

# THE DANCE IN 1926<sup>1</sup>

BY LÉANDRE VAILLAT

THEY called me the man who did not know how to dance. I wanted to prove that this was not an exact definition, and that is why I appeared this afternoon at five o'clock, as I am doing every day now, on the dance floor of an establishment in the Champs Élysées that has its name written out in great red letters on the door.

Obviously one does not describe a dance hall as one does a palace at Versailles. These more up-to-date places have nothing definite about them. Even those that describe themselves as modern grow old as quickly as the others. And how they love to follow the styles! In fact, they exist only for them.

To build a dancing establishment along any regular lines out of durable material would be to commit a grave error. Nothing of the sort is done. We look upon them as we do upon a dress which lasts only a single season. Red walls covered with cheap lacquer, something like the varnish that is squirted on an automobile through a kind of pistol; orange and blue lanterns; a lounge. The dance floor in the middle is perfectly square, and all about it are tables, with spaces on two sides, one on the right for the tango orchestra and the other on the left for the jazz band.

I take a chair on the floor beside the tango orchestra, for it is less deafening than the other. The jazz musicians across the way are getting ready. They take their instruments out, open the

piano, and uncover their battery of noise. Just look at that black piano and the nickel trombone and saxophone, the stretched parchment on the drums and the brilliant cymbals. They are old acquaintances, but they are going to behave themselves in such a way that we shall feel ourselves in the presence of instruments entirely rejuvenated. After all, is not that the history of modern art? It has taken old words, brushed the dust off them, and refurbished them. It has turned them to new uses, to express new thoughts.

I like the chatter and the little noises of an orchestra tuning up. Those who are looking forward to it waken to a gentle sense of rhythm whose possibilities multiply before the opening of the attack overpowers the listener.

Let us consider some of the dances. First, the one-step. It has an easy, encouraging air: one — two; one — two. Military. It is what good musicians call a *rosalia*. This is something like a brisk walk on the jetty at a time when the sea air makes you feel like walking and ocean breezes stimulate. Men over forty prefer this dance, for they have reached the age at which, according to Miss Barney, one learns how to be young. The tune they are playing — I shall buy a phonograph record of it. I ask for the name of the title. 'Eccentric.' Why 'Eccentric'? This word reminds me of the pout that women made in 1914 when people talked to them about the one-step, fox-trot, and similar American products. 'Eccentric' was everything that was not the waltz,

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the polka, or the mazurka. 'Eccentric' was the joke associated with this pouting expression.

Perhaps it was also the title given to the period after it had passed, as titles are always given, simply to number and distinguish it from other times. Perfumery has to have such names, and also *apéritifs* with which human beings poison themselves. So does each song that we sing. And must every wave that breaks on the beach where the girls are walking in the sun have one, too? No, 'eccentric' signifies nothing, not even gestures or the attitudes of children or young people. Their bodies — I was about to say their lives — reflect the joy of living, of stretching out their arms, laughing, breaking nuts between their teeth, swimming, and winning a rally at tennis. 'Eccentric' means a great deal of noise for nothing.

Now for the fox-trot. This is a more complicated matter. The musicians do their worst to break up the monotony of double beats, to dissipate the impression that the one-step always gives, and the dancers do the same, adapting their steps as well as they can to the various conceptions that the composer has devised to break a regular rhythm. They march back and forth from side to side, and execute one, two, or three turns, take a polka step, go forward firmly or heavily, return or swerve. There is a great deal of humor in this adaptation. Until recently the modern dance invariably repeated itself over and over. It was tightly fastened to a certain musical order; but the dancers of to-day enjoy the greatest physical latitude so that they may react properly to the variation of noises. They loiter, they pretend to obey, then they refuse, deliberately accept, consent with reservations, give themselves over with abandon; it is a perpetual adjustment into which the peculiar spirit of our

epoch enters. Occasionally the humor is like Charlie Chaplin's, only rather less romantic. It resembles life in the open air or a coeducational class. People know each other for so long that they have no surprises left. If there is one, it will be a surprise party.

'I wonder what's become of Sally (*Je me demande ce qui est devenue Sally*).'  
Really, I ask, if we both looked for her she might not be far away. 'Steamboat Saï (*Le bateau de Saï*).'  
To these fox-trots one gives a woman's name as one does to a yacht. They are as pure as lake water.

The fact is that if the time after the war was the clandestine age of the dance, to-day is the sporting age. To the emphatic, chattering, grandiloquent noise of the trombone the nasal saxophone replies like shouting from the street.

The Charleston is next. 'Cat's whisker (*La moustache du chat*).'  
The musical theme of this is an amorous duet of screeching on the roofs, where the cats revert to savagery and test their claws, shrieking out long serenades full of amorous execration. Charleston. This is one of them. Do you dance? No? Then do embroidery, read a novel, play bridge in a corner. You are useless in 1926. In the fervent crowd you must realize that the Charleston has taken the place of blues and the shimmy. What will replace the Charleston from Tugurt to the Transvaal? The African tribes do nothing but the Charleston. The universality of this dance among the black people gives it esoteric significance.

But what of it? Undress the dancers, — mentally only, for it would not always be fun in reality, — eliminate all the little individual mannerisms, lead them back to essentials — in brief, reduce the Charleston to its simplest elements and analyze it. You will find that it is entirely a matter of angles.

The angle between the bust and the legs, the angle between the thighs and the shins, the angles between the ankle and the foot and the foot and the floor. The double angle of legs bent like parentheses. It is an arabesque step, but broken. It is a circular step. In the fox-trot, which we knew in France before the Charleston, but which came from a country where the Charleston existed before the fox-trot, we took new turns to left and right. Here in the Charleston there are no such things, only a series of broken lines.

All the steps are executed on the toes and then on the heels. The foot is put down flat only to give the body a point of departure. This is carried out so thoroughly that each of the steps falls into two parts, and the two rhythms, ordinarily so equal, so mechanical, and so monotonous, are transformed into four parts constantly syncopated and cut — all of which goes to emphasize this impression of constant breaks. It is a dance like broken sticks. A foot pivots on the toe, and the other foot kicks out beside it, beating the air with a jerky, irregular movement until it comes to rest on the ground to allow the other to execute the same flip. You end by letting yourself be tossed — not swayed — by the cadence of feet constantly beating together on the floor. A noise like that of a donkey on a village street, or like the light rattle of ballet shoes in the Opéra. The Charleston is so successfully danced in one spot that it nearly realizes the ideal of requiring an infinite amount of time to cover a very small space. It is the art of utilizing the dance floor. The dancer looks as if he were pushing his partner with effort. She retreats, defending her ground inch by inch.

You can dance a fox-trot with the air of a Charleston, but if your neighbors are dancing the Charleston you will look like a galloping horse among

others who are doing a Spanish step. It will not be easy. You will run into obstacles. But do what my professor advised — throw out your chest, and stick out behind too. That is the way the Negroes do it. True, they are better made for that purpose. Josephine Baker, who started the Charleston at the Revue Nègre in the Champs Élysées music hall, did not expect to see the Charleston danced in clothes or in evening dress. Clothes or dress prevent our discerning the primitive geometry of the legs. Evidently that is what makes the spectacle of perfect young girls dancing the Charleston look so comic to me. I compare the docility with which they give themselves over to its imperious intonations with the insolence with which they would answer any indiscreet question or any demand whatever. Unhesitatingly they execute to the letter my professor's very realistic advice. Below the waist their bodies move frantically about, while above the waist their faces are distant, almost satiated in appearance. All these one-step and fox-trot tunes, carried to the four corners of the earth on phonograph records, are as famous as the name of a prize fighter, an assassin, or a movie actor, and they also carry with them the renown of some famous jazz band that first launched them to success. People speak now of the Savoy orchestra or Vincent Lopez with the same tone that we used to talk about the Colonne or Lamoureux. A group of my friends take an airplane to go and hear the jazz at the Savoy Hotel in London. They leave at noon, carrying with them a suitcase with evening clothes. They dine and dance at the Savoy and return the next day by the same route. I say nothing of Cocteau, who did his part with his band in the *Bœuf sur le toit*, nor of the pianist Wiener, whose arrangements of fox-trots for the piano have a

mathematical spirituality. *L'enfant et le sortilège* by Ravel is full of reminiscences of jazz. Critics like Schoeffner write books about his musical influence. A real artist showed me analogies between jazz and Chopin. He demonstrated how the left hand played the rôle of a battery while the right hand executed an airy melody carrying the rhythm, like the saxophone.

Paul Whiteman—and I do not know who he was before the war—has made several million dollars out of this craze in the United States. Others know receipts for cocktails; he knows the receipt for jazz. When he has broken in enough expert hands he baptizes the group and authorizes it to bear his name. We recently heard one of these legitimate children of his at the Ambassadeurs.

Paul Whiteman,—the white man,—simply this name written in gold medals on a banner tells the whole story of the revulsion of Americans against the Negro. To boast of being white! See where the famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, has at last led us. There is a certain amount of ingratitude involved, for without the Negro dance where would they be? The whole merit of the Americans consists in having put this technique within the reach of white people. It is, however, a relative merit, and actually consists in having developed the Negro dance into an article of exportation. The jazz band of the Savoy Hotel in London feels the need of going every year to refresh itself at the source of the jazz tradition, to intoxicate itself with mechanical rhythms that inevitably evaporate after a few months in London.

Astounded people about me ask: Is it beautiful or ugly? The question is like that of the eighteenth century: Is it good or wicked? It depends on the instruments, on those who play them, and on those who listen. Into our

abusive, pervasive anarchy jazz instills the clear mathematics of clever, delicate rhythm. It is a compensation and a marvelous balance. For it takes into account the intoxication and lack of equilibrium from which we all suffer. You think it is going to fall apart, lose its beat, and retrieve it rather ineptly. Absurd. It goes through, smiling, to the end. It simply gives the hearer the slip. Jazz livens our reflexes. It is a musical cocktail.

Now for the tango. The lamps suddenly go out. A heavy light succeeds the diamondlike scintillation and glows dark red. The gold walls grow dim and the contours of various objects fade. The tango orchestra succeeds the jazz band. It is good psychology, this intelligent correspondence between lighting and music—banal, perhaps, but how just! It gives the room the appearance of a shady dive. You think of Argentine cabarets where the tango holds sway. The one they are playing now is called '*Cœur de banlieue*.' It celebrates the kind of love that has every prerogative, that makes people dance and kill their enemies with dagger-thrusts in little suburban dance halls. In this dim light the dancers' faces appear olive-colored. Their expressions are more enigmatic, their origins more uncertain.

A little while ago, when jazz was beating in all ears, people's faces leapt about as a fisherman's bob plunges and rebounds in the water. Now they turn slowly in a continual mysterious flow which does not have any relation to the ground beneath them. Imperceptible impulses push forward or retard their course. It is like the clever carelessness of a potter who knows that the imperfection of his vase will reveal the living imprint of his hands. This kind of syncopation, which almost divides itself into a five-beat measure, is difficult to follow. In bending toward each

other the figures lose none of their proud distance. Dancers turn, hesitate, separate. They push or drag their partners with them. This is quite physical, but no effort is involved beyond a definite interruption of the circles in which they move. When the dance stops it is still a broken circle and can be taken up again at the point at which it was left. A gentle abandon, defeat due to laziness. The tango, which in recent years assumed a European polish, reverts to its origins. People dance it better—I mean in a more Argentine style, more subtly and with more curves.

The orchestra, too, plays more in accordance with its original traditions. Its composition is almost the same as that of the Spanish *orquesta típica*. That is what the Argentineans call a tango orchestra, in opposition to the classical orchestra and the jazz band. It includes the bandoleon, — a kind of long accordion, — a banjo, another guitar, and a piano which plays the part of percussion instruments, a battery of flat sounds beaten out mechanically in a most baffling style. There are violins — they are not essential. These orchestras remind me very much of old gypsies dressed in red waistcoats. But how much better I like these Argentineans in tuxedos, with white waistcoats and black cravats! They have the dull air of men who live only at night, and this gives their music and their way of playing it a serious air. All the melancholy of the rancho is evoked. Here are popular songs sprouting from the very sources of life itself. How easy it is to understand that on every Friday over there tango festivals are celebrated.

I am trying to disengage what all these modern dances have in common, and to group and associate them with the style of the age in which we are living. On reflection I believe that they can be divided into two families — on the one hand the one-step, the fox-trot, and the Charleston; on the other, the Boston, the *paso doble*, and the tango. The symmetry of the two orchestras exactly symbolizes this division.

The jazz band is represented by a broken succession of straight lines, and the tango orchestra by an interrupted series of curves. In both cases the desire to break the line, to prevent it from arriving at any conclusion, is obvious. Indeed, that is one of the characteristics of contemporary art. It is concise and compact, the enemy of rhetoric and facile transition. Is not the straight line, as opposed to the curved line, the symbol of the machine and of utility victoriously affirming itself in contemporary works? Is this not also the tendency of the decorative art of 1925, which replaced the arabesque design with the angular, the sphere with the polyhedron, freehand tracing with compass drawing? But is not the decorative art of 1925 as far away from us as the so-called modern style of 1900? More advance signs of decadence in the modern dance are appearing at this moment. Among them is the hostile attitude shown in most of the recent revues to the Negroes, for they nearly all contain some little jibe against the black invasion, but first of all is the fact that one can look at the whole matter philosophically, as if one were already speaking of the past.

## A JOURNEY TO ABYSSINIA. V<sup>1</sup>

BY JEAN D'ESME

WE have had to get together a caravan in the midst of all these receptions, calls, luncheons, tennis parties, breakfasts, and dinners. It is a task that one must have attempted to appreciate. We were bewildered at the outset by a diversity of counsels. Some told us: 'Hire your mules from a *neggadi*. It is the only sensible thing to do, and will save you an immense amount of worry.' Others advised us: 'Buy your own animals. Buy them! It is the only thing to do if you are to get any pleasure and satisfaction from your trip.' We tried both ways, and discovered that each has its peculiar disadvantages.

Bargaining for our beasts, although it was but one item in these protracted negotiations, was no simple matter. We had just twenty-nine days, according to our schedule, for our preparations. That is a fairly liberal amount of time in Europe, but in this country of procrastination, indolence, and trickery, where it takes an hour to buy a box of matches, twenty-nine days were all too short. Eight days before the date set for our departure we had procured only twelve of the forty animals necessary for our expedition. On the day after arriving at Addis Abeba we engaged a *caporal*, or caravan leader. He was a sturdy, vivacious little fellow, in perpetual movement, — always gesticulating, shouting, and rushing hither and thither, — and was blessed with an infallible memory, which enabled him to keep accounts with minute exact-

ness, although he could neither read nor write. Twenty days before the time for our departure he rushed up to us, talking excitedly: 'By Menelik! By Menelik, we'll be ready! I'll see that you get mules. But they're awfully dear this year. Pasturage is scarce. The twenty-five dollars a head I thought would do are not enough.'

'Let's make it a little more, then. How much?'

A pause ensued, during which our little caporal scratched his beard frantically. We profited by the opportunity to ask: 'When shall we be ready?'

'I think it will be safer — for you, not for me; I am only interested in your interests — well, to tell the truth, it would be better to pay a little higher.'

'How much?'

'Ah — ah — five — say thirty dollars a head instead of twenty-five. Two hundred dollars more for the forty animals.'

We stacked on the table a pile of twenty bright silver dollars just drawn from the vaults of the Bank of Abyssinia, all bearing the august features of Maria Theresa of Austria. Then we stacked up by the side of them nine other piles of the same height, without taking the trouble to count them. That is a custom of the country, which we soon learned. Our man verified the count of the first pile, saw that the other piles were the same height, swept the money into a fold of his *chamma* with one movement of the hand, swore

<sup>1</sup> From *L'Écho de Paris* (Clerical daily), August 31, September 8