Dancing across Copenhagen

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The Space for Dance in Copenhagen
In the early decades of the 1900s, the space for dance in Copenhagen could best be described as ‘expansive’. Shaped by international networks of agents and individual artists, it was a space of creative potential with a strong Nordic character, eager critics and spectators with a desire for artistic renewal.

Numerous factors contributed to the hunger for change. The resistance of the artistic directors of the Royal Danish Ballet towards anything and everything ‘foreign’ (i.e. new choreographic works that did not come from within the Danish tradition) not only drew audiences toward the private theatres, but also encouraged the more adventurous dancers to leave the company. Guest performances in the Danish capital by some of the pioneers of early modernist dance, and other international dance artists who personified ‘the new’ in the eyes of the larger public, further sharpened this taste for renewal. Especially important was the prolonged visit to Copenhagen by Mikhail Fokine, former choreographer of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, and his wife Vera Fokina. The fact that the Russian stars stayed on for about 18 months in 1918-1919 placed the city firmly on the map as a place of interest for ambitious Nordic dancers with a taste for experimentation and international collaboration across the arts.

In this essay I argue that Copenhagen constituted both a vortex and a node in the rhizomatic, nomadic and three-dimensional web of the Nordic avant-garde. Thus, from the point of view of dance, not only did the Danish capital deserve its nickname ‘little Paris’ and its reputation as a ‘waiting room’ on the road to the French capital (Abildgaard 2002: 175-176), but it was also an attractive stop on the
The Russian dancers Michail Fokine and Vera Fokina with Elna Larsen on arrival at Copenhagen Central Station 24 May 1925. Photographer unknown. Polfoto.

itineraries of touring artists en route from Paris, Hamburg and Berlin to the other Nordic capitals and St. Petersburg.

Structuring my argument around a selection of Copenhagen’s many dance venues, I shall identify some of the movements (both gestural, generic and geographical) that defined the new in terms of dance, before proceeding to a brief discussion of this newness in relation to ideas and aesthetic principles that have retrospectively been seen as defining characteristics of the early avant-garde(s).