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## **Book review: *Walking and dancing: three years of dance in London 1951–1953*, by Lorraine Nicholas**

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*Walking and dancing: three years of dance in London 1951-1953* by Lorraine Nicholas. Hampshire: The Noverre Press, 2013; ISBN 9781906830656 (£10.00)

*Walking and Dancing* uncovers and communicates the potential experiences of dance spectators in the 'ballet boom' of the early 1950s in London, 'repeatedly declared the dance capital of the world' (p.8). Nicholas combines walking as a research method with the more traditional historical approach of drawing upon primary sources to imaginatively evoke and recreate dance places and spaces, and the dancers and dance works within them, in the social, cultural and economic context of a bygone era. The author characterises the period of 1951–1953 by its 'Britishness': the Festival of Britain took place in 1951 and Queen Elizabeth II's coronation was in 1953. As Nicholas notes, this study on entertainment for the masses is timely given that both the London Olympics of 2012 and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee exist in recent memory.

By her own admission, through using artistic licence to recall a bygone era, Nicholas 'diverge[s] from best practice of academic writing' (p.12), utilising a style that is more 'conversational' (p.12) in nature. However, the adoption of walking as a research method is briefly explored and set in the context of the academy, drawing upon the disciplines of social anthropology and psychogeography to illustrate the

practicalities of the framework. Nicholas argues that 'places enable a channel of historical imagination; a structure for making us consider possibilities within a known framework' (p.9). Primary sources in the form of scrapbooks kept by amateur recorders and articles, critiques and conversations recorded by contemporary writers provide another layer of exploration. These documents and artefacts are heavily drawn upon to recreate the experiences of the spectators of the past and contribute to Nicholas' use of the universal pronoun 'we' in the main text; her voice becomes the contemporary of a 1950s dance spectator. If the walking determines the route by which the research is carried out and communicated, it is these voices of the past that provide the detail and colour both the author's and reader's imagination.

Unsurprisingly given such a multi-layered approach, this slim book features photos of dance venues and dancers as well as maps alongside the text. The inclusion of two maps pinpointing the main theatres and sites of interest in relation to one another and the geography of Greater London is useful. The key chapters in this book are chronological in nature and are entitled '1951: Dancing Britannia', '1952: Too Much Ballet' and '1953: A Crowning Glory', each chapter beginning with a brief description of a walk encompassing the sights and sounds of early 1950s London. The chronological approach is further cemented by the noting of key historical events in a second typeface, emphasising that crucial 'news' is being imparted. Below a section dedicated to the Royal Coronation Gala, we read, 'June 1953: 17th: Uprising in East Berlin put down by Soviet tanks' (p.99). The 'real' world is never far away. Although each chapter and segment imparts information linked to a specific time and place (particular dancers, performances, touring schedules), the same themes run through each of these chapters: the dominance of ballet in the British dance scene, the need for morale-boosting entertainment in a grey, drab post-war world, challenges to the British ballet lineage,

and the intersections between dance works and British colonialism / imperialism in a new era of organised mass immigration.

Nicholas aims to create an 'analogy between walking the real streets and travelling in thought... [and] to realign my selection to the real time of the moment rather than historical insight' (p.10). As the author points out, dance histories tend to focus on a particular dancer, dance genre or era of dance. Nicholas' use of walking results in a democratising of dance history through retracing the literal steps, and so the fictional experiences, of the rarely reflected-upon dance spectator. However, this aim does come with certain challenges and limitations because:

...this is dance in London as it *could* have been experienced by any anonymous, dance-aware person walking the city... However, this hypothetical spectator is not a single person but a conjunction of the twenty-first century researcher, her sources and some diverse, imaginary dance enthusiasts (p.11).

In following the 'varying viewpoints and values' (p.11) shared by Nicholas and the layered chronological and physical path created, there are moments of potential mild confusion and irritation for the reader. For example, the over-use of exclamation marks influences the reading experience and the barrage of named companies, dance places and spaces, dance works and dancers is also confusing. Lastly, a deeper description of what Nicholas or the 1950s dance spectator actually *saw* on their physical walks between landmarks would have been appreciated.

However, to adopt Scottish terminology, this book could be described as a wee gem of a study, and it should appeal to both the amateur and the academic. The study is an

opportunity for the twenty-first century dance enthusiast to be a spectator of early 1950s dance in Britain's capital, and at the heart of the work is a debate and discussion that resonates to this day: the role and purpose of dance performance when 'entertainment is public' (p.14). What stories can be told? What meanings should be conveyed? Nicholas' approach to asking and answering these questions is evocative, multi-layered and (certainly within the context of dance studies) unique.

### **About the review author**

BETHANY WHITESIDE embarked on an ESRC CASE Studentship in 2011, supported by Capacity Building Cluster 'Capitalising on Creativity' grant #RES 187-24-0014, following completion of an MSc in Dance Science and Education at the University of Edinburgh. Her PhD focuses on the sociology of participatory dance. Since embarking on her doctoral study, Bethany has presented and published at national and international conferences and given guest lectures at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh. She was recently appointed Visiting Research Scholar at Temple University Dance Department, funded by the ESRC as an Overseas Institutional Visit.