later in the year with a group piece *Dance of the Royal Ballet of Siam*. The latter used vaguely Siamese costumes but was clearly also an impressionistic piece. It is interesting to note that the cast included Doris Humphrey, later to be a pioneer of American modern dance.

In 1921 it was Shawn's turn to present Siam. *His Siamese Suite* drew from the *Ramayana* and had three sections presenting the abduction of Sita, the fight between Rama and Ravana, followed by Sita's rescue and the triumphal reunion. Also in 1921 Shawn created a solo entitled simply *Java*, danced by Martha Graham. This was followed by a Javanese piece for the company, *The Princess and the Demon* featuring Martha Graham and the young Charles Weidman. In 1924 Shawn choreographed *Balinese Fantasy*, danced by himself and St. Denis. *Fantasy*, it surely was, judging from the costumes.

In August of 1925, Denishawn embarked on an Oriental tour which was to last about fifteen months and to bring the two choreographers into first-hand contact with many of the cultures they had sought to express. The countries visited included Japan, China, Burma, India, Singapore, Java, Indo-China, Hong Kong, and the Phillipines. St. Denis and Shawn sought to see dance and dancers everywhere they went and they reported intense experiences in many places. A few years later Shawn was to summarize his experiences in the book *Gods Who Dance* (1929).

Four significant Southeast Asian works came out of the experience

of the Asian tour: *A Javanese Court Dance* by St. Denis and Doris Humphrey, *A Burmese Yein Pwe* by St. Denis, *Impressions of A Wayong Purwa* and *Danse Cambodienne* by Shawn. Interestingly, the Burmese piece was performed in Java, and St. Denis' Javanese piece was performed in Manila, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Japan. *Impressions of A Wayong Purwa* was also presented in Japan, but *Danse Cambodienne* was not performed until the company's return to the United States. Descriptions of the creation of *Court Dancer*, and *Yein Pwe* are given by Jane Sherman. Sherman makes the following interesting commentary about St. Denis' 'authentic' pieces:

Certainly these later dances were never as enthusiastically received by audiences as were her earlier and undoubtedly less authentic works—odd as this may now seem. (p. 134)

No account of St. Denis and Southeast Asia should omit mention of the group piece she created in 1930 under the title *Anghor-Vat*. It purports to dramatize a legend whose subject is the coming of the Naga Queen, portrayed by St. Denis, to invigorate the Khmer King, through a mystic union. There are only slight direct references to Cambodian dance, however, and the ballet falls into the category of impressionistic works. The costuming of the Naga Queen was spectacular and undoubtedly contributed much to the success of this work which came near the end of the Denishawn era.



La Meri "Burmese" rwe

la Meri

During the very first joint tour of St. Denis and Shawn in 1914, before Denishawn was actually proclaimed, the couple appeared in San Antonio, Texas. There they were seen by an 18-year old female dancer who bore the masculine name Russell Meriwether Hughes, later modified professionally to La Meri. La Meri had already begun the study of ballet and Spanish dance, but she was profoundly impressed by the 'orientation' of Ruth St. Denis. La Meri's career as a Spanish dancer was effectively launched in 1923, and in 1928 she had her first New York recital. By this time she had already plunged into the study of Indian dance and was in pursuit of other Asian dance traditions.

A decade later, after extensive touring in Europe and the Americas and having written a book, *Dance As An Art Form* (1931), La Meri travelled for study purposes to Asia visiting China, Japan, India, Burma, Java, Malaya and the Phillipines. She studied briefly with masters in Yogyakarta and Surakarta. In Jakarta (then Batavia), she was instructed in the Javanese court dances, Srimpi and Bedaya, by 'Soeharsano. In Burma, she studied with U Po-Sein

who had instructed St. Denis and Shawn during their Burmese sojourn. In Java, together with the distinguished Indian dancer Ram Gopal, she lectured on Indian dance.

In 1940, together with Ruth St. Denis, La Meri opened the School of Natya in New York City. The School evolved into the Ethnographic Dance Centre.

In a 1948 recital programme, La Meri was able to list as sources of her art India, Java, Burma and Siam, as well as Arabia, China, Japan, the Pacific Isles and Latin America. Her recital programmes frequently included a piece in Javanese Wayong Wong style, *Rama Breaks the Bow*, drawn from the *Ramayana*, as well as a Burmese *Pwe*.

La Meri wrote the article "Oriental Dance" for the influential *The Dance Encyclopedia* (1949, 1967) edited by Anatole Chujoy, in which she treats briefly the dance of Burma, Java, Indo-China (Siam and Cambodia) and Bali.

xenia Zarina

The biographical background of Xenia Zarina remains elusive. She is said to have been born in Brussels and to have studied with Fokine, Mordkin and Novikoff, all famous Russian ex-patriate teachers, in the

United States. At her New York debut recital in 1935, Zarina presented vaguely modern dances and dances of Mexico, where she was then living. At some point she had spent time in Iran, teaching dance (ballet) to the royal offspring. Zarina undertook a study tour in Asia in the late thirties, one outcome of which is the interesting and generally accurate *Classic Dances of the Orient*. Apart from chapters devoted to India and Japan, a chapter each is given to Thailand (she uses the post-World War II designation for the country), Cambodia, Java and Bali.

Apparently Zarina was in Pnom Penh in 1937. While she did not have direct access to the Royal Cambodian Dance Troupe, she was able to study with Princess Say Song Van, the estranged wife of the King's brother, who directed and managed a troupe under the indirect patronage of the French colonial government. Zarina describes performances in various settings including the Royal Palace and at Anghor Vat. The account provides several pages of description of dance technique and offers photographs of Princess Say Sang Van, several of her dancers, and of dance scenes at the Royal Palace and Anghor Vat.

In Thailand Zarina studied with Khunying Natakanuraksa described as "the Directress of the Royal Ballet". In 1938, the activities of the Royal Troupe were still conducted at the Grand Palace and Zarina describes a rehearsal for a performance of Khon conducted there. The performance, for the March New Year's celebration, was held in Sanam



Xenia Zarina "Legong"

Luang. Photographs of Khunying Natakanuraksai, of Nsi Sri Yanthanaphon, the mask maker, and of varied groups of dancers and students illustrate the account. For a discussion of the technique of Thai dance, the reader is referred to the chapter on Cambodia. Obviously, only the training offered to women dancers is discussed there.

In Yogyakarta Zarina was able, after some preliminary discouragement, to enroll in Krida Beksa Wirama under the tutelage of Pangeran Tedjekoesoemo, the co-founder of the school. Her description of the regimen there and of the various auxiliaries to the dance are excellent. She describes rehearsals at the palace or Kraton of Yogyakarta and she was invited to attend a performance of Bedayo at the Kraton of Surakarta. The Javanese chapter contains a section on technique and a selection of photographs relating to dance in Yogyakarta.

Zarina's account of Bali is the most circumstantial of the four chapters summarized here. She focused on learning Legong. Her teachers were Ida Bagus Rai Nyomaman Cria of Sanur and "Bjoman" Kaler in Denpasar. She mentions one S. M. Milevitch, a musician who apparently travelled with her, who struggled with the task of transposing the effect of the Balinese gamelan to the piano. Among dance performances she describes are Djanger, performed by adolescents and by children five to eight, a Kebiyar Duduk and a Barong-Rangda drama. A description of the technique of Legong and a portfolio of photographs complete the Balinese

chapter.

While there are many photographs of Zarina herself in the book, costumed in the poses of the various dance styles, it is difficult to trace her actual performing history. She did perform, however, in August 1955 at Jacob's Pillow, the dance colony founded by Ted Shawn. Her Southeast Asia selections were "Oleg", from the description a typical Balinese Legong, and a more elusive Balinese "humming bird" piece. She also performed a Cambodian "legend". The same programme featured Ruth St. Denis, then nearly eighty, performing two of her Indian Nautch dances.

*h*adassah

Hadassah, the last of the propagandizers of Southeast Asian dance whom we shall consider, was born around 1910 in Israel (then Palestine) into the Hasidic Jewish tradition, her father being a cantor or liturgical singer. Hasidic religious practice includes dancing. Her religious background, then, favoured a predilection for dance. Her first exposure to Indian dance and music came in Palestine in observing Indian soldiers there in the service of the British. Hadassah Spira arrived in New York early enough to see at least one of the Denishawn concerts at Lewisohn Stadium in New York City (the last occurred in 1931). Shortly

after arriving in New York, she married Milton Epstein who aided her in her studies of Asian dance, often serving as lecturer when she performed.

Hadassah's first New York appearance was in 1938 as a member of the Japanese company of Kenji Hinoki. She studied with La Meri and, during the 1939 New York World's Fair, with Javanese dancers who performed at the Fair. Her New York debut as a solo artist was a recital in 1945, in which she performed *Golek*, described as a "ceremonial court dance of Java". In 1950 she presented a company to the public. Between these dates, in 1948, she performed a Balinese sequence Kebiyar-Legong at a concert of the New Dance Group. For her company in 1952 she created an "Indonesia Suite" which included a trance section based on Balinese Sanghyang.

*f*rom Exotic to Ethnic to Multicultural

From the beginning of her career Ruth St. Denis was motivated by a quest for spirituality in dance and believed, from her reading, that it was to be found in the dances of Asia. She was not drawn, however, to a study of the vocabularies of movement of Asian dance. Her creations were poetic, impressionistic, mediated more by costume, rather



Hadassah "Golek"

than by authentic music and movement. The same was true of her collaborator Ted Shawn. Their sense of the 'living' Asia was, in fact, hardly different from their sense of 'dead' Egypt, Azteca, and Mesopotamia.

St. Denis and Shawn were profoundly affected by the experiences of the Denishawn tour of Asia, but in a very real sense the die had already been cast; in consequence their presentations of the dances of Asia remained exotic and must enter history as such.

With the remaining dancers discussed above, however, the focus shifts to authenticity and the classification 'ethnic' describes more fully their endeavors. As already indicated, each shared with Denishawn a profound interest in dances of India, particularly Bharata Natyam, and tended to see dances of Peninsular and Insular Southeast Asia as affiliated forms. But in each case, in a variety of ways, they were able to develop proficiency in the vocabulary of Siamese, Javanese

and Balinese dance and to present these to American audiences in a fashion which would be recognizable to indigenous performers and audiences.

The ethnic performances never reached the wide audiences that Denishawn claimed for its own, but La Meri and Hadassah were known to and respected by a smaller audience of dance aficionados during their careers. Strictly speaking, however, they have had no outstanding heirs among non-Asian dancers in the United States.

An international era in dance performance began to be written during the 1950s and later, characterized by visits of soloists and groups from various Asian countries, including those of Southeast Asia. At present with increasingly large communities of Southeast Asians in the United States, we can expect to witness the participation of Southeast Asian dance in a multicultural performance context.

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