

# Dancing with literature: An overview of South African ballroom dancing

Alida Green

*Department Historical and Heritage Studies  
University of Pretoria*

## *Samevatting*

Hoewel baldanse deel maak van Suid-Afrika se ryk erfenis, is hierdie sosiale aktiwiteit se kulturele-en maatskaplike waarde tot dusvêr nie in diepte ondersoek nie. Hierdie artikel gee 'n kort oorsig oor dansliteratuur wat tans in Suid-Afrika beskikbaar is; die stilisties aspekte en die teikenlesers van hierdie bronne word bespreek. Daar word ook kortliks na internasionale literatuur verwys aangesien dít die ontwikkeling van dans en plaaslike baldans, kontekstualiseer. *Dancing with literature* bespreek ook vlugtig die beperkinge wat deur vooropgestelde metodologieë op dansliteratuur geplaas word. Die leemtes in dansgeskiedenis-bronne word uitgewys. Verder word die belangrikheid van dans as betroubare kultuurvorm, wat die gees van die samelewing reflekteer, bespreek.

### **Keywords:**

Ballroom dancing; Dance literature; Cultural history; Leisure; Dancing history of South Africa.

## **Introduction**

While ballroom dancing has a longstanding history in South Africa, as yet it is a fairly untraversed field of study. This dance form can be defined as “a social gathering with the emphasis on dancing... a choreography of varying elaborateness invented by a professional dancing-master and performed either at a social gathering or on the stage...”<sup>1</sup> Given the popularity of ballroom dancing in South African society<sup>2</sup> it needs to be valued not only for, as the above definition suggests, its physical and aesthetic appeal, but also for its

---

1 Grove music, “Ballo” (available at <http://www.grovemusic.com.innopac.up.ac.za/data/articlea/music/0/01910.xml> as accessed on 10 July 2005).

2 See S Dalton, “Ritmes, passies en swier”, *Insig*, Maart 2000, p. 36 where ballroom dancing is rated as the third most popular leisure activity after soccer and boxing.

social and cultural significance. It has been said that “social dancing reflects the Spirit of the Age more faithfully than any other art”.<sup>3</sup> This points to the significant role dance can be seen to play in society. Moreover, in what historians describe as a “post-modern globalising world”, it has become apparent that while historical studies tend to be more thematic, focusing on specific topics, there is also a tendency to focus more on previously “ignored histories” of the marginalized or suppressed groups.<sup>4</sup> Where South African revisionist history, for example, focused mainly on “resistance politics, racial consciousness and class formation” two or more decades ago, historians are now diversifying and “turning their attention to the history of sport... culture, education...”.<sup>5</sup> There is a need now to write the “new kinds of history making, the histories of families, of sport or music...”.<sup>6</sup> Leading cultural historian Peter Burke argues, “[d]ance history, once the province of specialists, is now taken seriously by cultural historians and discussed in relation to politics and society”.<sup>7</sup>

This article presents a brief literature overview where the general trends in dancing literature will be discussed. The current problems in writing dance history will be outlined, emphasizing the need for a “new”, more inclusive, historical portrait of South African society.

### **Dancing through South Africa’s history’s pages**

There is a variety of material available on ballroom dancing. This includes books and articles as well as archival, audio-visual and oral sources. However, literary sources specifically dedicated to an exposition of dance history are limited. Most publications focusing on dancing either emphasise the technical aspects of dancing or discuss it as a mere social pastime. In the next sections these general patterns in dance literature will be discussed.

General South African texts seldom refer to ballroom dancing and the word

- 
- 3 Lancer, “In the dancing world: Official results of the examinations”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 May 1935, p. 8.
- 4 A Blunt & G Rose (eds.), *Writing women and space: colonial and postcolonial geographies* (New York, Guilford, 1994); H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people* (London, Hurst & Company, 2003); R Morrell & L Ouzgane (eds.), *African masculinities: men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); A Mountain, *An unsung heritage* (Cape Town, David Phillip, 2004); P Brock (ed.), *Indigenous peoples and religious change* (Leiden, Brill, 2005).
- 5 G Vahed, “Review: Vahed on Murray & Merret, Caught behind: Race & Politics in Springbok Cricket” (available at H-SAAFRICA@H-NET.MSU.EDU, as accessed on 21 May 2005).
- 6 M Morris, *Every step of the way. The journey to freedom in South Africa* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2004), p. 321.
- 7 P Burke, *What is cultural history?* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006), p. 91.

“ballroom dancing” hardly ever appears in the indexes. Only a few publications that appeared in the past decade mention or give a short discussion on the influence of “dancing”, but these remain chequered and superficial.<sup>8</sup> Some earlier studies approach dance purely as a social activity of a certain group. For example, in his 1955 commentary on the early leisure activities of the Dutch settlers, the cultural historian Victor de Kock, briefly refers to the informal, but popular, nature of seventeenth century travellers’ dances at the Cape. He refers to the “...Dutch sailors who came ashore visiting inns where they could pass away the time in merrymaking, and dancing their own boisterous measures...”<sup>9</sup> Both A.F. Hattersley<sup>10</sup> and CG Botha<sup>11</sup> in their social histories published in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, emphasise dancing’s popularity. They described its prevalence in the eighteenth century South African ballroom as adding to the “...colour of life”<sup>12</sup> and that “amongst the wealthy who had young folks in the house a dance was a regular pastime...”<sup>13</sup> In the 1970s, in their seminal *Oxford history*, Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson mention how “the Bantu” danced and point to social activities (including dancing) as separating the various races in South Africa.<sup>14</sup>

A decade later, in his popular pictorial history of South Africa, journalist Peter Joyce discusses dancing mainly as a form of white recreation. Here he mentions the first national ballroom dance competition held in 1928 and refers to heats that were danced throughout South Africa with the final taking place in Johannesburg.<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s passing reference is also made to specific ballroom dances, like the tango and the waltz, in texts such as *Cape Town the making of a city*<sup>16</sup> and *South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: chronicles of an era*.<sup>17</sup> These are also books written in the context of the white ballroom. A short, but annotated overview of ballroom (social) dancing appeared in the

---

8 American historian, Jaques Barzun, for example, discusses how the waltz can be seen as the start of a more “sexually” aware age. See J Barzun, *From dawn to decadence: 1500 to the present: 500 years of Western cultural life* (USA, Harper Collins publishers, 2001), p. 500.

9 V de Kock, *The fun they had! The pastimes of our forefathers* (Cape Town, Howard B Timmins, 1955), p. 47.

10 AF Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa* (Cape Town, AA Balkema, 1969), p. 17.

11 CG Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony with social customs in South Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century* (Cape Town, C Struik, 1973), pp. 51, 85.

12 AF Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa*, p. 17.

13 CG Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony with social customs in South Africa...*, pp. 51, 85.

14 M Wilson & L Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford history of South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1971), pp. 145, 162, 266.

15 P Joyce, *Reader's Digest: South Africa's Yesterdays* (Cape Town, Reader's Digest Association, 1981), pp. 102-103.

16 N Worden, E van Heyningen & V Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town the making of a city: An illustrated social history* (Cape Town, David Philip Publishers, 1998), pp. 139; 148-149.

17 P Joyce, *South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: chronicles of an era* (Cape Town, Struik Publishers, 2000), pp. 31, 141, 176, 103.

1971 *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*. Dorothy Dymond, who was a life member of the “Imperial Society of Teachers of Ballroom Dancing” as well as an examiner of the “South African Association of Teachers of Dancing” in Cape Town, was the author of this contribution. She claims that “in South Africa, like overseas... festive occasions were seen as an opportunity for a social ball” where “musicians played the accompanying music”. She however presents an overview that is entirely white and colonial with only a single concluding sentence referring to “coloured” and “bantu” participation.<sup>18</sup>

Dance is also referred to in publications dealing with predominantly Afrikaans related topics. In his publication *Solank daar musiek is...Musiek en musiekmakers in Suid-Afrika* (As long as there’s music... Music and music makers in South Africa) Jan Bouws, a musical scientist from the Netherlands, traces the development of music and musicians, especially songs and composers, in South Africa from the 1650s to the 1980s. Bouws emphasises the popularity of ballroom dancing describing for example, certain dances like the “minuet” and the waltz as well as the prominence of dance masters like Etienne Garoute and the importance of dance for the early pioneers.<sup>19</sup> The lack of a detailed index, footnotes and source list however makes it difficult to follow up on primary sources and detracts from the usefulness of the book. Another publication specifically aimed at the Afrikaans speaking sector of South Africa includes *Die etiek van dans* (The ethics of dance) which was written by JH van Wyk in the mid 1970s and forms part of a series of works published by the *Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys*’s (PUCHE) *Instituut vir Bevordering van Calvinisme* (Institute for the Enhancement of Calvinism).<sup>20</sup> Van Wyk considers the opinions of various prominent persons and institutions on dance including: church leaders like John Calvin; the Nederduits Gereformeerde (NG) and Gereformeerde Churches; South African writers, like JD du Toit (Totius); and the Bible. Although Van Wyk explores both institutions that support and condemn dances, and urges church members to differentiate between different dances and the influence they have on society, he is highly critical of the “modern dance” trend. He regards folk dances (volksdansen) as one of the few dances that can have a positive influence and warns readers *inter alia* against the

---

18 D Dymond, “Dancing Ballroom”, DJ Potgieter (ed.), *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa* III (Cape Town, NASOU, 1971) p. 558.

19 J Bouws, *Solank daar musiek is...Musiek en musiekmakers in Suid-Afrika (1652-1982)* (Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 1982), pp. 46-47, 112-113.

20 JH van Wyk, *Instituut vir die bevordering van Calvinisme. Die etiek van dans* (Potchefstroom, I.B.C., studiestuk 97, November 1975).

dangers of social dancing when married leading to promiscuity.<sup>21</sup> Although almost obsessed with the “dangers of dance”, van Wyk’s study is one of the few that compares both the so-called “negative” and “positive” influence of dance in the South African Protestant church environment. It is consequently useful as a point of reference for a study on the perceived “moral values” of ballroom dancing in South Africa within a particular sector of society. It is in a sense a source which can be reflected upon as an indicator of the times.

In his work entitled *African women in towns: An aspect of Africa’s social revolution*, Kenneth Little, professor of African Urban Studies at the University of Edinburgh, researches the African urban women’s experience of the townships on the African continent. Although very generalized, and with few examples taken from the South African context, Little’s study does emphasise the important role that certain Western activities, like ballroom dancing, played in raising the perceived status of an individual.<sup>22</sup> This touches on a theme that sometimes recur in the accounts of early travellers in Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Only a limited number of sources touch on why ballroom was so easily accepted in a diversified South African society. An example of this is South African anthropologist D. Coplan’s<sup>24</sup> *In township tonight! South Africa’s black city music and theatre*. It is one of the few South African books that discusses ballroom dancing within South African society. Published in 1985, this book emphasises black popular culture and the influence that industrialisation and urbanisation had on music, theatre and dance in the townships. Focusing mainly on the period from the nineteenth century up until the 1980s, *In Township tonight!* makes reference to ballroom dancing both as a professional white activity, as well as a preferred black and coloured practice.<sup>25</sup> Coplan has done extensive research on this era and his in-depth knowledge of popular black culture makes this book a worthy source of information on the development of dance in South African history.

Besides the above, there are a few journal articles concerning the presence of dance (often in combination with music or in relation to ballet) in South Africa,

---

21 JH van Wyk, *Instituut vir die bevordering van Calvinisme...*, pp. 8-9.

22 K Little, *African women in towns: an aspect of Africa’s social revolution* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp.1-5.

23 See for example D Fairbridge, *Lady Anne Barnard at the Cape of Good Hope 1797-1802* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1924), pp. 20, 28-31.

24 David Coplan is an anthropologist at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has done extensive research on the music, theatre and dance history of especially black South Africans.

25 DB Coplan, *In township tonight!...*, pp. 129-130.

as well as the biographical stories of South African dancers and their passion for ballroom. David Rycroft's<sup>26</sup> article on African music in Johannesburg, Peter Alegi's<sup>27</sup> work on sport and cultural performance and Lize Kriel's<sup>28</sup> study of contemporary exhibition dances are examples of the former. As regards the latter biographical trend, leading South African ballroom dancers, Bill and Bobby Irvine, produced a book in 1970 which traces the story of their dancing careers. This husband-and-wife team were leading ballroom dancers and taught ballroom in South Africa for a couple of decades. Bobby Irvine was born and grew up in South Africa, and in teaching ballroom they both visited dancing studios throughout South Africa across the black and white divide. The book is a life history tracing the rise of the Irvines' dancing career mainly between the 1950s and 1960s. The book refers to the state of dancing in the world and more particularly in South Africa during these years. Irvine also describes and compares the state and standard of white and coloured dancing in South Africa. The Irvines' travels take the reader to Japan, America and other prominent European ballroom dancing competitions (e.g. Blackpool), competitions which South Africa would participate in as the century progressed. Their writings reveal the difficulty of both surviving as a dancer and dancing as South Africans in the mid-twentieth century. Being a biography, the book mainly focuses on their personal dancing, their perspectives and their problems. Yet, in its very intimate and subjective nature lies the enormous cultural historical value of this text. Although the book is primarily autobiographical, it does provide some comment on the coloured dancers, whom they encountered in their dancing careers.<sup>29</sup>

There are a few academic studies that survey the presence of ballroom dancing in South African society. Matilda Burden's study entitled *Die herkoms en ontwikkeling van die Afrikaanse volksdans* (The origin and development of Afrikaans folk dances) explores the existence of social dancing in South Africa between 1652 and the 1940s. Her research is based on early travel journals and diaries and mainly Afrikaans magazines and newspapers as well as a number of questionnaires targeting the Afrikaans community.<sup>30</sup> Another study by Ranke Hamona entitled, *The impact of ballroom dancing on the marriage relationship*,

---

26 D Rycroft, "African music in Johannesburg: African and Non-African Features", *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 11, 1959, pp. 25-30.

27 P Alegi, "Playing to the gallery? Sport, cultural performance, and social identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35(1), 2005, pp. 17-38.

28 L Kriel, "The State Theatre Dance Company and the shaping of contemporary dance in South Africa", *Historia*, 46(1), May 2001, pp. 159-188.

29 B Irvine, & B Irvine, *The dancing years* (London, WH Allen, 1970).

30 M Burden, *Die herkoms en ontwikkeling van die Afrikaanse volksdans* (M.A., US, 1985).

explores the psychological value that social dancing has on marriage in South Africa in the twenty-first century.<sup>31</sup> Although both studies provide some insight into the social value of dancing in South Africa, the limited range of the authors' questionnaires/interviews and the small amount of primary archival documents used, limit the scope of these studies as they basically explore ballroom dancing within its leisure milieu.

There are also other academic studies that include ballroom dancing within broader themes, for example, Ellen Hellmann's study entitled: *Rooiyard. A Sociological survey of an urban native slum yard* which was published in 1948 as part of the Rhodes-Livingstone paper series. In this study, which was based on her 1935 M.A. thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand, Hellmann recorded the everyday life and analysed the various problems that individuals experienced living in a slum yard during the early 1930s. Although ballroom dancing is only mentioned in passing, the detailed research done on especially the social struggles and economic capabilities of these urban citizens makes it a valuable resource in determining what kind of ballroom dance infrastructure was available to them.<sup>32</sup> CM de Villiers's two-volume study entitled *Die vrytydsbesteding van volwasse manlike Bantoe in die gebied Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereniging* (Leisure activities of the male adult Bantu in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereniging area) also gives a detailed analysis of the nature of leisure activities amongst the black community, following much the same analytical structure that Hellman utilized forty years earlier. Although De Villiers does not focus, like Burden's and Hamona's studies, exclusively on ballroom dancing in South Africa, the value of this study lies in the author's understanding of the area, the people and especially in the detailed recording and the extensive nature of the questionnaire data collection and useful comparative tables.<sup>33</sup>

### **Finding inspiration: Ballroom dancing in international literature**

As is evident from the above, only a few general and subject specific studies are available on the developments of ballroom dancing in South Africa. The international literature on the other hand, presents an overview account of the

---

31 R Hamona, *The impact of ballroom dancing on the marriage relationship* (MA, UP, 2006).

32 E Hellmann, *Rooiyard. A sociological survey of an urban slum yard* (Northern Rhodesia, The Rhodes-Livingston Institute, 1948), pp. 37, 93, 94.

33 CM de Villiers, *Die vrytydsbesteding van volwasse manlike Bantoe in die gebied Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereniging* (D Phil., UP, 1972).

development of styles in ballroom dancing. However, many of these are “do-it-yourself” handbooks, illustrating the basic social steps of the various dances. Some of these books were written by the “big names” in the dance field, such as the dancers Alex Moore<sup>34</sup> and Victor Silvester.<sup>35</sup> These secondary sources are indicative of the type of ballroom dancing literature which is currently available in South Africa. They will be considered in terms of what they cover, how they reflect the times in which they were published and what aspects the various authors underplayed or neglected. This will reveal not only how literature on dancing has developed, but also what aspects still require attention for further study. It must also be noted that the South African ballroom dance arena was to a large degree influenced by the international realm. Ballroom dances were basically “borrowed”<sup>36</sup> from overseas. The international literature therefore informed the local developments. This discussion will also draw parallels between the international realm and South Africa.

### ***General histories of ballroom dancing***

International studies that focus on the general history of ballroom dancing provide a useful chronology against which South African developments can be measured. Publications like J. Martin’s *The dance: the story of the dance told in pictures and text*,<sup>37</sup> A. Haskell’s *The wonderful world of dance*,<sup>38</sup> S Sadie’s *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*,<sup>39</sup> W Sorell’s *Dance in its time*,<sup>40</sup> G Jonas’s *Dancing. The power of dance around the world*<sup>41</sup> and Don Herbison-Evans’s *History of modern ballroom dancing*<sup>42</sup> are some of the detailed studies on the history of Westernized contemporary dancing. These studies both highlight the most popular contemporary dances of a period and analyse the influence of a certain dance on other dances. One of the first books to

---

34 Alex Moore was the President of the “Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing” and an honorary president of the “International Council of Ballroom dancing”.

35 Victor Silvester was the co-founder of the British “Ballroom Branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing”.

36 AM Green, “Dancing in borrowed shoes: a history of ballroom dancing in South Africa”, (M.A., U.P., 2008)

37 J Martin, *The dance: the story of the dance told in pictures and text* (New York, Tudor Publishing Company, 1946).

38 A Haskell, *The wonderful world of dance* (New York, Garden City Books, 1960).

39 S Sadie, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians* (London, Macmillan publishers, 1980); Grove music, “Dance” (available at <http://www.grovemusic.com.innopac.up.ac.za/data/articlea/music/0/01910.xml>), as accessed on 7 October 2005).

40 W Sorell, *Dance in its time* (New York, Anchor Press, 1981).

41 G Jonas, *Dancing: The power of dance around the world* (London, BBC Books, 1992).

42 D Herbison-Evans, “History of modern ballroom dancing” (available at <http://linus.socs.uts.edu.au/~don/pubs/modern.html>), as accessed on 6 April 2005.

approach this subject on such a wide scale was C Sachs's *World history of dance*.<sup>43</sup> In order to explain the world history of dance, Sachs divided his book into two parts. The first explains general themes that can be found in various dances, including different basic movements (e.g. convulsive, circular, close dance); types of dances (e.g. initiation dances, wedding dances); forms and choreography (e.g. individual dances, choral dances, couple dances); and music. In part two, Sachs presents a chronological explanation of the most prominent dance movements over time. Other international dance historians tend to follow Sachs's example, using both a chronological and thematic approach in explaining the most popular dances of a certain period.

Another comprehensive source that is available on ballroom dancing, as it presents both the history of dancing and suggests other sources for further consultation is the above mentioned, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*. This musical encyclopaedia, along with its electronic version, provides both a detailed overview of the development of dance as well as a description of the history, figures and musical style of some of the social dances. Although the encyclopaedic style makes it difficult to get a clear overview of how dances developed over time, it is useful as a source to corroborate views in other sources. This source also explains variations of dances that were danced in earlier years in South Africa, but are neglected by other more general international histories.

Apart from Sadie and Sachs, most of these dance histories lack a detailed reference system. Furthermore dance is often viewed in the general studies as a "reaction" to society, and the books fail to explain dance and the reason for dancing apart from its artistic appeal. However, these publications highlights the very Western influence of ballroom dancing and thus provide insight not only into where the dances that are danced in South Africa came from, but also why South African ballroom dancers are so reliant on the international ballroom dancing scene for its choreography, music, clothes and inspiration.

### ***Literature on dances preferred by specific groups***

Some international authors moved away from discussing a broad general history but rather focused on the type of dance preferred by a specific group of people. These studies include amongst others: *The public dance halls of Chicago*;<sup>44</sup> *The*

---

<sup>43</sup> C Sachs, *World history of dance* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1938).

<sup>44</sup> L de Koven Bowen, *The public dance halls of Chicago* (Chicago, The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago, 1917).

*anthropology of dance*;<sup>45</sup> *Videodance*;<sup>46</sup> *Rhythmic gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di figaro and Don Giovanni*;<sup>47</sup> *Black dance*;<sup>48</sup> *Dancing till dawn: A century of Exhibition Ballroom dance*;<sup>49</sup> *Writing dancing in the age of postmodernism*.<sup>50</sup> The nature of these publications makes them very limited in scope. Furthermore, the importance of a specific group is usually (over)emphasised, often to the point of exclusivity. However, these publications are detailed and passionate accounts of how ballroom dancing is portrayed in communities and issues raised in these publications are regularly mirrored in South African society. For example, Bowen's book *The public dance halls of Chicago* is concerned with the conditions in dance halls in Chicago and emphasises the late hours, lack of infrastructure, "indecent dances", inappropriate advertising, liquor, and misbehaviour of both men and women involved in this pastime. Bowen feels that dancing provides "innocent enjoyment", but that other influences cause dancing to be "dangerous".<sup>51</sup> She concludes by recommending laws to prohibit the selling of alcohol at the dance halls. Although Bowen's book deals mainly with dancing in Chicago, the problems she discusses concerning public dancing are also echoed in South African dance history and thus her study serves as a useful comparative text. Another example is E Thorpe's *Black dance*. Thorpe presents a detailed discussion of the development of African-American dance in thirty-two chapters and is of direct relevance to how and why ballroom dancing is danced in black South African communities. *Black dance* traces the origin of African-American dance back to the slaves who were brought from Africa to the New World to work on the plantations. It shows how different African dance traditions were brought into contact with one another as well as different European dance traditions, conventions and protocols. Thorpe discusses the influence that minstrels, jazz, and tap had on the dances of the world. He also focuses on the life and development of prominent black dancers as well as the place of black dancers in the world of ballet and theatre, which took many prominent African-American performers, as well as their South African counterparts, to Britain. Thorpe concludes by pointing to the racial, political and social problems that black dancers still

---

45 AP Royce, *The anthropology of dance* (Bloomington, Indiana University press, 1977).

46 R Lorber, *Videodance* (D. Phil. Thesis, Columbia University, 1977), pp. i-20.

47 W Allanbrook, *Rhythmic gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di figaro and Don Giovanni* (London, University of Chicago Press, 1983).

48 E Thorpe, *Black dance* (New York, Overlook Press, 1990).

49 Julie Malnig (available at [http://www.greenwood.com/books/BookDetail.asp?dept\\_id=1&sku=MND/&imprintID=11](http://www.greenwood.com/books/BookDetail.asp?dept_id=1&sku=MND/&imprintID=11) as accessed on 10 October 2005); J Malnig, *Dancing till dawn* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1992).

50 S Banes, *Writing dancing in the age of postmodernism* (London, Weslyn University Press, 1994).

51 L de Koven Bowen, *The public dance halls of Chicago*, p. 12.

encountered at the end of the twentieth century. Although the book contains a wealth of relevant material, little attention is given to the sources used. There is also too much emphasis on specific individuals at the expense of an understanding of broader dance trends. However, *Black dance* does provide valuable insights into studying the influence and adaptation of social dance in various traditions, by giving a detailed history of the development of dance among a minority and oppressed group in the United States.

### **“Do-it-yourself” handbooks**

The majority of international literature on ballroom dancing are teaching books written by professional dancers for dancers or people who intend to dance. A few of these publications include: *Course of instruction in dancing and aesthetic development of the body*;<sup>52</sup> *The tango and other up-to-date dances: a practical guide to all the latest dances*;<sup>53</sup> *The modern dances, how to dance them*;<sup>54</sup> *A study in modern dance positions*;<sup>55</sup> *Tips to dancers, good manners for ballroom and dance hall*;<sup>56</sup> *Orchesography*;<sup>57</sup> *Modern ballroom dancing: history and practice*;<sup>58</sup> *Ballroom dancing*;<sup>59</sup> *Teach yourself ballroom*;<sup>60</sup> *Dance class*.<sup>61</sup> Apart from a very brief history on each dance these publications explain how and when to dance a specific dance as well as the proper etiquette at social events. In, for example, *A study in modern dance positions*, Wilson, a dance instructor, discusses the best and worst positions that dancers can dance in. Like other teaching books, this publication contains numerous photographs showing various positions in which dancers can hold each other, and provides a detailed discussion of the most basic positions in the ballroom dances, making it a useful general

---

52 LF Segadlo, *Course of instruction in dancing and aesthetic development of the body* (Newark, NJ, ca1889).

53 JS Hopkins, *The tango and other up-to-date dances; a practical guide to all the latest dances, tango, one step, innovation, hesitation, etc; illustrated with photographs posed by Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, Joseph C Smith ... and many other famous dancers* (Chicago, The Saalfeld Publishing Co, ca1914).

54 C Walker, *The modern dances, how to dance them, complete instructions for learning the tango, or one step, the Castle walk, the walking Boston, the hesitation waltz, the dream waltz, the Argentine tango*, (Chicago, Saul Brothers, 1914).

55 GH Wilson, *A study in modern dance positions* (New York, The Inner Circle, c1916).

56 VP Dewey, “*Tips to dancers*,” *good manners for ballroom and dance hall* (Wisconsin, Kenosha, ca1918), pp. 15, 21.

57 T Arbeau, *Orchesography* (New York, Dover publications, 1967), pp. 5-7.

58 V Silvester, *Modern ballroom dancing: History and practice* (London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1977).

59 A Moore, *Ballroom dancing* (London, A & C Black, 1974).

60 The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, *Teach yourself ballroom dancing* (London, Hodder Headline, 1992).

61 BBC Blast: Paul Bottomer,(available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blast/dance/> as accessed: 10 October 2005); P Bottomer, *Dance class* (London, Southwater, 2000).

reference book. This kind of instruction often found its way into the local South African newspapers advising the readers on what was acceptable.<sup>62</sup> Although Wilson's study and other similar publications, obviously have a very specific audience and limited scope, the value of these sources lies in their detailed accounts of everyday events. Often South African contemporary sources, especially newspapers and travel journals, merely mentioned that there was a dance or social event, emphasizing who danced but neglecting to explain how or what was danced.<sup>63</sup> International "do-it-yourself" dance handbooks thus serve as a ballroom reference book for popular dances of the time.

### **Out of step: Problems in writing ballroom dance history**

In general, the style and focus of the international literature focusing on dance has changed very little over the years. As is evident in the above section, authors seem to focus on the history and development of dances or the dances of specific groups<sup>64</sup> or general trends in dances.<sup>65</sup> Because of its direct link with people's everyday lives, a history of dance can however never ignore the economic, political, cultural or social circumstances of the time. Consequently the relatively few dance histories that have appeared are to a certain extent a reflection of the intellectual thought of the day.

It is apparent in many of the sources included in the previous section that writing dance history is not without problems. Apart from the usual difficulties in doing research (e.g. limitation of sources) the very essence of dance makes it nearly impossible to pinpoint specific changes in style and influence. According to Royce, researchers have "neglected dance" because they felt that it was "not really essential to understand it" while other researchers found it difficult to obtain and analyse information that was seldom stored.<sup>66</sup> Because people learn "rhythmic movement" by imitation and not from written sources, the basic steps of a certain dance are seldom recorded immediately. Unlike musical notation, dances do not have a specific writing style or language that enables them to have written record of movement. Although systems, like

---

62 T Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 July 1930, p. 5.

63 Lancer, "In the dancing world: success of the Easter dance events", *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 April 1935, p. 6.

64 E Thorpe, *Black dance*, pp. 60-66.

65 AP Royce, *The anthropology of dance*, pp. 38-49; J Martin, *The dance...*, pp. 20-40; S Banes, *Writing dancing in the age of postmodernism*, pp. 48-50.

66 AP Royce, *The anthropology of dance*, p. 38.

the Labanotation,<sup>67</sup> have been used to record movements, it requires time, training and effort to document each inclination in a dance. Usually only the strange or elaborate movements of a certain dance are photographed or described in detail, making it necessary for the historian to assume certain aspects when finding sources referring to dancing.

Firstly, because not everything about dancing has been recorded there will always be a dimension that remains unknown. Secondly, the historian must bear in mind that apart from dance instruction manuals, descriptions about dancing in sources are more a kind of social commentary than knowledge of an expert in the field. Thirdly, the historian must assume that there will always be groups of people who support or reject a certain style or type of dance within a community. Descriptions of dancing amongst a group of people thus do not necessarily represent the take or feeling of all the people in a given area. There remain these “hidden voices” practising dance in their own space with their own characteristics. Lastly, it must also be remembered that dancing is easily influenced by other cultures and changes in economic and social situations. Therefore it cannot be assumed that a dance from one decade will look exactly the same in the following decade. To truly understand the type of dances and influence dance had on a particular society it is consequently necessary to examine not only contemporary (mainly international) dance instructions manuals, but also newspapers, official records, administrative documents and popular literature simultaneously. Although these sources, as noted by Burke, do necessitate extreme caution and source criticism before they can be used,<sup>68</sup> it is only in the very personal nature and dance choices in these contemporary sources that the complexity of South African society can be understood.

### **Choreographing a ballroom history for South Africa**

The American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, described the method of studying cultural anthropology as a “thick description” where one symbolic incident or action can provide a “window to understanding a culture or

---

67 Symbolic representation of movement developed by Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian dancer, in the 1920s.

68 P Burke, *What is cultural history?*, pp. 114-115.

community”.<sup>69</sup> According to Geertz, one must be familiar with the social and cultural practices or laws of a specific society to determine if an action is an “incident” or a “symbolic presentation” of the community. He argues that by simply describing a certain cultural practice one can begin to interpret the event and understand the community better. The description is thus used as an interpretation of a specific event. Ballroom dancing may seem very far removed from the “Balinese cockfight” of Geertz’s famous essay, but dancing can also be observed as a symbolic representation of a society.<sup>70</sup> It is believed by simply explaining how and why a social action took place one can better understand the functioning of a certain community. Consequently a study of the relevance of ballroom dancing should explore the reasons why dance started, what it entailed, who it involved and how it was represented in order to reflect on the nature and history of the society at a certain time.

While the use of international secondary sources, such as books and articles, is indispensable to obtain a theoretical foundation and background understanding necessary for a study of ballroom dancing in South Africa specifically, South Africa-related information on dance is found in primary sources. These are spread thinly across the holdings of the National Archives, the National Library, the National Film Archives, Cape Town Provincial Archives and other archival collections housed in both the UNISA and University of the Witwatersrand archives. Dance does obviously not exist as an identifiable section or topic in any particular archives series, but information can be gleaned from sources ranging from the correspondence and minutes of officials, various organisations as well as public records and central government policies. These include, amongst others, the Governor-General (GG) archival series, the Bantu Men Social Centre (BMSC) minutes, African National Congress (ANC) correspondence, and minutes of the Garment Workers Union.

The problem in writing dance history lies not only with the lack of contemporary evidence, but even more so with the dance critics, current dancers and dance historians themselves.<sup>71</sup> It is interesting to note that during

---

69 J Tosh, *The pursuit of history*, (London, Longman, 2002), pp. 284-285; S Hammerstedt, “Anthropological theories: a guide prepared by students for students, Symbolic and interpretive anthropologies” (available at <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/436/symbolic.htm>, as accessed on 11 October 2005); P Burke, *What is cultural history?* pp. 36-37.

70 P Burke, *What is cultural history?*, pp. 36-37; S Hammerstedt, “Anthropological theories: A guide prepared by students for students, Symbolic and interpretive anthropologies” (available at <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/436/symbolic.htm> as accessed on 11 October 2005).

71 SJ Cohen, “Dance in its time”, *Dance Research Journal*, 15(2), Spring 1983, pp. 38-39.

certain periods many adults did not want it to be known that they were taking dance lessons, and this secrecy resulted in numerous ballroom dance teachers not getting the recognition and support that was due to them. This might explain the rather limited amount of contemporary sources that refer to ballroom dancing.<sup>72</sup> However, newspaper reports and magazine articles play a fundamental, if not indispensable, role in both recording and analysing contemporary social history.

The social commentary found in the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Bantu World* provide crucial information regarding the place and state of ballroom dancing during its heyday that would otherwise have been lost. The *Rand Daily Mail* was based in Johannesburg and reported on political, social and economic events concerning South Africa from 1902 up until 1985 when it ceased to exist and was dependant on a largely English-speaking support base.<sup>73</sup> Many of the details of the founding meeting of the South African Dance Teachers Association (SADTA) as well as the further development of competitive ballroom dancing in South Africa were recorded in a weekly column in the *Rand Daily Mail*. The authors of this “side-line” used pseudonyms– “Treble Viol” and “Lancer”– making it difficult to ascertain what positions they were writing from. They obviously had a keen interest in the role of ballroom in the local South African social scene providing very detailed first-hand accounts of South African ballroom. These are an indispensable and rare source of information in studying the development of this dance form. Reports regarding the activities of South African dancing organisations are scarce and it was primarily the *Rand Daily Mail*’s weekly report entitled: “Dancing and the ballroom” (since 1927), and “In the dancing world” (since 1934), that commented on their various activities and achievements. The weekly features in the paper further included snippets of international renowned ballroom writers, like Katie Smith, Victory Silvester, Josephine Bradley and Wellesley Smith, “words of wisdom” and “Do’s and don’ts” in the ballroom with pictures

---

72 Anon., “Fashions for the Royal visit: Dance time”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 June 1925, p. 13.

73 R Gibson, *Final deadline. The last days of the Rand Daily Mail* (South Africa, David Phillip Publishers, 2007); The Switzers’ detailed study on the black press reveals that the *Rand Daily Mail* did have a black support base and since 1965 even had a “black-supplement”. It is however difficult to determine how popular, if at all, the *Rand Daily Mail* was amongst the black community during the period concerned here, since the first detailed study *Market Research Africa* was only done in the 1960s. L Switzer & D Switzer, *The black press in South Africa and Lesotho: A descriptive bibliographic guide to African, Coloured and Indian newspapers, newsletters and magazines 1836-1976* (Boston, GK Hall & Co, 1979), pp. 20, 22, 127.

of the winners of local and international ballroom dance competitions.<sup>74</sup>

The Johannesburg based *The Bantu World: South Africa's only National Bantu Newspaper* included articles on dance from about 1932 onwards that were written by both black and white authors. This newspaper was founded by a white farmer, BFG Paver, to provide a "platform for free comment..." with, initially, a large body of African shareholders. Appearing every fortnight, at 3d a copy, the newspaper prided itself in being "truly independent" printing in six languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Sesotho, Sechuana, Afrikaans and English) and producing articles that were held to be "interesting and instructive to the Bantu people".<sup>75</sup> After 1933 the newspaper was taken over by the Argus Printing and Publishing company, which was controlled exclusively by white shareholders.<sup>76</sup> Like the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Bantu World* provided detailed comment on its readers' social activities, giving first-hand accounts on the popularity and nature of dancing.

The *South African Dancing Times* was first published in 1933, and although its publication was suspended between 1940 and 1945, most likely due to a lack of funds during the Second World War, it provided information on dancing up to the mid-1950s. Based in Johannesburg, the *South African Dancing Times* was more of a popular magazine, lavishly illustrated with self-help articles and a range of advertisements relevant to the dancing world. These give an indication of what was perceived as important for the dancers on the South African ballroom floor. It is unfortunate that it is difficult to locate this magazine, and the lack of a complete set makes it problematic to use what is a very rich resource to its full potential.

Travel documents and early colonial texts such as the journals and diaries of Jan van Riebeeck (1651-1662), Lady Anne Barnard (1793-1803) and W Bird (1822), which reflect on the social activities of the early colonial times, also cast a unique light on South Africa's ballroom history. Certain travel

---

74 T Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom: 'Sprightly Springboks'- 'Trebla'- Dancing 'do's and don't's by 'Treble Violl'", *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 June 1930, p. 12; T Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 May 1931, p. 7; T Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 December 1930, p. 12; Anon., "The correct dancing hold", *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 February 1925, p. 10; T Violl, "Dancing and the ballroom", *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 April 1932, p. 14.

75 Anon., "The Bantu World", *The Bantu World*, 08 April 1933, p. 8; Anon., "The Bantu World", *The Bantu World*, 7 May 1932, p. 1.

76 L Switzer & D Switzer, *The black press in South Africa and Lesotho...*, pp. 20, 22, 127; Anon., "The Bantu World", *The Bantu World*, 8 April 1933, p. 8; Anon., "The Bantu World", *The Bantu World*, 7 May 1932, p. 1; L Switzer, "Bantu World and the origins of a captive African commercial press in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(3), April 1988, p. 352.

diaries and reminiscences of the early twentieth century also highlight the prominence of ballroom dancing within specific communities. In her travel diary, *African Apprenticeship: An autobiographical journey in Southern Africa 1929*, Margery Perham, for example, set out to record the state of the “native” in South Africa.<sup>77</sup> She visited various black and white communities and, while she condemns the racist manner in which the white South African government and public treated the blacks, she also presents insightful narratives on their leisure activities.

In his seminal publication, *The Bantu in the city: a study of cultural adjustment on the Witwatersrand*, American missionary R.E. Phillips describes how black South Africans experienced life on the Witwatersrand. Phillips was sent to South Africa in 1918 to assist with the development of a social programme for the American Board Mission in South Africa. He was actively involved in various white and black clubs and formed part of a number of commissions of inquiry that investigated *inter alia* the “liquor problem” in South Africa and supervised the use of motion pictures for instructing black South Africans.<sup>78</sup> Phillips used his own experiences, oral records as well as newspapers and reports to record how blacks adapted to the urban area. This study consequently offers a unique view of the popularity of black ballroom because of Phillip’s extensive use of 1910s to 1930s contemporary sources and his own involvement in the social life of blacks in Johannesburg. Mia Brandel-Syrier’s study entitled: *Reeftown elite: a study of social mobility in a modern African community on the Reef* was published in 1971.<sup>79</sup> Brandel-Syrier followed and recorded the everyday life experiences of sixty black males from “elite” families in a township on the Witwatersrand during the 1960s. The first-hand accounts, detailed analysis and direct quotations from people living in the township provide an insightful account of social and economic survival on the Reef. Although *Reeftown elite* focuses mainly on the 1960s, the reminiscences of the Reeftown elite and their own comparison between dancing in the 1960s and ballroom in the “old days” provides useful glimpses into the prevalence and history of ballroom outside of the white ballrooms.<sup>80</sup>

---

77 M Perham, *African Apprenticeship: An autobiographical journey in Southern Africa 1929* (London, Faber and Faber, 1974).

78 RE Phillips, *The Bantu in the city: a study of cultural adjustment on the Witwatersrand* (South Africa, The Lovedale Press, 1970), pp. xiii-xiv.

79 M Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown elite a study of social mobility in a modern African community on the Reef* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

80 M Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown elite...*, p. 50.

## **Conclusion**

The ever changing social order of South Africa's pervasive legacy of cultural, economic and political segregation was mirrored in the realm of the history of South African ballroom dancing. In analysing sources from within and outside of the ballroom dancing arena from, both the international and local field, one can obtain an understanding of the significance of this social activity in the history of both white and black South African societies.