

Dancing in London: two views

Rodreguez King-Dorset, *Black Dance in London, 1730–1850*. McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7864-3850-1, 196 pp. several illustrations. Paperback £35.30

Alexandra Carter, *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005. ISBN 0-7546-3736-0, vi + 177 pp. 8 illustrations. Hardback £55

Understanding the cultural setting of the reconstructed dances practised by the historical dance community can be extended by research arising from the expanding field of academic dance history. Publications from scholars in university dance departments will be rigorous in their referencing of sources, are likely to adopt a clear theoretical framework, and will develop an argument in relationship to the topic. Although they may not engage closely with the practice of the dance genres under discussion, the best will provide both valuable insights and routes into further contextual material for understanding practice. Both the books reviewed here come from this milieu, and both explore the dance culture of specific London communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Black Dance in London draws on a variety of printed sources and images, combined with theoretical approaches, to investigate the dancing scene of the black communities of Georgian and Victorian London. The chapters move from a review of the theoretical frameworks and terminology of the topic of 'blackness', through an overview of African and European dance, particularly in relation to Caribbean and American slave experience, to a consideration of London communities followed by interpretations of selected images. It soon becomes apparent that the sources relevant to the London scene are thin and enigmatic, leading to an overemphasis on knowledge of the creolisation of European dance in the Caribbean and southern states of America. Clearly, little is known about the origins and identities of the small and constantly changing communities of black people in London across a span of 120 years. As a result, the author resorts again and again to guess-work. Hypothetical interpretations are then supported by selected cultural theory.

The quadrille is prominent in interpreting London black performance through the lens of Caribbean practice. However, the survey of nineteenth century dance development is unconvincing. The references and bibliography will be useful to anyone wishing to pursue the field for themselves, and the

reproduced images (albeit pale and only in black and white) are interesting, but no paginated list is provided. This is an important field of enquiry, but King-Dorset has only partially illuminated it.

Dance and Dancers in Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet, on the other hand, is a model of good writing and valuable scholarship. Carter approaches her field from a post-feminist position, but this is most apparent in her choice of topic: the ballet girls of the London music halls so far neglected by other historians of nineteenth century theatre dance. Carter has been a leading scholar in establishing the discipline of historiography in dance, and she makes the reader aware throughout this book of the complexities of interpreting evidence, particularly from a twenty-first century viewpoint.

Carter draws on substantial archival sources to realise the nature of the ballet performances at the Alhambra and the Empire, the working lives of the female corps, the contribution of the female performers to the storylines of the ballets and the critical and public reception of the dancers and their roles. Despite, or because of, the demands of synthesising these sources into a coherent picture, the writing brings this world alive alongside the individuals who populate it. With seven illustrations (albeit pale and only in black and white) and plentiful quotation, readers gain a vivid insight into a related field to social dance, where the classical technique of the soloist was not to be found.

A particularly effective coda to the scholarly exposition is Carter's imaginative fiction of chapter seven – *Cara's Tale* – through which the experience of one such girl is conveyed, ending with the poignant words: 'My thoughts won't go down in history. But the ballet will, and I'm proud to be a part of it'. The dance historian's task is epitomised here: to weigh up and logically interpret the extant evidence, avoiding simplistic guesswork, and look through it to the minds, hearts and, if possible, the dancing of the dancer.

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