

Stumbling from New York to West Berlin: American Dance Diplomacy in West Germany in the  
Late 1950s

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## Abbreviations:

ANTA	American National Theatre and Academy
BUSA	Ballets: USA
USIA	United States Information Agency
USIS	United States Information Service

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Robbins and his 19 dancers brought sparkling fireworks of youthful American feeling of life and art to Berlin.” – *BZ*<sup>1</sup>

José Limón: “A dance great — but of yesterday.” - *Variety* on *Der Abend's* review<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 1957, José Limón set out for Europe with his modern dance company, and two years later, Jerome Robbins too left for a European tour with his group Ballets: USA (BUSA). These dancers performed as ambassadors for their country and on behalf of their dance styles to share American cultural achievements abroad. They both held great pride in their work and their identities as American dancers. This pride stemmed from their view of their own dance styles as uniquely American. This term was used repeatedly by artistic decision-makers justifying Limón and Robbins’ worthiness of government endorsement and federal funds to spread their work around Europe. Despite each promising to show the European dance community innovative American dance and presenting American repertory, they received contrary reactions from members of the West German press. Robbins’s American dance is celebrated in the excerpts above for its charming style and artful choreography, while Limón’s American dance was seen as antiquated. While there is no single dance style that claims the title “the American dance” or even a clear consensus on what movement is and is not American — artistic decision-makers labeled the repertory of the José Limón Dance Company and BUSA as uniquely American. However, it is not the US tour planners who decided how receiving communities viewed the value of American dance, but the audience members and dance critics themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> “Foreign Service Dispatch from - US Mission, Berlin,” box 2, (S) \*MGZMD 46-73 October 16, 1959, Leland Hayward Papers.

<sup>2</sup> “Legitimate: Mixed Reaction to Jose Limon at Berlin Fest,” *Variety*, October 16, 1957.

Similar to traditional diplomacy, which is an international actor's attempt to conduct foreign policy by engaging with other international actors —usually through official government-to-government contact—public diplomacy is an international actor's attempt to engage with a foreign public to conduct its foreign policy which typically occurs through government, or government proxy, -to-people contact.<sup>3</sup> Public diplomacy includes five core practices: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting.<sup>4</sup> This study will examine US cultural diplomacy from the perspective of geographic-specific interactions through a case-study approach. I examine two specific instances of US cultural diplomacy in West Germany: the foreign tours of the José Limón Dance Company in 1957 and Jerome Robbins's *Ballets: USA* in 1959. Both utilized American dance to pursue public diplomacy aims in West Germany during the presidential administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower. I argue that even when planners organized dance tours to highlight similar features, anticipated a standardized reception outcome, and sent these tours to the same geographic location, local audiences and critics did not respond to this cultural diplomacy in a standardized manner. I also intend to outline the hopes and motivating factors of tour planners and, when possible, simultaneously appraise how these aims may have played out within the specific social, cultural, and artistic contexts of West Germany. My sources draw from the tour evaluations of the US State Department, US Information Agency, the American National Theater and Academy Dance Panel, and articles written by dance critics. Therefore, these views may not represent the consensus of audience goers or lay audience members. The critics and dance panel members were cultural elites, and although they dictated dance trends in a sense, they themselves did not

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

represent the average audience member.

President Eisenhower was a strong proponent of public diplomacy. He valued the psychological dimension of power and saw its value as an effective response to what the US State Department termed the “gigantic propaganda offensive” of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Historian Nicholas Cull has shown that public diplomacy initiatives during Eisenhower’s first term (1953-1957) were confidently defined by Washington policymakers and focused on promoting European integration.<sup>6</sup> However, during Eisenhower’s second term (1957-1961), public diplomacy shifted towards filling “gaps” between the US and Soviet Union in the space race, arms race, and general prestige.<sup>7</sup> Cull argues that this shift occurred following the Soviet Union’s successful launch of the Sputnik satellite and Sputnik 2, the first spacecraft carrying a living animal, into earth orbit in the fall of 1957.<sup>8</sup> Sputnik passed over the US twice undetected before Moscow announced its presence — this Soviet space race victory not only hurt the US government and public because a rival had bested them, but the chilling realization that the US was now vulnerable to a missile attack also spread feelings of vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> Public diplomacy policymakers worried that these technological developments in the USSR would lend credibility to the Soviet economic system, which had created Sputnik 1 and Sputnik 2.<sup>10</sup> Following this incident and a failed US satellite launch in December 1957, public diplomacy policymakers favored shifting public diplomacy image-building efforts from boasting US strength and wealth to expanding pre-existing efforts to export American cultural products and performances.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 150-151.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 134-135.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

While public diplomacy planners sought to contribute to the US Cold War project of changing hearts and minds, I intend to investigate how such a project may encounter opposing narratives from receiving audiences in West Germany. Within the US-German context, Manuela Aguilar calls attention to public diplomacy within US-German relations an important aspect of bilateral relations and argues that the period between 1955 and 1968 was an especially significant time as the dynamics of US-German relations shifted.<sup>12</sup> During this period, the US and Germany negotiated their way through the Berlin Crisis. West Germany also became less dependent upon the US as the state began to enter bilateral relations independently with other states. In the immediate post-war years, Americans aimed to influence the German character. To prevent Germany from sliding back towards totalitarianism, they hoped to use public diplomacy to sway the country away from an inclination towards authoritarianism and instead foster openness to American democracy and liberalism. During the 1950s, US public diplomacy in Germany aimed to maintain confidence in American leadership and project solidarity with West Germany in miniating its sovereignty as a democratic and capitalist state.<sup>13</sup> Cultural diplomacy efforts to West Germany specifically focused on dispelling German notions of the US as materialistic and prejudiced against Americans as a people without a developed culture, set of morals, or spiritual and religious values.<sup>14</sup>

The American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) Dance Panel played a prominent role in curating what American dance and which dancers were presented before foreign audiences. Although the State Department intended for the body to act independently of political oversight, existing scholarship reveals that the panel's mediation carried political implications.

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<sup>12</sup> Manuela Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy: German-American Relations, 1955-1968*, Studies in Modern European History, Volume 19 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The Dance Panel functioned from 1956 to 1962 and was meant to serve as an independent artistic oversight committee that recommended American dancers and companies to the Department of State for sponsored tours around the world. Dance Historian Naima Prevots's analysis of the Dance Panel's decision-making through meeting minutes reveals that while there was a separation between the choices of the Dance Panel and government agencies, public image concerns were at the center of most Dance Panel decisions. Panelists were aware of their role in curating US public diplomacy and the potential each tour carried in furthering American interests through the symbolism of the performing arts.<sup>15</sup> Dance Historian Rebekah Kowal moves beyond Prevots's illustration of artistic and political cooperation and illuminates how a deeper fundamental ideological coordination of governmental forces took place both within and outside the dance field.<sup>16</sup> Kowal argues that the Dance Panel independently took up the contradictory project of policing the boundaries of modern dance to transform it from an art form born out of political commentary in the 1930s into an apolitical art that aligned with dominant post-war socio-political expectations.<sup>17</sup> Kowal examines what "American" aspects were required of dance to receive US government funding and argues that through their mandate, the Dance Panel decided which American artists were worthy of state sponsorship and thus which artists were most representative of American Dance. In this sense, the Panel defined modern dance, and in their view, what was considered modern dance was also most representative of dominant American cultural values.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Rebekah J Kowal, "Setting the Stage: Modern Dance Universalism and the Culture of Containment," in *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

The individual tours of American artists exemplified that the Dance Panel favored those perceived as representing dance that was developed in America, apolitical or at least politically compliant, and held an appreciation for free expression and democracy.<sup>19</sup> While the Dance Panel's selection process and preferred artists criteria have been well studied, there is little research on how the Dance Panel's expectations in making these selections played out in country-specific contexts.

According to dance scholar Clare Croft, dance as diplomacy especially embodied the State Department and US Information Agency's (USIA or USIS) Cold War efforts to weaponize American cultural accomplishments to garner support in their struggle against the USSR.<sup>20</sup> Croft argues that dance's reliance on an emotional appeal through the dancer's body to connect with audiences resulted in the manifestation of emotionally driven intercultural bonds stemming from dance tours abroad.<sup>21</sup> Because of dance's power to connect viscerally with audience members, Croft argues that US dance tours carried favorable state-driven symbols to shape the American image abroad. In this way, cultivating sympathy for the US through dance diplomacy simultaneously compelled foreigners to care about America while furthering the US's battle against communism by providing a living example of the artistic results of a capitalist society

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<sup>19</sup> Melinda Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957: Modern Dance, Diplomacy, and the Cold War" (PhD, diss., Philadelphia, PA, Temple University, 2000); Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020); Stacey Prickett, "'Taking America's Story to the World': Touring Jerome Robbins's Ballets: USA During the Cold War," *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 2 (August 2020): 4–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767720000145>; Anne Searcy, *Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet-American Exchange* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020). Victoria Phillips's study of the State Department tours of modern dancer Martha Graham argues that although she claimed to be apolitical, her work as a dance diplomat and personal relations with politicians exemplified that Graham was in fact political. Melinda Copel also argues that the basic tenets of humanistic modern dance aligned well with the State Department and USIA's public diplomacy aims in that the dance's "emphasis on human and spiritual values, its upholding of freedom of expression and the importance of the individual—all provided a good match for the values and images the State Department wished to convey to the people of other nations" (Copel, 179).

<sup>20</sup> Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



and democratic freedom.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, musicologist Anne Searcy has brought to light the problematic nature of examining instances of Cold War dance diplomacy with the assumption that foreign audiences received or understood embedded politics within dance in the way that tour planners hoped they would. Rather, through her study of US-Soviet ballet exchanges, Searcy convincingly argues that previous attempts to understand the reception of these tours have failed to appreciate the impact of the cultural contexts of receiving countries in shaping critics' and spectators' perceptions of cultural exchange performances. Where possible, this study attempts to place the performances of the José Limón Dance Company and Jerome Robbins's Ballets: USA within the cultural context of West Germany during the late 1950s.

### **US Institutional Context for the Operation of Cultural Diplomacy**

By 1954, President Eisenhower worried that people abroad viewed American success as materialistic, measured through the creation of automobiles rather than the contribution of cultural works or spiritual and intellectual values.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, he sought to institute a professional public diplomacy program to shift negative foreign perceptions of the US by demonstrating that America had developed note-worthy and admirable cultural achievements under the US social and economic system.<sup>24</sup> Eisenhower took action and sought Congressional funding. As a result, the creation of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Emergency Fund for International Affairs in 1954 (Public Law 663) and the passage of the International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act in 1956 made the United States government's sponsorship of dance tours possible and underwrote America's first cultural diplomacy program

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<sup>22</sup> Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Edgar N. Eisenhower, November 22, 1955, file "USIA (2)," box 37, Administration Series, ACW file, DDE published in Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

geared towards the performing arts.<sup>25</sup> From 1954 until 1962, American performers were sponsored by these funds, which became known as the President's Special International Program. With funding secured, the government sought expert guidance as government agencies lacked the dance-specific expertise necessary to choose suitable artists for cultural exchange. Therefore, the American National Theater Academy (ANTA) filled this role and served as a non-governmental professional administrative agency to the US Department of State's interagency committee overseeing artistic decision-making. ANTA established the Dance Panel, which was composed of dance company artistic and executive directors—such as American Ballet Theater's Lucia Chase and New York City Ballet's Lincoln Kirstein, dance critics and publicists, dance choreographers such as Doris Humphrey and Agnes de Mille, Julliard dance faculty, and a representative from the American Guild of Musical Artists.<sup>26</sup> The Dance Panel was tasked with selecting American dancers and companies for state-sponsored foreign tours. However, in the first few years of the President's Special International Program, tour planners were hesitant to expose American artists' direct ties with US government funding, so media exposure for the program varied by tour. For example, the José Limón Dance Company's 1957 performance program wrote that the attraction was presented "In cooperation with the American National Theatre and Academy," a non-governmental agency, rather than acknowledging the President's Special International Program as the BUSA program did.<sup>27</sup>

The US Information Agency was established by the Eisenhower Administration and was tasked with managing and operating the US government's overseas information programs. The

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<sup>25</sup> Prevots, *Dance for Export*, 8-9, 11-22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 147-149.

<sup>27</sup> "Basic Principles for Guidance of Agencies Adminstrating the Cultural Program Financed from the President's Emergency Fund for International Affairs," November 1954-October 1956, box 48 folder 6, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, 2.

agency reflected its role as a conduit of cultural diplomacy with its motto, “Telling America’s story to the world.” However, cultural presentations and information programming operated separately as the Department of State facilitated cultural presentations through a network of cultural affairs officers. Despite this separation, USIA officers stationed at US embassies aided in cultural diplomacy logistics by connecting touring artists with the local media and organizing public relations events. The agency’s name changed several times, but from 1956 to 1959, the agency was called the US Information Agency (USIA) domestically and the US Information Service (USIS) abroad. Therefore, I will synonymously refer to this agency as the USIA and USIS.

The USIA Information Officers in Germany, along with the State Department’s Cultural Affairs and Public Affairs Officers stationed at the US embassy in Bonn, produced an annual country plan proposal that determined cultural diplomacy policy and activities.<sup>28</sup> The US ambassador to Germany approved these plans before they were sent back to Washington, where the German area office would work with the State Department to ensure the plan followed directives and aims.<sup>29</sup> These plans included target policy areas and themes that the embassy would work to address in Germany over the upcoming year. These plans reveal what priorities guided policymakers and bureaucrats as they presented cultural diplomacy exports in West Germany, and I will also reference these sources when laying out US priorities in West Germany.

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<sup>28</sup> Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Political Context**

The US, British, French, and Soviet military forces divided and occupied Germany at the end of the Second World War — as the United States, United Kingdom, and France controlled western portions of Germany and the Soviet Union controlled the eastern sector. Located within Soviet-controlled eastern Germany, Berlin was also divided into occupation zones. By 1948, the US, UK, and France planned a new German state made up of the western occupation zone and introduced a new currency, the Deutschmark, without consulting their co-occupying power, the Soviet Union. The currency reform wrested economic control from the Soviet Union and enabled the introduction of the Marshall Plan; this led the Soviet Union to introduce their own currency, the Ostmark. The USSR also began a blockade of all major transportation access points to West Berlin. The United States and the United Kingdom responded to the Berlin Blockade by airlifting food and fuel to Berlin from Allied airbases in western Germany. The crisis ended on May 12, 1949, when Soviet forces lifted the blockade on land access to western Berlin. Although the crisis dissuaded, this event solidified the division of Europe, and shortly after the blockade ended, West Germany was established, and the East German state was declared.<sup>30</sup>

The Marshall Plan, or the European Economic Recovery Program, brought extensive US financial assistance to West Germany (and other Western European states) to rebuild industrial production following the devastation of WWII. The US Congress funded the plan after they passed the Economic Cooperation Act in March 1948, and it came about as fears of communist expansion in Europe intensified following the rapid deterioration of European economies. The United States also benefitted from this aspect of US-FRG relations as the Marshall Plan solidified

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<sup>30</sup> Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Germany is No More: Defeat, Occupation, and the Postwar Order,” in Helmut Walser Smith, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, Oxford Handbooks in History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 607.

West Germany as a valuable trading partner, reliable ally, and stimulated the US economy by establishing a new market for American goods.<sup>31</sup> Together, the Marshall plan and the Western Allies who had organized the Berlin Airlift proved to the people of West Germany that their integration into the West was beyond dispute, and the US was a dedicated ally.<sup>32</sup>

Following the Berlin Airlift, Germany remained a central focus of US public diplomacy efforts as the USIA sought to continue to ease the path to West Germany's reintegration into Western Europe.<sup>33</sup> At the start of 1956, US-West German bilateral relations remained positive, and US country goals in West Germany in 1956 and 1957 reflected the US approach to contain communism while promoting Western integration. These goals included strengthening Western orientation, countering communist propaganda, and encouraging democratic processes.<sup>34</sup> This period coincided with the planning of the José Limón tour in 1956. During this time, the status of Berlin remained stable, and the question of German reunification was not at the forefront of most American policymakers' minds. Instead, their focus was diverted by other international crises such as the Hungarian Revolution and the Suez Crisis.

In 1958 and 1959, the Federal Republic of Germany remained a critical ally to the US and a frequent recipient of American cultural diplomacy. The Embassy of the United States in Bonn and the US Department of State viewed West Germany as the "pin holding the NATO alliance together," a key center for Western integration efforts, and the "strongest bulwark of the

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<sup>31</sup> Hoffmann, "Germany is No More," 607.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 120.

<sup>34</sup> Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 70-71.

West against the expansionist efforts of the Communist bloc.”<sup>35</sup> Bonn’s chief political concerns in 1959 centered around fears of communist infiltration and the political status of West Berlin.<sup>36</sup> The embassy’s 1959 country report on the US exchange program with West Germany underscored these concerns as top political priorities. The report showed that in 1959, amidst the uncertainties of the evolving Berlin Crisis, the embassy was anxious that Soviet pressure and the infiltration of “communist ideas and concepts” into West German society might neutralize the power of the Federal Republic, leading the country towards “communist domination.”<sup>37</sup> The report also concluded that if communism were to take hold in a united Germany, this would undermine the strength of the Western bloc.<sup>38</sup>

In 1959, the US Department of State sought to fulfill four main objectives in the Federal Republic of Germany. These objectives were outlined in the department’s West German annual country plan: (1) to promote respect for Americans as natural partners and allies with common spiritual and cultural ties and common political purposes; (2) to convince Germans that they must work closely with the other nations of the West to ensure their own freedom and prosperity; (3) to promote interest in democratic government and broaden participation in civic affairs; and (4) to further Germans’ understanding and adoption of the contemporary American economic system.<sup>39</sup> Cultural presentations, like *Ballets: USA* and the José Limón Dance Company, aimed

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<sup>35</sup> Air Pouch from American Embassy Bonn to Department of State, “Subject: Exchange: Annual Report on the Exchange Program with Germany for Fiscal Year 1958,” August 28, 1958, box 317, folder 16, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 2; Air Pouch from American Embassy Bonn to Department of State, “Subject: Exchange: Annual Report on the Exchange Program with Germany for Fiscal Year 1959,” August 7, 1959, box 317, folder 16 Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 1. It is important to note that the Department of State did not produce specific reports on cultural presentations in 1958 and 1959; however, the country plan, taken from the US exchange program report, identified broad American aims in Germany.

<sup>36</sup> “Annual Report on the Exchange Program with Germany for Fiscal Year 1959,” 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Annual Report on the Exchange Program with Germany for Fiscal Year 1959,” 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

explicitly at dispelling ideas of the US as materialistic and presenting Americans as people with well-developed cultural values.<sup>40</sup> Ballets: USA, in particular, was also well-positioned to undertake the first objective by contributing toward efforts to reassure West Germans that America shared their political purpose to protect the Federal Republic's independence and sovereignty (explored further in Chapter 3).

In November 1958, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev delivered a speech on the status of Berlin in which he demanded Western powers withdraw troops from the city within six months and announced his intention to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany in November 1958.<sup>41</sup> This ultimatum signaled the first of many sparks leading up to the height of the Berlin Crisis in 1961 over the city's future. Throughout this pressure, the US was committed to maintaining the freedom of West Berlin.<sup>42</sup> If the USSR had signed a separate peace treaty, this would have transformed Berlin into a neutral and demilitarized "free state" and would have nullified the basis for Western occupation in West Berlin by superseding the 1945 Potsdam Treaty.<sup>43</sup>

Despite American commitment to maintaining West German independence and the FRG's recent admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the embassy in Bonn concluded that West Germans and Berliners greatly questioned the Western Powers' willingness to take a firm stand against Soviet pressure in Berlin. Naturally, this worry loomed large in West Germans' minds.<sup>44</sup> Three days after the embassy issued its report on the exchange program, US Ambassador to the Federal Republic, David Bruce, sent a telegram to the State Department

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<sup>40</sup> Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Richard D. Williamson, *First Steps Toward Détente: American Diplomacy in the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1963* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 34.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 18, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> "Annual Report on the Exchange Program with Germany for Fiscal Year 1959," August 7, 1959, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 6.

characterizing West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as extremely distressed that Western solidarity was waning.<sup>45</sup> Bruce reported that the chancellor feared West Germany might become isolated under Soviet pressure.<sup>46</sup> In August 1959, President Eisenhower made his only presidential visit to the Federal Republic. Ambassador Bruce recommended that Eisenhower take a more personal approach to his meeting with Chancellor Adenauer and focus on reassuring him of the strength of Western unity. Bruce further suggested that the president make it clear to the world that any effort to isolate the chancellor or the Federal Republic had failed and would continue to fail. Nevertheless, throughout the ongoing Berlin crisis, West Germans continued to doubt the resolve of American promises to defend the independence of West Berlin and the interests of the Federal Republic.<sup>47</sup> By the time Ballets: USA completed its first performances in July 1959, it was clear to the Department of State that attempts to reconcile the situation produced little hope that the Western powers and the Soviet Union would find common ground on the question of German unification.<sup>48</sup> Through this growing political uncertainty, the US exchange program, with performances by groups such as Ballets: USA, was one tool the embassy employed to counter this psycho-political pressure.

### **American Dance**

Understanding variations between stylistic approaches in the broad American dance cannon is challenging without viewing the dance. Words do not quite translate the general feeling one experiences while watching choreography or what a piece looks like on stage. This problem is

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<sup>45</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume IX, Berlin Crisis, 1959-1960; Germany; Austria*, eds. David M. Baehler and Charles S. Sampson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), Document 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy Since 1945* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 86.

<sup>48</sup> Christian Herter, "Foreign Ministers Continue Discussions on Berlin and German Unification," July 20, 1959, Department of State Bulletin 41, no. 1050 (August 10, 1959): 197.



not new and is one that the Dance Panel, Cultural Affairs staff, and USIA experienced throughout the 1950s. In particular, the USIA staff at foreign posts struggled to convey differences in American dance styles to the local press and in preparatory advertising materials. In a correspondence from Cultural Affairs specialist Henry Kranz to dance critic and Dance Panel member Walter Terry, the staffer summarized this problem well, stating that Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham, and the New York City Ballet, for example, represent very different styles, but this was lost on foreign audiences. “Many foreigners do not know who represents classical ballet, modern and “abstract” dance sets on the American scene.”<sup>49</sup> Tour planners struggled to verbally characterize differences in American dance styles, because the dance elites themselves had not yet developed language to separate emerging schools of dance into broad categories.

American dance, especially modern and neo-classical works, were touted as exemplary evidence of a unique and developed high culture in the US. Many American dancers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to create a new American movement style rather than appropriating Native American dance or dance imported from Europe, Asia, and Africa and instead hypothesized that authentic dance must be inspired by one’s own identity and culture. Through movement, they set out to understand their identity as Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike their predecessors, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, dancers such as Limón’s mentor, Doris Humphrey, and her contemporary Martha Graham claimed their dance was American because they sought to explore American identity through dance. The repertory of Denis and Shawns’ company, Denishawn, was performed with an eclectic style that pulled from East Asian cultures and Native American dance. Its founders drew from the American publics’ widespread interest in exotica while adding

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<sup>49</sup> Correspondence from Henry B. Kranz to Walter Terry, March 29, 1960, box 68, folder 17, Walter Terry Papers, 1808 – 1982, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

a “free” style that they derived from the work of Isadora Duncan.<sup>50</sup> The Denishawn company survived until 1933; however, many of the company’s dancers, including Humphrey and Graham, left prior to 1933 to investigate the question of “What is an American?” and how movement could serve as a tool for dancers to speak as Americans or about American stories.<sup>51</sup> Humphrey and Graham carried out this project in New York City and sought to fulfill the general perceived need for American identity in the dance community – this perceived need stemmed from general isolationist and nationalist ideologues within American society in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>52</sup>

As Humphrey’s student, José Limón embraced this identity-driven approach to dance and believed that the investigative process by which modern dance was created was central to understanding its origin and thus, he viewed Humphrey’s dance as well as his own choreography as originating in America as a new dance form, indigenous to the US. American dance had, in a sense, developed out of German expressionist dance, which rejected ballet and embraced a free, more natural style of movement. In fact, during the 1950s, Germans referred to José Limón and Doris Humphrey’s American modern dance with the same term that they used to refer to their own modern dance tradition. They called both dance forms “Ausdruckstanz.” However, although American modern dance and German expressionist dance were similar in origin, in America, Ausdruckstanz was not translated into “modern dance.” Rather, it was referred to as a distinct dance style called expressionist dance.

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<sup>50</sup> Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 233.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid; José Limón, interviewed by Marian Horosko, *World of Dance*, The NYPR Archive Collections, January 1, 1964, WNYC site, 6:21, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/jose-limon/>.

<sup>52</sup> Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race,” and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London, UK: Routledge, 1998), 130.



Figure 1: José Limón teaching in a dance studio. Marcia Roltner, photographer. From the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5ebb0670-a79b-f1d9-e040-e00a1806292a>.

Jerome Robbins, founder of BUSA, was a versatile choreographer and his dance is not easily placed into one stylistic category. Throughout his career, he received acclaim for work as a choreographer on Broadway, in commercial theater, and in concert dance. Most of Robbins's concert dance works were rooted in modern dance and ballet. Some of his ballets, such as *New York Export: Opus Jazz* and *Fancy Free*, were influenced by Broadway, popular, and jazz dance.

While the American dance establishment viewed their dance as uniquely American, they also viewed dance as a universal art. This theory of universalism stemmed from the idea that dancers could unify the world's people through the universal language of human movement, which provided an avenue of communication that transcended any language barriers and thus provided great potential to grow mutual understanding between foreign audiences and American artists.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, there was a common assumption among the American dance establishment that modern dance was unique in that it was developed by Americans and oftentimes drew inspiration from American stories, but it was simultaneously transcendent of cultural barriers because of its universalist quality. This idea that dance is a universal language persists even

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<sup>53</sup> Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*, 32.

today. As previously noted, musicologist Anne Searcy pushes back against the idea that dance is a universal language and rather argues that dance “exchange viewers found new political, philosophical, or narrative meanings” in dance and the attention of an audience is guided by their cultural expectations and past sensory experiences of dance.<sup>54</sup> This study aims to view the dance of José Limón and Doris Humphrey, and Jerome Robbins from this perspective rather than the universalist viewpoint.



Figure 2: Jerome Robbins rehearses a female dancer in 1959. Martha Swope, photographer. From the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/f02849e0-e6db-0136-7499-0c97c027b438>.

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<sup>54</sup> Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*, 8.

## Chapter 2: Mixed Reviews of the José Limón American Dance Company in West Germany, 1957

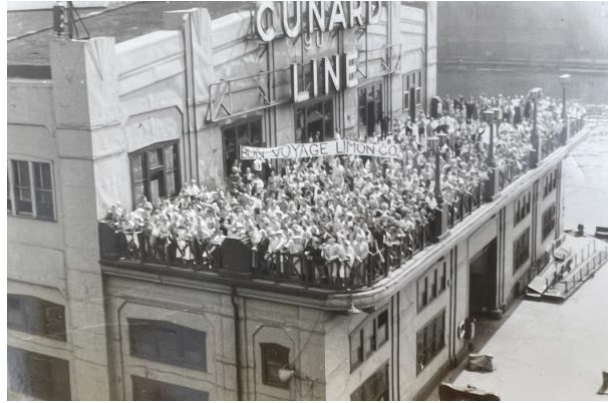


Figure 3: Company dancers Ann Vachon and Juliette Waung held up a farewell banner at New York harbor as the company pulled away from the pier. From Lucy Venable's scrapbook of the Limón Company Tour, Fall 1957, ACC.TRILVP.2019.0041.006, Lucy Venable Dance Notation Papers, Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute.

The José Limón Dance Company departed New York Harbor aboard the RMS Queen Mary at approximately 2:30 pm on August 21, 1957.<sup>55</sup> En route to the United Kingdom, the dancers prepared to embark upon a five-month-long European tour under the auspices of the President's Special International Program. They brought their hopeful ambitions to make meaningful connections with the European dance community, spark public interest in their approach to movement, and present the developments of American modern dance to Europe's cultural elites. Unfortunately, following the company's opening week in London, they received disheartening reviews, which Limón called "glacial and condescending, often scathing."<sup>56</sup> Three weeks later, in Paris, the reviews only worsened as Limón characterized the response as the rock-bottom of his artistic fortune and recounted that the Parisian press "wrote of us with derision and mockery."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Scrapbook of the Limón Company Tour, Fall 1957, ACC. TRILVP.2019.0041.006, Lucy Venable Dance Notation Papers, Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute.

<sup>56</sup> José Limón, report for friends and colleagues, January 6, 1958, box 18, folder 484, Mgzmd 24, José Limón Papers, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Discouraged by this poor reception but determined, Limón remained optimistic as he looked on towards the company's performances in Germany and Eastern Europe.



Figure 4: Limón Company dancers aboard the Queen Mary in order of appearance: Betty Jones Campbell, Pauline Lawrence Limón, Ruth Currier, Lola Huth, José Limón, and Lucy Venable. From Lucy Venable's scrapbook of the Limón Company Tour, Fall 1957, ACC.TRI.LVP.2019.0041.006, Lucy Venable Dance Notation Papers, Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute.

When the company appeared at the Berlin Cultural Festival from October 1-6, they felt triumphant and appreciated by German audience goers.<sup>58</sup> Limón simply proclaimed: "I love Berlin."<sup>59</sup> However, the USIS evaluation presented an alternative depiction of the West German reception. Rather than the non-stop enthusiastic applause that Limón remembered, the USIS post in Berlin reported that the audience was "merely admiring or cool."<sup>60</sup> The post also reported that the press reception was mixed with some admiration but mostly "restrained or critical" reviews and concluded that American modern dance lacked broad appeal in West Germany.<sup>61</sup> This conclusion is strange given Germany's significant cultural history as the origin of most Western

<sup>58</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Telegram from USIS Berlin to Secretary of State, October 10, 1957, Dept, of State, Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250,1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limón, Jose/10-1057, NARA II published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 357.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

concert dance forms diverging from strict classical ballet as the country has its own strong modern dance tradition (Ausdruckstanz), which began in the 1920s and influenced the creation of American modern dance.

By examining the José Limón American Dance Company's 1957 European tour, specifically their performances at the Berlin Cultural Festival and during stops in Bonn, Dusseldorf, Stuttgart, Munich, and Essen, this chapter aims to explore the limits of exporting the American dream and how press reception may not match cultural diplomacy tour planners' expectations. Although planners assumed that German audiences would appreciate Limón's dance because of Germany's strong modern dance tradition, I argue that it was this similarity that inhibited the success of the tour from the view of many German dance critics.

### **José Limón: American Dancer**

Limón's artistic mission and life story aligned well with the general aims of the President's Special International Program and the USIA's image guidelines which were often influential in planning official public diplomacy efforts. Throughout the 1950s, US public diplomacy programming sought to promote an idealized American society with little class struggle and great opportunity for social mobility. In turn, this idealized America would continuously help advance the social position of minorities and value the contributions of different cultures in enriching American culture.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Limón made an ideal diplomat for this cultural mission. As an assimilated immigrant from Mexico, he exemplified the American Dream while his dance style offered an Americanized alternative to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century European dance styles such as Ausdruckstanz. The Dance Panel believed that modern dance possessed the highly

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<sup>62</sup> Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 53.

effective ability to transmit universal messages and thought that the José Limón Dance Company demonstrated the superiority of American artistic ingenuity, the seriousness of American artistic pursuit, and artists' autonomy under capitalist democracy.

José Limón was born in Culiacán, Mexico, in 1908, and he later moved with his family to Arizona and eventually East Los Angeles when he was seven-year-old.<sup>63</sup> The Limóns fled the instability and hardships of the Mexican Revolution, and José lived in LA with his family until he moved to New York City in pursuit of a career as a painter. Although Limón was always artistically inclined, he only began dancing in 1929 after a chance encounter with modern dance. Limón accompanied a friend to a performance of German expressionist dancers and students of Mary Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi, and shortly after visited a modern dance classroom.<sup>64</sup> Limón began training at 19 and made great strides as he entered his performance career by 20.<sup>65</sup> This is considered a remarkable accomplishment, as most dancers begin training to attain a professional level of dance technique at a young age. Limón was taught by American modern dance pioneers, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and joined their dance company before he was drafted into the US Army in 1943. Upon returning to New York City following World War II, Limón created the José Limón Dance Company in 1946 and appointed his mentor, Doris Humphrey, as artistic director.<sup>66</sup> Over the next decade, Limón and Humphrey would lead the company to great success and solidify the troupe as one of the greatest names in American dance.

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<sup>63</sup> Patricia Seed, ed., *José Limón and La Malinche: The Dancer and the Dance* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



Throughout his career, Limón returned to Mexico on tour with his dance company and was invited by the Mexican government to take up the directorship of the Mexican National Academy of Dance in 1950.<sup>67</sup> Limón ultimately turned down this offer citing that he preferred working as an independent artist without government oversight and appreciated American artistic freedom.<sup>68</sup> American dance critic John Martin wrote that Limón felt his artistic career had developed in the United States and thus wished to continue it there.<sup>69</sup> Martin also lightheartedly lamented that the United States would “be grieved to the possible point of making an international incident of it, if what is unquestioningly our most important modern dance company were taken away from us.”<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Limón chose the American dance world and, through his public statements on this decision in the years following, including during the 1957 tour, celebrated American artistic freedom and non-governmental interference in the arts.<sup>71</sup> He thought of American modern dance as genuinely native to the US and sought to continue with the development of this dance form.

The Dance Panel, USIA, and International Educational Exchange Service viewed Limón’s story of assimilation and social mobility through hard work and dance innovation as a picture-perfect story that would further ideas of the American melting pot as a positive and effective means of inclusion. In other words, José Limón represented the validity of the American Dream. By the spring of 1956, the status of the 1957 tour remained unsure, and after two years of attempts to export the José Limón Company, it seemed approval for the tour might be delayed

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<sup>67</sup> José Limón, “The Dancer’s Status Here and Abroad: Comparisons and Observations,” *Dance Observer*, March 1958, 37.

<sup>68</sup> Limón, “The Dancer’s Status Here and Abroad,” 38.

<sup>69</sup> Ann Vachon, “Limon in Mexico, Mexico in Limon,” in *José Limón: The Artist Re-Viewed*, ed. June Dunbar (New York, NY: Routledge (Publisher), 2009), 81.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Limón, “The Dancer’s Status Here and Abroad: Comparisons and Observations,” 38. During press conferences on the 1957 tour, Limón shared this story when questioned why artists in the US did not receive regular state subsidies.

another year. When this issue was raised at the April 1956 Dance Panel meeting, Martha Hill, panel member and the Director of Dance at the Julliard School, cautioned the panel against budgeting more money for ballet tours and implored that the Dance Panel prioritize Limón's modern dance instead, stating that it "is an excellent exponent of an American-developed style."<sup>72</sup> She also raised the point that "it is of great propaganda value that a Mexican-born boy has become one of the top dancers in our country."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the general manager of ANTA, Robert Schnitzer, in his August 1956 memo to the US International Educational Exchange Service, suggested that Limón's identity, in conjunction with his status as a top modern dancer and past success throughout the Limón Company's state-sponsored 1954 tour made him uniquely qualified for an extensive government-sponsored tour.<sup>74</sup> Finally, one year later, in the State Department's preparatory instructions for USIS posts abroad, Limón's heritage and assimilation into the US was highlighted; the memo stated that he only returned to Mexico a couple of times for performances and that he is widely regarded as the top male dancer in America.<sup>75</sup> This focus on Limón's identity and life story, in conjunction with his artistic achievement in the US, represents the ideal vision of social cohesion and harmony that the USIA sought to promote. This message showed that Limón—a Mexican emigre from a low-income family that fled the instability and violence of war—was able to achieve upward economic mobility through his artistic genius and work ethic. His determination and creativity, with the support of artistic

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<sup>72</sup> Dance Panel meeting, April 26, 1956, box 101, folder 14, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Memo from Robert Schnitzer to International Educational Exchange Service, "Progress Report No. 31," August 7, 1956, box 48, folder 5, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Special Collections, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Department of State instruction from Secretary of State Dulles to USIS posts, June 27, 1957, Department of State, Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limon, Jose/6-2757, NARA II published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 333.

freedom, enriched American dance and led him to become the best male modern dancer of his generation, providing the perfect success story in which the conditions in America helped advance Limón's social position. Finally, by officially endorsing Limón's dance as representative of the best in American culture through government sponsorship, this tour demonstrated that the US government valued Limón's dance and recognized his contribution to enriching American culture.



Figure 5: José Limón and Pauline Koner performing *La Malinche*, a ballet based on the Mexican legend of a peasant girl who became the mistress of Hernán Cortés but later betrayed him to lead her people in a revolution against the Spanish Conquistadors. From the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/60c07d70-ab99-0139-cbbe-0242ac110002>.

### **Enthusiastic Dancers, Warm Audiences, and Lukewarm Critics**

Following the Limón Dance Company's difficult run in London and Paris, Limón finally felt wanted and understood by the people of Berlin, and this gave him the impression that he had found his audience.<sup>76</sup> Limón saw his Berlin performances as the company's "first triumph," moved by the endless rounds of applause and many curtain calls in which the audiences'

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<sup>76</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 4.

applause warranted the dancers continue bowing even after the curtain had closed.<sup>77</sup> Although Limón felt accepted and elated throughout his company's performances in West Germany, some of the West German press were evidently less enthusiastic. This contradictory, in fact, antithetical, perception of Limón and the German press is worth scrutinizing, as it not only exposes tensions between the hopeful goals of performers and the opinions of their intended audiences but also possibly reveals an American performer's limitations in grasping culturally specific forms of audience reactions in Germany.

The press compared Limón's style of American modern dance to German Ausdruckstanz, or expressionist dance, which rejected ballet and embraced a free, more natural style of movement that sought to explore the relationship between man and the universe.<sup>78</sup> During the Weimar period, Ausdruckstanz was most popular and gradually fell out of style by the end of WWII. Hence, the press at times also characterized the Limón Company's repertory as outdated. For the Limón Company, this evaluation was "a puzzling paradox," and Limón recounted that these reviews were "jaundiced, unfriendly, and insisted that what we had to present was "passe," that it had been done years ago by Wigman, Jooss, Kreutzberg, etc., and had no validity..."<sup>79</sup> Limón and his dancers felt these reviews were unfair and did not match their first-hand experience of booming applause and interpersonal interactions with audience members, local dancers, and opera house directors.<sup>80</sup> While most USIS reception summaries reported a similar divided reaction between established dance critics and audience goers, these reports did not

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<sup>77</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Isa Partsch-Bergsohn and Harold Bergsohn, *The Makers of Modern Dance in Germany: Rudolph Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss* (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Co, 2003), 61.

<sup>79</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 5.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*; Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], February 22, 1958, \*MGZTL 4-2705, Pauline Koner Collection, New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

characterize audience reception as enthusiastic.<sup>81</sup> Based on the dancers' enthusiastic accounts, it seems that the general audience received the company warmly; however, some members of the German press disliked the Limón Company's repertory. Several explanations for this phenomenon are explored in this chapter. They include the idea that José Limón and American modern dancers appropriated German expressionist dance, reviewers felt uneasy about these performances because of Ausdruckstanz's past ties with Nazi propaganda and culture, and the relative popularity of ballet over modern dance in Europe during the 1950s.



Figure 6: Opera House where the company performed in Berlin. From Lucy Venable's scrapbook of the Limón Company Tour, Fall 1957, ACC.TRI.LVP.2019.0041.006, Lucy Venable Dance Notation Papers, Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute.

Limón and the dance panel felt that Germans understood the mission of modern dance and the movement aesthetic. Thus, they expected a positive press reception and a unique point of cultural connection for Limón's dancers and German audiences. Based upon Limón's account, this idealized expectation would seem to have played out into reality as Limón attributed his

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<sup>81</sup> Communication from USIS Bonn to USIA Washington, February 17, 1958, Dept. of State Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limon, Jose/2-1758, NARA I published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 365-366; Telegram from USIS Berlin to Secretary of State, October 10, 1957, Dept. of State, Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limón, Jose/10-1057, NARA II published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 365-366.

perceived triumph in Germany to the rich German tradition in expressionist dance.<sup>82</sup> The company's leading dancer Pauline Koner similarly perceived that audiences in Germany felt a special connection with the company because they were previously exposed to the expressionist dance of Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg.<sup>83</sup> She said they "had no problem understanding and appreciating our American dance" and felt grateful for Germany's reception. She expressed that it healed the company's bruised egos following the brutal reviews in London and Paris.<sup>84</sup> The Dance Panel also thought the performances in Germany were a great success, citing that the rumors of poor press reviews were "more disappointing than the actual reports."<sup>85</sup>

Most critics of the Limón Company's repertory viewed this dance as an imitation of German Ausdruckstanz, while tour planners and Limón saw their modern dance as American. However, this dance was not American in that it represented Americana, but rather the Dance Panel and USIS emphasized this Americanness as stemming from the process by which the American dance scene and Americans created modern dance and Limón's style.<sup>86</sup> Upon reflecting on his European tour, Limón reported to the American dance community that he shared this message in encounters with local dancers, emphasizing that the "Americanness" of modern dance gave him confidence during the lowest points of the tour.<sup>87</sup> Backstage in his dressing room, Limón shared his account of modern dance's origin story with Polish dancers,

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<sup>82</sup> Barbara Pollack, "José Limón and Company in Europe," *Dance Magazine*, April 1958, 76.

<sup>83</sup> Pauline Koner, *Solitary Song* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 223.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Dance Panel meeting, October 17, 1957, box 101, folder 13, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Department of State instruction from Secretary of State Dulles to USIS posts, June 27, 1957, Department of State, Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limon, Jose/6-2757, NARA II published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957: Modern Dance, Diplomacy, and the Cold War," 333; Dance Panel meeting, April 26, 1956, box 101, folder 14, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Barbara Pollack, "José Limón and Company in Europe," *Dance Magazine*, April 1958, 76.

and when they asked how they might bring modern dance to Poland, Limón told them that you must “search deeply within yourself for the dance which is yours and nobody else’s. You must want to dance as Poles, not as Englishmen or Americans.” Limón sincerely believed in modern dance’s mission to offer dancers a medium through which they could explore their identities as Americans. He felt proud of this aspect of American cultural history. By providing this advice to foreign dancers, he created a shared emotional point of connection in which foreign dancers both understood and appreciated the Americanness of modern dance.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Limón told foreign dancers that modern dance was created out of necessity because US dancers had a message they could not convey through the European dance tradition.<sup>89</sup> Limón viewed modern dance as a tool through which Americans could understand their identity, and he wanted dancers everywhere to experience this. He believed that one should use dance to address their own needs as humans and draw from their rich dance traditions to investigate new ways of moving that fit uniquely within their national contexts.

While Limón’s dance was viewed as American, modern dance also aimed to universalize the human experience. Following the company’s performances in London, they felt defeated but also confident that the press reception would improve. In a report following the tour, Limón said that he held “a strong faith in our art, and what it represents, its power, its vitality, its validity, its sincerity, and its genuineness, as a voice speaking for us as Americans and as individuals of the twentieth century.”<sup>90</sup> The Limón Dance Company sought to use dance to speak with Americanness, but in a way that could be understood by all people living during their time. This same view was held by the American dance establishment of the 1950s, who saw the movement

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<sup>88</sup> Pollack, “José Limón and Company in Europe,” 76.

<sup>89</sup> Limón, “The Dancer’s Status Here and Abroad: Comparisons and Observations,” 39.

<sup>90</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 2.

styles of Martha Graham and José Limón in universal terms. They felt that modern dance could transcend insurmountable interpersonal boundaries because of the form's universalist ideology. Prominent dance critics Walter Terry and John Martin believed that because modern dance placed human emotion and bodily reactions to one's environment at the center of choreography and subject matter, it possessed this unique universalist capability.<sup>91</sup> Terry, who served as a member of the Dance Panel, attributed this universalism to the dance form's founding following the First World War. He argued that this period offered shared emotions and specific human hardship that exemplified a universal human condition.<sup>92</sup> Martin similarly felt that modern dance universalized itself as he argued that it portrayed "material that is closer to life experience than that employed by any of the other arts."<sup>93</sup> With this basis, the dance panel believed that modern dance could open avenues of communication leading to mutual recognition and understanding through American dancers performing universal themes for audiences — presenting vulnerable emotion that was transferred to the audience. Like Martin and Terry, Limón also saw dance as a universal language capable of transcending differences of race, culture, and ideological conflict. He believed that modern dance presented a "lingua franca" to all people — one that crossed both natural physical barriers and manufactured mental barriers such as country borders and narrow-mindedness.<sup>94</sup> Dance scholar Rebekah Kowal argues that the Dance Panel and the American modern dance establishment shared the common assumption that modern dance's universalism and focus on the individual within a collective made it capable of addressing a central question within the post-war period: what was "the meaning of the individual human life in a world

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<sup>91</sup> Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*, 46-47.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 152.



decimated by war and the Nazi holocaust and precariously poised on the threshold of nuclear annihilation.”<sup>95</sup>

### *Limón as Passé*

Throughout his career, Limón did not contest that German expressionist dancers influenced him. Rather, he viewed his dance as a new development over a continuation of German expressionism. While Americans knew of German Ausdruckstanz, notions of the distinctness of American modern dance from Ausdruckstanz during the late 1920s and 1930s persisted. Limón believed that the mixing of cultures in New York City from recent immigrants allowed the US to create a new dance culture that operated as a contemporary rather than the product of German expressionism that worked “in conjunction and accord” with US dance.<sup>96</sup> Limón and the Dance Panel did not deny the influence of German dance, but rather they believed the influence could not outweigh their own movement exploration and innovation.

Ausdruckstanz developed from the German Lebensreform—or life reform movement—of the early 20th Century. Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman sought to forge a free dance that was not bound to the technical rules of ballet or ornamentation, instead, they sought to establish dance as a medium to explore expression.<sup>97</sup> Rather than following a systematic technique, early German dancers sought to create dance that focused on emotional intensity, the strength of expression, visible tension, and minimalism which only presented the essential. Following the devastation of WWI, creative development in the arts flourished in the Weimar Republic as artists sought to overcome Germany’s defeat by forging art that was free from the restrictions of

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<sup>95</sup> Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*, 32.

<sup>96</sup> José Limón, *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir*, ed. Lynn Garafola, Studies in Dance History (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998) 62; Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 123.

<sup>97</sup> Norbert Servos, “Ausdruckstanz,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance* (Oxford University Press, 1998), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195173697.001.0001/acref-9780195173697-e-0099>.

the nineteenth century. This art was truly meant for the twentieth century as it included intense experimentation to find a dance that could fill the urgent need for avenues to express inner feelings.<sup>98</sup> This search for free expression led to an explosion in the popularity of dance in Germany as people sought out social dance and gymnastics for self-improvement. With this new enthusiasm for physical movement and the expressionist's mission to liberate concert dance and return it to a more natural state, Ausdruckstanz emerged as an important contributor to Weimar culture and forever changed the concert dance world as it broke away from the strict formalism of classical ballet and presented movement that explored personal experience through free movement.<sup>99</sup> Ausdruckstanz spread throughout Europe and in America as Wigman and Laban toured the US throughout the early 1930s. Additionally, many German concert dancers were trained under Wigman and Laban, who also spread expressionism.

Given German Ausdruckstanz and US modern dances' shared history, many dance critics during Limon's 1957 tour felt that his dance appropriated or copied Ausdruckstanz. Similarly, dance scholar Melinda Copel claims that Limón and tour planners intentionally failed to acknowledge the influence of German Ausdruckstanz on US dance as a means to preserve the perception of the company's repertory as uniquely American dance.<sup>100</sup> However, José Limón and his company members did not deny the influences of German dancers such as Rudolf Laban, Kurt Jooss, Mary Wigman, and Harald Kreutzberg. Instead, their statements reveal gratitude for these dancers' contributions to early 20th-century dance rather than sentiments that conveniently ignored the German influence. Universalist thinking and the search for American identity led to

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<sup>98</sup> Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 25.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>100</sup> Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 172.

this lack of acknowledgment. Some German press seemed to agree. For example, *Der Kurier* reported that “one will try to make an automatic comparison between the American and the German expressionist dance (of the Wigman school). Since both disciplines share a similar origin, one can find more agreement than separation.”<sup>101</sup> However, other critics did not relent—for example, *Der Abend* viewed this similarity as de-authenticating the originality of Limón’s dance as the critic compared Limón’s dance to fake flowers serving as substitutes for real flowers.<sup>102</sup>

USIS reports also confirm that a substantial part of the German press viewed Limón’s dance as a copycat.<sup>103</sup> However, the USIS report specifically emphasized that press reviews left the impression that Limón was an excellent copycat of Harald Kreutzberg, whom Limón has claimed as his metaphorical dance father.<sup>104</sup> In his memoir, Limón opens the book with a widely cited essay entitled “East Fifty-ninth Street: The Birthplace,” in which he recounts that his metaphorical dance parents were American dance innovator Isadora Duncan and German expressionist dancer Harald Kreutzberg and his foster parents were American modern dancers, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman.<sup>105</sup> This imagined family exemplifies Limón’s acknowledgment of German and American influences in shaping his work across two generations of dancers. Limón claimed his “birth” as a dancer occurred while watching Harald Kreutzberg perform in New York and that after this experience, he suddenly felt transformed and

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<sup>101</sup> Walter Kaul, “Ein Wirbelstrum Fegte Über Die Bühne: José Limon Mit Der American Dance Company in Titania-Palast,” *Der Kurier*, Oktober 1957.

<sup>102</sup> Hans Rauschnig, “José Limon: Weihevolltes Gestern,” *Der Abend*, Oktober 1957, 12. Jahr, Nr. 229 edition.

<sup>103</sup> Communication from USIS Bonn to USIA Washington, February 17, 1958, Dept. of State Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limon, Jose/2-1758, NARA I published in Copel, “The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957,” 365.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 366.

<sup>105</sup> Limón, *José Limón*, 1.

compelled to dance by the feeling that he no longer wanted to live if he could not dance as Kreutzberg did.<sup>106</sup>

Although some press reviews viewed Limón's dance as appropriating Ausdruckstanz, the dance form's pioneers did not seem to share this sentiment. Following the tour, Limón reported that Wigman welcomed his company with warmth, and he felt an instant connection with her.<sup>107</sup> Wigman attended many performances and had Limón over to her house for a "fascinating evening." He said: "It was a rare privilege to know this great generous woman, this rich, all-encompassing maturity, the loving spirit."<sup>108</sup> USIS also arranged a reception following the Limón Company's opening night at the Berlin Cultural Festival, at which Mary Wigman was an honored guest.<sup>109</sup> Pauline Koner, who sat with Wigman at the reception, shared how the expressionist dancer had influenced her own dance career. Similarly, she felt that Wigman greeted the company with enthusiasm.<sup>110</sup> Limón and Wigman kept in touch through letters during the tour, and Wigman expressed her well wishes for a positive reception during the company's Stuttgart performances and that she hoped to see Limón during her upcoming visit to the US.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, in a letter to her former student and German émigré to the US, Hanya Holm, Wigman recounted that both the company's artistic impression and her personal encounters with the company dancers were "delightful" and specifically categorized the Limón Company's repertory as American dance.<sup>112</sup> It seems that Wigman's view of the Limón

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<sup>106</sup> Limón, *José Limón*, 16.

<sup>107</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 4.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Koner, *Solitary Song*, 223.

<sup>111</sup> Correspondences from Mary Wigman to José Limón, October 26, 1957 and December 1, 1957, box 6, folder 147, (S) \*MGZMD 24, José Limón Papers.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Mary Wigman to Hanya Holm, November 1, 1957, published in Mary Wigman, *Liebe Hanya: Mary Wigman's Letters to Hanya Holm*, ed. Claudia Gitelman, trans. Marianne Forster et al. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 143-144.

Company's dance aligned well with that of the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, which reported that while Limón's dance was reminiscent of German dance in the 1920s, it was still American dance with its own style stemming from a different culture with "another mentality and another outlook on life."<sup>113</sup> When Wigman toured the US in 1930, she noticed the affinity forming between the new American modern dance and German expressionist dance and termed this experimental American dance as "amerikanischer Ausdruckstanz" or an American rendition of German expressionist dance.<sup>114</sup> Wigman's appreciation and excitement towards Limón and Humphreys' dance is a starkly different interpretation of their work compared to the German press.



Figure 7: José Limón sitting at a formal dinner with Mary Wigman (to the right) and an unidentified woman in Berlin, October 1957. From the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/0c6c63a0-bde3-0131-3767-58d385a7bbd0>.

<sup>113</sup> Communication from USIS Bonn to USIA Washington, February 17, 1958, Dept. of State Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limon, Jose/2-1758, NARA I published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 366.

<sup>114</sup> Mary Mayer, "Mary Wigman's Dance Principles Explained," *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1931, B18 quoted in Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*, 48.

### *American Dance and the Nazi Past*

While the press commentated on the similarities between the Limón Company’s repertory and the works of German expressionist dancers, the reviews also exhibited frustration with the guiding principles of expressionist dance. The frustration manifested through references to Ausdruckstanz’s past Nazi affiliations and the general post-war trend toward favoring ballet in Germany. Interestingly, *Die Welt*’s review referred to the Nazi slogan “Blut und Boden” with the subtitle in which it read “The Guest Performance of Jose Limón at the Titania Palace: folk art, not ‘blood and soil.’”<sup>115</sup> The review seems to use the subtitle as an opportunity to clarify that the Limón Company’s repertory did not align with the aims of past Nazi propaganda. “Blood and Soil” was a foundational Nazi slogan used to evoke the idea of a pure “Aryan” race and the territory it wanted to conquer and invoked a mystical vision of the special relationship between the Germanic people and their land and was used to justify the forced seizure of land.<sup>116</sup> Under the Nazi regime, Ausdruckstanz was expected to serve as an instrument for National Socialist ideals such as “Blood and Soil.” This mission was led by the Reich Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, at the Reich Chamber of Culture.<sup>117</sup> Ausdruckstanz dancers who chose to stay in Germany were required to prove their Aryan origins to perform publicly and were central to Nazi high culture until 1937, when the “radicalization of the regime” took place, and the Chamber of Culture began to abandon their mission to remake Ausdruckstanz.

Additionally, many of the unfavorable reviews not only viewed the company’s repertory as outdated or an imitation of German expressionist dance, but they also thought the concept of

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<sup>115</sup> Horst Koegler, “Ehrfurcht Vor Allem, Was Leben Heißt: Gastspiel José Limon Im Titania-Palast: Volkskunst, Nicht ‘Blut Und Boden,’” *Die Welt*, Oktober 1957.

<sup>116</sup> “What is Antisemitism? Origins of Neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Terms and Symbols,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism/origins-of-neo-nazi-and-white-supremacist-terms-and-symbols>.

<sup>117</sup> Susan Manning, “Modern Dance in the Third Reich, Redux,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 395–415, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199928187.001.0001>, 402-403.

Ausdruckstanz, or modern dance was too philosophical. Their rejections echo the critiques of Ausdruckstanz raised by Joseph Goebbels, who also found the dance form to be too philosophical when he abandoned the dance form as a tool for propaganda. In a letter sent to Rainer Schlösser (who served under Goebbels as the Reich Drama Adviser) in 1940, Goebbels wrote of Ausdruckstanz: “Dance must address the senses and not the brain. Otherwise, it is not dance any more but philosophy. Then I would rather read Schopenhauer than go to the theater.”<sup>118</sup> Like Goebbels, some German dance critics also found the works of José Limón and Doris Humphrey to be too intellectual, and therefore they rejected the concept of Ausdruckstanz. For example, the critic from *Der Kurier* felt that Humphrey’s work “Variations and Conclusions” from the ballet *New Dance*—which explores new horizons and the speed of change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—presented the same “ideological extravagance and wishy-washiness that can be seen in Ausdruckstanz.”<sup>119</sup> They also commented that Limón and Humphrey’s choreography took “philosophical flights into the stratosphere.”<sup>120</sup> Others commented that the company’s repertory was not art as it required interpretation to understand. Thus, they equated Limon and Humphreys’ movement to words and the pieces as a whole to literature. For example, *Der Abend* wrote that expressionist and modern dance have “removed the body and lives from thoughts, feelings, and worldviews. The dance interprets and speaks, so it needs words. Thus, this is ultimately literature – but not dance.”<sup>121</sup> Therefore, those reviewers who offered these comparisons may have disliked the José Limón dance company’s repertory because the sentiment expressed by the Reich Minister of Propaganda’s biases against the dance form

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<sup>118</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher. Stamtliche Fragmente*, entries 14 and 19 December 1939 published in Manning, “Modern Dance in the Third Reich, Redux,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, 406.

<sup>119</sup> Kaul, “Ein Wirbelstrum Fegte Über Die Bühne: José Limon Mit Der American Dance Company in Titania-Palast.”

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Rauschning, “José Limon: Weihevolltes Gestern.”

lingered from 1940 well into the 1950s.



Figure 8: José Limón Dance Company performing Doris Humphrey's "Variations and Conclusions" from the ballet *New Dance*. Photo from the 1957 touring program from Lucy Venable's scrapbook of the Limón Company Tour, Fall 1957, ACC.TRILLVP.2019.0041.006, Lucy Venable Dance Notation Papers, Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute.

### ***The Germans "resort to the old pretty ballet"*<sup>122</sup>**

Another possible explanation for why many critics reviewed the Limón Company so harshly may be that ballet was simply more popular, and critics preferred neoclassical dance that altered ballet rather than rejecting it altogether, as American modern dance and German expressionist dance had. This is ironic as the Dance Panel and Robert Schnitzer wanted to send the Limón Company to Europe to diversify US dance presentations. They felt that by 1956 Europe had "now been pretty well saturated with American ballets and it might be a valuable change of pace to send a modern dance group."<sup>123</sup> Additionally, following WWII, most German dancers turned to classical ballet and away from Ausdruckstanz as it was now tainted by its

<sup>122</sup> Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], Pauline Koner Collection, 11:50-12:22.

<sup>123</sup> Memo from Robert Schnitzer to International Educational Exchange Service, "Progress Report No. 31," August 7, 1956, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 9.



association with Nazism. Shortly after the company's return from Europe, Pauline Koner shared her experience on tour during a symposium at Connecticut College. She hypothesized that there was now relative popularity of ballet over modern dance in Germany, which she said had changed from the early 20th century.<sup>124</sup> Koner generalized that European cultural elites did not want to see any dance that was not rooted in ballet, and she felt that Europe was too lazy to invent new dance following WWII and simply wanted to “resort to the old pretty ballet.”<sup>125</sup> Although this view is reductive, German scholar Jost Hermand advanced a similar view that post-war Germans advocated for performing arts styles that harkened back to the older pre-WWI German cultural tradition.<sup>126</sup> Cultural commentators also tended to direct their criticism toward “modernism” that had developed at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>127</sup> This phenomenon was seen when the New York City Ballet visited Germany in the early 1950s and overwhelmed audiences, thereby solidifying the victory of classical dance over the few still existing choreographers of German Modern Dance.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, the State Department's evaluations of the 1956 and 1957 tours of the American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet concluded that ballet was received with overwhelming favor by the German press and audiences alike.<sup>129</sup>

Some claimed Limon's dance style strayed too far from classical dance forms, and thus it appeared outdated. Koner recalled that the critics described the company as old-fashioned. Yet,

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<sup>124</sup> Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], Pauline Koner Collection.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:50-12:22.

<sup>126</sup> Jost Hermand, “Resisting Boogie-Woogie Culture, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art: German Highbrow Objections to the Import of “American” Forms of Culture, 1945-1965” in Alexander Stephan, ed., *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture After 1945* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2004), 68-69.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, xv.

<sup>129</sup> “President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations General Statements,” 1958, box 6, folder 14, \*T-MSS 199-028, Robert C. Schnitzer and Marcella Cisney Papers, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, 3.

at the same time, they praised the works of Jerome Robbins and French choreographer Maurice Béjart whose choreography moved in a balletically inspired way.<sup>130</sup> Like the Limón Company, Maurice Béjart also performed at the Berlin Cultural Festival in 1957, which further opened the door for comparison. For example, *Der Abend* commented that when it comes to Maurice Béjart and Limón's dance styles, "comparison kills," which the reporter supported with the statement that since the French dancer had "smashed bare human existence against our retinas...there simply are new standards."<sup>131</sup> The periodicals *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which reported on Martha Graham and Jerome Robbins's appearances in Berlin in 1957 and 1959, respectively, failed to mention the Limón Company's appearance at the Berlin Cultural Festival.<sup>132</sup> *Die Zeit* rather focused their dance reporting on praise-filled comments for Maurice Béjart. Limón even commented in his post-tour report that the European press suggested that modern dance was being done much better by Robbins and Béjart.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, *Abend Zeitung*'s reporting seemed disappointed that the Limón company presented "a kind of Wigman dance series of the Twenties," especially "considering the remarkable impetus contemporary ballet derived from such American artists as Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins and Todd Bolender."<sup>134</sup> Koner found this comparison frustrating as Doris Humphrey trained Robbins, and Koner argued that his dance aesthetic borrowed aspects of modern dance and used them to alter ballet.<sup>135</sup> She found it disappointing that the European critics did not recognize this, but this is

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<sup>130</sup> Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], Pauline Koner Collection, 11:50-12:22.

<sup>131</sup> Rauschnig, "José Limon: Weihevolltes Gestern."

<sup>132</sup> Thilo Koch, "Die theatrale Riesenwelle," *Die Zeit*, October 10, 1957, <https://www.zeit.de/1957/41/die-theatrale-riesenwelle/seite-2>.

<sup>133</sup> Limón, report for friends and colleagues, José Limón Papers, 4.

<sup>134</sup> Communication from USIS Bonn to USIA Washington, February 17, 1958, Dept. of State Central Files, Record Group 59, Stack Area 250, 1955-59, Box 111, 032 Limón, Jose/2-1758, NARA I published in Copel, "The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957," 366.

<sup>135</sup> Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], Pauline Koner Collection.

also ironic, as the German critics similarly felt that American modern dance was inspired by German expressionist dance. However, American dancers claimed the style was purely American.



Figure 9: Pauline Koner and José Limón in 1957 dancing in the *Moor's Pavane*, which is widely regarded as Limón's best work and was received warmly in West Germany. Roger Wood, photographer. From the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-495e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

## **Conclusion**

Tour planners believed the Americanness of the Limón Company's dance, combined with modern dance's supposed universal quality, would offer a unique point of connection for West German audiences, dancers, and critics. Although the tour provided Limón and his dancers the opportunity to make a meaningful connection with German expressionist dance pioneer Mary Wigman and they seemed to receive a warm response from the general audience, some German critics rejected Limón and Humphreys' modern dance as outdated. This contradicted the outcome that tour planners anticipated from a modern dance tour which they believed would spread truly American characteristics.

However, it is important to remember that younger generations of German would not have been as familiar with Ausdruckstanz as their parents or the dance critics because the dance style fell out of public and governmental favor by 1940. In this sense, Mary Wigman left her interactions with the company hopeful that their presence sparked a renewed interest in Ausdruckstanz. She told Koner backstage that the company's presence was "very useful in stimulating the dance world in Germany to love modern dance again."<sup>136</sup> The Berlin Cultural Festival left Wigman fulfilled as, for the first time in a long time, the company re-ignited conversations about Ausdruckstanz in West Germany, and Wigman "was not only a part of it [the Berlin Cultural Festival], but also saw" herself at "the center of interest."<sup>137</sup> Although the Limón Company's dance was not heralded as innovative or an exemplary example of American cultural development, it brought new hope to German expressionist dance. Given the audience's openness, perhaps this tour created a new opportunity for future modern dance development in Germany.

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<sup>136</sup> Pauline Koner speaks about José Limón Dance Company's European tour at a symposium held at Connecticut College [sound recording], Pauline Koner Collection.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from Mary Wigman to Hanya Holm, November 1, 1957, published in *Liebe Hanya*, 143-144.

### Chapter 3: “Nothing Out of America Could Have Been More Precious:” 138 Jerome Robbins Dances the Anxiety Away at the 1959 Berlin Cultural Festival

When choreographer Jerome Robbins and his company, Ballets: USA (BUSA), returned from their first tour of Western Europe in 1958, American media coverage celebrated the company’s homecoming. Newspaper headlines praised BUSA for representing America well. For example, two headlines read “Ballet: Rousing Success” and BUSA “set Ballet Europe on its ear.”<sup>139</sup> Television host Ed Sullivan proclaimed that BUSA “conquered the world and did so much good for America.”<sup>140</sup> Bringing Robbins’s innovative choreographic style, characterized by its incorporation of pedestrian movements,<sup>141</sup> Classical ballet technique, and elements of popular dance, BUSA’s tours presented audiences with a new conception of America as a young superpower in Spoleto, Italy and Brussels, Belgium.<sup>142</sup> Building upon this success, the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) Dance Panel recommended BUSA to the Cultural Presentations Staff at the US Department of State for a longer, more extensive European tour in 1959. Midway through its nineteen tour stops, BUSA arrived in Germany on October 2, performing at the Berliner Festwochen, or the Berlin Cultural Festival, and at Staatstheater Stuttgart. The repertory included four original works by Robbins: *New York Export: Opus Jazz*,

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<sup>138</sup> Hank Werba, “Jerome Robbins: Yank Talent O’Seas Needs U.S. Showmen, Europeans N.G.,” *Variety*, November 4, 1959, 12.

<sup>139</sup> Howard Taubman, “Ballet: Rousing Success: Spoleto Festival Audience Cheers U. S. Troupe Led by Jerome Robbins,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1958, 26; “Legitimate: Dance Reviews - Ballets: USA,” *Variety*, September 10, 1958, 146.

<sup>140</sup> Jerome Robbins, *New York Export: Opus Jazz - The Fusion of Jazz and Ballet Dance*, directed by Henry Joost and Jody Lee Lipes, (New York, NY: Factory 25, 2010), 51:33-51:51, <https://osu.kanopy.com/video/new-york-export-opus-jazz>.

<sup>141</sup> In this context, “pedestrian movements” refers to a dancer carrying and moving their body as they would in their day-to-day life. For example, pedestrian movements in dance include walking with one’s feet in a parallel position, as one might walk down the street, or carrying the body with a casual air. This way of moving is atypical in classical ballet.

<sup>142</sup> Stacey Prickett, “‘Taking America’s Story to the World:’ Touring Jerome Robbins’s Ballets: USA. During the Cold War,” *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 2 (2020): 21.

*The Concert, Afternoon of a Faun, and Moves*. These ballets offered spectators different specific qualities — the youthful nonchalance of the Beat Generation and collective anxiety, self-aware humor, intimacy, and vulnerability. In addition, Robbins's incorporation of pedestrian movements and ordinary storylines made his choreography accessible to the common European spectator.

The ANTA Dance Panel believed BUSA's performances would be successful no matter where they toured. They saw Robbins's choreography as presenting a unique blend of American popular culture and concert dance that garnered broad appeal.<sup>143</sup> Dance Historian Jennifer Homans argues that Robbins's dance style, and the works of other American ballet and modern dance choreographers, took on a distinctly American style as they developed from hotly contested debates amongst American dancers, and the contrast of the ideas behind these techniques led American dance to take on a unique dynamism.<sup>144</sup> In this way, Robbins's work took on an ambassadorial role. For these reasons, *Ballets: USA's* 1959 European tour was well-positioned to contribute to the State Department's efforts to dispel German prejudices of Americans as materialistic and lacking well-developed cultural values. This chapter explores how the tour may have helped efforts to ease the anxieties of West Germans caused by the instability of the ongoing Berlin Crisis (1958-1963). Additionally, this chapter argues that the combined effect of BUSA's interracial casting and repertory selection helped reinforce efforts initiated by the Eisenhower Administration to dispel notions of America as a racist country and project the value of inclusivity. On a local level, this case study on US cultural diplomacy to Germany suggests that BUSA's performances at the Berlin Cultural festival exemplified

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<sup>143</sup> Dance Panel meeting, September 25, 1958, box 101, folder 15, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, 6.

<sup>144</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York, NY: Random House, 2010), 469.

American attempts to reinforce Western integration efforts and bolster Western solidarity with the Federal Republic through soft-power diplomacy.

### **The Presentation of Jerome Robbins's Dance**

Jerome Robbins formed BUSA in 1958 to present audiences abroad with the variety of dance techniques, styles, and theatrical approaches that resulted from the development of American dance.<sup>145</sup> Through BUSA, Robbins did not set out to represent all of American dance; rather, he chose the name “Ballets: USA” to ensure audiences abroad knew from where the dance, dancers, and choreography had emerged.<sup>146</sup> He felt that concert dance in America was so influenced and dramatically altered by American culture and the American people that the US now had a distinctly American dance with characteristics separate from the European concert dance forms imported to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>147</sup> Robbins also advertised his company in this manner in promotional materials. For example, in the general release sent to all foreign press, Robbins stated that his troupe would bring “a wholly American concept of ballet” to Europe, therefore, claiming before cultural critics and dance spectators that his dance was a redeveloped, genuinely American product.<sup>148</sup> In a sense, this presented the dynamism of Robbins's classical works and beloved jazz ballets as something that could provide a living example of what Americans could accomplish in a country that claimed to be the home of democracy and, by extension, artistic freedom, and liberty.

Although Robbins's dance was seen as uniquely American for its blending of classical

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<sup>145</sup> Jerome Robbins, “The Background of Ballets: USA” box 2, (S) \*MGZMD 46-73, Leland Hayward Papers, Records of Ballets: USA, ca. 1956-1962, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York, NY, 3.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Ballets: USA general press releases, 1959, box 2, (S) \*MGZMD 46-65, Leland Hayward Papers, 2.

ballet with rhythmic syncopation and pedestrian movements, this left the Dance Panel, the US Information Agency, and the US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Relations with the impossible task of defining Robbins's dance for a foreign audience. This conflict manifested itself through several attempts to rename the company prior to the 1959 tour. Suggestions included "Broadway Ballets" and "The Jerome Robbins Dance Company."<sup>149</sup> However, the title "Ballets: USA" stuck and was used to present the company throughout the 1959 tour. BUSA offered the ideal image to combat spectators' conceptions of ballet as elitist and stuffy while simultaneously crediting Robbins's innovative choreography as something genuinely American, as the company's title, Ballets: USA, suggests.

Based upon Robbins's public statements and correspondences with James Magdanz, the Department of State Cultural Presentations Staff Director, Robbins understood the political nature of presenting his dance as American at BUSA's European performances. For example, in a letter sent to Madganz at the end of BUSA's tour, Robbins shared that he appreciated "how enormous and important the impact of American culture, carefully presented, can be on our European friendly and not so friendly nations."<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, in a public letter published in *Variety* magazine, Robbins underscored the importance he attached to presenting his American dance abroad as an effective form of cultural diplomacy, stating that his tour, along with others, were making a genuine contribution to international understanding.<sup>151</sup> From these private and

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<sup>149</sup> Dance Panel meeting minutes, October 10, 1959, box 101, folder 15, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection. At the Dance Panel's October 1959 meeting, the panel approved BUSA to become the first American dance company to tour the Soviet Union under the sponsorship of the President's Program, under the condition that Robbins rename his company.

<sup>150</sup> Letter from Jerome Robbins to James Magdanz, November 30, 1959, box 131, folder 1, Jerome Robbins Papers.

<sup>151</sup> Jerome Robbins, "International: Robbins Charges Points Distorted," *Variety*, November 18, 1959. *Variety* published an article on November 4, 1959, reporting on BUSA's performances in Madrid, Spain. The article also made several negative claims about ANTA and the State Departments' handling of tour logistics. Robbins was upset with the impression the article left and asked that his response letter be published correcting the disputed claims. The cited quotation was published in Robbins's response letter.



public expressions, we see Robbins's perception of American dance as something that could effectively form cultural bonds with foreign audiences through mutual understanding. This awareness also suggests that Robbins understood that his dance could have a tangible impact on how BUSA's audiences perceived what it means to be American. His delineation between friendly and unfriendly nations also exemplifies Robbins's awareness of America in relation to Eastern bloc nations and his recognition of the broader role BUSA's performances played in US Cold War diplomacy.

Unlike most Dance Panel discussions considering artists for cultural exchange, the talent of BUSA's dancers and the aesthetic appeal of their performances were rarely questioned during monthly Dance Panel meetings in 1958 and 1959. In fact, given the perceived broad appeal of Robbins's blending of both high and popular culture, the Dance Panel approved BUSA to tour anywhere in the world that the State Department felt necessary.<sup>152</sup> According to German historian Alexander Stephan, this blurring of the boundary between high and popular culture was uncommon in Germany during the 1950s.<sup>153</sup> Many educated middle-class Germans and German intellectuals approached American cultural expressions with a closed mind as they believed these expressions were poor copies of European originals. However, Robbins's work's unique melding of high and popular culture made it a better candidate for exportation to Germany than other more classical works.<sup>154</sup> Robbins's incorporation of artistic mediums believed to have originated or had significantly advanced in the US brought a uniquely American flair to what Germans saw

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<sup>152</sup> Dance Panel meeting minutes, September 25, 1958, box 101, folder 15, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 6. At this time, concert dance forms such as ballet and modern were considered high art. Whereas social dance, which you might find at a jazz club, would have been considered popular culture by cultural elites.

<sup>153</sup> Alexander Stephan, ed., *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2007), 75.

<sup>154</sup> Dance Advisory Panel Meeting, International Cultural Exchange Service of ANTA, October 10, 1958, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 3.

as an altered version of European culture (rather than just a bad copy).<sup>155</sup> In this sense, Germans saw Robbins as having taken the best of American popular culture and European dance forms, such as ballet, and elevating this popular culture to be “just as good” as European classical music and dance.

### **Presenting Americanness While Projecting Solidarity**

BUSA was perhaps most well suited to project the American determination to defend Berlin and maintain its independence at a tense point in the ongoing Berlin Crisis. By the late 1950s, the US State Department aimed to transform Berlin into an international center for educational and cultural pursuits and intended to maintain the city’s cultural and intellectual spirit.<sup>156</sup> The 1959 Berlin Cultural Festival, funded by the government of West Berlin, hoped to show the world that the people of “West Berlin live on the side of freedom” and that their cultural ties were “irrevocably with the West.”<sup>157</sup> Mid-century Cold War international arts festivals were important performance venues providing local citizens access to American concert dance and global audiences and critics a space to gather and view American art. They also offered performances that state officials and influential audience members were likely to attend.<sup>158</sup> Gerhart von Westerman, the Berlin Cultural Festival organizer, hoped that the 1959 Berlin Cultural Festival would act as a brightly lit showcase to the Eastern bloc displaying the cultural achievements of

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<sup>155</sup> Alexander Stephan argued that the German-educated middle-class and intellectuals held deeply rooted prejudices towards the idea of American cultural expressions as high culture. They viewed them as poor copies of European cultural products (Stephan 2007, 75-75). In *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, Uta Poiger argues that by the 1950s, famous West German writer and radio host Joachim Ernst Berendt saw jazz as a new kind of mixed high culture. Berendt made European music the standard against which the “progress” of jazz was judged, placing the development of American popular culture into “high” culture as something that could be measured against a European benchmark (Poiger 2000, 139-140).

<sup>156</sup> Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 166.

<sup>157</sup> Lewis Funke, “Berlin Festival to Open Sunday: Arts Event Will Underscore Western Sector’s Cultural Ties with the West,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1959.

<sup>158</sup> Prickett, ““Taking America’s Story to the World,”” 6.

the West and West Berlin.<sup>159</sup> This motivation behind the festival's organization can be seen as the cultural elites' response to West Berliners' growing anxiety surrounding the political state of West Berlin as a part of capitalist West Germany or a part of a unified Berlin within communist East Berlin. By sponsoring BUSA, with Robbins's American style of choreography, the US government provided the Berlin Festival with a headlining act that truly projected a widely acclaimed example of American concert dance. In fact, USIS Officials, in coordination with the American Embassy in Bonn, requested that an "outstanding American cultural group" visit Berlin sometime in the Fall of 1959, given the political situation.<sup>160</sup> The Amerika Haus in Berlin, an American cultural center run through the USIS, welcomed BUSA's visit to Berlin as they viewed US participation in the festival "as having the greatest of political as well as cultural meanings to the citizens of Berlin."<sup>161</sup> The Dance Panel meeting minutes also show the desire to provide the Berlin Festival with truly American dance. When the Dance Panel approved Robbins's company for their second European tour, they cited his choreography as "a characteristic expression of American dance" and believed his work was the most uniquely American repertory available at the time.<sup>162</sup> With this choice of cultural exchange, the US government sought to assert its support of the Berlin festival's efforts, projecting solidarity with the struggle of West Berliners amid the Berlin Crisis and reaffirming the American resolve to ensure West German sovereignty.

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<sup>159</sup> Funke, "Berlin Festival to Open Sunday."

<sup>160</sup> Air Pouch, to the Department of State from the American Embassy, Bonn, Subject: Cultural Presentations: President's Program: "Ballets: USA," January 20, 1959, box 131, folder 1, Jerome Robbins Papers, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York, NY.

<sup>161</sup> Correspondence from Ralph Hines to Jerome Robbins, August 7, 1959, box 131, folder 5, Jerome Robbins Papers.

<sup>162</sup> Dance Panel meeting, October 10, 1958, box 101, folder 15, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, 3.

Widely considered the highlight of BUSA's 1958 tour, *New York Export: Opus Jazz* was an obvious choice to showcase uniquely American dance. Robbins's inspiration for *Opus Jazz* came from a *New York Post* interview with Jack Kerouac, a famous Beat Generation author.<sup>163</sup> The Beat Generation was a movement that found modern society purposeless and found this sufficient justification for both their withdrawal from society and their protest against it. The movement was composed of writers and thinkers formed out of post-war America's rising cultural, political, and ideological tensions.<sup>164</sup> In a letter to his colleague Leonard Bernstein, Robbins expressed his idea to examine the "search, pain, drives, ecstasies, depression and astonished puzzlement" of this youth movement through a new ballet.<sup>165</sup> He was both frightened and fascinated by the movement's disillusionment with modern society. He wanted to explore how a ballet might capture this understanding of human existence through "episodic experiences which well up and take over the protagonist and leave him with everything inside and a cool, knowing exterior."<sup>166</sup> Robbins sought inspiration from jazz dancing and music to reveal the profound and important aspects of the urban youth's attitude toward life in the late 1950s.<sup>167</sup> With their confident but nonchalant movements, dancers in this ballet portrayed human happiness, struggle, love, and friendship. By incorporating this contemporary and timely storyline and utilizing both jazz- and ballet-based movement, Robbins presented uniquely American dance that provided a glimpse into the lives of American youth in New York City.

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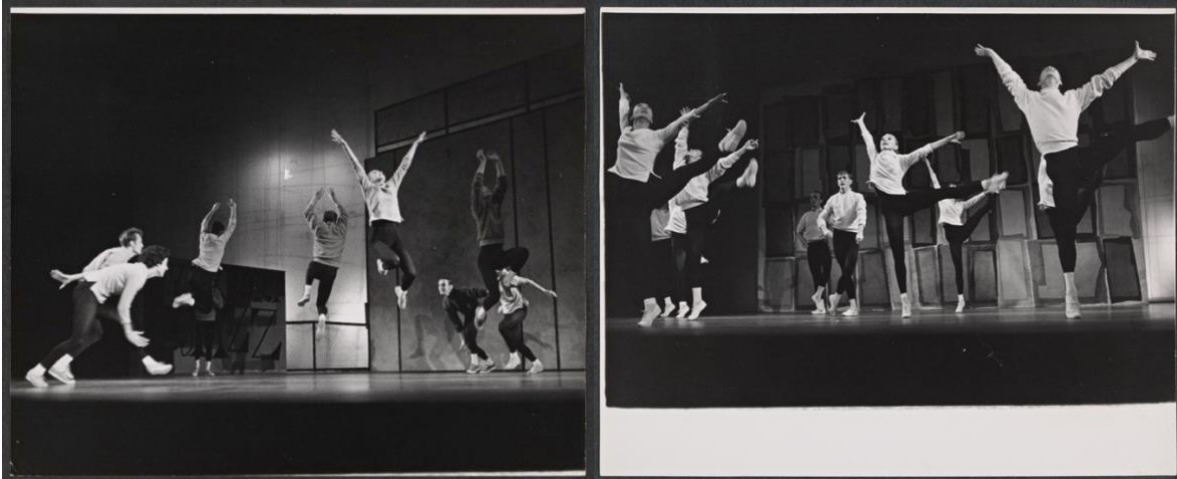
<sup>163</sup> Letter from Jerome Robbins to Leonard Bernstein, February 13, 1958, published in *Jerome Robbins, by Himself: Selections from His Letters, Journals, Drawings, Photographs, and an Unfinished Memoir*, edited and with commentary by Amanda Vaill, (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2019), 212-213.

<sup>164</sup> Christopher Gair, *The Beat Generation: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 20.

<sup>165</sup> Letter from Jerome Robbins to Leonard Bernstein, February 13, 1958, published in *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 212-213.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Robbins, *New York Export: Opus Jazz - The Fusion of Jazz and Ballet Dance*, 46:23-46:40.



Figures 10 and 11: Ballets: USA dancers performing in *New York Export: Opus Jazz* in 1961. Friedman-Abeles, photographer. From the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ba81a2b8-7a8a-c2c6-e040-e00a18066866> and <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8934cb30-1d48-0130-6883-58d385a7bbd0>.

In the *New York Post* interview that first inspired Robbins, Jack Kerouac proclaimed that jazz was the music of the Beat Generation, so Robbins set his dance-based exploration of this social movement to a dynamic jazz-inspired composition by Robert Prince.<sup>168</sup> With Prince's jazz accompaniment, *New York Export: Opus Jazz* functioned as a means to project democracy and embody American innovation. Throughout the 1950s, jazz music became associated with democracy and freedom after the State Department undertook efforts to change perceptions of jazz both domestically and internationally.<sup>169</sup> They sought to frame the music style as innovatively American and democratic in performance with a distinguished and honorable history that differed from the cultural censorship of jazz music in the Soviet Union.<sup>170</sup> Jazz at the

<sup>168</sup> Mike Wallace, "Interview with Jack Kerouac: Lowell Author Gives His Version of the Beat Generation," *New York Post*, January 21, 1958, published in Paul Maher Jr, *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Encounters with Jack Kerouac*, First Edition (New York, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 49.

<sup>169</sup> Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17-29; Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Diplomacy in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, (Oakland CA: University California Press, 2015), 79. By 1957, jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman had experienced great success on USIA-sponsored tours, securing jazz as a staple in the American cultural diplomacy arsenal (Cull 2008, 140). While on tour, Black and white artists performed together, presenting a narrative of egalitarianism and the perception that Black artists were a valued part of American culture (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 100).

<sup>170</sup> Fosler-Lussier, *Music Diplomacy in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, 77-79, 84; Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (University of California Press, 2000), 162.

Berlin Cultural Festival was especially integral to Gerhart von Westerman's aim to reinforce West Berlin's solidarity with the West, as it contrasted with the active suppression and censorship of jazz in East Germany and differentiated the West from the East.<sup>171</sup> This only increased the effectiveness of the imagery of American youth dancing to American jazz as especially American and democratic. It is important to note that Robbins's incorporation of ballet and jazz movement and his dancers' "too cool" attitude resonates with discourse around the appropriation of African American culture in Western Concert dance. Robbins's use of the "cool" attitude in *Opus Jazz* mixed concert dance movement with "Africanist components such as off-center actions, syncopations, and isolations," which Brenda Dixon Gottschild's analysis locates within Robbins's close colleague, George Balanchine's movement style.<sup>172</sup> Prickett argues that although "Robbins's style was distinct from that of Balanchine," the attitude of *Opus Jazz* fits with Gottschild's broader analysis of the appropriation of this Africanist attitude within Balanchine's work.<sup>173</sup> In this sense, *Opus Jazz* served as a sort of propaganda to counter international attention on the exclusion of Black Americans from US democracy. Presenting a multicultural cast, dancing ballet infused with street vernacular, and set to jazz music, *Opus Jazz* exemplified a message of inclusivity.

*Opus Jazz*'s performance was groundbreaking, as most German spectators had never experienced such a ballet that combined a contemporary storyline portrayed through the melding of popular and concert dance.<sup>174</sup> The first movement, "Entrances: Group Dance," introduces sixteen "city kids" dressed in black tights, colorful sweaters, and everyday sneakers. They

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<sup>171</sup> Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 163.

<sup>172</sup> Robbins danced with Balanchine's company, The New York City Ballet while serving alongside Balanchine as the company's Associate Artistic Director and eventually led the company following Balanchine's death in 1983.

<sup>173</sup> Prickett, "Taking America's Story to the World," 11.

<sup>174</sup> Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 300.

energetically run in a circular pattern drawn together by their young playful energy.<sup>175</sup> The sudden but purposeful jutting of their hands towards the sky on the strike of the drum, forward heel taps, swaying hips, jazzy snaps, and Robbins's clever group work all develop the movement's buoyant but suave atmosphere. These pedestrian movements eliminated the typical upright posture of classical ballet and provided the audience with a less ethereal and more human-like movement language. This commitment to pedestrian movement is carried throughout the ballet. For example, it appears in the suspenseful hunched runs and aggressive stomps of the second movement, "Statics," as five male dancers pursue a female dancer non-consensually.

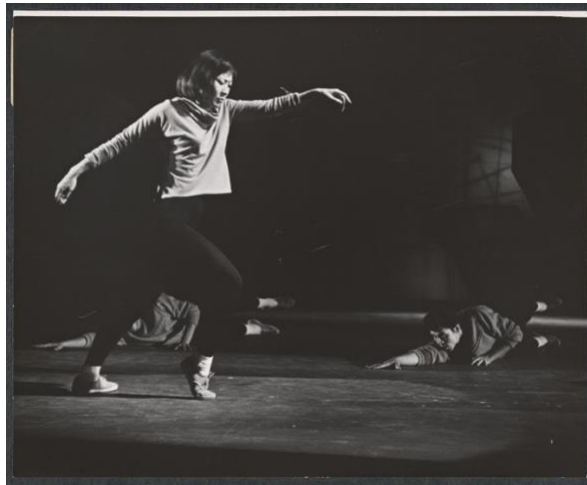


Figure 12: Patricia Dunn performing as the leading lady in "Statics" from the ballet *New York Export: Opus Jazz* in 1961. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/84558180-1d48-0130-10da-58d385a7bbd0>.

In the fourth movement, "Improvisations," the "too cool" attitude slips away as Robbins reveals a new dimension of youth culture. Dancers smile and playfully take turns dancing in pairs as the other dancers form a semi-circle in the background. The nonchalance of the first movement meets the fun of "Improvisations" in the final section of *Opus Jazz*, "Theme, Variations and

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<sup>175</sup> Jerome Robbins, *New York Export: Opus Jazz - The Fusion of Jazz and Ballet Dance*, directed by Henry Joost and Jody Lee Lipes, (New York, NY: Factory 25, 2010), <https://osu.kanopy.com/video/new-york-export-opus-jazz>.

Fugue,” which brings moments of pure youthful imagination as the men support the women as they handstand across the stage, for instance. By embodying the everyday in his choreography, costuming, and uplifting the story of the Beat Generation and their beloved jazz, Robbins merged aspects of concert dance and American popular culture.

*Opus Jazz* was not the only ballet to adopt this eclectic style. Robbins’s comic ballet, *The Concert* (or *The Perils of Everybody*), also presented a uniquely American example of Western Concert Dance. *The Concert*, set to music by Frédéric Chopin, utilizes classical ballet technique while satirizing concertgoers and ballet dancers in a self-aware presentation of an evening at the ballet.<sup>176</sup> The ballet begins with the pianist, who remains on stage throughout the work, making a grandiose entrance as they dramatically wipe a pile of dust from their piano before turning to glare at the audience, waiting for their inevitable laughing response. *The Concert* also features a “mad ballerina” so obsessed with the music that she falls asleep hugging the grand piano. These characters depict the broad spectrum of ballet stereotypes, from the overly serious and assured musician to the delicate female dancer who loses herself in the music. The fourth movement of the ballet, “The Mistake Waltz,” is danced by six women wearing traditional baby blue tutus and hair bows to match. Robbins’s choreography humanizes the ethereal nature of ballet, working to remove its elitist stigma by presenting classical ballet choreography filled with comedically-timed mistakes. Mistakes such as facing in the wrong direction, taking mismatched arm positions that differ from dancer to dancer, and ending “The Mistake Waltz” in different positions presents the dancers’ serious demeanor as that of young girls performing for their parents at a dance recital. *The Concert’s* incorporation of these comedic elements portrayed through classical ballet steps and set to Chopin merges elements of high and low culture, like *Opus Jazz*, to present an

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<sup>176</sup> Jerome Robbins, *The Concert*, performed by The Paris Opera Ballet (March 27, 2020; Paris: Paris Opera Ballet, 2020), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwiTxCjNKI8>, (accessed April 25, 2021).



original and innovative picture of American dance.



Figure 13: Ballets: USA dancers taking their curtain call after performing *The Concert* in 1961. Friedman-Abeles, photographer. From the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/a1d1a540-1d48-0130-f3b5-58d385a7bbd0>.

Although some concertgoers found this parody disrespectful to classical ballet and Chopin, especially in Poland, reviewers from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* perceived the ballet as innovative. Furthermore, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented that this self-reflective irony was well done, stating that Robbins's unique American choreography could afford to parody even the classical attitude.<sup>177</sup> *Die Zeit* also commented that *The Concert* presented America in the best light with "its most endearing features" that played on the fun accents of Chopin's music to show Robbins's American dance as "the new world set to the background of the old."<sup>178</sup> These reviews applauded Robbins's *The Concert* and viewed

<sup>177</sup> "Zwischen Central Park Dschungel: Berliner Festwochen-Erfolge," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 7, 1959, my translation from German.

<sup>178</sup> Thilo Koch, "Bei Jerome Robbins hustet niemand," *Die Zeit*, October 9, 1959, my translation from German.

the work as an innovative merging of European concert dance and music with American popular culture.



Figure 14: Ballets: USA female dancers performing the “Mistake Waltz” from the ballet *The Concert* in 1961. Friedman-Abeles, photographer. From the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ba81a2b8-7a89-c2c6-e040-e00a18066866>.

By mixing the popular culture of jazz and comedy with concert dance, *Opus Jazz and The Concert* were particularly compelling works to embody the “made in the USA” label in the German context. These works mixed social elements with European high art, such as ballet and Chopin’s masterful music. Robbins’s ability to meld so many elements within his work portrayed a uniquely American dance that embodied the best of both American and European cultures. In this sense, BUSA’s 1959 Berlin performances converged with the message of US political goals to dissuade West German anxieties. BUSA contributed to Berlin Cultural Festival organizer Gerhart von Westerman’s aim to exemplify West Berlin’s resolve to remain a part of the Western Bloc by displaying the cultural achievements of the West. Thus, BUSA aided the

cultural festival in presenting a program that reflected the innovation of Western culture.<sup>179</sup> This allowed the State Department to project its commitment to maintaining Western solidarity with the people of West Germany and the US' willingness to take a firm stand against Soviet pressure surrounding the question of Berlin.

### **Presenting Multiculturalism and Identity**

BUSA's dancers' varying identities and images as everyday young Americans also made the company an appealing choice for the role of cultural ambassadors.<sup>180</sup> Although Robbins had previously worked with many of his dancers, he formed BUSA after holding open auditions in New York City.<sup>181</sup> Following these auditions, Robbins formed the company with a mix of young and relatively unknown classically trained ballet dancers, former Broadway cast members from Robbins's *West Side Story*, and modern dancers from other professional companies.<sup>182</sup> One BUSA dancer, Sondra Lee, fondly recalled the company as "an unorthodox group," made up of dancers of "different sizes, different shapes," and who "didn't follow the rules" of a typical ballet company.<sup>183</sup> Robbins also wrote in promotional materials that he saw his own company as typically American, stating that "individual members represented almost every national trait, strain and background."<sup>184</sup> Youthful and diverse, BUSA represented the ideal casting of dancers necessary to project an inclusive depiction of the American "melting pot," while also challenging the negative international press coverage of the general American attitude towards the Civil

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<sup>179</sup> Funke, "Berlin Festival to Open Sunday."

<sup>180</sup> Jerome Robbins, "The Background of Ballets: USA." Leland Hayward Papers, 2.

<sup>181</sup> "Robbins to Audition Dancers," *New York Times*, February 16, 1959, 24.

<sup>182</sup> Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 299.

<sup>183</sup> Robbins, *New York Export: Opus Jazz - The Fusion of Jazz and Ballet Dance*, 50:03-50:14.

<sup>184</sup> Robbins, "The Background of Ballets: USA." Leland Hayward Papers, 2.

Rights movement within the US.

Throughout the tour, European critical response reflected the impact of Robbins's casting decisions. In her analysis of BUSA's representation of race, dance historian Stacy Prickett claims that the US press and some of the European press reception utilized racialized terminology to reinforce stereotypes of Black dancers.<sup>185</sup> This was predominantly present in reviews of John Jones, a Black dancer from the Katherine Dunham Company, who starred in *NY Export: Opus Jazz* and *Afternoon of a Faun*. Although Jones's performance received widespread praise, comments about his body and physical fitness attributed his artistic achievement to a racialized innate rhythm.<sup>186</sup> Such press comments are littered throughout foreign dispatch reports gathered by US embassies in countries across Europe. However, interestingly, the press excerpts collected by the embassy in Bonn omitted any comments on Jones's dancing or the multicultural make-up of the cast.<sup>187</sup> This exception may have resulted from a combination of West Germany's self-perception that it had become a post-racial state and the little emphasis Western powers placed on deconstructing Nazi racial attitudes during the Post War-era.

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<sup>185</sup> Prickett, "Taking America's Story to the World," 14-16.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Foreign Service Dispatch, from US Mission, Berlin, October 16, 1959, box 2, file (S) \*MGZMD 46-73, Hayward, Leland, 1902-1971. Records of Ballets: USA, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York, NY.



Figure 15: John Jones and Wilma Curley in *An Afternoon of a Faun* in 1961. Friedman-Abeles, photographer. From the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/772f7c60-1d48-0130-2d4b-58d385a7bbd0>.

Race, as a concept in mid-century Germany, no longer distinguished between groups outside of the Black-white binary as the Nazi racial state once did; instead, race was radically reduced to a simplified understanding of Black and white.<sup>188</sup> Although some Germans certainly maintained a racialized understanding of the world and antisemitic, racist, and ethnocentric biases persisted, the emphasis of denazification efforts, such as reeducation and democratization, led West Germans to construct for themselves a “raceless” society.<sup>189</sup> Reeducation efforts focused on deconstructing West German’s perceptions of authority over feelings about racial difference, and denazification emphasized targeting party membership over social attitudes.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the image of Germany as a success story throughout the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or the economic miracle, furthered the Western alliance’s need for West German economic prosperity amid Cold War competition, which placed further emphasis on measuring West German democratization by the status of economic recovery rather than through justice and the memory of Nazi-era

<sup>188</sup> Atina Grossmann et al., *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 104-105, 42.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 104-105, 23.

<sup>190</sup> Rita Chin and Heide Fehrenbach, “German Democracy and the Question of Difference, 1945-1995,” in *After the Nazi Racial State*, 104-105.

atrocities.<sup>191</sup> Additionally, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the West German government declared problems of race, which they narrowly viewed through the framing of mixed-race children as a "problem"— from Black American GIs and white German women during the post-war occupation — as having been solved with the integration of the oldest children into the German workforce.<sup>192</sup> Therefore, it was in this context that West Germans created the perception of a post-racial society, in that racist behaviors and policies persisted, but they were not recognized as such, and instead, most Germans saw race only in instances of overt acts of racial violence.<sup>193</sup>

Only two years prior to BUSA's performances in Germany, the Little Rock Nine were denied entry to their newly "desegregated" school in Little Rock, Arkansas, by the Arkansas National Guard on the orders of Governor Orval Faubus. This overt racism made headlines around the world, including in Germany. In her book, *Cold War Civil Rights*, Mary Dudziak states that Little Rock provided a new, more contemporary benchmark for people outside of the US on the state of racial discrimination in America.<sup>194</sup> In this same vein, a German critic referenced the events in Little Rock to show readers that John Jones's inclusion and acceptance into BUSA's casting was not the norm in America. The critic specifically referenced two duets between Jones and Wilma Curley, a white dancer. They were both cast in the fourth movement

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<sup>191</sup> Chin and Fehrenbach, "German Democracy and the Question of Difference, 1945-1995," 105.

<sup>192</sup> Heide Fehrenbach, "Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State," in *The Nazi Racial State*, 53. In her chapter on "Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State," German historian Heide Fehrenbach found that the conclusions of German anthropological studies on mixed-race children in the 1950s aligned with previous racial stereotypes handed down by older generations of racial scientists. The reports stated that these children had developmental, physical, and behavioral differences from white children, of which "a marked joy in movement, including dance...with particular talents for rhythmic speech, rhyme, and imitation" was listed (Grossman et al. 2009, 40-41).

<sup>193</sup> Rita Chin and Heide Fehrenbach, "Introduction: What's Race Got to Do With It? Postwar German History in Context," in *The Nazi Racial State*, 19-23.

<sup>194</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 118.

of *New York Export: Opus Jazz*, “A Passage for Two,” and in Robbins’s *Afternoon of a Faun*.

The critic wrote that *Afternoon of a Faun* “admittedly could not be shown in Little Rock.”<sup>195</sup>

Here we see the critic’s separation of BUSA and its State Department sponsorship from the racist events in Little Rock, which was seen as an isolated section of racist Americans. The USIA and Department of State believed Little Rock hurt America’s image abroad, including its ability to garner support within the Cold War context.<sup>196</sup> Thus, one of USIA’s goals during this time was to separate the poor optics of racism in Little Rock from the general American image at large. American officials thus endeavored to show that while there were bigoted people in Arkansas, the United States, a nation of immigrants, and certainly President Eisenhower, did not share the beliefs displayed in Little Rock.<sup>197</sup> Robbins’s casting for these intimate duets acted as a conduit to show that Little Rock was an isolated incident, and even a ballet company that embraced “USA” in its title embraced Black Americans.

Beyond this symbolism, the innocently sensual nature of an *Afternoon of a Faun* displayed by a mixed-race couple may not have been viewed as radical but rather out of the unspoken norm for “acceptable” relationships at the time. By the early 1950s, West German and American officials did not accept that interracial relationships, usually between white German women and Black American GIs, were based in genuine and reciprocated desire and love.<sup>198</sup> Women who took part in these relationships were seen as mentally impaired or prostitutes. Only fifteen years prior, white women’s sexuality under the Nazi government was stringently policed, as they were only meant to be with “Aryan male partners” in a sort of selective pronatalism

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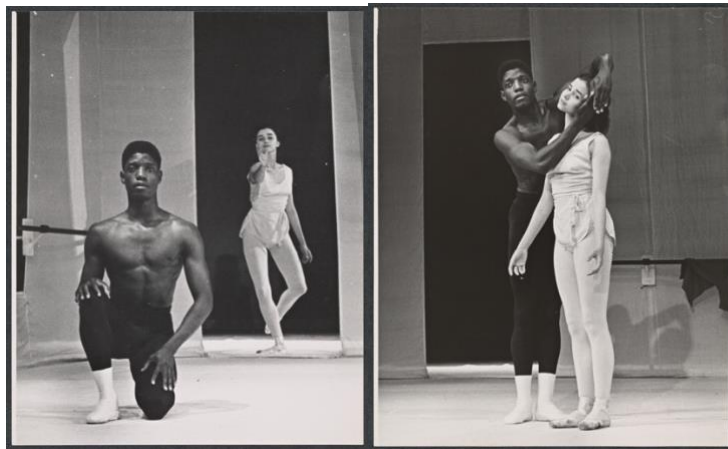
<sup>195</sup> Koch, “Bei Jerome Robbins hustet niemand,” my translation from German.

<sup>196</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 118-125.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 132-143.

<sup>198</sup> Fehrenbach, “Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State,” 36.

aimed at building a nationalist racial state.<sup>199</sup> The piece is deeply intimate and vulnerable, as Jones stops to smell Curley's hair and, at the very end, gently leans over to place a kiss on her cheek. German historian Heide Fehrenbach suggests that many Germans at this time held a heightened wariness for what they believed were the destabilizing social effects of perceived racial difference.<sup>200</sup> Although German audiences may not have outrightly condemned this work, many would have considered it an unlikely and even questionable casting choice for such a high-profile performance.



Figures 16 and 17: John Jones and Wilma Curley in *An Afternoon of a Faun* in 1961. Friedman-Abeles, photographer. From the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/70ee00b0-1d48-0130-dafd-58d385a7bbd0> and <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/737ebff0-1d48-0130-7597-58d385a7bbd0>.

Following the racist events in Little Rock, President Eisenhower sought to prevent further deterioration of the American image by appealing to Americans' sense of patriotism, asking them to cease their hostile behavior and place their country's image over racial discrimination.<sup>201</sup> In this context, Robbins's uniquely American dance presented Jones in a patriotic manner. Whether purposeful or coincidental, placing Jones front and center following the events at Little

<sup>199</sup> Fehrenbach, "Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State," 34-35.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>201</sup> Chin and Fehrenbach, "German Democracy and the Question of Difference, 1945-1995," 132-133.



Rock embraced Eisenhower's patriotic message while furthering the Department of State's aim to show that Arkansas was an outlier, as even a culturally elite artist like Robbins embraced and uplifted his Black dancers.

### **Conclusion**

Following BUSA's performance in Berlin, it received a resoundingly positive response from both the American and German press. In his thank you letter to Robbins, Von Westerman congratulated BUSA on its success and stated that the performance was one of the great highlights of the festival.<sup>202</sup> *The New York Times* reported over a dozen curtain calls as the dancers bowed before their audience of 1,800 cheering festival attendees at the Titania Palast.<sup>203</sup> The US embassy in Bonn and the US Mission in West Berlin both sent glowing reviews of the performances back to Washington. Berlin reported that BUSA performed before five sold-out audiences and reported that the audiences' acclaim for BUSA "took the Festival by storm" and that this "was almost without precedent in the history of the Festival."<sup>204</sup> The mission also reported that Von Westerman declared "the Robbins group was the [*sic*] outstanding event."<sup>205</sup> The overwhelmingly positive translated press excerpts, which accompanied Berlin's evaluation, concluded that BUSA had great success in Germany.<sup>206</sup> *Variety* reported on the response of German critics stating that "so many a reviewer opined: the best ballet ensemble that ever came here [Berlin] within the postwar years."<sup>207</sup> Bonn also noted positive affirmations of Robbins's approach to choreography and the abilities of his dancers, noting that "his 19 dancers brought

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<sup>202</sup> Letter from Gerhart von Westerman to Jerome Robbins, October 28, 1959, Jerome Robbins Papers, my translation from German.

<sup>203</sup> "Berlin Cheers Ballets: USA," *New York Times*, October 3, 1959, 14.

<sup>204</sup> "Foreign Service Dispatch from - US Mission, Berlin," October 16, 1959, Leland Hayward Papers.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> "Robbins Wows Berlin: Ballet Follows Another US Hit - Leonard Bernstein," *Variety*, October 14, 1959, 11.

sparkling fireworks of youthful American feeling of life and art to Berlin,” and “the corps will make history.”<sup>208</sup> The embassy in Bonn also took note of the warm German reception of Robbin’s unique approach to choreography, stating that BUSA’s performance “demonstrated the impact of the modern American dance on contemporary ballet,” proclaiming BUSA’s visit ranked “amongst the most outstanding cultural events ever sponsored by USIS in Germany.”<sup>209</sup> These reviews suggest that BUSA presented the best of uniquely American dance at the Berlin Cultural Festival, an effort that contributed to the overall success of the festival, as perceived by the American government and press.

This positive response from the German press, US Embassy in Bonn, and the Berlin mission certainly contributed towards the Department of State and Dance Panels’ overall satisfaction with the European tour at large. BUSA’s performances left the State Department with a deep respect for Robbins’s work and trust in his ability to carry out a tour under government sponsorship. In fact, James Magdanz, the Cultural Presentations Staff Director, cited BUSA’s success during a Subcommittee on Appropriations hearing in the summer of 1960 to justify continued Congressional support for the President’s Special International Program for Cultural Presentations.<sup>210</sup> In the immediate years following BUSA’s return home from the 1959 tour, Robbins was unable to secure further government funding for future tours due to a change in policy that favored sponsoring new artists and companies that had not previously toured with State Department sponsorship.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> “Foreign Service Dispatch from - US Mission, Berlin,” October 16, 1959, Leland Hayward Papers.

<sup>209</sup> “Foreign Service Dispatch - from USIS Bonn,” November 6, 1959, box 2, (S) \*MGZMD 46-73, Leland Hayward Papers, translated from German by a State Department Official.

<sup>210</sup> US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Departments of State, Justice, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., 1960, 816.

<sup>211</sup> Letter from Robert H. Thayer to Jerome Robbins, August 25, 1960, box 131, folder 1, Jerome Robbins Papers.

*New York Export: Opus Jazz, The Concert, Afternoon of a Faun, and Moves* all sought to incorporate aspects of everyday life and employed distinct emotional methods, including youthful coolness, comedy, and vulnerability, to promote intercultural sympathy between the dancers on stage and the audience. Robbins's unique approach to choreography and use of everyday storylines in his dance gave BUSA's repertory a uniquely American appeal. By bringing BUSA's fresh repertory and diverse cast to Stuttgart and the Berlin Cultural Festival, the company also projected notions humanizing America and ballet while highlighting the value of inclusion. The state of the Berlin Crisis in 1959 was a time of heightened anxiety amongst West Germans. The Berlin Cultural Festival sought to ease this anxiety by projecting West Berlin's allegiance to Western culture on the world's stage. With their government sponsorship, BUSA's performances in Germany contributed towards the State Department's effort to ease West German anxiety. Therefore, this case study exemplifies American attempts to reinforce Western integration efforts and bolster Western solidarity through soft-power diplomacy.

## **The Coda: A Comparative Evaluation**

The José Limón Dance Company and Jerome Robbins's BUSA presented audiences in West Germany with different styles of American dance. Both products of the Americanization of European concert dance during the first half of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Limón company's repertory resulted from the American modern dance tradition influenced by German Ausdruckstanz and established in the 1930s. It rejected ballet and sought an organic movement style through which dancers could investigate their identities as Americans. Robbins's dance resulted from his reimagining of ballet as he incorporated elements of modern dance, pedestrian movements, and popular dance to pioneer a youthful take on concert dance. The Dance Panel promoted that through these processes, Limón and Robbins' dance became uniquely American and thus would function to demonstrate the developed state of American culture and the power of artistic freedom in the US.

These characterizations of Limón and Robbins' dance as American and their differing approaches to Americanizing European concert dance-influenced how many West German critics received their State Department tours. For Limón, the Dance Panel's assumption that Americanized modern dance would simultaneously diversify American dance exports to Europe while offering a unique connection point for German audiences to American dance led some critics to devalue the Limón Company's performances. They saw the Americanization and reproduction of Ausdruckstanz through modern dance as a fruitless project, given their dismissal of Ausdruckstanz's core concepts and uneasiness about the dance form's Nazi past. As a result, they did not view the Limón Company's repertory as truly innovative as the Dance Panel had intended. On the contrary, the characterization of Robbins' dance as innovatively American, as the Dance Panel proposed, is precisely how it was received by most West Germans, who

appreciated Robbins's new take on ballet. Perhaps, the post-war popularity of ballet in Germany, as a resort to culture from a time before the First World War, truly shifted critics' perspectives, so they no longer valued the contributions of concert dance that rejected ballet. In this case, Robbins's dance, with its roots in the ballet aesthetic, made it most appealing in West Germany during the late 1950s. This appeal allowed the dance to present what audiences perceived as a genuinely Western cultural display at the 1959 Berlin Cultural Festival.

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