

THE “BARRE” IN HISTORY OF BALLET



When I see my young pupils here in Mumbai trying to practice at the barre I feel like telling them how much is behind that piece of rod that every dancer at all levels , from amateurs to prima ballerinas, hold for at least twenty minutes to prepare and warm up their

entire body before a centre class practice or a performance. I truly believe that it is the best way to train and maintain our bodies through the years. Even in old age one can do it and feel energised. In no other classical style of dance is there such a well thought, codified system. I only came across a study, actually a lecture, in Bharatanatyam (Indian classical dance) where it was mentioned that the Devadasis, the temple dancers of South India , used to practice with a rod held by two dancers at the sides.

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“De Arte saltandi et choreas ducendi” the first treatise on Ballet by Domenico da Piacenza(1420)



When Ballet was introduced in the Italian courts of the De Medici, Sforza, D'Este and other families in the 13th century , of course it was pure entertainment in banquets but already there were steps and combinations but no sign of barre exercises. It was called "Tripudium" (from latin meaning the beating of the feet of soldiers) or "Saltatio" (latin for jumping) and became "Ballet de Court" as the French later named it.

When Caterina De Medici settled in France she organised on occasion of the wedding of the queen 's sister what it is considered the first long "Ballet de Court". A big production extending for six hours. "Le Ballet Comique de la Reine"(1581) was a dance drama based on the myths of Circe and a way to please the queen. In the few paintings available there is no sign that the royal people were exercising at the barre that time but they wore masques and had horses dancing with them!

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The Sun King, Louis XIV as Apollon

Moving to the next century we see the great French king Louis XIV extremely passionate for “Comédie Ballet”, as it was called at that time (it will take another two centuries to finally have the name only as “Ballet”). He appointed Monsieur Pierre Beauchamp as Master. By this time the five positions were defined and the names of steps codified in French language. I suspect that maybe the barre started at this time but there is no proof of it anywhere, though “L'Académie Royal de Danse" was officially established” in 1661 (it will be called a little after “L'Académie Impériale de Musique" and later “Opéra de Paris”).

Since the dancers’ feet had to be opened at 45 degrees in first position....maybe the support was not needed and they were also wearing heels. Nowadays we have a turn-out of 180 degrees which involves a support and machines for manipulation of the hips! They were really enjoying themselves at that time...

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Madame Camargo in “arabesque” position

In the 18th century we have the “Ballet d’action”, the Vestris family as teachers and dancers, the two prima donnas Madame Sallé and Madame Camargo. We are now entering the professional era at the “Opéra de Paris” but still no sign of barre practice. Dresses are shortened, the male “tonnelets” and female “paniers” (sort of nets supporting the dress) removed, and the first “arabesque” becomes a regular step showing the ankle of the ballerina, still wearing heeled soft shoes.

Jean Jacque Noverre in his “Lettres sur la Danse” (1760) - Letters on Dance- wrote a lot about the “ballet d’action” in need of better trained dancers with expressions, feelings and realistic content in choreographies, but no mention of the barre yet.

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The Lesson, E.Degas, c.1870

It is only in the 19th century, the great romantic era that the barre started being used surely with Carlo Blasis (1797/1878). He was a famous writer , choreographer and teacher, an innovator as far as all the technical aspects of what is now everywhere called “Ballet”. He was director of the La Scala opera theatre in Milan. Barre practice was very different from today - very short with only a few exercises, but

with long repetitions of 16 to 24 Battement Tendus and very slow Grand Pliés.



The Classroom, E.Degas, a detail

The beautiful paintings of Edgar Degas show very clearly dancers with their legs on the barre in a class where Jules Perrot is teaching. Perrot used to partner, among other ballerinas of his time, with Maria Taglioni who officially introduced the pointe shoes. They both went to Russia and together with choreographer Marius Petipa taught Ballet to the Russians.

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Did you know?

In his “Lettres sur la Danse” Noverre mentions a machine called “tourne-hanche” (turn-hips) and he is very much against it to the point that in his 12th letter he clearly remarks : “this machine is distorting the body of the dancer instead of improving it”.

At the beginning of the 20th century a very famous teacher Enrico Cecchetti from Italy went all over Europe to teach and was employed by Diaghilev’s “Ballets Russes”. He reorganised all the exercises for the ballet class. It is interesting to note that in his system the barre started with Pliés and were followed immediately by Grands Battements, and there were no Battements Fondus. Today generally we practice the Grands Battements at the end of the barre.

Sometime after the war, around 1950, a Russian dancer and teacher Boris Kniaeff started the floor

barre (barre au sol) for the only reason that the Russian company on tour in Paris didn't have a classroom with barre. Therefore to train for the daily practice he thought of doing the same exercises by sitting and lying down on the floor. He stayed over in France and opened a school with his wife Olga Spessivtseva (the greatest Giselle ever).

Of course the Kniazeff method was codified in a few years and contributed a lot to the success of the French dancers. He only passed it on to a handful of loyal students. From then on other systems have evolved and developed by teachers so much that nowadays all the preparation for young pupils and warm up of dancers is done initially with floor exercises.

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