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The Paris Opera Ballet in the Americas: Dancing Diplomacy (1948-1950)

Stéphanie Gonçalves

The Atlantic area was a privileged space for the Paris Opera Ballet after the Second World War. North and South America hosted two major tours in 1948 and 1950, giving the company an opportunity to win over a new urban audience and firm up its international prestige.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stéphanie Gonçalves

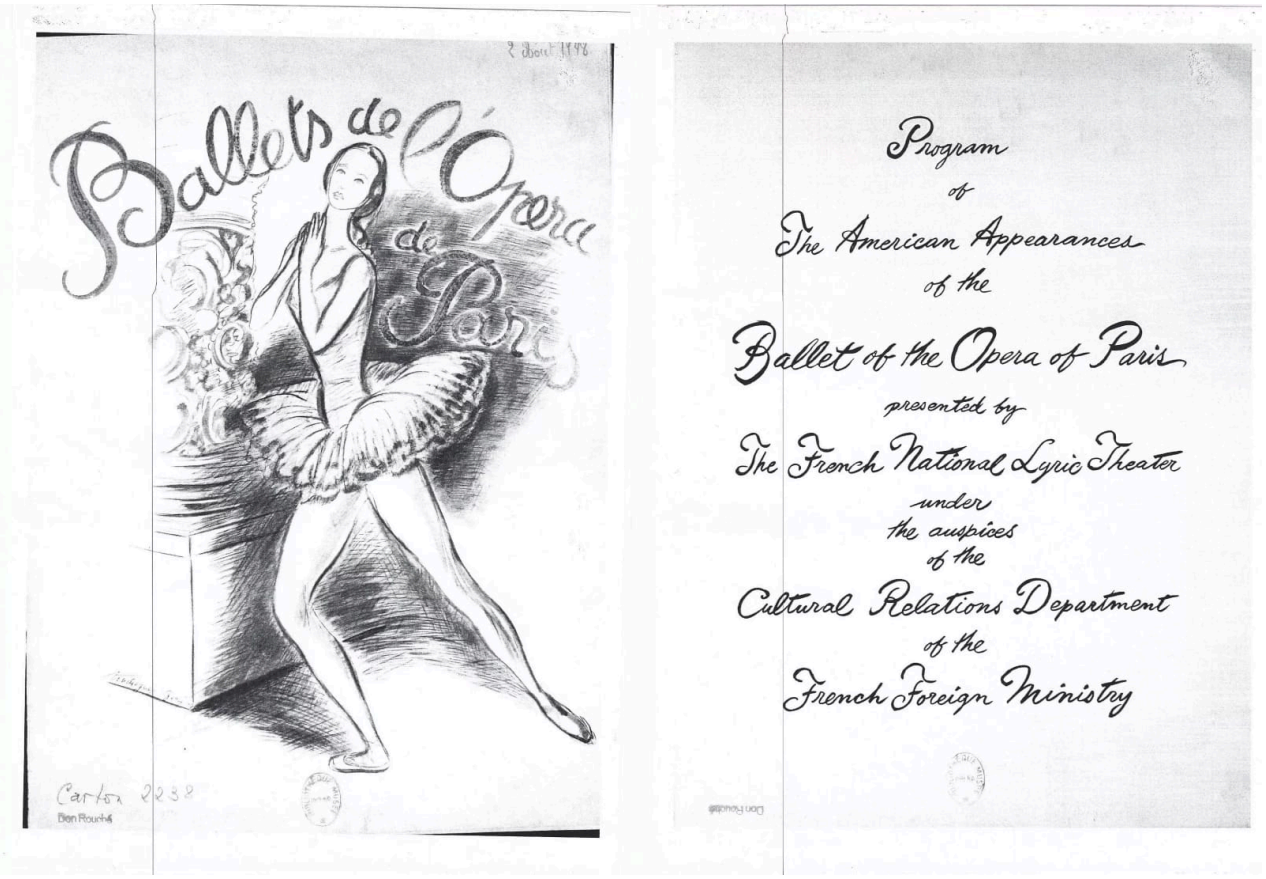
Post-doctoral researcher · Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique belge · Université libre de Bruxelles · Belgium

Stéphanie Gonçalves is an historian, postdoctoral researcher at the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research at the Université libre de Bruxelles. In 2015, she defended a PhD on the cultural diplomacy of ballet during the Cold War (Danser pendant la guerre froide, 1945-1968, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018). She is a specialist of the link between dance and politics in the 20th century and is interested in the transnational circulations of dancers.

A fertile ground after the Second World War

The Atlantic space has proven to be fertile ground for the Paris Opera Ballet. They sailed across many times after the Second World War (1948, 1950, 1962, 1966, 1967, 1974, 1976, 1986, etc.), primarily to the United States. On their last visit, to New York in July 2017, the Paris Opera, Bolshoi and New York City Ballets jointly paid a historic tribute to Georges Balanchine, the Georgian-born choreographer who founded American ballet. South American capitals were another, albeit secondary, Paris Opera Ballet destination. Ballet, folk, post-modern and contemporary dance companies were sent abroad with a strategic purpose, especially during the Cold War, for they are a powerful cultural vector. [1] Unlike theater, dance requires no translation. As a corporal art, it features strong yet graceful bodies sculpted by years of experience, reflecting the national ballet schools that trained them. As one of the performing arts, dance showcases the skills of the artisans working backstage—costume makers, dry cleaners, set builders—as well as ballet masters and choreographers. The Cold War period coincided with the rise of commercial aviation, which allowed entire companies to travel further and faster. Tours were costly events that had to pay off symbolically, if not financially. They helped to boost national prestige abroad, or, in the case of France and in the vocabulary of the time, "to serve as French propaganda". [2]

This article focuses on two tours in particular: Canada and the United States in 1948 and Brazil and Argentina in 1950. They were the most important after the end of the Second World War in terms of length, financing and repertoire. The main reason the Paris Opera Ballet crossed the Atlantic was to introduce its history and repertoire to America, where Ballets Russes tours, the arrival of Russian dancers fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution in the 1920s and the opening of major ballet schools in the 1930s had already broken ground. Europe exported ballet to both North and Latin America. The purpose of the tours was to win over a new, urban and elitist audience. In the context of the cultural Cold War, France, like its American, Soviet and British rivals, sought to present itself abroad in the best possible light. Ballet tours contributed to this with a classical repertoire rooted in a long history: Louis [xiv]{.smallcaps} founded the Royal Academy of Dance in 1661. As new American companies were on the rise, the Paris Opera sought to retain its senior position in the international rankings of ballet companies. In addition to the artistic stakes, this was a way to continue strengthening bilateral diplomatic relations with *soft power*, a "fight for the glory and influence of France". [3] The captain of the *Campana*, the ocean liner on which the troupe sailed to South America in 1950, summed it up with these words: "the mission of ballet is to cement bonds between the Latin peoples through beauty and propaganda." [4]



The Paris Opera Ballet's 1948 program in the United States

Source: BNF, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, Fonds Rouché, 2238



The Paris Opera Ballet in Chicago, 1948. *The New York Herald Tribune*, September 23, 1948, p. 5

Source: Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique

Upstream, a triangle of players

A ballet tour is a compromise between three kinds of players: artistic (the administrative staff, artistic team and dancers), political (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Association Française d'Action Artistique and local diplomats) and commercial (the impresario, if any). Each has its own objectives, which are not always compatible. This can spawn tensions, but everybody cooperates to make the tour a success.

First, the artistic players: they are the ones in the spotlight and welcomed at various events in their honor. They number at least fifty: dancers, directors, administrative staff, dressers, stage managers, conductors, ballet masters and choreographers. The administrative and artistic teams agree on which ballet to perform when it is ready (the ballet's final version, the cast, including understudies in case of illness or injury, rehearsals, which can take several weeks, sets, costumes and props). These decisions are not easy to make because the hierarchy of the Opera's artists, individual desires and the work contracts' strict terms must be respected. For example, the dancers cannot exceed a certain number of rehearsals and performances per week. Sometimes they give up their vacations to go on tour so that the Paris stage is not left empty during the season.

The commercial players are the second leg of the triangle. The impresario, a professional in the host country, handles negotiations with the host theater, promotion and sometimes part of the logistics (hotel bookings and meals). Generally, his expenses are either included in the initial budget, or he takes a percentage of the profits as reimbursement. He acts as a link between the host theater, the company and

the political players, such as the French cultural attaché in the host country. Knowing what appeals to local audiences, he suggests the repertoire beforehand. Some impresarios were stars in their own right, like Sol Hurok (1888-1974), who leveraged the company's prestige to promote his own career.

The political players are on both sides of the Atlantic. In Paris, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Association française d'action artistique (the AFAA, created in 1922) manage international cultural exchanges. Abroad, French embassies and their cultural attachés act as local intermediaries to plan the tour, anticipate a wide range of problems that might arise (visas, currency exchange issues, customs) and ensure that the offstage program settled upon beforehand is followed (visits, receptions, etc.). This is an essential aspect: tours are an opportunity to network with the local artistic, economic and political elites. Local political actors and officials who deal with cultural exchanges at the highest levels are also involved. Beyond the quaint image of ballerinas in tutus, a whole complex machine is set in motion and tough bargaining sometimes takes place behind the scenes. The repertoire is a matter of contentious debate, for, as a cultural showcase, the tour must demonstrate that the Paris Opera Ballet not only masters the classics (*Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, etc.) but also innovates with works by emerging choreographers. The idea is to strike the right balance between tradition and modernity, to avoid appearing either too stuffy or too *avant-garde* to audiences and critics. The size of the stages is also important because the Paris Opera sets need plenty of room.

The first transatlantic tours

In September 1948, the Paris Opera Ballet began its first North American tour, performing in Montreal, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Richmond and Washington, cities with significant numbers of wealthy ballet lovers. In a world where new rules were being defined, the tour was organized for New York's *Golden Jubilee, but it also* helped the Paris Opera Ballet to get back on the road and, following some short tours in Europe, to travel further and longer after the Second World War. North America was crucial for the promotion of ballet, especially New York, where the art form came into its own in the 1920s and 1930s, thanks in particular to Georgian-born dancer and choreographer Georges Balanchine. In 1934, he founded the School of American Ballet before taking over as head of the American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, two New York jewels of classical dance. This was also a diplomatic exchange between Allies: the *Golden Jubilee* coincided with the return of the last American troops from Europe. The immediate postwar years were a pivotal moment after the troubled period of the Paris Opera's wartime collaboration, whose wounds were still unhealed. Serge Lifar, the controversial ballet master who collaborated with the Germans during the war, participated in the tour, but American critics took quite a dim view of him. John Martin of *The New York Times* denounced Lifar as a collaborator officially endorsed by France, while Sol Hurok, the tour's impresario, called him a "*bad boy*." [5] Lifar could not appear on stage: protestors outside the theater demonstrated against his presence. [6] His tarnished image undeniably marred the tour.

Abroad, dancers took on the dual role of ambassadors and cultural transmitters: not only did they personify France on foreign stages—the *Marseillaise* was played on each first and last night in the cities visited—but the tours were also key steps in their careers, allowing them to experiment and achieve unprecedented fame. Dancers from competing companies had the opportunity to exchange know-how and sometimes take courses together on Broadway and at the School of American Ballet. Years later, Claude Bessy, then a 16-year-old dancer in the corps de ballet and later director of the Paris Opera Ballet School,

remembered her enthusiasm. "Freedom was mine," she recalled. "After years of deprivation, I discovered a land of plenty with shops, abundant, mouth-watering food, parades and street parties—the legendary America." [7] The United States undoubtedly called to mind its share of desires, dreams and emancipation.



Serge Lifar in *Le Chevalier et la Damoiselle*, 1941

Source: Photo © Ministère de la Culture - Médiathèque du Patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Studio Harcourt

The late summer of 1950 was the first time the Paris Opera Ballet travelled to South America, performing in Rio, São Paulo and Buenos Aires for six weeks, a relatively long period explained by the distance covered. On the diplomatic front, the goal was not so much to develop a Cold War cultural strategy as to resume exchanges with the Latin part of the Americas, which had considerably fallen during the war. The semantics of friendship, sometimes waxing lyrical, can be read in the Paris Opera's official reports: "Brazil and Argentina's unforgettable welcome, so spontaneous, so affectionate, [...] an atmosphere of sensitive understanding where the talent of French artists could reach the full measure of its expression." [8] During the Second World War, South America was a safe haven for dancers fleeing Europe, and for part of the Ballets Russes, and Colonel de Basel's company performed at the Colón Theater in Buenos Aires. In 1950, Brazil's urbane, well-heeled public—"young people" who love "modern creations", said the French ambassador to Brazil [9] —were eager to see French artists. According to the ambassador, the groundwork had already been laid in 1949, when the Ballet des Champs-Élysées and its star dancer, Jean Babilée, and Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault's theater company, which had received funding from the AFAA, had visited Brazil. The repertoire of the Paris Opera ballet was carefully chosen to please local audiences, that could not easily travel to Europe and wanted to see a wide array of productions: 17 ballets were performed, an unusually high number, as if to show the French artists' range of possibilities. The program included *Giselle*, *Swan Lake* and *Coppelia;* pieces from the Ballets Russes period such as *Prelude*

to the Afternoon of a Faun and *La Péri;* and many works by Lifar, who was still the Opera's main choreographer: *Phaedra*, *Icarus*, *Suite en Blanc* and *Les Mirages*. Unlike with the 1948 North American tour, Lifar's presence did not cause an uproar, according to Paris Opera and Ministry of Foreign Affairs sources. On the contrary, in his report the French ambassador to Brazil praised the "modern creations by that inventive genius Lifar," [10] whose name helped sell tickets. [11] He also took the opportunity to give lectures on his book *La Danse aujourd'hui* and direct Sophocles' *Electra* at the Buenos Aires University Theater.

The voyage, time to relax

The brand new magazine *L'Opéra de Paris* published two articles about the South American tour, including gleeful times aboard the transatlantic liner *Campana* on the way there and the *Florida on the way back*. [12] Intended for opera subscribers, the publication was conceived as a showcase, so it made sense to print articles praising the touring company and its hosts. Fun and recreational activities punctuated the crossing, "an escape and a prison". [13] The *Campana*'s deck turned into a schoolyard where passengers played games every day to while away the hours. There was tennis, ping pong, cards, role playing and festivities, such as when Neptune baptized the liner as it crossed the Equator. Of course, there were tensions, too. Things could get out of hand—one dancer dusted with flour was pushed into the swimming pool by her colleagues and another fell and thought she broke her coccyx—but in general the mood was high-spirited and good-humored. In the evenings, dances and film screenings alternated on the deck. Three passengers celebrated their birthdays: Ginette Berthéas, 23, Micheline Bardin, 30, and Jean-Bernard Lemoine. Most of the 60 dancers and accompanying persons were young; some in the corps de ballet had just reached majority age. The figures reflect how exceptional the tour was: 60 artists and technicians, plus 70 tons of sets, costumes and props for 17 ballets. [14]



Members of the Paris Opera Ballet playing the apple game during the Atlantic crossing, 1950

Source: L'Opéra de Paris, no. 2 (octobre-novembre 1950): 29. Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra de Paris

On location: on and off stage

The articles are illustrated by many photographs, making life on and offstage seem even more real. They show the sets being unloaded in the port of Rio; relaxed dancers in the wings posing for the camera after performances; guided tours like the one at the Serum Institute (*sic*) in Rio; and Argentinian audience members sipping maté, the local beverage, before the show. The articles noted that the performances were sold-out and ticket requests filled the classified ads. To give an order of magnitude, 45,000 people attended 15 sold-out performances at the 3,000-seat Colón Theater in Buenos Aires alone. This success is also explained by the participation of the company's guest of honor, Paris-trained American ballerina Tamara Toumanova, who danced with the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo before emigrating to the United States. In São Paulo, 40,000 people were treated to a free show organized by the city in a stadium to democratize ballet, at least temporarily. Critics—only laudatory articles were published in *L'Opéra de Paris, of course*—wrote that the troupe had "incomparable technical purity". [15] However, the French ambassador to Brazil struck a more negative note, mentioning the decline of Lifar's abilities: he was 45, over the hill for a classical dancer.

The tour was a public, critical and diplomatic success. In Argentina, Juan and Eva Perón were said to be the company's foremost fans. The dancers were invited to the presidential palace for a grand banquet before visiting an orphanage funded by Eva, where a child gave a ballet demonstration before an audience that had already been won over by the French dancers. In Rio, the dancers, who were staying at the

Ambassador Hotel at 25 Senador Dantas Street, a stone's throw from the theater, were treated as important cultural ambassadors. In his September 16, 1950 report, France's ambassador to Brazil, Gilbert Arvengas, noted that "the dazzling success [...] fully lived up to [the Brazilian people's] expectations." [16]

However, the tour organized "to spread the artistic and cultural influence of France" [17] was an abysmal financial failure. First, the closing of the accounts led to a multi-year lawsuit (at least until 1954) centering around Spanish conductor Cesare de Mendoza Lassalle (1910-1999), the local impresario for the tour's Argentine leg. Sources consulted at the Paris Opera do not shed light on who won the case or how it ended. The reports consulted in the archives show that at least four years of grueling negotiations and back-and-forth took place between the parties. French organizers were always at risk from mismanagement of funds or unanticipated customs fees that cancelled out an already wobbly financial balance. Moreover, Argentina wanted to tax the profits, which spawned negotiations lasting for several months as diplomats scrambled to find a solution, even though the amount does not seem to have been considerable. In the end, the AFAA filled the gap by paying the financial guarantee provided to balance the books. The 1948 North American tour ended with the same problem: the Court of Audit took four years to definitively close the accounts. The two transatlantic tours, whose financial basis was unsound, were the most important after the war. Later, the company focused on Europe and the USSR, shifting the center of gravity eastward. Diplomats seemed skittish after the financial woes that troubled the transatlantic tours. But the Cold War context and the emergence of Western European ballet and Soviet folk dance companies also account for the shift. The Paris Opera was now competing more with Soviet stars than American ones.



César de Mendoza Lassalle signing the guest book in Montreal, October 16, 1946

Source: Ville de Montréal, Section des Archives, côte [CA M001 VM094-Y-1-17-D0299]

Until today

After tours in North (1967) and South America (1962, 1966), the Paris Opera Ballet crossed the Atlantic fewer times. The trips were too expensive and low on the list of AFAA priorities. Moreover, the Paris Opera Ballet had lost a bit of its luster over the years and its popularity was overshadowed by modern and contemporary dance. Tours were replaced by visits for occasional galas. Today, the company performs less regularly abroad due to the cost. But when it does travel, North America remains a top destination, where a faithful, urban public still packs houses. The last United States tour was in summer 2017 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of Balanchine's ballet *Joyaux* and perform *Emeraudes* alongside the New York City Ballet and the Bolshoi. South America has not been a recent destination of the opera. They had rather visit Asia, especially Japan (February 2020), where classical dance still has a large following.

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NOTES

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