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# The Commerce of Dance: A Postmodern Analysis of the Firm's Role in Shaping Dance in Brisbane

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*Abstract: Theatre dance (notably ballet) can be seen as part of the domain of high culture and the social elite. However, through a historical postmodern analysis of one major company's role (the Firm) in Brisbane (Australia) between 1926 and 1960, it becomes evident that the Firm, when faced with the commercial reality of running a theatre business, blurred social classes when it came to the promotion of theatre dance. The first part of this paper will provide the theoretical background of historiography, cultural theory, and notions of class, as well as the popular high art debate. The research method adopted will then be outlined before discussing the results. Through this postmodern analysis of what occurred in Brisbane, a greater appreciation of the influential link between commerce and dance is established. In particular, it will be argued that this commercial impact (or influential link) related to the major influence of the Firm in running a production company and the blurring of classes involved. It was this commercial link that was critical in the shaping of ballet in Brisbane as it occurred at a time prior to any systematic government support.*

*Keywords: Dance, Commerce, Historiography, Cultural Theory*

## Introduction

Established as an Australian state in 1859, the State of Queensland (Qld) has its initial European origins as a penal colony of the British Empire from 1824 to 1839. In 1859 Brisbane with a population of 6,051 was nominated to be the capital of this new state. Today, Brisbane seen as a cosmopolitan city with a population of over two million in 2013 with all the hallmarks of a city of this size, such as government funded art bodies including the Queensland Ballet Company. Systematic government support for dance in Australia has not always existed. For example the Australian Ballet Company, formerly the Borovansky Australian Ballet Company, received government funding for the first time in 1962 (Lisner 1983, 7).

This paper will focus on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1926 to 1960) to reflect on what occurred in the shaping of ballet in this relatively young capital – particularly focusing on Her Majesty's Theatre. Adopting a historiographical approach, it will be argued that commercial factors were influential in the blurring of class distinctions, as well as the marketing of ballet as both 'high' and 'popular' art.

Section Two of this paper will outline the theoretical background, covering notions of historiography, cultural theory and concepts of class. The third section will then provide an outline of the research method and limitations. Section Four will provide an analysis of the research findings, considering the impact of 'the Firm' and class status. The fifth section will then conclude the paper.

## Theories

The research in this paper is underpinned by historiography, cultural theory and popular art versus high art debate, each of which is discussed below.

## Historiography

In its simplest terms, historiography is defined as the study of the theories of specific histories and the understanding of the need to constantly revise, reshape and review these histories

(Himmelfarb 1995). Historiography accepts that a certainty about the past can never be reached and that history is constantly changing and must be constantly re-evaluated.

The *traditional* modernist paradigm sees the researcher as an objective observer, the authorial author and expert on the topic (Ginzburg 1986, 133), with universal and totalising claims (Best and Kellner 1991). The ambitious aim of *post* modernism is 'to liberate us from the coercive ideas of truth and reality' (Ginzburg 1986, 137), and to provide a critique of representation even if it is just a practical representation or perspective of the object (Best and Kellner 1991). Post modernism, while ambiguous, has the overarching goal for sceptical interpretations of such things as culture, arts and economics (Best and Kellner 1991). This research aims to use this perspective in considering cultural theory on the shaping of theatre dance in Brisbane.

### ***Cultural Theory***

Using a Western European framework the idea of class can be sub-categorised as the: Upper Class; Middle Class and Working Class, although there are no set barriers distinguishing them with certainty (McGregor 1997). If art is accepted as a product of a particular context, then it may not be controversial to accept Ross's (1994, 548) claim that there is a connection between art and social class. In particular, ballet has traditionally been viewed as a high art, a serious and refined aspect of high culture, reserved for those who were educated in the appreciation of the finer things in life (Dyer 1992). This can be traced back to its origins as ballet was initially a method of formal entertainment reserved for the nobility of the Italian Renaissance, and reached its apogee during the early years of Louis XIV's reign and later blossomed in the Tsarist Russia (Clarke & Vaughan 1977, 42).

McGregor (1997, 30) claims that the concept of 'class' structures society and determines social groupings. There exists certain characteristics that make class structures and the chief determinates are power, occupation, wealth, education, family background and culture (McGregor 1997). However, there is a complex relationship between these characteristics.

Education can play a key component in determining class status. An education, or lack of, can dictate what role one has in the class structure hierarchy (Burgmann & Lee 1988). However, McGregor (1997, 38) argues that education can act as a ladder, allowing those from the lower classes to climb into a higher class status group.

McGregor (1997, 42) believes that people's lifestyle is a reflection of their class status. A lifestyle reflects how you live, and what morals you have, as well as deciding how you spend your money and on what (McGregor 1997, 42). Di Maggio & Umseem (as in Apple 1984, 186) claim that status groups are evaluated by their involvement in 'culture'. Hoebel describes culture as an 'integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not a result of biological inheritance' (Hoebel 1972, 27).

### ***Popular Art versus High Art Debate***

If culture is seen as a marker of social status, it is important to investigate theories of the relationship between art and social class, which include the consideration of high and popular art.

There appear to be at least three major ways of assessing the 'popularity' of a piece of art. The first is to consider the 'number' of people who are attending, or are interested in the work (Escarpit in Barbu 1971). The second is to examine the 'features of the work', and thirdly, to categorise the characteristics, or class status, of the audience attending the art.

Adorno (1997) designates popular art as that which can relax an audience; be non-demanding in nature; and offer an escapist quality. Lowenthal (1968) also describes popular art as an escapist product theorising that popular art has a dominant commitment to entertainment.

In the literature, the word 'entertainment' is commonly claimed as a characteristic of popular art. Lynch & Veal (1996, 223) state that entertainment should be less demanding on an audience,

allowing them a positive and enjoyable experience. Dyer (1992, 24) explains that the label ‘art’ often prevents people from seeing the enjoyment in a work and consequently the label ‘entertainment’ became better appropriated as it infers popular art or art for the masses.

Varnedoe & Gopnik (1990) imply that popular art is for the masses; art for the untutored, middle and working classes, where no formal education is necessary to appreciate it. When we assume that popular art is for the middle/working class groups, we are maintaining this class distinction.

High art, as popular art’s binary opposite, is traditionally owned by the upper classes of society, those who are educated in the finer things in life. Bourdieu (1977, 226) says that high art is seen as noble or legitimate because only those with a developed taste can appreciate it. This developed taste refers to the audience background, their social standing, their education and their degree of wealth. Consequently, high art is often referred to as elitist, as it is generated towards a minority, or elite few, and this excludes many from appreciating it, or even being given the opportunity to appreciate it.

In terms of the domain of art, this is the crux of Bourdieu’s (1977) debate; the theory that high and popular titles are social boundaries given to classes and patronising and limiting in their assumptions that classes cannot cross over and appreciate the others’ art. However, is this represented with the shaping of theatre dance in Brisbane in the early 20 century?

## Research Methodology

Central to this research is to de-construct history, analyse it and then produce a unique personal analysis (acknowledging the potential bias that this may entail which is both a strength and limitation of this method). The outcome is simply one version of the history of theatre dance in Brisbane. The time period used commenced from 1926 which was the first visit by Pavlova as part of the Imperial Russian Ballet to Australia. Although there had been international ballerinas visiting Australia prior to her, Pavlova’s performances could be considered a catalyst that awakened audiences to this form of entertainment. 1960 was chosen as the end date as this was when the Queensland Ballet company was established and it also allowed the eras of the 1920s to the 1950s to be considered as they potentially offered some significant factors and points of analysis.

The analysis of theatre dance through the post-modernist paradigm was seen important as existing research of theatre dance in Brisbane lacked analysis and demonstrate the features of the traditional modernist paradigm Pask (1979 & 1982), Hollinshed (1987) and Donovan (1984).

Initial research of theatre dance in 1926, it was discovered that all of the ‘big’ touring productions performed at Her Majesty’s Theatre.<sup>1</sup> It appeared that Her Majesty’s was known as the theatre where so called ‘high art’ was offered, productions such as the opera, ballet and large musicals (Pask 1982). Her Majesty’s Theatre housed most of the theatre dance productions, and promoted dance as a separate art form rather than as an incidental extra in a vaudeville show. For these reasons, Her Majesty’s Theatre was chosen as the focal point in considering the shaping of ballet in Brisbane. Consequently, one particular limitation is the focus on one theatre during the period, as other theatres could have different experiences. However, given that Her Majesty’s was one of the major theatres in Brisbane during the time period, it is therefore deserving of closer attention.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be clarified that for part of the period studied, ‘Her Majesty’s Theatre’ was actually ‘His Majesty’s Theatre’. The theatre originally opened in 1888 and was known as ‘Her Imperial Majesty’s Opera House’. In 1901 the theatre reopened as ‘His Majesty’s Theatre’ and, after major renovations to the auditorium and foyer, was again reopened in 1929 (Parsons 1995; 268). It remained as His Majesty’s until 1955 when it was renamed Her Majesty’s Theatre. This name remained until closure in 1983 (Queensland Performing Arts Museum 1999; 23). For the purpose of this study the theatre will be referred to as ‘Her Majesty’s’.

### Data Collection

Two principle methods were used to collect the data: questionnaires and written sources. Questionnaires were sent to people who had an affiliation with Her Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane, from 1926-1960. Patton (1990, 173) calls this 'homogenous sampling' – a program that has many different 'types' of participants. This type of sampling enables the research to analyse many different perspectives and individuals over many periods of time, and provides it with a larger scope of experiences and recollections.

The final method of data collection relied upon written sources, both published and unpublished, including: articles, reviews and advertisements from *The Brisbane Courier* and *The Courier Mail*, Brisbane's two local newspapers from 1926–1960; and 'ephemera', such as old programs, program inserts or pieces of memorabilia donated.

Through this investigation a 'Chronology' was constructed allowing the discovery of many international, national and local dance companies visiting Her Majesty's Theatre between 1926-1960, how many times they toured to the city, and how many ballets they brought with them (referred to as the 'Chronology'). Analysis of the Chronology allowed patterns to emerge which will be discussed in the results which follow.

### Results

20 participants responded to the questionnaire, representative of the eras from 1926–1960, although they do not cover each and every year: Table 1. Consequently, another limitation of this study is the low number of participants undertaking the questionnaire and their own bias they may have.

One of the main findings of the research was how commerce influenced the shaping of ballet in Brisbane. This concerned the major influence of 'the Firm' in running a commercial production company, which blurred the class distinction that arguably is related to ballet.

Table 1: Questionnaire Participants

Participant number	Year(s) associated with Her Majesty's Theatre	Type of association
1	1960s	Principal dancer with Borovansky Ballet Company
2	1970s	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
3	1960-83	Performer with Borovansky Ballet Company The Australian Ballet Company The Elizabethan Trust Opera Company (now Opera Australia) Bye Bye Birdie Stage Manager Technical Administration
4	1960-69	Audience member
5	1980-81	Dancer with Inaugural Dancers Company 1980 Queensland Ballet Company 1981 Lyric Opera 1981
6	1952-60	Dancer with Borovansky Ballet Company
7	1950s	Audience member & close associate of Founder of Queensland Ballet Company
8	1973-77	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
9	1948-83	Audience member
10	Late 1950s	Audience member Backstage assistant

11	1970-83	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
12	1960-83	Audience member Committee member to keep theatre open
13	1963-83	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
14	1963-83	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
15	1948-83	Dancer with Borovansky & Australian Ballet Companies 1960-70 Audience member 1948-83
16	1959-83	Audience member The Borovansky Ballet Company My Fair Lady
17	Prior to 1960s	Interpreter for Bolshoi Ballet Company
18	Prior to 1960s	Dancer with Australian Ballet Company
19	1950-83	Audience member
20	1980-83	Lighting technician

### *The Firm*

Her Majesty's Theatre was operated by J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd (the 'Firm'). The theatre entrepreneur, James Cassius Williamson, began the Firm in the late 1800s and built an empire which was later amalgamated and managed by the Tait brothers. This organisation either owned or controlled the major theatres in Australia, with each large city boasting its own Her Majesty's (Pask 1982, 21). The Firm monopolised what was performed within the theatre, and consequently they were able to mould the theatre dance industry. In support of this theory, the Chronology reveals that the Firm was responsible, or at least collaboratively responsible, for financially backing and managing the entire dance productions occurring within Her Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane, including local, national and international artists.

Generally, the Firm's priority was to run a successful 'business' and present the biggest and most 'popular' shows - shows that would attract 'bums on seats' and make a profit. The findings reveal that the promotion of ballet was simply another money making process for the Firm. Consequently, the rationale for program content selection was simple: 'profit maximisation' (Crow 1996, 34). Participant 3 confirms this as he claims that *'whatever J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd. thought would make money would be presented and backed'*. Ballet was being presented regularly at Her Majesty's Theatre, with 75 productions over the 35 year period of study. From this it may be indirectly concluded that ballet was a profitable venture for the Firm.

An example of the Firm's business acumen can be illustrated by their relationship early on with the Borovansky Australian Ballet Company (referred to as the 'Borovansky Ballet Co.'). From the Chronology, it becomes evident that the Firm organisation was confident in the ability of the Borovansky Ballet Co. to attract a regular and substantially sized audience in Brisbane, with it responsible for 29 of the 75 ballet productions over the study period.

The Firm brought the Borovansky Ballet Co. to Her Majesty's annually, for what was generally a four week season with a regular weekly program change. This would indirectly indicate that the theatre did have a regular audience for the ballet company. A four week season of ballet had the potential to pose a financial danger, as Brisbane at that time did not have a population equivalent to some of the larger Australian capitals. Consequently, if four weeks of ballet with regular program changes didn't sell, then the Firm would ultimately lose money. However, the Chronology illustrates that it was common for the Firm to support the Borovansky Ballet Co. for such durations, sometimes even longer. Participant 6 recalls that the Borovansky Ballet Co. once played to packed theatre houses for a record season of seven weeks. This is supported by Participant 16 who remembers that long queues of ballet patrons would be lined up at the box office prior to performances to purchase tickets for the ballet. While this statement is purely anecdotal it appears to be supported by the notion of a seven week program.

The Chronology also reveals that the Borovansky Ballet Co. would bring four programs of up to three ballets, although the longer the Borovansky Ballet Co. played in the theatre the more programs they brought. For example, in 1956 the Borovansky Ballet Co. brought four programs to Her Majesty's Theatre: *Les Sylphides*, *Fifth Symphony-Tchaikovsky*; *Swan Lake*, *L'Après Midi d'un Faun*; *Petrouchka*, *Corrida*, *Pineapple Poll*; and *Le Carnaval* and *Nutcracker*. Interestingly, according to the Chronology, Borovansky Ballet Co. toured many of the same ballets to the theatre. For example, the company performed the Russian ballets, *Swan Lake* and *Les Sylphides*, six and seven times respectively between 1944 and 1960. *Swan Lake* was featured in 12 separate productions by various ballet companies over the 35 year period, meaning it was performed in Brisbane approximately once every three years.

The reason the Firm was bringing the same ballets to Brisbane, year after year may relate to notions of popular art, including financially successful, accessibility, entertainment value and pricing; each of which is explored below.

### *The Blurring of Classes*

It appears that theatre dance in Her Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane, was not reserved primarily for the elite or upper classes, rather that it seems to have been a method of entertainment that held no social boundaries and catered for a range of social classes. This profit motive provided an egalitarian context of theatre dance, which is different to the original, aristocratic context of ballet (Dyer 1992). A consensus shared by several authors is that Australian theatre dance showed no social boundaries and was accessible to all classes. Overall this blurring of class distinction in the promotion of ballet is supported by Waterhouse's (1990, 142) acknowledgment of Australia not having an entrenched aristocracy. This may have emerged as a result of the short history of European occupation of Australia. Australia was initially colonised as a penal settlement, and consequently the social distinctions between the classes were much less established.

Rickard (in Goldberg & Smith 1988, 180-183) proposes that, possibly due to the size of the population of Australia, 'theatre in Australia had to be popular to survive', and Her Majesty's promoted dance as such; it made a point of ensuring that high culture (in this case, ballet) could be popular, in that no audience required a previous knowledge or education to understand and appreciate the dance being promoted.

Many of the general public had at least heard of the big name ballets, such as *Swan Lake*, *Les Sylphides*, *Coppelia* and *The Nutcracker*. Even if the general population or 'non-theatre goer' had never heard of such ballets, touring them time and time again almost guaranteed that these people may at least begin to recognise the titles and perhaps at some time attend the theatre, even out of curiosity. It is suggested that these 'ballet favourites' were ballets for the masses, for all to enjoy, understand and be entertained by.

By the Firm promoting ballet as popular entertainment, it enabled the art form to become accessible to more than the upper classes. Audiences did not feel alienated by its content and presentation style, and were confident that they would be able to 'understand' what they were going to see. In Her Majesty's Theatre, audiences could view the ballet as entertainment, confident that they would appreciate it regardless of their education or socio-economic standing. Consequently, in promoting the ballet as entertainment and constantly touring the same ballets to this theatre, the Firm attracted many more 'bums on seats' which satisfied their commercial success.

For a more specific example of this notion of escapism in terms of 'popularity', consider the 1948 tour to Her Majesty's Theatre by the British dance company, Ballet Rambert. This company toured in an era in which people had not only witnessed the conclusion of World War 2, but had also suffered both socially and economically because of it. Consequently, when people were beginning to rebuild their lives, they were searching for a sense of normalcy and happiness,

and were eager to be entertained. The Ballet Rambert fulfilled these criteria and consequently attracted large Brisbane audiences. Their productions, which included *Swan Lake*, *Les Sylphides*, *The Nutcracker*, *The Fugitive*, *Peter and the Wolf* and *Facade*, 'sought belly laughs rather than refined smiles of connoisseurs' (Pask 1982, 42). This 'pure pleasure', or enjoyment, required no previous theatre dance knowledge or experience and the audience were able to simply sit back, forget the troubles of the past and be entertained.

To entice this type of audience member into the theatre, the Firm adopted a 'cross class' selling technique that sold dance to 'cross over' classes of patrons. To the middle and working classes, dance was sold as popular art, and simultaneously, the same shows were sold to the upper classes as high art, with different pricing available. This can be illustrated by an example in 1929 where a journalist for *The Brisbane Courier* (Mon. April 1, 1929) writes of the ballerina Anna Pavlova, her sold out season of ballet, and the very generous public appreciation. This article appears on the Entertainment Billing page, between the reviews of other shows playing in Brisbane's local vaudeville theatres. Vaudeville was traditionally entertainment for the working/middle classes, and in a sense the location of the article concerning Pavlova invites such an audience to patronise the ballet.

By contrast, the 'Social Sphere', a section found two pages further on in the newspaper and dedicated to the high society market of Brisbane, has a column titled, 'His Majesty's - The Audience'. This column lists all of the society figures who attended the ballet the previous evening; Governors, Ladies, Colonels and official secretaries who sat in vice regal boxes. This is obviously a page where the upper echelon (Upper Class) of Brisbane could be 'seen' and show off their social standing. Even in later years this social 'snobbery' continued, as reported by several participants: Participant 9, an audience member from 1948-1983, recalls that opening nights in Her Majesty's meant that most upper class patrons dressed for the occasion, with the ladies in evening gowns, furs and jewels, and their escorts in formal dinner suits. Both Participant 2 and 15 remember it as a very upper class audience.

The irony here is that the shows were all the same, the marketing recipe being to manipulate the selling techniques to combine ingredients that could attract all classes. Varnedoe and Gopnik (1990, 57) suggest the following theory that seems to describe the concept that the Firm were using. They took what was essentially considered a high art (ballet) and created a wider appeal.

Another example, consider how the Firm regularly brought *Swan Lake* and *Les Sylphides* to Her Majesty's Theatre. Goldberg & Smith (1988, 223) state that 'the profitable formula for ballet was that they were classics and a light hearted romp'. This highlights the Firm's successful selling methods. 'Classics' can be seen as a reference to high art - classic ballets are those which have been in ballet company repertoires for hundreds of years, and an educated connoisseur of dance can understand and appreciate them. However, the same sentence contains the phrase 'light hearted romp', where the working and middle class are supposedly addressed. This phrase indicates that the ballets contain nothing threatening to their social upbringing and that there is no need for prior knowledge or education. The ballet, or 'light hearted romp', is simply an invitation to be entertained. In this way, the Firm segmented their audiences, keeping all social classes happy and entertained, and maintained the popularity of theatre dance.

Another aspect of this accessibility is that the Chronology supports the theory that the Firm wanted 'big name' productions. It is suggested that from 1926-1960, the Firm did not support smaller productions such as contemporary or experimental dance, as this may have led to a financial loss. Lisner (1983, 3) confirms this when he writes, 'The regional dance companies, it was thought, had a role to play in the commissioning of experimental work because that made good economic sense'. This is supported by participant 19 'modern dance was not well received so they [the Firm] stopped bringing them'.

Another way the Firm popularised ballet was through admission prices. Carroll (1976, 7) states that 'with a steadily expanding economy, each city had its quota of theatres where actors could perform and its quota of citizens with the price of a ticket'. Particularly in the late 1920s to



early 1930s, ticket prices for dance within the theatre were very reasonable; the theatre often advertising that there was 'no seat over 1/-' (*Brisbane Courier* Jan. 1933). According to the Australian Yearbook, 1934, as of 31 December 1933, the nominal/minimal weekly wage for a Queensland male was 88 shillings and one pence; that is to say that the cost of a theatre ticket, as a portion of income, was approximately 1.13 per cent of the basic wage. These nominal prices enabled the theatre, and consequently dance, to be accessible to even a working or middle class audience.

Justification for these affordable ticket prices was simple. From the introduction of the talkies in the late 1920s, Her Majesty's had to keep its audiences happy and abundant by ensuring that their prices were comparable to those of the movie houses. The participants support this argument: '*Tickets were generally accepted as being reasonably priced and compared favourably to other theatres*' (Participant 1); '*the admission prices were closer to the cost of the movies*' (Participant 4); '*tickets were affordable to the average theatre person*' (Participant 7); and '*there were a number of different prices so that even the poorest theatre lover could rake up enough for a cheap seat*' (Participant 9).

This apparently 'classless society' ensured that everyone could enjoy theatre dance, and Her Majesty's Theatre enabled what had been proposed by Connell & Irving (1992 200) as 'high art', to become accessible to all regardless of class, creed or upbringing. However, the participants did recognise class distinctions within Her Majesty's Theatre, although they agreed that all classes were welcome and in attendance at the theatre: '*There was always a mixture of classes and excellent ballet followers for all seasons*' (Participant 1); '*A mixture of classes attended the ballet and tickets were affordable to the average theatre patron*' (Participant 7) and '*Audiences were comprised of a mixed age and social background. Audiences from all walks of life could afford to go to the theatre*' (Participant 16).

Bourdieu's theories are vital to this argument, as he suggests that the value of a cultural object varies according to the system in which it is placed. For example, strip cartoons may be entirely prestigious cultural assets or reduced to their ordinary value depending on the context in which they are placed (Bourdieu 1984, 88). The Firm ensured that theatre dance is accessible to all classes, and therefore the upper classes get their high art and the middle and working classes get their popular art. This analysis is reflected in the newspapers of the times as previously discussed.

## Conclusion

Through a postmodern analysis using historiography it was highlighted how the Firm blurred class structures with the shaping of ballet in Brisbane. The Firm as the operator of Her Majesty's Theatre had a large influence, as it largely monopolised what was performed and thus was able to mould theatre dance in Brisbane. This included the backing of the Borovansky Ballet Co. with numerous tours from the 1940s to 1960s. Also the Firm blurred the possible class structures involved with ballet in the marketing of dance. The Firm promoted the entertainment value of ballet as a popular art form to ensure patronage. This included highlighting the escapism of the performances, keeping ticket prices accessible (which was seen necessary due to competition from such things as the 'talkies'). However, the Firm was mindful to cater to the Upper Class by references to the classics and the grandeur of opening nights.

A new perspective and story about the development of ballet in Brisbane has been established and demonstrates how commerce in various ways has had an instrumental role in shaping ballet in Brisbane in the early twentieth century.

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