

A critical analysis of the movie white nights



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Helen Mirren, Geraldine Page

The movie *White Nights* was produced in the 1980's – ballet by then, had long since moved from being solely a court dance used for political propaganda in the 16th and 17th century to a performance in its own right, in the form of ballet d'action. This new style of ballet – ballet d'action, allowed for more freedom of movement. The constrictive costumes and masks were done away with and a more conducive and fuller use of the expressive capacity of the body was adopted. The concept that art should aspire to imitate nature became a basis of most dances choreographed during this period, the 17th century and the 1800s. Skirts were shortened and pointe work was introduced in response to this newfound freedom for dancers.

By the beginning of the 18th century, pointe work was an established part of any dance performance. It also helped to promote the idea of romanticism in ballet, portraying the ballerina as a fleeting, fluttering, ethereal being, ever out of the reach of mortals. Ballet during this era was a means of self-expression, with focus more on emotions and feelings. However, at this time, the male dancers parts in a performance were limited, more often than not, due to the controversy that most male dancers were homosexuals, which the dance industry tried to shush up[1]. Their roles were reduced to ones of moving statues, present only in order to lift a ballerina or compliment her portrayal of daintiness with physical strength. This issue was only re-dressed in the 20th century, when attempts to break out of the mold of classical ballet were initiated.

The 20th century saw artists beginning to appreciate the qualities of an individual, the necessity of religion, expression and emotion. This then resulted in an explosion of modern dance. Suddenly there was a newfound freedom, a higher tolerance for what one might label as art. Choreographers during this period preferred to use minimum influence of classical ballet in their works, and often only for foundations of their own new more contemporary techniques. All this freedom for experimentation and acceptance of new ideas and techniques resulted in a massive creative growth for dancers and choreographers alike. The definition of dance was altered in the minds of the public as well. By the 1980's dance had seem to have come a full circle and was now known as modern dance or contemporary dance. This is the type of dance seen in the movie – an influence of all the various changes dance had gone through since the 16th century.

White Nights in essence, has a lot of contemporary dance moves and dance scenes. Take for example, the very first scene where Mikhail Baryshnikov who plays Nikolai, the Soviet ballet dancer, performs. His dance moves were all atypical to the classical ballet style, and he moved according to the music – something that was practiced by choreographers and dancers alike, especially in the 18th century, which saw the arrival of Jean-Georges Noverre and his ideas about dance performances, which he published in a book - *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets*. The use of the performance to narrate a somewhat abstract story is another indication of the contemporary and modern nature of the dance. The flowy, knee length dress on the female dancer, which enabled larger, more exaggerated movements of the legs with

ease, is an indication of the rejection of the heavy, floor length heavily adorned dresses of the earlier days. Pointe work, which originated with Marie Taglioni, who was established as the first woman dancer to dance an entire performance with pointe work[2], is also used which shows that it had already been established and used for a while. The props and background being minimum, enables the audience to concentrate on the dancers and the flow of the story. However props that were used were simple, for example the rope, cigarette, chair and skeleton facemask and they had a part to play in the narration of the story as well. The use of the pulley system to change background to the last scene is another indication that this dance performance had come a long way from the initial performances which rarely used such elaborate means to switch backgrounds, as the invention of the proscenium stage had not yet come about and if a performance involved background changes they were incorporated into the performance itself. When the camera zooms out for the last scene in the dance performance, the entirety of the stage can be seen. Then the camera switches to the audience and one notices that the members of the audience appear to be mostly from the relatively upper classes of society in order to be able to pay to watch an arts performance for entertainment.

In the second dance scene in the movie, Gregory Hines is introduced. He plays the part of an African-American tap dancer – Raymond Greenwood. Hines is seen showcasing his tap dancing skills in a performance, which seemed to be catered to officers and white collared men present in Soviet Union. Steve Condos[3], a master at rhythmic tap dancing, majorly influenced Hines in his choreography and performances. Rhythmic tap was a

type of tap dancing where a louder more grounded sound, as opposed to the usual percussive sound, is achieved by the dancers or 'hoofers' by using their legs. Tap dancing first originated amongst the African-Americans slaves in America, who combined their African cultural and tribal dance with a tinge of modern influence. The elaborate footwork in their dances, combined with shoes, backed with a metal plate at the heel and toe produced percussion like sounds and beats similar to their tribal drumbeats for them to dance to. Hines was a tap dancer who combined 'Hoofing' as well as the 'Class Acts', both different types of tap dancing. 'Hoofing' being the style where complex footwork was given emphasis also known as Rhythmic Tap dancing. Hines can be seen performing this in several dance scenes later in the movie. 'Class Acts' was the type of tap dancing where dancers used their whole body to generate movement and sound. The setting for the second dance performance in the movie is comparatively smaller to the first venue Baryshnikov performed at in the opening scene. Hines as Raymond, tap dances in the performance, in accompaniment to a small band of musicians and his singing, adding in the percussion beats with the sound he produces with his feet, and then does a magnificent piece of Rhythmic tap dance, as the camera zooms in on the complex foot work, on the stage, all the way down the aisle and back to the stage again.

These first two dance scenes serve only as introductory scenes for Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gregory Hines, as one observes later on, the two dancers showcase a much higher skill in their respective styles of dance and also collaborate and integrate a bit of the other's dance style into their own.

The consecutive dance scenes show an alliance of both men as they slowly influence each other with their own adopted styles. In the scene where Hines (Raymond) tells Nikolai (Baryshnikov) his story, he weaves a bit of his tap dancing skills into it to add sound effects to the narration. Later on, in the scene in the dance studio, Baryshnikov improvises dance moves to the music playing on the tape recorder. He implemented the 'Class Acts' style of tap dancing, moving his whole body and generating beats as his feet strike the floor, while seemingly showing off to Hines.

In his dance 'solo', an on the spot reaction to the music he was listening to, Hines presents a classic rhythmic tap dance routine. One can see the complicated footwork clearly, as he taps and slides to the music, leaping and skipping through the air to the beat. It is a very skilled rendition of a tap dance performance as opposed to the initial basic and relatively simple form of it in the initial stages, when it first originated as an African-American culture.

Baryshnikov's solo comes later on, when he goes to visit Helen Mirren, who plays the character Galina Ivanova, a former ballerina and Nikolai's former flame. He uses dance as a form of expression and release for pent up feelings and emotions. He uses exaggerated movements and pointe work, moving his entire body. His dance does not follow any story line and comes across as abstract and improvised. It is a performance that showcases male strength at its rawest form almost as if Baryshnikov's character – Nikolai appeared to be attempting to release his pent up emotions and frustrations through physical expression. Which is another indication of the influence of modernism on the dance world at that point of time. Who, in the early 16th

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centuries would have thought of dance as a form of expression and intimate communication, besides for political purposes and entertainment?

The most renowned dance scene of the movie is the duet performed by Hines and Baryshnikov, a climatic pas de deux in the dance rehearsal studio, a combination of ballet, classical and contemporary, and tap. A dance which reveals the skills of Baryshnikov and Hines as professional dancers. The synchronization, the agility, the spins, the glides – a perfect blend of classical ballet and contemporary tap dance. The result? A genius dance performance! An indication of its contemporary nature, is the interweaving of two styles of dance and also the fact that the dance was simply and only based on a reaction to the music played and did not have a story to tell or a plot to follow, unlike the earlier court ballets in the 16th and 17th century. This is a reflection of the dance scene across the world at that time – where people were beginning to explore more avenues to dance, more styles of choreography and learning the importance of dance as an art.

All in all, *White Nights* is a movie which portrays dance as an evolving art. An ever-changing, extremely diverse art form, it puts under the spotlight, the journey dance travelled through, pushing through the political and cultural barriers that might have arisen, to get to where it is as we know it today. It also allows for an assumption that dance would continue to grow and evolve along with the times. It especially evokes a certain interest due to the strange and unusual collaboration of ballet – a prim, proper, dainty performance as we know it today to tap dance, a dance which originated from tribal roots. It shows that dance can transcend any kind of barrier and unite people.

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[2] <http://www. the-perfect-pointe. com/PointeHistory. html>

[3] <http://www. buzzle. com/articles/history-of-tap-dance. html>