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Historical Approaches To Dance

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*Boléro* - Dancer As Animal

Dance is a way to uncover abnormalities and find the rawest versions of ourselves, without judgment. Deep feelings arise from the vulnerability of being seen, and by removing performance coats that were designed for us by society, we expose unusual behaviors. Oftentimes resembling those of other species. Picture the movement of an animal when observing it closely. The creature progresses naturally without the burden of societal shame, for there are no expectations predetermined for it. Many choreographers like to experiment with this concept and create work that encapsulates unlearned behaviors. *Boléro*, choreographed by Maurice Béjart and danced by Sylvie Guillem, demonstrates the idea of humans as animals. Guillem uses her body to execute inhumane performance as resistance against a civilized culture. With great agency, Guillem achieves barbaric, animalistic movement to test her audience's perception.

The original dance of *Boléro* was presented in 1928. The music was created by French composer Maurice Ravel for an original ballet choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska and danced by Ida Rubinstein. Ravel intentionally created a composition of large-scale ballads that would be fitting for what Nijinska had in mind. Therefore, the music is striking when paired with the movement of exceptionally trained dancers.

Béjart's version of the ballet premiered in 1979 and was danced by Jorge Donn. Many dancers have performed his version since, but one that stands out as the most angelic and emotionally provoking, with a powerful woman as the lead, is Sylvie Guillem's version. It was presented in 2015 in Tokyo, Japan, and a full version of the performance can be accessed on youtube.

The original choreography which was strictly ballet becomes less classical when Béjart gets his hands on it. *Boléro* starts off with a spotlight that fades in on a soft swanlike arm gesture that Guillem executes. The light follows her arm as she unfolds it with ease. She repeats this fluid motion with her other arm, and then moves them both as if they were two birdlike creatures interacting with one another. The lighting does a lovely job of focusing the audience's attention to the articulation of Guillem's arms alone in space, disregarding the entirety of the stage or the rest of the dancers surrounding her. This action of only her arms moving shifts into her entire body, and Guillem begins soft prances that resemble a horse's gallop in slow motion. The spotlight moves out, so the viewer can witness her limbs working simultaneously. Still moving with a balletic aesthetic and strong technique, one witnesses the dancer fighting to expose creature-like movement.

Guillem's costume is simple with a tan bra for the top and black leggings for her bottoms. With little distraction from her clothing, the intensity of her dancing is especially visible. Her hair lies naturally on her shoulders, to enhance the idea of an animal in its natural habitat.

Guillem's subtle and specific placements last about four minutes, and then the dancers behind her are revealed. They are all male presenting bodies wearing no shirts, but black pants for their bottoms. Lined up in the back of the stage, they put on a strong and still stance.

However, the solo movement continues and becomes more powerful. There is a memorable moment where Gulliem reaches for the audience and figuratively pulls them into her grasp. While she does this, she stares them down, her eyes signaling that she wants to be heard. She wants them to feel what she is feeling.

Once the other dancers begin to move, they circle her while completing similar gestures. She is still the leader of the pack though, like the king of the jungle. They bow before her, and more and more of them join. Their persecution and repetition is quite lovely.

With the speed picking up, Gulliem jumps in the center of the stage and flails her arms wildly. She turns and kicks with high energy. Her energy transfers to the dancers around her, and they persist along with her. After a gradual build up, the dance reaches its climax, and Gulliem lets go of her typical ballet form. She does toe touches like a cheerleader, and the ensemble holds arms in a circle around her. At this point her fingers are spread wide apart with a lot of tension in them. She is hungry for freedom. Her stare at the audience becomes so intense that her eyes almost bulge out of her head.

The performance finishes with everyone bending down toward Gulliem. It feels extremely powerful, her being a woman and the rest of the dancers being men.

The roll of the pelvis, swanlike hands, and a constant prance of the feet are all metaphors that support the theme of *Boléro*. With *Boléro's* serious tone, Béjart makes it important for the viewer to acknowledge their social biases. There are endless possibilities for human behavior, but few are revealed. Instead humans repress many natural instincts for the acceptance of others.

Bronislava Nijinska may not have had this theme in mind when originally choreographing *Boléro*. However, the choreography reveals that even if it was a subconscious thought during the creative process, a freedom for unusual behavior exists in the work.

When Maurice Béjart took over the work in 1973, his intention was more clear. He played with an animal theme by introducing abnormal movement to the dancers. A lot of his inspiration came from both African and Hindu gestures. Taking himself outside of his culture helped him create choreography that did not resemble that of European aesthetic, or what he was used to. He was also fortunate to work with phenomenal dancers, like Sylvie Guillem who could emotionally connect with her audience.

One of the male presenting dancers who performed in the work discusses the rehearsal process in an interview for Opéra National de Paris Magazine. Mathias Heymann is interviewed by Anna Schauder, and he describes how the dancers were each given a sheet of paper with different animal positions on them. They were told to interpret the picture and memorize the phrase. One calligraphic sheet was called *Cat* because “the movement imitated the way in which a cat jumps in the air” (Heymann, “And Béjart Created *Bolero*”). There was also one called *Crab*, and one called *BB*. After learning the phrases, Heymann describes how they matched the steps to the music.

Along with outlining the process of *Boléro*, Heyman describes how his abstract role in the piece has helped him discover a part of his personality that was hidden before. He mentions how he brings out “a more animal, bestial side in *Boléro*.” He states, “This new role gives me the opportunity to explore another facet of my personality that I haven’t necessarily been able to tackle until now” (Heymann, “And Béjart Created *Boléro*”).

Maurice Béjart has a history of pushing the boundaries in choreographic dance. His career in dance choreography started in the 1950s and lasted until the 1990s. His controversial work in ballet made him one of the most well known choreographers in Europe. Unlike many other ballet instructors at the time, Béjart allowed modern and other styles of dance to heavily influence his work. Oftentimes there was conflict between the ballerinas he set work on, and the unusual steps he proposed to them. This friction was present in his pieces - technically trained dancers fighting what they already knew and had been taught their entire careers. However, many dancers have mentioned how Béjart was a pleasure to work with, despite his extreme concepts. He was always calm and stayed humble through great success, and he inspired others by seeing past the rules in place. He was a confident individual during a time when homophobia was clearly taboo. Instead of hiding his sexuality, he inspired other dancers to be open about theirs. Out of the 200+ ballets he choreographed in his lifetime, almost all of them demonstrated his unique flare that was recognizable to many.

One of his most famous works is *Symphonie Pour un Homme Seul*. Other than the ballet slippers on the dancers' feet, nothing else made it clear about this piece that it was even a ballet. Again, Béjart brings abstract shapes to the balletic form. Similar to *Boléro*, *Symphonie Pour un Homme Seul* uses a main dancer to represent the conflict of one's true desires vs outside expectations. With limitations from society, the lead dancers in both ballets fight to expose their natural expressions through movement.

There are many choreographers today who share similar ideas to Béjart and that choreograph with a similar style. One in particular is French artist, Damien Julet.

Damien Julet is a relevant contemporary choreographer, who has traveled around the world for performances and collaborations. His work experiments with different ways to detach personality and identity from the bodies on stage. Dancers' bodies are almost bare on stage, clothing being the least of Julet's concerns. Like Béjart, he wants to reveal as much of the natural human creature as possible. His dancers carry out distinctive "headless" poses by hiding their faces behind limbs of other bodies or by wearing furry, knotty wigs. His intention is to "conceal gender and identity and hint at the existence of some non-human entity" (Julet). Julet even created work to Ravel's same composition of *Boléro* that Béjart did. Julet's piece called *Boléro* is not the same as Béjart's, but it is definitely inspired by it. And like Béjart's *Boléro*, it dismisses the hierarchies of the Opera Ballet.

Along with choreographers, dance writers touch on the topic of dancers discovering animal-like behavior through movement. In the book *Sharing The Dance* written by Cynthia J Novack, improvisation is mentioned as a form that encourages the body to say "yes" to natural instincts, without judgment. This often means gestures that resemble different species, other than the civilized human. She refers to Erick Hawkins's philosophy in particular. Hawkins brings up how "a dancer must be trained to conform to the classical movement vocabulary" (31). So, in order for a dancer to create authentic improvisation, they must be untrained. Just like in order for a person to see past the rules that were placed upon them since birth, they must detox their brain of any learned habits.

Like the improvisation that Novack discusses, Béjart's choreography is not guided by a narrative. Narratives make it hard for choreographers to see past the original structure, restricting them from reaching the unknown. By not following a narrative for *Boléro*, Béjart set himself up

for endless possibility. This was an important choice for him to make because he discovered the perfect concept to explore. And it made him stand out. His work is unique and relatable. It opens up room for a variety of interpretations.

With that being said, *Boléro* choreographed by Maurice Béjart and danced by Sylvie Guillem uses the concept of dancers as animals to make a lasting impact on its audience. Bejart puts all social structures aside to make his work truly relatable. Guillem's virtuosic performance is empowering and the look in her eyes sends an important message. When seeing Guillem on stage, humans see themselves in their rawest most barbaric form. A sense of freedom is released.

### Works Cited

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Video of Performance:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS\\_WJmLGFrA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS_WJmLGFrA)