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# Early Ballet in the United States: The Importance of Florence Rogge, Choreographer

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EARLY BALLET IN THE UNITED STATES:  
The Importance of Florence Rogge, Choreographer

BY

E. LAURA HAUSMANN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## Abstract

EARLY BALLET IN THE UNITED STATES: THE IMPORTANCE OF FLORENCE ROGGE,  
CHOREOGRAPHER

By

E. Laura Hausmann

Advisor: Professor Amy Herzog

Radio City Music Hall, the first building completed in the complex known as Rockefeller City, premiered its inaugural performance on December 27, 1932. The initial vision of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was to build the Hall into a center that showcased the accomplishments of American innovation through advanced engineering, art, and culture. The Hall represented newness. During the worst years of the Great Depression, newness represented optimism and hope for a better economic future for the country.

An integral component included in all stage shows at the Music Hall was the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company. Florence Rogge, the Artistic Director and Choreographer of the company, presented innovation that served to further propel Rockefeller's initial vision by uplifting the people through fantasy, performing arts, and entertainment. Ballet also represented newness in the United States. Rogge successfully introduced and shaped a new aesthetic of ballet for American audiences, who were unfamiliar with ballet.

The focus of this thesis is to examine the progression of early ballet in the United States. In order to understand the importance of Florence Rogge's contributions to ballet, an analysis includes archival research and the oral histories of five members of the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company from 1944-1958.

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## **Introduction**

### **Newness for the American people**

Radio City Music Hall, the first building completed in the complex known as Rockefeller City, premiered its inaugural performance on December 27, 1932. The initial vision of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was to build the Music Hall into a center of entertainment that showcased the accomplishments of innovation in American business, advanced engineering, and shared culture. The Music Hall represented newness. During the worst years of the Great Depression, progressiveness inspired optimism and hope for a better economic future for the country. The heartbeat of the Music Hall, “The Great Stage,” featured productions intended for general movie-going audiences.

An integral component included in all stage shows at the Music Hall was the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company. Florence Rogge, the Artistic Director and Choreographer of the company, defined an originality that served to further propel Rockefeller’s initial vision by uplifting the people through fantasy and the performing arts. Ballet was also novel and recent to most audiences in the United States. This analysis describes the importance of Rogge’s contributions to ballet, and posits that the new American form of ballet evolved from the movie palaces. I argue that Rogge successfully introduced and shaped an aesthetic of ballet for general audiences in the United States, who were unfamiliar with ballet.

To achieve this goal, this thesis is organized into eight sections. In Section One, I provide an account of the historical context that led Rockefeller to his ideas. In Section Two, I discuss the building of Rockefeller Center. Section Three provides a survey of the theatres under the early direction of Samuel L. Rothafel. Section Four evaluates the emerging talents, important contributors to the development of ballet in the movie palaces. Section Five offers research that

defines the turning point for ballet in America and merges into Section Six, which provides information on Radio City Music Hall. Section Seven provides an analysis of Florence Rogge's choreographic process, supplemented with the interview conducted by writer, Walter Terry. The final section includes oral histories from five ballet dancers who were members of the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company. Before I begin the examination of subject content, I provide a historical context in which Florence Rogge and the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company emerged, and it is to this that I now turn.



## Section One

### **Historical context**

In 1929, at the time the stock market crashed, Rockefeller held a 24-year lease on a ninety-one million dollar property in New York City. This midtown area was referred to as “the speakeasy belt” (Hannah 8). The failing economy dimmed the outlook for business and dashed the plans to further gentrify the neighborhood and to build a new Metropolitan Opera House. Rockefeller implemented a bold idea to establish Rockefeller City, later renamed Rockefeller Center, as the world center of commerce, technological achievement, and Art Deco innovation.

A complex of buildings, an encapsulated city within the city, was built on the property. Even in the depressed economy, the originality of Rockefeller Center attracted commercial tenants. The buildings represented the highest ideals of architecture, art, and design; and served as a beacon of optimism and hope. Rockefeller developed a distinctive idea.

***The Calvinist doctrine.*** Rockefeller Center was built on the former location of the Dutch Reformed Church. Historian Margaret Thompson Drewal explained that both institutions, the Dutch Reformed Church and Rockefeller Center, supported similar work ethics founded in the Calvinist doctrine (69). The localization of spirit in the workplace was consistent with the Calvinist doctrine, which sacralized work as the only arena in which man’s salvation can be objectively demonstrated (Turner qtd. in Drewal 69). The theme of Rockefeller Center was announced as, “Homo Habor, Man the Builder” (Alexander qtd. in Drewal 70). The Calvinist values, transposed into a tourist establishment, merged the service of the work ethic into an entertainment and leisure activity. Spiritual and moral principles affirmed that achievement through hard work produced visible results.

Happiness and welfare centered on the work philosophy of the American people. Drewal

explained that if the entire population touched by Rockefeller Center could be elevated into a better working life, the economic structure of America could reap the benefits of this positive influence (71). During the late 1920s, the framework was established to merge the initial intentions for Rockefeller Center by enhancing the American commerce and by uplifting the spirit of the people struggling through the extended years of the Great Depression (Francisco VII).

***Vision beyond art and culture.*** Rockefeller, a prominent American philanthropist, was motivated to build Rockefeller Center in order to energize capitalism. The principles of corporate economics justified building Rockefeller Center and the Radio City Music Hall into iconic venues that represented the vitality of America (Drewal 69). Rockefeller Center became an achievement of advanced technology and Art Deco splendor that also intended to support commerce and encourage cultural appeal to all socio-economic groups (Drewal 69). The center served to “advertise” America throughout the world as the core of engineering and artistic signature, income-producing business, and hope for the people through accessible culture. The Music Hall was designed to be a center of social influence to demonstrate the possibilities of an economic life of a new social ideal. Rockefeller also justified building Rockefeller Center in order to provide employment opportunities for the people during the peak years of the Great Depression.

The influence of radio and communication was paramount to Rockefeller Center. Rockefeller’s search for a commercial partner in the project led him to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). RCA was a young company with NBC radio programs that attracted substantial audiences and with RKO studios that produced and distributed motion pictures that provided a much-needed relief for a country enduring devastating economic struggles. The President of

RCA was David Sarnoff (Drewal 69). This collaboration further supported Rockefeller's intention to establish the complex as an important center for media and communication.

The signature representation of Rockefeller's ideology was the Radio City Music Hall, the first building to be completed in the complex. Rockefeller drove the last rivet in the final building on November 1, 1939, signaling the occasion of the completion of the last building in Rockefeller Center. During the ceremony, David Sarnoff renewed the statement of purpose for Rockefeller Center, and stated during the ceremony, "Rockefeller Center sounds the keynote for all the cities and buildings of tomorrow's better world. ... It is much more than a triumph of architecture. It is a triumph of the human will. It passes on to the future generations the heritage of our nation's pioneers. It expresses the modern age. It is a living symbol of the spirit of America" (qtd. in Drewal 69).

## Section Two

### **Building Rockefeller Center**

*Samuel L. Rothafel.* Rockefeller's economic strength and RCA's influence in popular media needed to be linked with invention and expertise in theatrical production. In the late 1920s, Samuel Lionel Rothafel, or Rothafel (1882-1936), or "Roxy," as millions across the country knew him, was an equally influential entrepreneur, who had demonstrated commercial success in operating his own theatres. The contributions of Rockefeller, RCA, and Rothafel merged integral skills that continued to solidify the initial vision of Rockefeller Center.

Rothafel was noted for developing the lavish presentation of silent films in the deluxe movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s ("Interview"). As a pioneer of movie presentation, Rothafel synchronized music to silent films and used multiple projectors to enable fluid transitions between reel changes. The movie palaces became a center of general entertainment that idealized the "American Dream." Rothafel, similar to Rockefeller, intended for his work to be accessible to the people.

In his capacity as a movie palace impresario, Rothafel also became important to ballet in the United States. General audiences were familiar and comfortable with movie-going. Rothafel produced stage shows with music and dance that enhanced the feature film. Within the context of the complete stage show, ballet productions, supported by special effects and whimsical themes, evolved and established residency in the United States. This format deftly presented ballet, a new form, to general, movie-going audiences. It was essential for ballet to be introduced to the American public in ways that it could be understood and enjoyed. Professional ballet in the United States, in this form, emerged from stage shows at movie palaces. Ballet was not independent.

Early films, and the methods and means that contributed to their successful showing, were essential to the development of ballet in the United States. In order to enhance commercial viability, the feature film accompanied ballet, vocal chorus, orchestra, and variety acts to complete the stage show format. Ballet was supported by the structure it needed to become accessible to the public. An analysis of Rothafel's evolution as a movie impresario is vital, because it parallels the presentation of professional ballet to the movie-going audiences. Rothafel supplemented the films in various ways, in order to make the entertainment into a theatrical event. Rothafel experimented with variations in formatting at various movie palaces. The successes, failures, and discoveries; along with the talent of Florence Rogge, eventually led to the emergence of a uniquely American form of ballet.

Many audiences in the United States had limited exposure to ballet in any form. International touring companies, including the *Ballets Russes*, astonished American audiences with their performances (*Ballets*), which were primarily presented in major cities to culturally-educated, theatre-going audiences. The Metropolitan Opera in New York City also maintained a professional ballet company in residence, since its first performance season in 1883 (Dunning). The ballet at the Metropolitan Opera performed, as needed, during the opera seasons, limiting its exposure to general audiences. Occasionally, the company performed without the opera. The ballet was an essential component that served to enhance the overall visuals on the opera stage. Ballet, seen in the form that was emerging from Rothafel's movie palaces under the direction of Florence Rogge, established a style intended for all audiences, including general, movie-going, entertainment-seeking American audiences.

### Section Three

#### **Theatres under Rothafel's early direction**

*Rialto Theatre.* On April 21, 1916, the Rialto Theatre, the original “Temple of the Motion Picture” and “Shrine of Music and the Allied Arts” (“Rialto”), opened at the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway, in the center of Times Square. Under Rothafel’s direction, shows at the Rialto Theatre ran five times per day and included the Rialto Orchestra, vocal and instrumental solos, and accompaniment by the grand organ (“Rialto”). In order to supplement the feature film and to motivate audiences to fill his theatres, Rothafel continued to enhance the experience and devised the *Rothafel Unit Programme* (Melnick *American* 176).

Critics, distributors, and journalists from all over the country arrived at the Rialto on May 9, 1919 to screen the first *Rothafel Unit Programme* (Melnick *American* 176). Each *Programme* featured a variety of films including a dramatic feature, comedy, scenic, news, or magazine film; together with complete music scores, lighting effects, and incidental numbers. The Rothafel Pictures Corporation announced that it would produce six *Rothafel Unit Programmes* each year, which would be released in forty-five theatres on the same date (Melnick *American* 176). The *Rothafel Unit Programme* was heavily advertised and marketed. Roxy began running weekly advertisements in film trade journals writing to “The Exhibitors of America” that “Judging from the finished subjects I have seen, it may truly be said that the *Rothafel Unit Programme* will prove beyond all question the Highest Class Entertainment in the World” (qtd. in Melnick *American* 176). Sylvester Rawling of the *New York Evening World* wrote that “Rothafel has done for the Movies what Wagner did for Opera; he has co-ordinated the Arts into one harmonious whole” (qtd. in Melnick *American* 177). Although the critical responses were not stellar, most reviews were optimistic about the potential success of the format, which preceded

the progression into complete stage shows. In a program from the July 27, 1919 performance at the Rialto Theatre, there was no dance, ballet, or choreography listed or included in the program (“Vintage”). I offer that Rothafel sought to discover the most effective ways to present patrons with additional entertainment to supplement the movie. At this time, they did not yet include ballet.

***Park Theatre.*** At the Park Theatre, located at New York City’s Columbus Circle, Rothafel was contracted to be the new manager and to showcase eight months of the *Programmes*. Since the same *Programme* was distributed throughout the entire country and released at the same time, nothing differentiated the performances at the Park Theatre. In 1919, Roxy restructured the *Programme* in order to make the version at the Park Theatre unique from other presentations shown around the country. Roxy maintained the same films, but surrounded them with a format that included a new concert orchestra and live performances. “S. L. Rothafel’s Complete Show Idea” at the Park included *Miniature Ballet*, choreographed by Russian-born Adolph Bolm, from *Ballets Russes* (Melnick *American* 178). Rothafel’s bold decision to differentiate his movie showing by adding ballet was a turning point for ballet, and a successful way for ballet to be seen by audiences who would otherwise “not go to the ballet.” Although critics did not hold the *Programme* in high regard, this format further exposed ballet to general audiences in a venue defined as accessible entertainment. This allowed the public to be comfortable with the unfamiliar dance form and served to promote the development of ballet in United States. By July 1919, *Rothafel’s Unit Programme* was dismantled into smaller units that were shown at individual theatres (Melnick *American* 178).

***California Theatre (Los Angeles, CA).*** The California Theatre was leased by Samuel Goldwyn to showcase his films. Rothafel left the Park Theatre and was named “national director of

moving picture presentation” for Goldwyn Pictures. In early December 1919, under Rothafel’s direction, the California Theatre presented *Soldiers of Fortune*, as a successful example of a stage show, which enhanced and collaborated with a movie feature. Other dance styles began to integrate into movie palace stage shows. Prior to the beginning of the film, “an atmospheric prelude to the story” (Melnick *American* 182) was presented that featured Spanish dances by Senor and Senora Espinosa and Characteristic Castilian Dancers (Melnick *American* 182). Dance was included as a divertissement in the program. Reviewer Henry Dougherty of the *Evening Express* described Roxy’s program as “original and sometimes daring in (their) conception of picture presentation ... springing new innovations and surprising the public as well as competitors” (qtd. in Melnick *American* 182).

Rothafel created a new entertainment format. Movies were not seen in isolation; they were part of a theatrical presentation. Rothafel’s success at the California Theatre established a harmonious stage show that equally collaborated with film, music, and dance, which revitalized his career and allowed for further experimentation to nurture unique formats to showcase films. In January 4, 1920, *The Cup of Fury* (1920) was presented with Roxy’s elaborate atmospheric prelude, which included live and recorded entertainment, in addition to modern dance innovator, Martha Graham (Melnick *American* 182). Although Graham did not receive positive reviews, critics held the quality of the program in high regard. The following week, Graham continued to perform at the theatre, accompanying the film, *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919). In my evaluation, it is unlikely that Martha Graham, then or now, was considered to be entertainment suitable for family, movie-going audiences. Rothafel’s audacity was searching for American innovation. Graham was at the forefront of daring American modern dance. Rothafel continued to incorporate various forms and styles of dance into the framework that surrounded the movie



feature. Rothafel wanted to include a new and important voice in dance that would enhance his movie-based productions. This dance form did not exist yet. Rothafel's discoveries progressed toward the development of a permanent professional ballet company.

**Capitol Theatre.** On October 24, 1919, Rothafel returned to New York City to open the Capitol Theatre, located between 50<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup> Street on the west side of Broadway (Melnick "Station" 219). The Capitol, the flagship movie palace of MGM films, was built upon the foundation of good taste (Gabel). The Capitol's printed programs were modeled after Broadway Playbills, with illustrated covers and narratives that were more in tune with the taste of polite and educated high society (Melnick *American* 186). At the Capitol, Rothafel intended to continue the successful format, which comprised the movie feature within a complete stage show.

The premier production included a diverse selection of newsreels, short films, and *His Majesty, the American* (1919); a seventy-piece orchestra led by Arthur Pryor, an art department led by John Wenger, ensemble performers, a motion picture department led by Henry "Hy" Mayer; and *Demi Tasse Revue*, an elaborate stage production led by Ned Wayburn (Melnick *American* 186). Mae West was featured along with Wayburn, a prolific choreographer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and producer of live entertainment. Among the other artists selected for the *Demi-Tasse Revue* was George Gershwin, who performed two of his unpublished works, *Come to the Moon*, with lyrics co-written by Wayburn. Gershwin also premiered the public performance of *Swanee*, accompanied by an ensemble of dancers (Melnick *American* 187).

On May 30, 1920, the Capitol announced that Rothafel would soon present his modern and signature entertainment format, which included a feature film, music, and dance. Rothafel built a new stage to expand the chorus and orchestra, in order to better facilitate sound and visibility. Other personnel were hired that included Alexander Oumansky, ballet master. The

directors of many departments at the Capitol Theatre were immigrants, similar to Rothafel.

Oumansky emigrated from the Ukraine in 1911, where he had become well known as a member of the *Ballets Russes* under Vaslav Nijinsky. Oumansky also served as the ballet master at the Metropolitan Opera House (Melnick *American* 188).

In 1920, while preparing to reopen the Capitol Theatre, Rothafel saw ballerina Maria Gambarelli, an immigrant from Northern Italy, during a trip intended to seek new talent. After dancing for a year at the Metropolitan Opera, Gambarelli danced with Anna Pavlova at the Hippodrome in New York before going on tour with a variety of performers including Theodore Kosloff and Ed Wynn (Melnick *American* 188). Gambarelli later appeared in a variety of reviews, similar to many other ballet dancers at the time, and along with another dancer, Doris Niles, became two of the theatre's most popular attractions (Melnick *American* 188). Writer Ross Melnick explained, "The assembled corps of musicians, conductors, dancers, and choreographers was a principal reason for the Capitol's success in the latter half of 1920" (Melnick *American* 188). Dance was an important component that served as a culturally uplifting accompaniment to a movie feature. Gambarelli told *The New York Times* nearly seventy years later, "During my time, even if I danced in movie theatres, I made people, the everyday public, love the dance. We taught them about ballet" (qtd. in Melnick *American* 188). Rothafel officially took over the Capitol's presentations on June 4, 1920, setting out to expand the partnership between movies, music, and the performing arts. Under Roxy's direction, theatrical production and business flourished at the Capitol, despite the economic slump.

Rothafel discovered a modernist perspective on showcasing films, accompanied by music and dance. Within the successful structure of the movie palaces, Rothafel accomplished two things for ballet in the United States. Initially, ballet became one component that contributed to a

larger platform of family entertainment, allowing all audiences to enjoy it. Additionally, the stage shows provided a venue to support the professional artistic development and employment of dancers. Movie palaces provided the venue that established the first permanent place for ballet in the United States, which performed in complete dances on a full-time basis, during every stage production. The ballet did not rely on other aspects or themes of the performance.

I assert that full time repertoire ballet in the United States originated in movie houses, which were under the direction of Samuel L. Rothafel. Vintage programs indicated that professional ballet, a fully employed company, was fully in effect in the movie palaces from the early 1920s. A program from the Capitol Theatre on January 2, 1921 described S. L. Rothafel as the “Originator of this form of divertissement” (“Vintage”). The program listed the *Finale from Second Act of Aida*, assisted by Mlle. Gambarelli and the Capitol Ballet Corps. Alexander Oumansky was listed as the choreographer. *Funeral March of the Marionettes*, assisted by the Capitol Ballet Corps, with no choreographer credited, was also listed as an additional dance on the program. On July 30, 1922, Gambarelli, and by request, Alexander Oumansky, performed *Divertissements*. On October 14, 1923, Michio Itow staged the ballet, *Prologue with Special Music Score*, which was performed by Gambarelli and the corps de ballet (“Vintage”).

Between 1935-1943, the stage shows proved too costly to continue. The availability of sound pictures and the Depression transitioned most of the theatres into movie houses, including the Capitol. World War II brought an economic revival to the American economy, reinstating the full stage show format. The stage shows finally ended in 1952; the following year a wide screen was installed. The Capitol Theatre was demolished in 1968 (Gabel). Despite this evolution of entertainment, Rothafel’s experimentation with formatting led to the successful inclusion of high-level concert dance within an entertainment, movie-based venue.

***Roxy Theatre.*** Under Rothafel's leadership, the Roxy Theatre, located on 50<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue, became a New York City showplace of importance (Francisco 3). At the time, the largest theatre was the Roxy Theatre ("Roxy"), which maintained in residence a full orchestra, vocal chorus, ballet company, specialty acts, Roxy's American Rockets, and technical workers essential to create lavish productions. The traditional format continued to feature a film within a complete stage show. The premiere performance at "The Cathedral of the Motion Picture" opened on March 11, 1927, with *The Loves of Sonya*. The *programme* for the performance stated, "The programs of the Roxy Theatre are conceived, staged and lighted under the personal direction of Mr. Rothafel, "Roxy" (Dorris 92).

## Section Four

### **Talents emerged**

Prior to the start of the featured film at the Roxy Theatre, a full-length ballet was presented within the context of the stage show. The cast of *A Floral Fantasy* included Gambarelli, Prima Ballerina, and the Roxy Ballet Corps. Choreography is credited to Léo Staats, Maître de Ballet, formerly of the Paris Opera House. Leon Leonidoff is included on the program as the Associate Ballet Master (Dorris 92). Rothafel consistently demonstrated efforts to discover and utilize internationally acclaimed artists in the realm of concert dance. I offer that Rothafel's artistic and management decisions intended for professional ballet and dance, within the context of his movie palaces, to become internationally important.

It was at the Roxy Theatre that Rothafel assembled the collective talents that developed the artistic signature that shaped the stage shows. Léo Staats, Leon Leonidoff, Léonide Massine, and Florence Rogge served to establish the importance of ballet and to make it accessible to the general public. The creative staff enhanced the artistic direction with access to a 110-piece orchestra, solo pipe organ, male vocal chorus, large corps de ballet, and the Roxyettes, under the direction of Russell Markert.

This was the continuation of full-time professional ballet in residence in the United States. It is often represented in history that ballet, at this time, was not "professional." In my analysis, this construct is due, in large part, to the fact that ballet was presented within a stage show format that centered on a movie feature. Since ballet was presented in a movie palace, a venue with the purpose of entertainment, and not in a theatrical venue known for high art, it was assumed that it could not have been professional. I define the work of the ballet company, most assuredly, to have been professional. All dancers worked throughout the year, often every day of

the week, and received substantial compensation. These facts defined them as a professional ballet company and as a progression of early professional ballet in the United States.

*Léo Staats*. Experimentation led Rothafel to discover the forms of dance that were best suited to integrate into the movie-based stage shows. Rothafel was committed to finding and utilizing the highest level of professional dance in various genres. Prior to Rothafel's tenure at the Roxy Theatre, movie palaces under his direction included choreography or performances by Adolph Bolm, Martha Graham, and Alexander Oumansky. Although these artists had no stylistic similarities, they all celebrated international critical acclaim.

Rothafel remained consistent in this quest and sought out talent from the Paris Opera, a world ballet company of importance. A combination of events brought Léo Staats from the Paris Opera to be the first choreographer at the Roxy during a New York stay of approximately two years (Dorris 84). Since 1926, Staats was considered to be the foremost French choreographer that had emerged from the Paris Opera for several decades, where he staged his first noted works in 1908-1909. After serving as choreographer at the *Théâtre des Arts*, Staats became premiere Maître de Ballet at the Paris Opera from 1919 to 1926 (Dorris 85). Ivor Guest, ballet historian, explained, "(Staats) he was considered the most eminent French choreographer of the first third of the twentieth century" (qtd. in Dorris 85). Guest suggested that the Paris Opera was looking for another choreographer, knowing that Staats had choreographic virtues and faults, and especially, "an unevenness of inspiration" (qtd. in Dorris 85). In 1926, Staats received an offer to work in America, a place where fortunes could be made (Dorris 85).

Initially, Staats was brought to America to teach during the Summer Program at The John Murray Anderson-Robert Milton School of Theatre and Dance in New York City. The *Catalogue* listed a distinguished faculty and a diverse range of disciplines that included Mikhail Mordkin

for ballet, in addition to Martha Graham and Michio Ito for Character and Interpretive (qtd. in Dorris 85). John Murray Anderson was known as the producer for *The Greenwich Village Follies* and for his ability to stage lavish Broadway shows.

In his memoirs, Anderson stated that Léo Staats was brought over from France, in order to invigorate interest in the school's Summer Program. Staats' work at the school during the ten-week summer session cost the school five thousand dollars. The students did not appreciate Staats as ballet maestro (Dorris 86). When Staats gave instructions in French, the students did not understand; Staats reacted with a "Gallic grouch which sometimes lasted for five minutes" (Anderson qtd. in Dorris 86). During his teaching tenure, Staats was scheduled to produce one or two of the ballets and revues that were previously choreographed in Paris. On June 3, 1926, *The New York Times* reported that Staats did not choreograph any original works for the American students attending the summer program (qtd. in Dorris 86).

The June 1926 issue of *The Dance* announced Staats' arrival. The Anderson-Milton School posted a half-page advertisement for the event that indicated:

THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY IN YEARS!/LÉO STAATS/Director of the Ballet, Premier Danseur of the National Opera in Paris, and one of the World's greatest teachers of the classic ballet and ballet compositions will come to America for the first time to conduct a finishing course for instructors, professionals, amateurs for ten weeks beginning in June at the John Murray-Anderson-Robert Milton School for Theatre and Dance (qtd. in Dorris 86).

There were high expectations set for Léo Staats. In the same issue of *The Dance*, author Troy Kinney wrote an article titled, "Will Léo Staats Revolutionize the Dance in America?" (qtd. in Dorris 86). Kinney explained that Staats understood what the American public wanted, which was proven in the Folies as well as in the opera (qtd. in Dorris 86). According to Kinney, Staats was able to instill an endless variety of surprising qualities, even if they had been previously seen (qtd. in Dorris 86). Kinney was dubious regarding the artistic progression of dance and stated,

“How we need Staats in America right now” (qtd. in Dorris 87).

During the Summer Program, Louis H. Chalif, a highly respected master teacher, led the annual convention of the American Society of Dancing Teachers in a discussion on the Charleston. Staats stated, “(I) found it (Charleston) to be very good for amusement, although not by any means a dance” (qtd. in Dorris 87). Staats explained that Americans were athletic and rhythmical, but were deficit in patience and endurance for serious dancing, such as ballet (Dorris 87). In my analysis, this revealed Staats’ perspective that discouraged the evolution of a vernacular style of American ballet. The same ballet traditions found in Europe were unfamiliar to the American aesthetic.

On September 26, 1926, *The Times* published an article stating that Staats intended to produce classical French dances at the new Roxy Theatre in New York City, under the direction of Samuel L. Rothafel (qtd. in Dorris 87). Staats explained:

We see so many Russian and other modern ballets of acrobatic dancers in Paris-and you have the same experience in America-that I have determined to present traditional French ballets in New York. ... Eighteen thousand people will be able to see classical French ballets daily. ... I also intend to create a choreographic conservatory where all kinds of dancing from Japanese and Turkish to the waltz will be studied, but I also intend to carry out French traditions. ... Later, when the times are ripe, I hope to take the entire ballet of the Paris Opera to America, where the public will greet us gladly (qtd. in Dorris 87).

Parisian and other European audiences were accustomed to “white ballets” and other traditional classics rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century ballet. I offer that the American audiences were new to ballet, and needed a vernacular form that could be immersed into the culture. There was potential to develop an American audience for ballet (Garafola 20). Staats produced many well-received neo-classical ballets at the Roxy Theatre. Staats recognized the increasing interest in dance in America, but was not confident about its artistic progress.



This further defines the argument crucial to this project. Ballet, presented in a format that mimicked European traditions, did little to introduce or entice America into its audiences. In my evaluation, this was the time when ballet revealed the urgency for a signature American style that did not alienate the public. I offer that Staats supported ballet in a form that was intended for the elite, arts-appreciative, educated community. Rockefeller intended for the arts to be available and accessible to all socio-economic groups. Ballet was shaping itself to establish a unique American aesthetic, in addition to introducing itself to the masses through movie-going audiences.

In 1927, the Roxy needed to gross \$90,000.00 per week to manage the expenses. By comparison, the Ziegfeld Follies at the New Amsterdam Theatre needed \$16,000.00 per week (Dorris 93). The economic demands put Staats in the position to produce new productions every week to bring in changing audiences that could support the essential costs. Reviews in *Variety* and *The New York Times* varied, but were frequently favorable and mentioned the appreciation expressed by the patrons. On January 18, 1928, 'Mori.', a reviewer for *Variety*, "preferred the snappy routines" (qtd. in Dorris 95) performed by the Roxyettes, and described the ballet company in the performance of *Bacchanale* as "a group of anemic ballet dancers who were set to knock the audience into a well-earned snooze" (qtd. in Dorris 95). At other times, 'Simc.' raised questions in *Variety* (qtd. in Dorris 95) and explained, "The ballet chorus girls, wherever or whoever they are, do little more than simple elevation. It all says that it is making ballet work too common, while likely strangling many a girl's ambitions to become a ballerina" (qtd. in Dorris 95). A program from the Roxy Theatre on February 18, 1928 listed the ballet and the Roxyettes as featured dancers included in the complete stage show. Léo Staats is credited as Maître de Ballet. During the 1950s, years after Rothafel's administration, the theatre suffered from a decline in attendance, closed in 1960, and was subsequently demolished in 1961 ("Roxy").

**Leon Leonidoff.** In the same 1928 production, the creative and administrative talents further evolved. Leonide Leonidoff is listed as Ballet Master and Production Assistant to Mr. Rothafel (“Vintage”). Leonidoff was a founder of the Isba Russe Ballet Company. In 1920, the company toured the United States for performances in major cities and at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. The company was an immediate success. Rothafel was impressed by the performances and made Leonidoff the ballet director and subsequently, the Associate Producer of the Capitol Theatre. From 1927 to 1932, Leonidoff directed stage shows at the Roxy Theatre (Shephard), where he was known for his abilities to produce a large stage show quickly.

In 1928, Léo Staats and his principal ballerina, Gambarelli, left the Roxy Theatre. The Dance Collection of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Gambarelli file, includes a brief “Resume of biography” by Irene Albert, presumably intended for an unpublished biography. According to Albert, “Gamby left Roxy in 1928 when the Machiavellian tactics of his Russian assistant, Leonid Leonidoff, deprived the great showman of his judgment, his ballet master, Léo Staats, and Gamby of earnings to which she was entitled” (qtd. in Dorris 96). Rothafel remained consistent in his commitment to provide the finest ballet in the world to American audiences, inside his movie palaces. Rothafel’s audacious efforts presented choreographic freshness, in the genre of ballet, within the context of a movie-going, entertainment-seeking audience.

**Léonide Massine.** In 1929, Rothafel hired Léonide Massine to serve as Ballet Master and Resident Choreographer for Ballet within the stage shows at the Roxy Theatre (Dorris 84). Massine was an important source of choreographic innovation borne out of Serge Diaghilev’s, *Ballets Russes*. As a European leading dancer and choreographer of the 1920s and 1930s, many of Massine’s dances became icons of twentieth century choreography. In a challenging transition

period, over two years he choreographed one ballet each week at the Roxy Theatre in New York City, periodically returning to Europe to create new works ("Leonide").

Massine was also known for a style of dance and choreography that did not resemble many traditional European classics. Massine implemented a diverse use of choreographic styles that ranged from commedia dell'arte to modernism, resulting in a synthesis of classical, folkloric, and characterization articulated through expressive movements. In my evaluation, Massine's style aligned with Rothafel's vision to create and encourage a signature form of ballet for the American audiences. I offer that this understanding was essential in order to successfully bring ballet to America. Massine remained at the Roxy Theatre for three years ("Vintage").

The Roxy Theatre's program from July 11, 1930 indicated that Leonidoff remained Production Assistant to Mr. Rothafel ("Vintage"). Russell E. Markert was listed in the program as the Director of The Thirty-Two Roxyettes ("Vintage"). Harriet Hoctor, the principal ballet dancer, was featured in the listing, along with The Roxy Ballet Corps. The program did not credit the choreographer for the ballet company. Léonide Massine and Florence Rogge were credited as Ballet Master and Ballet Mistress, respectively ("Vintage"). These changes in the artistic staff forged key relationships that continued to initiate ballet for general audiences.

**Florence Rogge.** On Broadway, Rogge choreographed the original production of *Virginia* (1937) and *The Well of Romance* (1930) ("Florence"). The importance of Rogge's artistic contribution and success as a choreographer and director in the realm of ballet evolved parallel to the development and artistic programming changes in the movie palaces. Trained in Detroit and New York City, Rogge established an association with Leon Leonidoff during performances in Toronto (Atkey 42). Rogge's ballet choreography also established a new partnership between the capabilities of the stages and insight into the American taste.

## Section Five

### **The Turning Point for Ballet in America**

At the Roxy Theatre, the nexus of the stage show focused on the new film release. Ballet, as well as other features of the stage show, completed the three to five hour productions. This accomplished more than continuing the introduction of ballet to the movie-going, general audiences, who had never seen ballet. These stage shows began to popularize ballet. This was a turning point and an opportunity for the art form to become infused into the taste of the American public.

***Rockefeller Center Theatres: RKO Roxy Theatre and Radio City Music Hall.*** Rothafel continued his progression and transitioned into producing at two recently completed theatres in Rockefeller Center: RKO Roxy Theatre and Radio City Music Hall. The new RKO Roxy Theatre, a smaller theatre for 3500, was built to be a movie showplace. The premiere performance on December 29, 1932 included a stage show and the film, *The Animal Kingdom*. Two days earlier, the larger theatre, Radio City Music Hall, opened with a stage show only policy (“Center”). In 1933, the RKO Roxy Theatre began to feature more economical second-run double bill film *programmes* (“Center”). After successful litigation by the owners of the original Roxy Theatre on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> Street, the theatre was re-named the RKO Center Theatre. In 1934, RKO was omitted from the Center’s name when it opened its first production, *The Great Waltz*. After the show closed, the Center Theatre attempted to show films again. Movies did not succeed at the Center Theatre. In an effort to compete with the larger Radio City Music Hall one block away, the Center Theatre turned to stage extravaganzas that included an occasional opera or ballet. Sonja Henie was featured in ice shows from 1940-1950. The Center

Theatre became NBC's largest television studio in 1950, hosting the *Milton Berle Show*. In May 1954, NBC's lease expired, and the decision was made to demolish the theatre ("Center").

## Section Six

### **Radio City Music Hall**

*Artistic direction.* Rothafel was chosen to be the unofficial director of architecture and construction for the new Art Deco splendor, the Radio City Music Hall. “The Great Stage” modeled its format after proven selective successes at the Roxy Theatre. The larger Radio City Music Hall, with over 6400 seats, was intended to be a center for Vaudeville shows. When Vaudeville became antiquated, the Music Hall also began to show films within the context of complete stage shows. The Radio City Music Hall dominated, with productions and films intended for family audiences.

Rothafel continued to utilize the production and artistic capabilities demonstrated by Leon Leonidoff and Florence Rogge. In 1932, Leonidoff left the Roxy and went on to plan the larger scale production for the opening show at the Radio City Music Hall. Leonidoff’s name on a production assured the audiences of grandeur and spectacle. Two years later, Leonidoff became the Senior Producer and Vice President, where he remained until his retirement in 1974. The stage shows were an essential partner to the featured films that had become a main attraction of the Hall. Leonidoff hired Florence Rogge to direct the resident company, the *Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company* (Dorris 97). Rogge understood the American audiences and was eminently more successful at bringing ballet to all socio-economic classes, supporting a primary vision of Radio City Music Hall (Drewal 69).

Rogge brought ballet to the general public. Léo Staats and Léonide Massine also brought ballet to the same audiences. However, Rogge introduced ballet in a way that did not alienate audiences with an unfamiliar European or elite art form. Rogge addressed the American tastes and presented classical ballet to a movie-going audience, and because of her skillful insights,

also shaped the new American aesthetic. These initial steps were crucial to establish ballet as an art form, as opposed to a form of sport. Rogge's choreographic practicality created a style of ballet production within a larger stage show setting that supported Rockefeller's initial vision to bring fantasy and hope to a country struggling through the bleakest years of the Great Depression.

Rogge's accomplishments that entertained and enriched audiences were equally noted by critics and valued by the dancers under her direction. During that time, it was rare for a woman to be appointed to a position of artistic direction and administrative authority. The importance of Florence Rogge's contribution to the success of the stage shows and to early professional ballet in the United States remains underrepresented and neglected. Many contemporary sources of information do not acknowledge the existence of the ballet company.

***The uniqueness of the Music Hall: the physical structure.*** The creators of the Hall required the new theatre to be artistically original and technically perfect. The finest architects, engineers, and theatre technicians were engaged to build the new showcase wonder. Innovative ideas in theatre construction and lighting effects were infused into the designs. All aspects of the theatre were modern, comfortable for patrons, and monuments of the designer's achievements. The Radio City Music Hall today remains one of the largest theatres in the world.

Opening day at the Hall welcomed leaders of the nation's political, economic, social, and theatrical community. The spacious Grand Lounge displayed murals by Louis Bouche, floor to ceiling mirrors in the sixty-foot Grand Foyer; and the heroic Ezra Winter Mural, *The Fountain of Youth*, at the top of one staircase (Hannah 45). Donald Deskey was in charge of the decorative scheme and physical structure. Walking into the foyer of the Music Hall was an experience that promoted fantasy for patrons, surrounded by Art Deco murals, sculptures, chandeliers, carpets,

and bronze wall carvings (Hannah 12).

As a stage production theatre, the architectural designs took unprecedented risks, boasting unique technical capabilities and functions. The stage utilized innovative theatre enhancements that produced a smoke screen, rain curtain, and other technical effects, which remained features unique to the Radio City Music Hall. A hydraulic system operated three sections that elevated and rotated independently. The center chromium disc, which also inclined, was often used in the staging of Rogge's choreography. Demonstrating advancements in technology, the hydraulic piston mechanism was a model for the lifts used on the nation's aircraft carriers during World War II (Hannah 22). The extraordinary acoustics enhanced the sonic experience of the full orchestra and vocals on the stage. The walls of the theatre emanated sounds from "The Mighty Wurlitzer."

The engineering innovations demonstrated on "The Great Stage" were incontrovertible evidence and displays of the positive achievements and accomplishments of "man's hard labor." The importance of a strong work ethic was thematically reinforced through artistic themes and technological achievements, never before accomplished. During the peak years of the Great Depression, these experiences at Radio City were designed to inspire the people through visual and sonic fantasy. The Art Deco designs and technological marvels of the Music Hall, similar to ballet, also represented modernity to the American culture.

**Employment.** The Music Hall provided a complete social and professional community, "a city within a city," for the performers and technical crew. The backstage had a cafeteria, clubrooms, lounges, library, showers, and dormitory for resting during extended days of rehearsals and performances. All essentials needed to work were inside the Music Hall. As one example, the Music Hall maintained the "shoe man," an employee responsible to secure every dancer with a



specific brand, maker, and style shoe, according to individual preferences. The costume shops designed and constructed original costumes and millinery. The Music Hall constructed a state-of-the-art recording studio. On the sixth floor, an overnight hospital had a nurse available twenty-four hours a day, with a doctor on call to keep the performers and technical stage crew healthy and ready to work. The fourth floor library featured a lounge surrounded by walls of books. On the ground floor, the cafeteria provided meals that were available for a more reasonable fee than outside the Hall. There was no need for any performers or members of the production staff to leave the theatre (Harwood).

Since new stage shows needed to be produced every time a feature film changed, choreography and production scenes needed to be performance-ready in a minimal amount of time. The proportions of the rehearsal hall, which were identical to the stage, made this possible. The floor of the studio was marked with numbers across the stage (stage right to stage left) and with letters from the front to the back of the stage (downstage to upstage). The numbers and letters on the stage correlated exactly to the rehearsal studio. This expedited rehearsal time; performers went directly from the studio to the stage. The office of the art director displayed an exact working model of the Great Stage that allowed a miniature version to be staged before each production (Harwood).

## Section Seven

### **Florence Rogge's choreographic process**

As the Artistic Director and Choreographer of the ballet company from 1932-1952, Rogge expertly crafted ballet by using standard classical vocabulary and by utilizing the functions of "The Great Stage." Rogge's choreographic signature was defined by these elements, which created visual spectacle and theatrical tableau that had never been seen on any stage. Rogge was willing and able to shape her artistic goals by partnering with the stage to present a new form of ballet to appeal to the American public. Rogge's creative approach would not have been possible or relevant in any other proscenium setting. All patterns, entrances, exits, and special effects emanating from the possibilities provided by the "The Great Stage" were essential and key to Rogge's artistic success. During all stage shows, under Rogge's direction, the ballet often performed two or more featured, full-length dances. In addition, the ballet dancers were included in all seasonal scenes, including the thematic *The Glory of Easter* and *The Living Nativity*.

**Walter Terry.** Dance writer of record, Walter Terry (1913-1982), noted the important contributions of Florence Rogge. The New York Public Library of Performing Arts, Special Collections, maintains the complete archive collection of *The Walter Terry Papers*. During his tenure as the dance critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York World Journal*, and *Saturday Review*, Walter Terry was also known as an important writer of articles, perspectives, and books on dance. It was by hosting his radio program, *Invitation to Dance*, that Terry began to promote the public's understanding and interest in the subject.

*The Walter Terry Papers* remained consistent in their favorable reviews of Florence Rogge and her work with the nation's early professional successful resident ballet ensemble, the

Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company (Terry). Terry's support of Rogge and the company was reflected in his equal commitment to introduce classical dance, a new cultural form, to the United States.

In Terry's recorded interview, Florence Rogge addresses the problems and conditions faced during the choreographic process at the Music Hall. Rogge responds with respect to the audience, size of theatre, and mechanics. Referring to the stage itself, Rogge states, "Work with a large paintbrush. Steps need to be large" (Rogge). In terms of mechanical devices, Rogge often used the three elevators, in order to produce theatrical effects. In *Bacchanal*, a signature ballet, the steam curtain was used. The elevators split the stage into three different and equal sections; the tallest reached thirteen feet.

Rogge refers to the formula for the stage show itself and describes the *Easter Show* as spring-like with rain and flowers (Rogge). Rogge reflects that it was not just a ballet; it was a real spring production. Terry asks Rogge to explain her treatment of traditional ballets and the methods and means by which they are made acceptable to a movie-going audience (Rogge). Rogge explains, "We (the ballet) needed to adjust to all of those things. Large movements that were exaggerated were more visual to the audience's eye" (Rogge). In *La Valse*, using three elevators was impractical on many points. Rogge states, "We found ourselves in trouble when we went down to the stage. As the elevators lifted, balance was impossible" (Rogge). An alternative version was choreographed. Terry defines Rogge's work process and states, "You are governed by the rhythm of the music, and by the actual rhythm of the equipment you are using" (qtd. in Rogge).

In Rogge's acclaimed ballet, *Rhapsody in Blue*, the chromium plate required the dancers to work on a slippery, revolving, raked surface. This was also used in *Swan Lake* and *Symphony*

*in Birds*. During the original version of *Rhapsody in Blue*, the fast turns and subtleties were impractical to perform on the plate. This required an adapted version (Rogge). Rogge addresses the ways in which movement needs to be adjusted and the treatment of ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *Les Sylphides*. Terry asks Rogge to explain the ways in which a traditional classic, such as Michael Fokine's, *Les Sylphides*, differs in order to fit into the formula of a spectacle show (Rogge). Rogge responds, "The male version was different. We handled it this way. There was no time for two male variations. I was trying to say the same thing as Mr. Fokine. We did much more sweeping movement than Mr. Fokine" (Rogge). Terry asks Rogge the degree of artistic freedom allotted to her by the producers. Rogge responds, "They let you do some small detailed work as long as you come up with a big tapestry five minutes later" (Rogge). Terry refers to "special training sessions on the bias?" (qtd. in Rogge). Rogge explains that the pas de deux found it difficult and preferred for the dance to be performed traditionally, not on the chromium plate (Rogge).

According to Terry, the audience wanted "décor and elements of spectacle" (qtd. in Rogge). The producers wanted *Swan Lake* for the closing of the show to be spectacular. Rogge refers to the artistic license allowed and states, "If you prove one point, sometimes you get to do another" (Rogge). Rogge explains that she was not permitted to make all artistic decisions. Regarding *Swan Lake*, Rogge states, "... hope to do more traditionally. It seemed hard for me to understand too because it was my favorite" (Rogge). The process needed to be a constant collaboration. Rogge continues, "The adagio, the hardest medium for our audiences to understand. I had to find out why our adagios were so unsuccessful" (Rogge). Audiences responded with statements, "They hang on to each other so much. It's so awfully slow" (qtd. in Rogge). Rogge explains that the Music Hall audiences wanted "brilliance at the ending of it and

more power. Eventually, we were able to pick out the right kind of numbers. ... “Rose Adagio,”  
*Sleeping Beauty* ... The audience loved it. That part of my battle would be won if I could do that.  
... In the past ten or fifteen years, people understand and seem to like it” (Rogge).

## Section Eight

### **Oral Histories**

In addition to the written publications and audio recordings of Walter Terry, further analysis of the work of Florence Rogge is provided through the oral histories of five members of the ballet company, who worked between 1944-1958, during or immediately following Rogge's tenure. Each company member reflects on the work process, professional expectations, and success of the choreographed presentations.

***Sydelle Sylovna Gomberg.*** Gomberg went to New York City when she was about 14 or 15 years old. At age 15, it was suggested that Gomberg audition for a position at the Radio City Music Hall. Gomberg states, "I auditioned for Florence Rogge and she accepted me" (D'Urbano).

Rogge insisted that Gomberg return with her birth certificate. Gomberg explains:

I went down to the Town Hall, the City Hall of New York, and got my birth certificate, and the birth certificate said that I was born in 1928, which made me only 15. So, I took the birth certificate home and scratched off the last number and made myself a year older ... so 1927 ... gave it to Florence Rogge, and she said, 'Fine Sydelle. We'd like to have you in the company, but we don't have a position for you right now. So would you like to rehearse with the company and take class?' (qtd. in D'Urbano). I said, Oh, I'd love to. That was in December. In March, when I turned 16, she came to me and she said, 'Sydelle we have a position for you. You can come in' (Rogge qtd. in D'Urbano). Oh I said, how wonderful! So I joined the company, went out on that stage, which was unbelievable, and looked out on to the empty house with something like 6000 seats. I was overwhelmed with joy (D'Urbano).

Gomberg was a member of the company from 1944-1945, until she was abruptly terminated from her job. At age 17, Gomberg initiated attempts to unionize the Radio City Music Hall. Gomberg shares, "But I realized that it was a very, very difficult job. Long hours, many shows, lots of rehearsals, and I decided I would try to unionize them. Because they weren't unionized in those days, and when Florence found out, she fired me. So this was after a year in the company; I was fired, let go" (D'Urbano). Gomberg continued her career and joined the

Broadway production of *Lute Song*. One year later, Gomberg was rehired at the Music Hall and remained employed through 1948. Gomberg states, "I was invited back by Florence Rogge, where I did return, and I didn't fool around with the union, and I enjoyed it, enjoyed every minute of it. It was wonderful" (D'Urbano).

With utmost certainty, Gomberg knew that her attempts to bring the union, American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) to the Music Hall, had caused her termination. As Gomberg explains, "I was told that by Florence. ... that you don't do things like that. I was 16, what did I know? We were AGVA members before we went into Radio City. ... so it was very simple for me to get in touch with the union ... unionize Radio City, the ballet, and I failed" (D'Urbano).

Gomberg further emphasizes:

I felt even though we were making a fairly decent salary, we were working very, very long hours, from early morning till' 10:00-11:00 at night. We did 4 shows. On holidays, we did 5 shows, and we rehearsed in between shows-took class in the morning. It was really, it was hard, it was very hard, but looking back on it now, that's a dancers life. We're all very disciplined and hard working ... and we know that, but for some reason-stupidity in my head-I tried to unionize them, and I couldn't. Probably, I didn't know how to go about it correctly. I don't know. And I don't remember how Florence Rogge found out. I just know that it was something that made her very unhappy. In retrospect, I'm sorry that I made her unhappy. You know, that hurts me because she originally hired me as a 16 year old, and that was something I shouldn't have done (D'Urbano).

When Gomberg returned one year after her termination, AGVA had not entered into the Music Hall. Gomberg was asked if she felt, in retrospect, that her contribution was more typical of a woman today. Gomberg responds:

No, that never occurred to me; that never occurred to me. That wasn't what I was after. I was after to try to help the dancers to get things going, smoothly for them. I don't know how they would have done it since they had to do 4 shows a day. ... I guess there was no alternative. In retrospect, I loved being at Radio City and working on that stage with the stage crew, and everybody was so wonderful, and the dancers were wonderful. We had two dressing rooms. I was in the smaller dressing room of the two and got to know my colleagues very closely and it was beautiful. If I had to do it over again, I would. Only, I wouldn't go to the union (D'Urbano).

Rogge approached Gomberg to rehire her. As Gomberg explains, “I didn’t go back to her to see if I could get the job back. She somehow got in touch with me. It was a good job in retrospect” (D’Urbano). Gomberg states that Rogge and management were receptive to her return and reflects, “I mean I was treated just the way I was the first year I was there. It was wonderful” (D’Urbano). Gomberg was the only dancer in the company who attempted to bring the unions into the Music Hall. With no information regarding how the Music Hall became aware of her efforts, Gomberg explains, “I don’t know, they never told me. Isn’t that a shame?” (D’Urbano).

Referring to the audience’s appreciation of Rogge’s work, Gomberg reflects, “We weren’t competing with the Rockettes. Obviously, the Rockettes were the popular group. .... More people were turned on by the Rockettes. The ballet dancers were very well trained, very well trained. It was probably the best job in the country at the time; that was in the mid 40s” (D’Urbano).

Gomberg describes Rogge’s choreographic process, and explains, “She starts to teach, and if she doesn’t like what she sees, she may re-choreograph. You go with it; that’s the way dance is. Sometimes it looks good in your head, but then when you put it on the bodies, it doesn’t look so good. Actually, she was a wonderful director” (D’Urbano). Referring to the overall picture, tableau and or “tricks” included in Rogge’s choreography, Gomberg highlights:

She had an overall picture of what she wanted the dancers to do, and remember, it was a very big house, Radio City. It was about 6000 seats, and she wanted an overall look. We weren’t doing fouettés and difficult things; that’s for principals to do, you know, solo dancers, not the corps de ballet, and that’s true actually in any company. You don’t have the corps de ballet doing fouettés (D’Urbano).

During the 1940s, more dance companies began to emerge in the United States that offered work to female professional dancers. Gomberg explains if the dancers felt they needed to



go elsewhere and dance with another dance company, or if the dancers had sufficient artistic pride and satisfaction to compel them to remain in the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company. Gomberg describes, “Well it would depend upon the dancers, the individuals. Some individuals wanted to be in a classical ballet company and get themselves up into being principal dancers, not just in the corps de ballet” (D’Urbano).

Gomberg assesses if the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company was considered to be a classical company and explains:

Well no. It was a theatre company. Radio City was a theatre; it wasn’t a ballet company. This was the corps de ballet in Radio City Music Hall. It is like being in a Broadway show. You are in a theatre as opposed to being with a classical ballet company. It’s a slightly different feeling, even though we have a live orchestra, and a good orchestra, actually (D’Urbano).

It is often a standard procedure for popular ballets to be shared, in order to contribute to repertoire in other companies. Taken out of the context of the stage show at the Music Hall, Gomberg responds to this possibility for Rogge’s choreography and reflects:

No, I don’t think so because it was done with a more Broadway feeling than a classical. I mean, even if it was classical dancing. I’m just trying to think some ballets, yes, maybe that could be true. It was classical, very classical. . . . But, the ballet was more classical ballet. Florence Rogge, Miss Rogge, had a lot of courage and view about how to do things (D’Urbano).

***Paulette Knox Harwood.*** A personal interview with Paulette Knox Harwood, soloist with the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company, describes a rare perspective of professional work, during the early years of ballet. Harwood was employed at the Hall from 1945-1947. Harwood responds to a series of questions relating to employment opportunities for women in her chosen field, prior to working in the ballet company at the Music Hall. Harwood states that there were no employment opportunities for women; ballet companies had not yet developed in the United States. Professionally trained ballet dancers were underemployed and worked at cabarets,

including *Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe* in New York City. The women were underage to be working in a venue with alcohol and received no employment benefits provided to other workers in the establishment. Harwood often commuted to New York City to be booked on club dates through the William Morris Office. Many of these professional dance jobs were presented at the Waldorf Astoria as variety entertainment for important social and business events. Rockefeller's innovation that established the Radio City Music Hall as "The Nation's Showplace" also served to provide an important source of income for many who were forced to accept employment beneath their level of training and skill.

Harwood highlights, "I had been to a couple of shows at the Music Hall. I saw that theatre, and I just thought I wanna dance here. Some day I'm gonna dance on that stage, because the dancers that were there were absolutely wonderful" (Harwood). Harwood was asked to specify if she was referring to the ballet company and responds:

Absolutely. The Rockettes were great and cute and the line kicks and all but the ballet company was stupendous! Well, it filled the stage. It made you feel like you wanted to get up on stage and dance with them. It made you really appreciate that ballet wasn't just *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, and the traditional ballet company ballets, but the ballet was full and well rounded and creative, and it moved, and it was just very inventive. And I thought, if I could get on that stage ... I thought that would be magnificent (D'Urbano).

Harwood recounts that nightclub dancing was "dancing on a kitchen table," and in contrast, being on stage at the Music Hall, "I can fly from one end to the other" (Harwood). Harwood describes a ballet seen at the Music Hall, prior to being accepted into the company, and states, "It was one of her (Rogge's) white ballets. It was absolutely beautiful. ... one of the most beautiful things I ever saw" (D'Urbano).

The William Morris Office informed Harwood that they could not provide her with an audition at the Music Hall. The Music Hall was non-unionized; Harwood was a member of AGVA. Harwood was determined. Referring to her program she saved from the performance at

the Music Hall, Harwood saw the name “Leon Leonidoff, Producer” (D’Urbano). At age seventeen, Harwood demonstrated the initiative to personally call the producer at the Music Hall. Auditioning for Rogge in the large rehearsal hall, Harwood performed a dance with “everything but the kitchen sink in it” (Harwood). After completing the prepared audition dance, Harwood was asked to demonstrate “difficult hop turns en pointe, circles of piqué turns, tricks, turns, and tumbles” (D’Urbano). Rogge stated, “I think I can use you. Can you be at rehearsal this afternoon?” (qtd. in D’Urbano).

Harwood explains that Rogge insisted on quality and details, and was able to communicate ballet to patrons from all socio-economic classes. Harwood emphasizes:

She made it very interesting. We were all great ballet dancers. She made it look like anybody could do it. It did not look untouchable. It had a natural look to it. Her ballets were real. Audiences loved them. The applause was deafening. As a tableau, it was magnificent. We could feel that audience response, and it only made us work harder (D’Urbano).

Harwood reflects that Rogge took a known classic, and maintaining the original theme, made aesthetic adjustments to present a more theatrical version that accompanied the technical capabilities of the stage. Referring to Rogge’s creative rehearsal process, Harwood states that Rogge began with a concept and described the desired effect. Harwood explains, “She (Rogge) loved patterns. When she did the *Vegetable Garden Ballet*, there was a little bit of comedy” (Harwood). A humorous and enchanting ballet was in opposition to a dramatic film feature.

Harwood explains:

We were a forest scene, and there were swans. There were birds; I was a parakeet, and they had the stage built in three sections, with a circular part of the stage that traveled-a turntable that traveled-and on top of this turntable they built a chrome plate on a slant, on a raked stage, and it was surrounded by, and when they put a projection on it, it looked like water and one of the scenes, there was a swan on it. ... She had me dance on that plate. So I had to have rubbers put on my pointe shoes so I didn’t break my neck or slide and slip, and she wanted me to do two circular piqué turns around the stage (D’Urbano).

Harwood feared that centrifugal force would propel her off the elevated plate, before she discovered that turning in the opposite direction, the “centrifugal force would send me to the center” (D’Urbano). Harwood comments on Rogge’s rehearsal process, and states:

It didn’t bother me that we worked hard. I was used to it. That was what we thought we should do. The thing that I loved the most was that she was a real perfectionist. She knew what she wanted to do, but she would see something and work on it and improve it. If she saw that something didn’t work, she would change that step. She would come up with something else. . . . making a painting at Radio City Music Hall. When we did our bird ballet, she took the turn table and built a chromium plate that was only one foot off the ground downstage and eight feet off above the ground upstage, making it look like it was a lake. It took Rogge’s vision to create that in the facility. I think that so much of what she did is lost. I know she wrote notes down, but they did not credit her. She was not entrepreneurial (D’Urbano).

Rogge’s choreography placed dancers on all levels of the stage to create an ethereal mise-en-scene tableau that covered the surfaces like an impressionist painting. Original or familiar music often accompanied ballets with well-known themes to create versions that appealed to the American aesthetic. Rogge’s special skills launched Rockefeller’s initial vision to bring culture to the general public, not just to a specific socio-economic elitist class.

Harwood explains the reasons for Rogge’s choreographic success and states, “I think she understood what the average American family would enjoy-down to earth, not above their understanding . . . more about emotion” (D’Urbano). Harwood also explains her analysis and reasons that ballet, as a cultural form, did not progress successfully into all socio-economic classes, and shares, “It was always assumed that ballet was for the upper crust and the attitude was that it was on a plane with opera. It was determined to be that way by the international companies that came in” (Harwood). Rogge’s formula was uniquely adapted to enhance the physical capabilities provided by the Music Hall stage. Harwood explains without hesitation, “Her (Rogge’s) work could not be duplicated” (Harwood).

Harwood emphasizes that the audiences demonstrated the amount of their appreciation by

the length of the applause after each dance. As Harwood describes, “Sometimes, the audience would applaud for over five minutes. I swear to you that we got more applause than the Rockettes. I had this little time bomb in me . . . anything 8-10-11-12 seconds was WOW. Whenever I was dancing I thought, well, that was good; it was ten seconds of applause” (Harwood).

Harwood was present during several conversations between Rogge, Leonidoff, and Russell Markert, Artistic Director and Choreographer for the Rockettes. According to Harwood, Leonidoff and Markert frequently depended upon Rogge’s skills to stage a large production scene. Harwood shares:

Leon sat in the center of the house with Russell on his left and Florence on his right. Russell and Leon would ask Florence for advice and what she thought of the staging. He would speak to her before he spoke to Russell. Over the microphone, Leon relayed his directions to the performers that came from Florence. Leon always deferred to Florence, but he was given credit for it (Harwood).

Harwood’s analysis is consistent with the information published on July 31, 1934. *The Wall Street Journal* omitted any mention of Rogge as the choreographer of a signature ballet, *Bacchanal*, and indicated, “The stage show at the Music Hall features, among other divertissements, the Rockettes demonstrating their usual precision tricks with their hands and arms, and a riotously colorful Leon Leonidoff ballet that is bacchanalian and Hadean at once” (qtd. in “The Big”). As Harwood emphasizes, “Florence had no recognition” (Harwood).

When a new stage show was created, Rogge was responsible for many aspects related to the choreography and staging for production scenes that included the entire stage company. Harwood explains, “Ninety-nine percent of the time it was Florence Rogge that was choreographing them” (D’Urbano). Rogge was responsible for choreographing both iconic religious-themed scenes: *The Glory of Easter* and *The Living Nativity* (Harwood). According to

Harwood, “It was Leon’s idea to add the animals” (Harwood). Vintage programs stated, “Produced by Leon Leonidoff,” and did not credit Rogge for choreography (“Vintage”). In contrast, Russell Markert was credited as the choreographer for *The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers* and for other favorites performed by the Rockettes.

It is typical for choreographers, who have achieved international acclaim, to be sought after by other companies. This is consistent with Rothafel’s commitment to hire Léo Staats from the *Paris Opera*, Adolph Bolm and Léonide Massine from the *Ballets Russes*, and other dance luminaries for their contribution to the stage shows at other movie palaces. A successful choreographer often becomes in demand in other professional situations based on vogue popularity, not because the style of their work demonstrates suitability for a specific need. Rogge earned equal critical acclaim. Despite her stellar work at the Music Hall, Rogge was not contracted as a featured guest choreographer for other emerging companies or commercial venues. Harwood comments that management did not adequately recognize Rogge’s work and offers, “I don’t think they did. I don’t think they really knew or appreciated her or knew about her. I really feel that she was this sort of little hidden thing at the Music Hall because they did not do anything to promote her” (D’Urbano).

At that time, the American Guild of Variety Artists had not become the parent union for the Music Hall. Harwood had joined the union during her previous employment and withheld this information from the Music Hall. Work conditions provided the dancers with three days to rehearse for a new show that accompanied a change in feature film, or to learn replacement dances for the current show. The dancers worked three weeks and received one week off, four weeks and received two weeks off, or ten weeks and received three weeks off. The ballet dancers took advantage of the weeks off and worked at various other employment opportunities in the

realm of dance. Harwood explains, “The only way we existed was with chloroform liniment” (D’Urbano).

During her tenure at the Music Hall, Harwood was well compensated with a base salary of \$35.00 per week; received an additional fee of \$15.00 per week for performing a solo; earned an additional \$5.00 per week for performing in an additional dance or production scene; and was provided an additional \$5.00 per week for any change of costume. Additionally, the audience observed two individuals on opposite sides of the stage playing “The Mighty Wurlitzer.” Only one person was a professional organist; the other was a ballet dancer, compensated an additional \$5.00 per week to simulate proficient musicianship. This salary was sufficient to fully support Harwood and her grandmother, both living in New York City. By age 21, Harwood saved \$3,000.00 working at the Music Hall, which was used for a down payment to purchase her first home (Harwood).

Although the ballet company often worked one additional dance per show more than the Rockettes and equally contributed to all seasonally related production scenes, the members of the ballet company were paid less (Harwood). Harwood was emphatic in her response that the ballet dancers were paid less because their director, Florence Rogge, was a woman. The Artistic Director of the Rockettes, Russell Markert, was a man. According to Harwood, gender discrimination prevented Rogge, despite her enormous success, from being hired by any other ballet companies that had emerged in the United States, during her tenure at the Music Hall (Harwood).

During the 1940s, other ballet companies of importance developed in major cities in the United States. Harwood responds to the assessment that the ballet dancing at the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company was inauthentic and highlights:

I never felt that way. I cherish every single moment I was there. I was working in the best theatre in the world, with the best director in the world. . . . I felt that Florence Rogge was a genius. It came from being this ballet that was for the elite, the special people and brought it to the ordinary average person, like my family, so that they could feel ballet was something wonderful and creative. Rogge's ballets were very rewarding to dance. It was all encompassing. The Music Hall was like a family. We were made to feel very welcomed, and very nurtured, and very protected (D'Urbano).

**Stella Bell.** As a member of the corps de ballet in 1949, Stella Bell recounts a professional experience that is antithetical to the events described by Gomberg and Harwood. Bell refers to the Music Hall and explains, "It was a factory to me. The dancers performed in four shows per day, rehearsed between shows, worked seven days a week for three weeks, and received three days off" (Bell). The salary was \$60.00 per week; Bell received \$49.00 after taxes. Some ballet dancers had the opportunity to receive additional wages by performing supplementary tasks. During one of the production scenes, the surface of the stage produced the illusion of moving waves. The ballet dancers received an additional \$15.00 per week to stretch out flat, completely covered underneath a canvas, and push the canvas to produce a rippling effect (Bell). Bell explains:

Oh you didn't speak up in those days. You didn't say anything. We were just so thrilled to be dancing and to be paid for it. The ballet dancers were always lower on the scale. There were lots of tourists who thought that line kicking was fantastic. The United States was not sophisticated about ballet. They didn't have ballet. *Ballets Russes* toured and familiarized some audiences-exclusive, educated, worldly audiences (Bell).

Bell did not renew her contract with the ballet company, left New York City, and returned in 1951. Referring to the possibility of continuing with her former employment at the Music Hall, Bell states, "I refused to go. If I starved I wasn't going back. It wasn't enough dancing for me. It was simplistic choreography. It was boring" (Bell).

Bell recalls performing in *Undersea Ballet*, *Bolero*, and a ballet that resembled *State Fair*. Similar to other dancers in the corps de ballet, Bell served as a chorus member in



production scenes. Bell describes her impression of Rogge's choreography and reflects, "I thought Leonidoff was the choreographer. Because he was the choreographer, he got the credit. I thought that Florence Rogge was the Dance Mistress; Florence Rogge was directing the staging" (Bell). Rogge ran the rehearsals for the large production scenes that built a montage. As Bell explains, "She (Rogge) knew exactly what she wanted. She did not waste any time. When I got there, I was just put in it after it had been staged. I just assumed that Leonidoff choreographed it" (Bell).

During rehearsals, Rogge stood in the center, directed rehearsals, and did not need to demand or raise her voice. Bell was respected and well treated at the Hall. Bell describes the choreography at the Music Hall as very pedestrian. In contrast, Bell explains:

*Bolero* was fantastic. Her (Rogge's) choreography seemed to be constructed to use that huge stage and formations. It is boring because all you are doing is bourrée-ing; you are not doing steps. You ran in circles. It was strictly for seeing a whole show. It made a good show. I was a ballet dancer; I wanted to do steps. It just wasn't choreographed. *Undersea Ballet* was behind a scrim. It was beautiful from out front. It looked as if you were under water (Bell).

Describing the audience's response to the ballet company, Bell states:

The applause, the 'ooing;' it was larger than life. A full symphony orchestra included refugees from World War II and Jews from Europe. RCA had a symphony with Toscanini. It (ballet) was awesome, the applause, the gasping, because it was so beautiful. Oh I think they were just blown away. I think they loved it. I think they thought it was the most beautiful thing. They would look in awe. You were surreal. The ballet was not fantastic, but it was beautiful. Before that time, audiences had only seen ballet in movies. The draw was the Rockettes. Ninety-nine percent of the audience went to the Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes. The audience thought that the ballet dancers and the Rockettes were the same. The Rockettes were the main attraction of the theatre. That is what brought audiences to the Music Hall. They are there to see the Rockettes. The Rockettes-that's all you ever hear people talk about. The publicity of the Music Hall supported the Rockettes. (Bell)

Bell reflects on interaction with Florence Rogge and touches upon, "I saw so little of her. She was very nice. She had me for a private audition: piqué turns, échappés. I did a ballet for her

that I choreographed myself. My teacher arranged for a private audition” (Bell). In response to the concept that Rogge presented ballet in a positive light to American audiences, Bell states:

I would like to think that she did. She was his (Leonidoff) brain and did 99% of the choreography. It wouldn't matter who choreographed the show. But, it was an old gay men's club. Choreographers were all men. You never ran into a woman. Yes, you could assist them. Within a larger structure, a woman would not be hired. All Broadway shows have male choreographers. I have always seen the guy get the gig. I'm doing the work (Bell).

Bell was thrilled to include work at the Music Hall as one of her credits. Aspiring to become a choreographer, Bell shares, “I learned a lot about production there” (Bell). Bell describes the reasoning that compelled her to leave her position with the ballet company and states:

No, I didn't want to work there anymore. I wasn't really doing any choreography. I was disappointed because I thought I would really be dancing. I wasn't being used. Other dancers did things. The corps de ballet did formations and backgrounds. I didn't understand corps work. I didn't know what a corps de ballet would be like. I wanted to do a Broadway show. The corps de ballet was not enough for me. I wanted modern and dramatic abilities. It was just boring to me. I didn't want a job. I wanted to create, to choreograph (Bell).

**Jean Barrozo D'Urbano.** D'Urbano was a member of the ballet company from 1956-1958, under the direction of Margaret Sande. During Rogge's tenure as Artistic Director and Choreographer, Margaret Sande was a principal dancer with the company. After Rogge's departure in 1952, Sande took over as Director and Choreographer of the company until 1959. D'Urbano performed a repertoire that included Rogge's signature ballets, in addition to Sande's new works. D'Urbano never participated in any choreographic process under Rogge's direction.

During the 1950s, the United States had a variety of employment opportunities for resident professional ballet. D'Urbano explains that additional ballet companies and professional employment venues included Ballet Theatre, which later became American Ballet Theatre; New York City Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, smaller companies, industrials, live television, and auditions

every week. Dancers went to rehearsal studios off Times Square. There were always auditions (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano describes the desirability to work at the Radio City Music Hall Ballet during the 1950s and explains:

It was ... if you could get in, you had a steady job, which was wonderful to be able to work a number of ... as long as you could stay there, in that respect. Other problems, other shows, other small companies, had a very hard time keeping dancers dancing all the time full out through the year. That's how I happened to be doing Ballet Theatre because Lucia Chase wanted to carry the company through the summer so that they could go through into their winter touring schedule. So, I was fortunate to be able to-at Ballet Theatre School-audition there and did for three summers with Ballet Theatre, and they did productions out at Jones Beach. They did *Arabian Nights*, and then they did *Show Boat*, and we worked with the Met Opera. And we were the Ballet Theatre dancers and had all of that lovely thing going in the summer. So it was very difficult for companies to have a full year of performances for their dancers. Whereas, but fortunately, there were other things you could audition for, hopefully, fit it in (D'Urbano).

The dance community did not consider the work at the Music Hall to represent low artistic merit. However, one of D'Urbano's teachers did not support an anticipated audition for the Music Hall ballet and suggested another company, which had plans to start in the future.

D'Urbano describes the demanding audition for the Music Hall ballet and explains:

But, they realized later on that it was a tough audition. When you auditioned for the Music Hall, you had to be able to do a lot of fouettés, at least 16 to 32 fouettés. You had to be able to do piqué turns in huge circles around that whole stage. But, you auditioned up in the rehearsal hall, which was the same size as the stage from 50<sup>th</sup> to 51<sup>st</sup> street, so you have to realize it was a whole block in width [laugh], and of course the depth was unbelievable. So you really ... it was a tough audition to get in, and they expected that you did it, and you were a strong dancer. ... It is such an experience to step out on that stage; it is just breathtaking. From what I can gather it was mainly Florence Rogge's works. Perhaps, Margaret Sande tweaked things here and there, but Florence Rogge basically created them (D'Urbano).

Rogge's ballets were maintained in repertoire. D'Urbano's analysis explains, "They were beautiful works, interesting works, very creative. ... I don't think (Sande) could have come up with anything comparable to what Florence Rogge produced and created" (D'Urbano).

Reflecting on the rehearsal process under Sande's direction, D'Urbano states:

She, it was in a rehearsal, you, you didn't really smile, or you just did what you were told, and you did it, because if you smiled she had a feeling that perhaps you were laughing at her, or if you talked to another dancer next to you, she was not liking that at all. Not that you would be talking about anything else. ... She thought you were making fun of her or talking about her. She didn't like that. So everybody had a very serious expression on in rehearsals all the time because, Rogge, because excuse me, Margaret Sande was always very nervous about everything, and I think she was afraid she was going to lose her job. She, it wasn't pleasant. We, we girls and the guys too, whoever was with us for whatever performances, everybody became very close because you just never knew what to expect in rehearsal and her attitude and so forth and what made. ... She was always unhappy, very nervous and unhappy, which was sad (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano explains that although the ballet was a successful part of the stage show, Sande was not considered to be a successful director. According to D'Urbano, rehearsals were not to create new ballets. Occasionally, timing was adjusted in pre-existing Rogge ballets, to coordinate with factors related to stage spacing. D'Urbano reflects:

I think the company, they all worked very hard these kids, all the other dancers were strong dancers, and really put their heart and soul into it, and were always kind of waiting to be appreciated, and the ballet was really not appreciated by Sande. You just wanted to feel that, we wanted to make her happy, and, and be appreciated-the dancers and the quality (D'Urbano).

Russell Markert offered helpful elements of staging and positive critique. Markert appreciated the ballet company and contributed by changing small details. Often, Russell Market came to rehearsals to "give a pep talk, I think, just to bring everybody's spirits up" (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano reflects:

But actually, I think he came in and gave people a sense of feeling that they were important. The ballet was a little more important than we felt we were at times because of Sande's constant nervous problems all the time and not her attitude and so forth, and he would be so pleasant and talk to everyone, as if he was pleased with the way things were going with the dancers, and so forth. So, that, that was very nice; it was a very good feeling that we never really got only when he would come in at times. ... We just felt, oh I guess we are worthwhile (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano discusses if difficulties were due to Sande, management, or audience responses to the

ballet company. D'Urbano states:

Well there was audience appreciation. I think it was Sande's attitude-Margaret Sande's attitude. I don't think she was as creative, naturally, she wasn't as creative but I think she just didn't have the confidence in herself or the background. ... She just seemed to be that she was afraid that she would be let go at anytime. She was very nervous in any rehearsal-running. She was just a nervous wreck constantly. ... She did not have the professional confidence (D'Urbano).

Referring to the union, D'Urbano reflects, "It was AGVA. But at one point they had hoped, we had all hoped that Actors Equity would probably take over. And we really tried, the Glee Club, the Rockettes, the ballet tried to bring in Equity and they were all so, those folks were also fired [laugh], and then they came back later. But, Equity never came, came in" (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano reflects on the satisfaction with financial compensation and responds:

Not really, well, we were paid for rehearsals, and we were paid for costume fittings. Whereas many years before, they were not paid for costume fittings, and believe me, there are a lot of times you're standing up there having costume fittings and wig fittings and whatever, and but, we were paid for that. And I believe in the early 50s, they provided tights. Whereas, before that, I don't think they provided tights with the costumes and so forth. Oh yes, once a week we got a pair of pointe shoes. Cause we did, when you think, seven days a week and four shows a day [laugh]. You really took care of your pointe shoes. You put glue inside; baked them in the oven; you kept them up on the light bulbs to keep them dry [laugh]. By the time near the end of the week got there with all those shows [laugh], you got through the end of the week, or you saved them very carefully. So it was, you were very cautious about your pointe shoes (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano evaluates the artistic sensibilities of the company. Relating the work at the Music Hall to other companies that had emerged, D'Urbano explains that in addition to the Music Hall providing secure employment, the ballet company displayed artistic merit and was a fine company and states:

It was. I felt it was an excellent company. We had Melissa Hayden from Ballet Theatre, who came and was a principal dancer. Every, many of the dancers were in and out of other companies. And I just think that they weren't given the attention that they should have been. I thought that what we were doing, with the ballet, some of the ballets were very lovely and beautiful. There were a lot of things that you did that were dangerous, when I think back. As far as the way the stage was built and so forth. And, but for the most part, everything was very, they made beautiful pictures on stage, beautiful, lovely

portraits. It was, and I think too at that time a lot of the companies were falling into modern dance, which made the ballet company at the Music Hall rather special. At that time, they were trying to come up with lots of modern dance and so on, which after about an hour of serious things like that I think it's lovely to see a ballet company and come out and feel, Oh wasn't that beautiful; wasn't that lovely? But, and everybody gave their all. We all became very, very close, tight friends (D'Urbano).

The ballet company never assembled at a reunion, until the 1990s. Members of the ballet company from the 1930s up through the 1970s are now included on the roster, which was never maintained at the Music Hall. D'Urbano shares:

Everybody was so close, because what we had gone through, it prepared you for life. You could [laugh], you could do practically anything. Having put up with what we had to put up with and to make it perfect four shows a day and five shows a day. And have them come in and correct and say 'did you, were three inches off of this' or 'be sure this is fixed.' So, it prepared you for anything. It really did (D'Urbano).

Rogge's choreography and the ballet company served the mission to bring culture to the masses. D'Urbano explains:

Yes, absolutely. People didn't realize they were seeing ballet because this country is sports, and of course, they loved the Rockettes, but it had to be serving the audiences because, when you think different shows and different performances, there would be lines from the stage door all the way down to Rockefeller Center around the corner and up on the other side of audience-people waiting for the next performance next show (D'Urbano).

D'Urbano describes the audience's response and states:

It wasn't told that it was ballet, I think, so they liked it. But if, I think, perhaps, if they had been told 'We're going to have a lovely ballet company ... Oh, I don't know whether I want to see ballet, ballet?' In our country unfortunately, everything is sport, and it's not as appreciated as much. They thought it was the Rockettes a lot of times doing the ballet. They thought it was all the Rockettes (D'Urbano).

Audiences that were unfamiliar with the entertainment or art form approached ballet with uncertainty. D'Urbano reflects:

I think people have not been exposed to it. Some people have ... but a lot of people don't, and they've not been exposed to it. Though fortunately, in those days, we had marvelous movies expressing dance with Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor and all of the classic movies. ... It just expressed a lot of joy. And the ballet, you felt good seeing the ballet ...

It was very special time. It really did when you think of the audiences, I mean that filled theatre 6000 people four times a day. It did; it absolutely did. And I wish it were still continuing, really. It started to develop audiences for the other companies that were coming along (D'Urbano).

Rogge retired from the Music Hall in 1952. Paul Haakon, internationally recognized danseur and principal with the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company, referred to Rogge's retirement as "a great loss to the Music Hall" (Francisco 90). Rogge's contributions to the Music Hall are marginally and inaccurately documented. According to D'Urbano, "They just made her disappear" (D'Urbano).

***Karmen Herman Oberempt.*** Oberempt studied at the school that was affiliated with the New York City Ballet, under the direction of George Balanchine. After Mr. Balanchine observed Oberempt in class, she expected to be accepted into the company, but was not offered a contract. Instead of achieving the goal to dance with the New York City Ballet, Oberempt joined the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company two years after Rogge's departure. At that time, the ballet company was under the artistic direction of Margaret Sande and supervised by the guidelines of AGVA. Oberempt describes her experience under a different aegis, and explains, "Once I went to the Music Hall, my company chances were nil. It was the kiss of death. It was a chance to make a living and eat. It was a job. It was pretty much a formula. I was an X, moving to an O" (Oberempt). Oberempt worked at the Music Hall between 1954 and 1958.

In 1954, Oberempt's salary was \$52.00-\$60.00 per week. Work conditions at the Music Hall required four to five shows a day, seven days a week. The ballet company worked for four consecutive weeks and received one week off. It was an all-consuming job. With limited time, dancers rehearsed between shows. Since the union required that dancers be provided time to rest, the dancers slept in the dormitory during any time possible (Oberempt).

Oberempt describes her experience watching the ballets at the Music Hall, and states,

“You have no idea what you’re a part of until you see it as a whole. When I went out front and looked at it, I was just blown away. I didn’t even know that *Bolero* and *Rhapsody in Blue* were attributed to Florence Rogge. The impact was not artistic. It had visual merit. It had spectacle” (Oberempt).

Oberempt further explains that the ballet dancers were prohibited from sitting on the roof of the Music Hall, in order to avoid suntans or to become darker. Oberempt explains, “One girl whitened up. We were white robots. None of us were respected as dancers. We were pawns” (Oberempt).

As Oberempt reflects, “Leon Leonidoff usually wound up yelling at Sande because he didn’t like the effect. She worked for him. She was a very timid person. She was very much afraid for her job. Sande did what she had to do to keep her job. I hear she was a marvelous dancer. She was the original in *Rhapsody in Blue*” (Oberempt). Oberempt describes the interaction and tension during rehearsals between Leon Leonidoff, Producer, and Margaret Sande, and explains:

Sande was a very timid person, and was very much afraid for her job. Leon Leonidoff, the mad Russian, she was terrified of him. *Bolero*, I thought that was pretty dramatic. I don’t even know if we did. I don’t know if it was Margaret Sande’s or Florence Rogge’s. We were not privileged to see the notes. We just assumed it was Sande’s.

To me, Radio City Music Hall was a temple of mediocrity. It was circus. It was Vaudeville. It’s a good show-family entertainment. I was smug and very critical. What I was doing was not my teenage dream. If I were in a company, I might have felt the same way. Maybe Florence was the catalyst that made you feel that you were in a ballet company. ... The audience was not there to see ballet. They were there to see sparkles and a really great show. ... I could not separate it. I knew what the Music Hall was about. ... I was jaded. I wanted to do Balanchine (Oberempt).

Oberempt describes the situation that caused her termination from the ballet company and states, “I went off pointe to not fall off the stage; I got fired. I was gone for a couple of weeks to come back. I got hired back. You are not to go off pointe” (Oberempt).



## Conclusion

The primary mission of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was to build Rockefeller Center to propel the country forward by advertising America as the nexus of innovation depicted through engineering and culture. The premiere performance at the Radio City Music Hall was on December 27, 1932, during the bleakest years of the Great Depression (Francisco 18). This was an important time to include cultural prosperity to uplift and provide hope to all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Florence Rogge was the first American Artistic Director and Choreographer for a professional ballet company-in-residence that performed full dances in repertoire during every performance. Rogge knew how to present ballet to new audiences in effective ways that did not assume they had any familiarity with the form as culture or as entertainment. Rogge's leadership of the Radio City Music Hall Ballet began on the Music Hall's opening day and continued until 1952.

Early ballet in the United States developed and progressed in the movie palaces during the early 1920s. There were no resident, professional, full time ballet companies independent from the movie palaces. This cultural form was further restricted from the general public by the fact that performances by international touring ensembles were only made available at important theaters in major cities in the United States. This further limited access to rural demographics and to less-affluent socio-economic classes.

Ballet was new to American audiences, and served to enhance the overall theatrical, movie-going experience to the general public. Presented in this way, ballet addressed the taste of the American public and also served to introduce and establish a new, American aesthetic for the

treatment of ballet. Florence Rogge succeeded in fulfilling this component of Rockefeller's initial vision.

Rogge possessed the artistic skill and talent to present ballet to the American audiences. The majority of patrons in these movie-going audiences had either never seen ballet, would have never gone to see ballet outside of its association with mass entertainment, or had a preconceived idea that they did not like ballet. General audiences did not belong to the socio-economic community that was familiar with the elite high art form of ballet. The economic crisis of the Great Depression further solidified this response and distanced the general public.

An analysis of archival sources and oral histories of five dancers described tangential professional experiences. Despite the broad spectrum of dissimilarities, that included positive and negative employment expectations, all five dancers interviewed concurred that Rogge's work consistently demonstrated an effective and stellar use of ballet on "The Great Stage." The work of Florence Rogge was appreciated by public audiences from around the world and was held in high regard by other professionals.

As television became infused in a more prominent way into the lives of the American culture, audiences no longer filled the theatre. In 1978, it was agreed to demolish the magnificent structure. History rarely reflects that it was a member of the ballet company that engaged the support of Mary Anne Krupsak, New York State's lieutenant governor, for support in the fight to save the Music Hall (Francisco 118). Instead of "tearing down the house that Roxy built," the New York Landmark Preservation Commission proclaimed the Music Hall to be a National Landmark (Francisco 128). The inside and the outside of the building were mandated to continue unchanged in the traditional and original condition. In 1979, the Music Hall remained, but discontinued the traditional format that included a film, stage performances, and thematic

productions. It has become a popular and entrepreneurial venue for television broadcasts and commercial entertainment. In these ways, this one-of-a-kind Art Deco treasure is utilized as a “rental house arena” that can easily accommodate 6500 patrons during each show.

Seasonally, the Radio City Music Hall celebrates a remaining family tradition with the full stage production, *The Christmas Show*. The finale in the current production continues to include the traditional holiday favorite scene choreographed by Florence Rogge, *The Living Nativity*. Florence Rogge remains uncredited in recent programs, despite the fact that the scene has remained an essential thematic signature since 1932. Russell Markert, choreographer of the Rockette classic, *The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers*, seen in the contemporary seasonal stage show, appropriately, remains fully credited in current programs. During their decades at the Hall, Florence Rogge and Russell Markert served as principal choreographers for their respective ensembles.

Current history represented through publications, does not consistently credit Florence Rogge for her work, and in many cases, does not acknowledge the existence of the Radio City Music Hall Ballet Company. In 1999, author Gail Green Hannah wrote *Radio City Music Hall: A Legend Is Reborn*. Since the book was published by Radio City Entertainment and is available primarily at the Music Hall, I offer that the Music Hall presents the publication as a source of record. The book contains a collection of archival representations, including an 1804 black-and-white sketch of the Elgin Botanic Garden that occupied the land that would later become Rockefeller Center. Contemporary photos and narratives forward into the time of televised popular music award shows. A commemorative section of the original curtain, obtained during the Music Hall’s renovation, is included in the book, demonstrating production quality. Pages of photos accompany a narrative that seemingly, provides a comprehensive history of the Music

Hall. Despite the efforts made to accrue these photos and archives, there is no mention of the ballet company. There is no mention of Florence Rogge.

Rogge was willing and able to present ballet in a venue of mass, public entertainment, without compromising artistic integrity. Rogge used the Music Hall to enhance ballet, and simultaneously, used the hall to establish an American aesthetic. Ballet was maintained as an art form, and avoided transitioning into sports-like entertainment. The contributions of Florence Rogge are unique to ballet. Rockefeller, Rothafel and subsequently, Rogge, endured challenges that resulted in accomplishments, strides, and triumphs. Rockefeller's vision for the Radio City Music Hall was realized. The stage production forged a partnership between motion pictures and early ballet in residence in the United States, and initiated a new genre that was accessible to the public.

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