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Recommended Citation

Shen, Fay, "Finding Psychology in Ballet: Antony Tudor's Not-So-Psychological Ballets" (2021).

Undergraduate Library Research Awards. 3.

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Finding Psychology in Ballet:
Antony Tudor's Not-So-Psychological Ballets

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DANC 281

May 1, 2020

Antony Tudor is considered to be one of the greatest choreographers of the twentieth century. He began his career in London, however, most of his works were created in the United States during his work with the American Ballet Theatre (ABT). Tudor was known for his very distinctive psychological ballets that differed significantly from what was being staged at the time. He choreographed ballets that conveyed obvious emotion through very intentional and also subtle movements and gestures.¹ Some of his most well-known works include *Jardin aux Lilas* (*The Lilac Garden*) (1936), *Dark Elegies* (1937), *Pillar of Fire* (1942), and *The Leaves Are Fading* (1975). What set his ballets apart from classical and romantic ballets, such as *The Nutcracker* and *La Sylphide*, was that there was no “decorative choreography.”² Every turn and every leap in Tudor’s ballets enhanced the storytelling and his works became labeled as psychological ballets because they left audiences thinking about the story rather than just the dancing. However, from a psychologist’s point of view, the term “psychological” actually may not be representative of what Tudor’s ballets really are. Psychology is a discipline with a variety of branches of study and in order to call something “psychological,” one must first understand what psychology is and how it can be applied. Dance history presumes that Antony Tudor’s ballets are “psychological”, yet from a psychological point of view, Tudor’s work might not be regarded otherwise.

What is psychology? The word itself comes from the Greek word “psyche,” meaning the human soul, mind, or spirit.³ The official definition of psychology provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) is “...the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline

¹ Rachel S. Chamberlain. Duerden, *The Choreography of Antony Tudor: Focus on Four Ballets* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003))

² The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “Antony Tudor,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., April 16, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antony-Tudor>

³ “Psychology,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychology>

embraces all aspects of the human experience [...] ‘the understanding of behavior’ is the enterprise of psychologists.”⁴ Essentially, the study of psychology focuses on why and how people think and behave the way they do. There are many, many fields of study in psychology such as developmental, clinical, health, social, and sports psychology. Most psychology involved in the arts is forensic and/or abnormal psychology. Forensic psychology is a specialized field of psychology involving providing expertise and insight for legal situations.⁵ For example, a forensic psychologist could help law enforcement determine why someone committed a homicide. This is related to abnormal psychology, which is the branch of psychology that studies people who are considered “abnormal” due to having a mental disorder.⁶ Ted Bundy, the Joker from Batman, and the Zodiac Killer are all known for displaying abnormal behavior.

The term “psychological” is not only used to describe ballets, it has also been used frequently in cinema to describe films of the horror or thriller genre. Psychological thrillers, like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, involve both forensic and abnormal psychology. They began to rise in popularity in the 1920s and 30s, a few years before Tudor started creating his ballets, which may be part of the reason why they were labeled as psychological.⁷ At that time, people believed that anything that was meant to purely entertain but instead got the audience to think was psychological. Movies, plays, and ballets with darker themes were also seen as psychological. Another attribute of entertainment that has been deemed “psychological” is realism. Tudor himself once said that he wanted “real people, not dancers” and that he wanted to prove that

⁴ “About the APA,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, July 2019), <https://www.apa.org/about/>

⁵ “Forensic Psychology,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, July 2019), <https://www.apa.org/ed/graduate/specialize/forensic>

⁶ “APA Dictionary of Psychology: Abnormal Psychology,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, July 2019), <https://dictionary.apa.org/abnormal-psychology>

⁷ Cliona, “The History and Development of a Psychological Thriller,” LinkedIn SlideShare (LinkedIn, March 9, 2014), <https://www.slideshare.net/cli0na/the-history-and-development-of-a-psychological-thriller>

dancers were “real” through his choreography.⁸ Ballets such as *Swan Lake* are pure fantasy while Tudor’s ballets deal with logical concepts that most people can relate to, which leads to audiences contemplating how what they just watched on stage relates to their own lives.

These are all reasons why dance history deems Tudor’s ballets as psychological, still, in order to evaluate how psychological these ballets really are from a psychological point of view, different measures must be used. Psychology is a science, and science has rules and methods. So, in this evaluation of Tudor’s ballets, a ballet must have one or more of the following criteria to be considered psychological. First, following the definition of psychology, the story of the ballet must have to be related to the minds and thought processes of the characters. For example, a ballet could reveal to the audience exactly how a character arrives at a decision by taking them through a detailed account of their course of thought. Second, the ballet must illustrate a psychological process or illness through symbolism and/or storytelling. For instance, the plot of the ballet could be depicting a mental illness such as depression using symbolism. Third, the ballet must have an “abnormal” character who has a mental illness which significantly impacts the plot.⁹ Examples of mental illnesses include schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Jardin Aux Lilas (The Lilac Garden) is widely considered to be the first psychological ballet in history. Dance writer and researcher Rachel S. Chamberlain Duerden categorizes this ballet as one of Tudor’s “story” ballets in her book, *The Choreography of Antony Tudor: Focus on Four Ballets*.¹⁰ Duerden sees this as a story ballet because there is a clear beginning, middle,

⁸ Anna Kisselgoff, “Psychological Aspects of the Dance,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 1987, sec. A, pp. 28, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/21/arts/psychological-aspects-of-the-dance.html>)

⁹ An “abnormal character” will be defined as a person who behaves in extreme ways that do not conform to the society they are in due to psychological issues.

¹⁰ Rachel S. Chamberlain. Duerden, *The Choreography of Antony Tudor: Focus on Four Ballets* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003))

and end to the plot, unlike some of Tudor's other ballets such as *Dark Elegies*. *Jardin Aux Lilas* depicts the story of a young woman named Caroline at a garden reception where she says goodbye to her friends and family before she is to marry a man who she does not love. She encounters her lover who she leaves standing alone on the stage at the end of the ballet while she walks away with her fiancé.¹¹ The story does not have any obvious psychology to it. Alastair Macaulay of *The New York Times* wrote, "Nobody played a psychiatrist in it, but it's steps, gestures, and phrases showed flickering aspects of repression, denial, private longing, heartbreak, personal conflict, and hypocrisy..."¹² Looking at the first criteria, *Lilac* does not take the audience through the thought process of Caroline. Her conflicting feelings about not marrying the man she loves are very apparent but it is definitely more of a matter of heart rather of mind. This is a love story with an unhappy ending, not a look into the mind of a young bride. This also goes for the second criteria of expressing a psychological process or illness. The closest thing to that present in the ballet is love and heartbreak. But again, those concepts cannot be explained purely by psychology. The last criteria of having a character with a mental illness is also not met. Thus, even though there is the presence of many strong emotions, *Jardin Aux Lilas* cannot be deemed a psychological ballet.

The second ballet examined herein is Tudor's *Dark Elegies*. Duerden puts this ballet in the "mood ballet" category since it has more of an abstract idea behind the plot rather than a narrative.¹³ *The New York Times*'s Jack Anderson would agree with Duerden with his description

¹¹ "Jardin Aux Lilas (Lilac Garden)," The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust (The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.antonytudor.org/ballets/lilac-garden>

¹² Alastair Macaulay, "Under Analysis: The Psychology of Tudor's Ballets," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/arts/dance/11maca.html>

¹³ Rachel S. Chamberlain. Duerden, *The Choreography of Antony Tudor: Focus on Four Ballets* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003))

of this ballet being “totally plotless yet emotionally rich.”¹⁴ *Dark Elegies* shows a very tight-knit peasant community of people dealing with the loss of their children.¹⁵ Rachel Rizzuto of *Dance Teacher* magazine describes this piece as a “mediation on grieving.”¹⁶ The title of the ballet itself gives away what the ballet is about. In her article, “Notes on *Dark Elegies*,” in *Dance Chronicle*, Elizabeth Sawyer explains that, “Tudor chose the plural, ‘elegies,’ to indicate that people react differently to personal trauma.”¹⁷ Each woman, man, and couple that dances in the ballet expresses their grief in different ways. Additionally, each section of the ballet represents a distinct stage of the grieving process. According to the APA, there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹⁸ Tudor’s choreography embodies each stage in very effective way that allows the audience to see exactly what the characters are going through. Sawyer describes the last scene of *Dark Elegies* as, “the [completion of] the gradual healing process as the dancers become more connected to one another.”¹⁹ After this last scene, the dancers exit the stage into a bright light showing that they have healed and are moving on, depicting acceptance, the final stage of grief.

This ballet clearly meets the criteria needed to be called a psychological ballet. With the first criteria, the minds and thought processes of the characters are clearly explored since the entire ballet centers around the characters expressing their grief. The next criterion requires the ballet to illustrate a psychological process, which *Dark Elegies* does by exploring the five stages

¹⁴ Jack Anderson, “Dance: Tudor's 'Dark Elegies,' by Ballet Theatre,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 1987, p. 9, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/06/arts/dance-tudor-s-dark-elegies-by-ballet-theater.html>

¹⁵ “Dark Elegies,” The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust (The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.antonytudor.org/ballets/dark-elegies>

¹⁶ Rachel Rizzuto, “Antony Tudor 1908–1987,” *Dance Teacher* (Dance Teacher, September 17, 2019), <https://www.dance-teacher.com/antony-tudor-1908-1987-2392654233.html>

¹⁷ Elizabeth Sawyer. “Notes on Dark Elegies.” *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–27. <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rih&AN=A481814&site=eds-live&scope=site.>

¹⁸ “APA Dictionary of Psychology: Stages of Grief,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, July 2019), <https://dictionary.apa.org/stages-of-grief>

¹⁹ Elizabeth Sawyer. “Notes on Dark Elegies.” *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–27. <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rih&AN=A481814&site=eds-live&scope=site.>

of grief. The last criterion requires the presence of a character with a mental illness. It could be argued that all the characters experience some sort of depression in the ballet. However, the type of depression that they experience is not major depressive disorder, which is the type that comes to most people's minds when hearing the word depression. This kind of depression is not caused by trauma or something unfortunate happening, unlike the depression depicted in this ballet. The characters experience situational depression, also known as having a depressive episode. This goes away with time, which the ballet shows.²⁰ At the same time, it is not clear if the characters are simply dealing with grief or if they really are depressed, so it is unclear if this criterion is met. Regardless of whether this last criterion is met, *Dark Elegies* definitely meets the other two criteria, allowing it to be deemed a psychological ballet.

Tudor choreographed *Pillar of Fire* in 1942. This ballet has been designated to the “story ballet” category by Duerden because of the detailed plot and complex characters.²¹ *Pillar of Fire* tells the story of a woman named Hagar who has two sisters, one older and one younger. Hagar fears that she will have the same fate as her older sister who is a spinster. So, instead of waiting for the man she loves to return the same feelings, she finds company in another man whom she does not love. After facing criticism from the townspeople, Hagar leaves the other man, and ultimately, Hagar and the man that she loves come together and dance.²² This ballet showcases Tudor's social expressionism the best because of how moments of pain are shown throughout the ballet. Burt Folkart of the *Los Angeles Times* proclaims that *Pillar of Fire* “typified the Tudor

²⁰ Situational depression has the potential to develop into major depressive disorder if it persists for more than one to two years depending on the individual.

²¹ Rachel S. Chamberlain. Duerden, *The Choreography of Antony Tudor: Focus on Four Ballets* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003)

²² “Pillar of Fire,” The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust (The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.antonytudor.org/ballets/pillar-of-fire>

genre.”²³ Then again, this “Tudor genre” and social expressionism is not enough to make the ballet psychological. The plot does not include a character with a mental illness or an overarching psychological theme. One could argue that it does convey to audiences the thought process of Hagar when she has to face the angry townspeople shaming her, yet that idea fits more into sociology, the study of society. Overall, even though *Pillar of Fire* may have been the best representation of Tudor’s ideology and choreographic style, it cannot be considered to be a psychological ballet.

The last ballet of Tudor’s discussed in this paper is *The Leaves Are Fading* (1975). Similar to *Dark Elegies*, Duerden categorizes this ballet as a “mood ballet.” *The Leaves Are Fading* begins with a woman stepping on stage into a glade during daylight and she begins to reflect on her past memories. Dancers act out her nostalgic thoughts until it darkens and the woman leaves having reflected on her youth.²⁴ *The Leaves Are Fading* was Tudor’s last major ballet and the day before his death in 1987 Tudor was rehearsing the ballet with ABT.²⁵ Some dance scholars, such as Sawyer believe that this was Tudor’s way of coming to peace with his personal life.²⁶ The process of creating this ballet may have been cathartic for Tudor and the audience may have also experienced catharsis through watching the ballet, which is a psychological process. Nevertheless, *The Leaves Are Fading* does not actually meet any of the three criteria to be considered psychological. There is no psychological disorder, process, or

²³ Burt A. Folkart, “American Ballet Theater’s Antony Tudor Dies at 79,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-04-21-mn-298-story.html>)

²⁴ “The Leaves Are Fading,” The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust (The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.antonytudor.org/ballets/the-leaves-are-fading>)

²⁵ Burt A. Folkart, “American Ballet Theater’s Antony Tudor Dies at 79,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-04-21-mn-298-story.html>)

²⁶ Elizabeth Sawyer. “Fading Leaves and Glowing Memories.” *Dance Chronicle* 32, no. 1 (2009): pp. 4-56. www.jstor.org/stable/25598190.0)

theme present in the ballet. While the ballet invokes psychological processes in those who watch it, the actual content of this ballet is not psychological.

Many of Tudor's ballets seem to get the audience to engage in psychological processes without actually having any psychological content, especially the ballets that Duerden categorizes as "mood ballets." Those who dubbed these ballets as "psychological" did not mean psychological in the sense that it is related to the study of psychology, they meant it in the sense that these ballets did something other than purely entertain. Tudor's ballets cause his audience to feel strong emotions which is why those who watch describe them as psychological. With the exception of *Dark Elegies*, Tudor's psychological ballets do not in fact embody any aspect of psychology. A better word to describe his ballets may be "therapeutic" or "cathartic" or simply "thought-provoking." Regardless of what his ballets should be called, Antony Tudor truly did create his own genre of ballet. Some argue that Jules Perrot's *Giselle* is the first psychological ballet, but *Giselle* is very different from Tudor's works. *Giselle* actually does meet the psychological criteria of having a character have a mental disorder. In the ballet, a young woman named Giselle goes mad and dies after finding out that the man she loves lied to her. After death she becomes a Willi and her purpose becomes getting revenge on any man that she sees. Both the madness of Giselle and the serial-killer-like Willis fall into the category of abnormal psychology, qualifying *Giselle* as a psychological ballet which does make it the first psychological ballet but the fantasy aspect of *Giselle* is what separates it from Tudor's psychological ballets. Most audiences watching *Giselle* would not feel a strong connection to the characters and story unlike those watching Tudor's ballets. Antony Tudor's works may not be about psychology, but they did get people to think in ways that no other ballet had been able to do up to that point. In looking from a psychological point of view, Tudor's ballets cannot be called psychological.

Conversely, from a ballet audience's point of view, Antony Tudor's ballets are truly psychological.

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