

Gerald Jonas Dancing
212. Tanager Ballet, 1997

Excerpts on Ballet from Gerald Jonas, *Dancing*. NY: Harry Abrams, 1992, 21-23.

Even the most spontaneous dancing occurs not in isolation but as part of some culturally shaped event; without an understanding of the activities that surround and sustain the dancing body, it is impossible to grasp the full import of the dance.

Ballet, which is the quintessentially European form of dance drama, had its origins in the court entertainments of Renaissance Italy and France. The earliest ballets were participatory spectacles in which kings and queens and courtiers danced and listened to noble masqueraders declaiming poetry that praised the court in high-flown metaphor borrowed from Greek and Roman myths. To be assigned a role in these spectacles was a mark of honor for a courtier. Only slightly less structured were the frequent balls around which the social life of the court revolved; the social station of each gentleman and lady was revealed by the order in which they danced, couple by couple, before the assembled nobility; those of highest rank danced first, a protocol echoed today in the custom of reserving the first dance at a wedding for the bride and groom (who are treated as royalty for a day).

Out of the court spectacles of Europe's grandest monarch—Louis XIV of France—evolved the wordless dance drama we know as ballet; during its evolution many ideals of courtly bearing and behavior were refined into aesthetic principles. (As we have seen), the emphasis on an erect, uplifted body with an unbending torso and shoulders pulled up and back can be traced to ballet's origins at court. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, ballet had been recast into a theatrical spectacle performed by professional dancers for paying audiences. To ensure a supply of trained dancers, schools were established; instruction was based on a repertoire of positions, exercises, steps, and movements which European ballet masters codified under a technical vocabulary of mostly French terms (*pirouette*, *entrechat*, etc.) that are still in use.

For the largely upper-class audience, going to the ballet was a social event of great importance; being seen at the theatre by the right people was as important to some spectators as the stage spectacles they went to see. But the core of the experience remained the dancing of skilled professionals who were applauded for their feats of expressive and athletic grace; as time went on, more and more attention was directed to the dancers' appearance of lightness and the seeming effortlessness with which they launched themselves through the air, as if gravity were nothing but a minor inconvenience to the dancing body. During the nineteenth century, audiences took delight in the illusion of weightlessness projected by ballerinas in toe shoes. In its resolve to prevail over, rather than accommodate, the forces of nature, ballet gives expression to one of the characteristic aspirations of Western societies.