

## Orientalized Aztecs: Observations on the Americanization of Theatrical Dance

K. Mitchell Snow

The popular stage seems an unlikely venue for choreographic expressions of expansionist nationalism, yet the passing fad for “Aztec” dancing in the vaudeville theaters of the United States during the early twentieth century demonstrates the durability of images about Mexico that fueled nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny. This imperialist notion held that the United States had a “sacred duty to expand across the North American continent” and to “reign supreme in the Western Hemisphere” (Weeks 1996, 66). The existence of Spanish America on its southern and western borders posed a considerable political challenge to the United States in the realization of what it saw as its divinely ordained future (33–58). In the hands of creators working in the United States, Mexico’s Aztecs became ambivalent symbols of an American past that was simultaneously powerful and exotically barbaric.

Choreographer Ted Shawn (1891–1972) and film director Cecil B. DeMille (1881–1959) spectacularized the Aztecs, propagating ideas that justified the continued expansion of the United States. Both created works based on widely read mid-nineteenth-century books on Mexico’s past that served as American counterparts to the orientalist texts that, as Edward Said pointed out in his now classic *Orientalism* (1978), justified colonial European interactions with its eastern neighbors.

The works of DeMille and Shawn, in turn, served as points of reference for Russian-born classical dancers who adopted the Aztec as signs of the Americanization of their work. Thus, it was Theodore Kosloff (1882–1956) who asserted in a 1917 interview with a magazine aimed at motion picture theater owners that the United States was “on the verge of the dawn of a new art, the dance of the Aztecs” (“Aztec Dance Coming” 2017, 10). Its “leading dancers,” Kosloff announced in a self-referential mode, were about to “introduce Aztec numbers as a much-needed relief from the interminable sensuous melody of the Hawaiian.”<sup>1</sup> Kosloff predicted that the then-reigning craze for Hawaiian music would fade because “we overdo a good thing in this country and soon grow tired of it.” He proposed that “Aztec” dancing was destined to become the next popular trend.

Kosloff, it seems, was as interested in promoting the upcoming thirty-two-week tour of his *Aztec Poem* on the Orpheum circuit as he was to publicize his appearance in DeMille’s silent film on the conquest of Mexico, *The Woman God Forgot* (Morris 1991, 52). Shortly after Mikhail Fokine

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**K. Mitchell Snow** ([kmitchellsnow@gmail.com](mailto:kmitchellsnow@gmail.com)) is the author of *Movimiento, ritmo y música* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), a biography of Mexican choreographer Gloria Contreras. He has written about Latin American art and culture for publications such as *Américas*, *Art Nexus*, *Dance Chronicle*, *History of Photography*, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, and *Interdanza*. His latest project, under the working title *Murals in Movement: Dancers and Painters in the Construction of Post-Revolutionary Mexican Identity*, is slated for publication with the University Press of Florida.

(1880–1942) and Vera Fokina (1886–1958) permanently resettled in the United States, they too created a nominally “Aztec” ballet, *Thunderbird* (1921), whose paper-thin veneer of the pre-conquest past suggests an awareness of Shawn’s protomodern *Xochitl* (1921), one of his three “Aztec” works.<sup>2</sup> Both Shawn and Kosloff shared explicitly stated goals of creating an American dance, while the motivations behind the Fokine’s transformation of their *Thunderbird* into an “Aztec” dance are less clear.

If, as Lynn Garafola notes, Parisian audiences had redefined orientalism as evidence of the “Russianness” of the Ballets Russes (Garafola [1989] 1998, 16), then Kosloff and the Fokines would redefine Aztec exoticism as evidence of the “Americanness” of their works developed for new-world audiences. The Russian émigrés seem to have been entirely unaware of the underlying political implications associated with Americanizing the Aztec that permeated the examples from which they drew.

The political content of the works by DeMille and Shawn needed no redefinition for its domestic audience. Both had been inspired in William H. Prescott’s (1796–1859) *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) (Bartlett 1918, 67; Shawn 1926, 19). Prescott’s book played a direct role in the implementation of the US nineteenth-century pursuit of Manifest Destiny. General Winfield Scott used the book as a guide for his invasion of Mexico City during the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), an event which secured all of what is now California, Nevada, and Utah; most of Arizona and New Mexico; and significant portions of Colorado and Wyoming for the United States (Evans 2004, 83; Franchot 1994, 38–39). Prescott structured his book “to support a fundamentally simple theme: the inevitable ruin of a rich but barbarous empire through its inherent moral faults; the triumph of ‘civilization’ over ‘semi-civilization’” (Levin [1959] 1995, 164). Prescott’s contemporaries viewed his book as “prophetic” of the “civilized” US victory over “semi-civilized” Mexico in the Mexican-American War (Franchot 1994, 39).

The Prescott-inspired works of DeMille and Shawn provide a new-world parallel to the imperialist assumptions about the “other” identified by Said. He described Orientalism as “a Western style for . . . having authority over the Orient,” in which western culture “gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against” its neighbors, while simultaneously imposing “limitations on thought and action” (Said [1978] 1980, 11). Prescott presented the Aztec leaders as representative of the “general style of Asiatic pomp and luxury,” who lived “indolent lives” of “soft pleasure . . . reminding one of the tales of an Oriental harem” (Prescott [1843] 1936, 91 and 114 note 76). Levin noted that for Prescott, the Aztecs were “at once civilized, in an Oriental fashion, and savage. The Oriental comparison is not confined to speculation about . . . origins. . . . When Prescott told [fellow historian George] Bancroft that the Aztec ‘civilization smacks strongly of the Oriental,’ he named an essential ingredient of his literary and moral recipe for the Indian” (Levin [1959] 1995, 150). In the aftermath of the Spanish invasion, and the cultural and racial mixing it begot, Prescott turned the tables and began to depict the now fabulously wealthy Spanish as suffering from the same “idle luxury” that he thought corrupted the Aztecs (Prescott [1843] 1936, 667; Franchot 1994, 38–62). Thus, the *Woman God Forgot* and Shawn’s Aztec dances were framed in Prescott’s unequal discourse of Northern Anglo-Protestant “superiority” over the Southern Latin-Catholic rather than the dynamic imposed by the Christian West on the Islamic East which Said identified ([1978] 1980, 15).

US assumptions about Mexico and its past differed from Said’s Old-World example in one critical respect. The United States developed its image of Mexico as it was simultaneously striving to legitimize its own standing on the international stage to its former colonial overlords. In his *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (2012), historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) identified several key aspects of nineteenth-century thinking on what constituted a viable nation. Principal among these were self-determination, expansionism, historical association, and shared culture. No one could reasonably argue that the United States lacked a claim to self-determination and an expansionist agenda.

As a new nation, and ever increasingly as a nation of immigrants, the United States did, however, struggle with its qualifications for historical association and shared culture.

It was, in large measure, this condition which led to the US infatuation with Mexico's past during the mid-nineteenth century. This era was marked by the publication of three popular books, all of which remain in print today: Prescott's analysis of the conquest and John Lloyd Stephens's (1805–1852) *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843). These works fueled what Mexican historian Juan Ortega y Medina (1913–1992) called archaeological Monroism—which included the appropriation of Mexico's past to create a civilized prehistory for the United States (Ortega y Medina 1962, 37–86). The impressive ruins of Mexico's past, Ortega y Medina submitted, provided the United States with a “potent shield to justify itself before Europe” on the historical association front (55).<sup>3</sup>

### DeMille's *The Woman God Forgot* and Kosloff's *Aztec Poem*

Neither DeMille nor Shawn limited themselves to studies of Prescott for their Aztec works. Both also made ample use of Lew Wallace's (1827–1905) wildly fanciful novel *The Fair God* (1873), which was itself inspired by Wallace's own reading of Prescott (Wallace [1873] 1898, xxv–xxviii). *The Fair God* presented Aztec Mexico as a kind of New World counterpart to Imperial Rome but made free use of Prescott's orientalizing of the Aztec as well. In his description of an entirely imaginary gladiatorial arena built within the marketplace of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán, Wallace limned an elaborately furnished section to seat Moctezuma's equally imaginary harem, “soft testimony that Orientalism dwelt not alone in the sky and palm-trees of the valley” (Wallace [1873] 1898, 77). This sort of imagery made the novel perfect fodder for DeMille's preferred approach to mass entertainment, which culminated in his 1959 adaptation of Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880).

Rather than acknowledge Wallace as the source for his *The Woman God Forgot*, DeMille credited his then-mistress, Jeanie Macpherson (1888–1946) as scriptwriter for his film. Macpherson had once been a student of Kosloff's and she was responsible for introducing him to the director (Morris 1991, 47). The fact that she had done little more than abridge Wallace's novel was evident enough that the reviewer for *Photoplay* noted that the screenplay “more than suggests that the author is familiar with Lew Wallace's ‘The Fair God,’ which in turn suggests that its author was familiar with Prescott's ‘Conquest of Mexico’” (Bartlett 1918, 67).<sup>4</sup>

*The Woman God Forgot* provides an example of what Elizabeth Kendall describes as the early cinema's prolongation of nineteenth-century theater (1979, 134). Its melodramatic plot revolved around the love of Tezca, Moctezuma's daughter, for the Conquistador Alvarado, whom she rescues following his failed diplomatic mission to her father's court. When her intended Guatemoc, played by Kosloff, discovers the two together, he demands Alvarado's sacrifice as a prelude to their wedding ceremony. Tezca's desperate effort to save his life leads to the destruction of her city by the Spanish. DeMille hewed to the pretext that his film was set in Mexico until he reached its culminating scene when Alvarado finally reunites with Tezca, who is now the last of the Aztecs. Their reconciliation takes place at the base of Bridalveil Falls in the shadows of Yosemite National Park's El Capitan, one of the most iconic landscapes of the United States—perhaps not coincidentally a landscape it had wrested from Mexico. As Mexico was in the throes of its revolution at the time the film was shot, this scene, absent from Wallace's novel whose heroine dies in its closing pages, seems to provide a political comment alongside its requisite Hollywood happy ending. The film's publicity material even characterized the production team's visit to Mexico to photograph the ruins of its “Aztec palaces” as an “invasion,” a term that would carry bellicose intent for audiences in 1917 (*Artcraft Studios Press Book* 1917, 18). The US Army had been in Mexico

in an unsuccessful pursuit of the revolutionary leader Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878–1923) as recently as February of that year.<sup>5</sup>

Although the DeMille film contained no dance sequences, it served as the inspiration for the Americanization of Kosloff’s subsequent *Aztec Poem*.<sup>6</sup> Kosloff evidently saw the value of promoting his work as an American product. One publicity piece associated with the *Aztec Poem* tour put it this way:

Probably Russian dancers have discovered that Americans do not quite “get” the classic ballet. An American, when he wants anything, from a girl for his wife to a piece of pie for desert [*sic*], just mentions it right off the bat. But the people in a Russian ballet, when they want to convey the idea of love or a taste for pie, approach the matter in a way to confuse the issue and that leaves it entirely hazy in the American audience’s mind as to whether a man wants to marry a girl or is just asking her what time it is by her wrist watch. All of which leads us to the fact that Kosloff and his dancers have achieved a marvelously well-rounded and artistic offering without any top-heavy ballets, and yet with sufficient of the dramatic, principally conveyed in the manner of the doing, and therefore suggestive rather than laboriously worked out. (“Theodore Kosloff at the Orpheum” 1917, 3)<sup>7</sup>

During the course of the tour, Kosloff also asserted that “in America, the ballet will be adopted as its own, and will be brought to a state of perfection hitherto only dreamed. . . . For it is an art that must be saved . . . and we who know it and are in America have the precious heritage of doing so. . . . I hope to do my little part in promoting this great work” (“The Stage and the Screen” 1917). In a separate interview, he went on to express concerns about the American tendency to borrow movement sources from the “conglomeration” of its immigrant populations, which he opined led to “backwardness in developing her own dance forms” (“Supreme Dancing” 1917, 10). Regardless, he concluded that because of what would become known as World War I, “the world must look to America for artistic progress for many years to come” (10).

Kosloff seems to have crafted his *Aztec Poem* as a kind of early cross-promotion with *The Woman God Forgot*, expecting attendance at his live performances to benefit from the film’s marketing program.<sup>8</sup> The studio achieved some success in publicizing the film’s elaborate costumes, designed by Kosloff’s dancing partner and mistress Natacha Rambova (1897–1966; born Winifred Kimball Shaughnessy in Salt Lake City, Utah), which Kosloff reportedly passed off as his own work (Morris 1991, 56). Rambova avidly embraced references in Prescott ([1843] 1936) about the excellence of Aztec featherwork, reportedly requisitioning an estimated four hundred pounds of feathers to bring her costumes to the screen (Fair 1918, 49). The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Kosloff’s all white, feathered cloak for the film’s wedding scene required a special car to deliver it to the set and a dedicated attendant to take care of it while it was in use (“Kosloff Now Happy” 1917). The dancer said it was a “vast relief when he finally doffed the troublesome thing” at the end of the scene. While Kosloff later performed his *Aztec Poem* in theaters across the country attired in the same costume he wore for the film, the wedding scene’s feathered cape remained behind in Hollywood.

DeMille’s film also provided the context in which Kosloff claimed Aztec art as his source of choreographic inspiration. In his interview with *Artcraft Advance* promoting *The Woman God Forgot*, Kosloff held forth on the virtues of preconquest culture:

The Aztecs had a fine sense of rhythm and color. They used combinations of both. Their ceremonial dances, and all dances were ceremonies with them, were well worked out. We have old drawings and paintings to show this, and I have made a deep study of them to portray the dance correctly in my present interpretations. Of course, I have modernized the various dances, but it was necessary to eliminate

some of the brutality and to add some of the accustomed gloss. However, even in the natural state, the Aztecs had a fine dramatic sense, and their dances must have been wonderful for a people who never had a touch of European or Asiatic culture. The poses used by the Aztecs in dancing were, many of them, quite reminiscent of the ancient Egyptians, and it is not hard for one familiar with the latter to recreate the Aztec dance motifs. (“Aztec Dance Coming” 1917, 10)

Kosloff’s assertion that the highly stylized, static visual art of the Aztecs provided dancers with a source for “correctly” resurrecting the culture’s movement style took the notion that Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950) created his choreography for *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* (1913) “within the rigid limits of an antique bas-relief” and Americanized it (King 1916). This was, it appears, the first appearance in print of what would become a trope used by creators on both sides of the border, with Mexico searching for an “authentic” American art within the modernist milieu.<sup>9</sup> His reference to the supposed similarity of Aztec dance to ancient Egyptian poses, and to his own familiarity with such sources, underline the orientalist origins of his *Aztec Poem*. Garafola characterizes Kosloff’s work with DeMille as having “plundered an earlier style of European ‘high art’ to entertain the American masses” (Garafola 2005, 69). Kosloff had danced in some of the Ballets Russes’s earliest productions, and repeatedly presented Fokine’s works, including *Cléopâtre* and *Schéhérazade*, as his own creations (Levine 2009; Prevots 1987, 121; Pritchard 2013, 210). In this instance, Kosloff had no need of lifting choreography. Instead, he adopted the rhetoric of modernist primitivism employed by the early Ballets Russes to the Americas, nesting it comfortably within his employers’ career-long interest in establishing the historical “authenticity” of his films as evidence of their quality (Birchard 2004, 22).

Beyond images of the designs for some of its costumes, little remains to illuminate the essence of Kosloff’s *Aztec Poem*. Based on unspecified sources, Rambova’s biographer, Michael Morris, claimed that *Aztec Poem*’s dancers “displayed themselves most dramatically with exaggerated makeup, partial nudity, [and] copper body paint. . . . The presentation incorporated the warlike with the ceremonial” (Morris 1991, 52). The newspaper reviews from the period offered equally vague impressions that revealed little about the work’s scenario. The notice in Salt Lake City, Utah’s, *Deseret News*, for example, advised only that the dance was “a wild, weird swing of a pagan rhapsody colored with the mystery and splendor of the age” (“Miss Shaughnessy Appears With Dancers” 1917, 14). *The New York Times* described the appearance of Kosloff’s company at the Palace as simply “half an hour of good Russian dancing” (“Mollie King at the Palace” 1918, 9).

Press reports do indicate that the *Aztec Poem*’s score was the creation of Andrei Fedorovich Arends (1855–1924), who was principal conductor for the Bolshoi Ballet Company in which Kosloff had once performed (Libbey 1918, 38; Rodriguez de la Hoz 2014, 7–8). Schirmer had just published a suite from Arends’s score for the ballet *Salammbô* (1910), based on an orientalist novel by Gustav Flaubert (1821–1880) about the priestess of Carthage and her blood-soaked efforts to regain the city’s sacred veil from a band of lustful mercenaries. Given Kosloff’s lack of compunction about adopting Fokine’s work as his own, his *Aztec Poem* may well have consisted of selections from Alexander Gorsky’s (1871–1924) choreography for Flaubert’s tale. If that was the case, Kosloff’s main contribution was to give the dance a new-world setting through Rambova’s pseudo-Aztec costuming.

As superficial as it may have been in treating its purported subject, Kosloff’s *Aztec Poem* appears to have influenced at least one dancer outside of his company. Charles Weidman (1901–1975), who was known to attend every dance performance he could in his hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska (Lancos 2007, 59), had the opportunity to see the Imperial Ballet perform there on November 8, 1917 (“Theodore Kosloff at the Orpheum” 1917, 3).<sup>10</sup> A few years later, attired in the closest imitation of Kosloff’s costume he could muster, Weidman offered a farewell performance of his own *Aztec Dance* (1919) in Lincoln’s Temple Theater, marking his imminent departure for Los Angeles

and studies at the Denishawn School.<sup>11</sup> Not long after Weidman arrived in Los Angeles, he would make his first professional appearance to replace the injured Robert Gorham in *Xochitl*, dancing the role of a legendary predecessor to the Aztecs, the Toltec leader Tepancaltzin.

### Ted Shawn's *Xochitl* and the Fokine's *Thunderbird*

If Kosloff's stated goal was to Americanize the ballet, Shawn's aim was to create a distinctly American dance that was not ballet. "The word *ballet* has too definite associations with known forms," he wrote, "and the birth of the dance in America will make new forms, has already made new forms, which the word *ballet* does not adequately describe" (Shawn 1926, v). Company promotional material specified that the "intention of Denishawn is to use the techniques of all known styles and systems of dance, but merely as a compost out of which America's own message in the art of the dance may grow" (*Denishawn Dancers* 1926, 2). Although it was not a "known" style, "Aztec" dancing was part of that mix.<sup>12</sup>

Like Kosloff, Shawn would claim a study of Aztec culture as his source of authority for the movement style of his works in this vein. Shawn's continued efforts to give his multiple productions drawn from Mexico's pre-conquest past an aura of authenticity demonstrated a more sustained effort to engage with its history than had Kosloff's "deep study" of Aztec art. Shawn's first Native American-themed work was his Wallace-inspired *Dagger Dance*, which depicted an Aztec youth who, rather than accept his fate on the stone of sacrifice, commits suicide with the dagger of the title (Sherman 1989, 369).<sup>13</sup>

Shawn created his *Dagger Dance* as an audition piece for Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968), who was seeking a young man to perform tangos and maxixes between the "oriental" dances of her performances. Although she thought it "one of those rather crude and simple rhythmic dances which in after years one looks back upon with a kind of loving tolerance," she was moved by the strength of his dancing and hired him immediately (St. Denis 1939, 159). Shawn's first Aztec work entered the company's repertory alongside Miss Ruth's "Hindu" *Incense* (1906), *The Cobras* (1906), and *Radha* (1906) (Shawn 1960, 28). A 1926 souvenir program for Denishawn contended that St. Denis "was the first dancer to translate the hieratic art form of wall-carvings and tomb paintings into a distinctive type of dance—and the whole style of 'Egyptian' dancing so in vogue today is founded on her work" (*Denishawn Dancers* 1926, 7).

Just as he had described St. Denis as devoting "all her spare time to reading and to searching libraries and museums in every city she visited" after her career changing encounter with a cigarette poster featuring the Egyptian goddess Isis (Shawn 1920, 4), Shawn credited his reading of Prescott and Wallace with inspiring his own "constant searching of the libraries of the country, as I one-night-standed [*sic*] month after month, each season" (Shawn 1926, 19). Wallace had framed his novel as a "translation" of a lost manuscript by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1568?–1648), and Shawn's continued interest in the Aztec would eventually lead him to an excerpt from Ixtlilxóchitl's *Relación histórica de la nación tolteca* (Historical Relation of the Toltec Nation, circa 1600–1608), which provided the basis for his *Xochitl*.

Ixtlilxóchitl's relatively straightforward story recounted how the Toltec leader Tepancaltzin was smitten by Xóchitl's beauty and resolved to make her his consort when she arrived with her father at his stronghold to present him with a bowl of the agave syrup they had discovered (Chavero 1884, 385). Shawn barely anglicized the character's names, dropping the accents and a difficult consonant, but he transformed the story into a melodrama worthy of a decadent "Oriental harem." His dance version of the tale changed the agave syrup into its fermented version known as pulque and its male lead into an "emperor." Intoxicated by both the pulque and by the beauty of Xochitl, Tepancaltzin asked her to dance for him and, further inflamed by her performance, attempted to violate her.

Drawn back into the throne room by Xochitl's frantic cries as she attempted to protect her virginity, her father rushed Tepalcaltzin with a knife, only to have Xochitl repulse his furious attack. The work ended with union of the still virtuous maiden and her "emperor" (Sherman 1979, 60–61).

Shawn conceived *Xochitl* specifically to display the dramatic talents of Martha Graham (1894–1991), and her impassioned performance in the role effectively launched her professional dance career (Shawn 1960, 188). According to former Denishawn dancer Jane Sherman (1908–2010), the leads in *Xochitl* used the interpretive style typical of Denishawn creations (Sherman 1989, 370). The six women who portrayed the throne room attendants, however, used a highly stylized, flattened style of dancing that was intended to match the work's sets and costumes.<sup>14</sup>

*Xochitl* was Shawn's first major work, and he spared no expense in bringing it to the stage. It featured a specially commissioned score by Homer Grunn (1880–1944), who composed it with themes he derived from the music of the Pueblo Indian peoples of New Mexico, peoples Shawn inaccurately described as "lineal descendants of the Aztecs" (Shawn 1926, 19).<sup>15</sup> He also hired Mexican designer Francisco Cornejo (1892–1963), who would later gain fame for his art deco Mayan Theater in Los Angeles (1927), to create the ballet's elaborate sets and hand embroidered, feathered costumes—including yet another feathered robe for its male lead (Shawn 1960, 93).

In the context of *Xochitl*'s creation, Shawn wrote about his visit to the "library of the University of Texas, just after it had received the shipment of a private library purchased in Mexico City, a collection of over a million pieces, books, codices, pamphlets and prints dealing exclusively with the prehistoric civilizations of Mexico" while he was on tour with Denishawn (Shawn 1926, 19). The only opportunity for such a visit to that library would have occurred in the fall of 1914, well before *Xochitl* was on the horizon (Schlundt 1962, 21). Sherman added her own interpretations of what he found at the library, imagining that for *Xochitl*, "Shawn undoubtedly examined paintings, photographs of stone bas-reliefs, and written descriptions of sacred ceremonies, for from these he derived a semi-hieroglyphic choreographic style, the designs for his costumes, and the pictorial suggestions for his sets" (Sherman 1989, 370).

The throne room set for *Xochitl* had been inspired by a painting, José María Obregón's (1832–1902) *The Discovery of Pulque* (1877), which graced the walls of the Academy of San Carlos, where Cornejo had trained alongside Diego Rivera (1886–1957) (Tenorio-Trillo 1996, 118; Lopez Orozco 2010, 87). A full-color reproduction of Obregón's masterwork also appears immediately before the legend of Xochitl in the first volume of *México a través de los siglos* (Mexico Throughout the Centuries, 1884–1889), the most comprehensive Spanish language study of Mexico's preconquest past available at the time (Chavero 1884, plate following page 384). *Xochitl*'s basic story line must have come from Cornejo as well. Given that Shawn needed translators to study dance in Spain, Cornejo had to have provided him with the legend of Xóchitl and the names of its protagonists, as Ixtlilxóchitl's version of the Xóchitl story is still not available in English translation (Shawn 1960, 130).

Shawn toured *Xochitl* nationally and internationally as "the first native American ballet because of its décor and powerful new dynamic dancing, to which the word 'virile' was attached" until 1927 (Kendall 1979, 167–68). St. Denis's attempt to dance the role of Xochitl in London was the work's one notable failure, and she acknowledged that the role was not as well suited to her as it was to Graham (St. Denis 1939, 227). When Graham left the company, her younger sister Georgia, better known by her nickname of Geordie, took on the role of Xochitl to help ensure that the popular work stayed in the Denishawn repertory (Graham 1991, 90). Geordie scored her greatest success as Xochitl in a performance in Bombay, India, during the company's extended tour of the Asian continent from 1925 to 1926 (Sherman 1979, 63).

Just a few months after *Xochitl* made its premiere at the Pantages in Long Beach, California, the Fokine's *Thunderbird* opened for a nearly four hundred performance run in New York City's massive Hippodrome Theatre, which seated more than 5,000 spectators (Schlundt 1962, 32; Horwitz 1985, 52). The ballet's name signaled its producer's intent to invoke an indigenous American past. The thunderbird forms part of the lore of many Native American peoples, particularly those inhabiting what is now the Pacific Northwest, but it did not figure in the Aztec cosmovision.<sup>16</sup> The "whole tribes of totem poles" that Hungarian émigré Willy Pogany (1882–1955) had designed for the production would also have been appropriate for a Pacific Northwestern setting, but not a Mexican one ("Ballet and Ice" 1921, 6). Fokina's ascription of her scenario to "an ancient Aztec tale" and her self-presentation as a "Toltec princess" (Fokina quoted in Beaumont 1935, 123), both elements associated with Shawn's successful mounting of *Xochitl*, appear to have been a relatively late addition to the production. The only other elements in *Thunderbird* that connected the work to Mexico's past were the Nahuatl nouns assigned as names to its lead dancers—Aztlán, the "Aztec Chief" danced by Mikhail, which was the name of the semimythical Aztec homeland, and Vera's enchanted "princess" Nahua, which was what the Aztec called people who spoke their language (Aguilar-Moreno 2006, 28, 67).<sup>17</sup> How and by whom the decision was made to transform *Thunderbird* into an "Aztec" ballet is in no way clear, but the references to Shawn's work seem too specific to have been merely coincidental.

The *Thunderbird* opened with a poststorm encounter between its titular supernatural being and Aztlán (Beaumont 1935, 123–24). When the thunderbird flew off, Aztlán, who had fallen in love with the magical bird, called upon his magician to capture her. The magician and his assistants conjured a golden tree which entangled the thunderbird in its branches. Stunned by her beauty, Aztlán was unable to move, but attracted by the thunderbird's struggle to escape, his warriors tried to shoot her. Aztlán, awakened by the danger to his beloved, threw himself in front of the arrows and met his death, at which point the thunderbird transformed back into her human form, Nahua, and danced Aztlán back to life. Aztlán's magician united the couple in marriage, and the work concluded with the entire tribe saluting the event with an Aztec war dance. As Fokine biographer Dawn Horwitz points out, this scenario, and possibly some of the choreography, was a mixture of *Swan Lake* (1877) and *Firebird* (1910), with, perhaps, a touch of *Dying Swan* (1905) added for good measure (Horwitz 1985, 52–55).

The *Thunderbird* shared the Hippodrome stage with baseball-playing elephants, a juggling bulldog, a crow who caught balls thrown by the audience, and an "ice-ballet" by Charlotte of the Silver Skates, all of which earned multiple critical plaudits. The Fokine ballet received more mixed reviews. An unnamed writer for *The New York Tribune* waxed enthusiastic about "the rushes of the thunderbird" with which Fokina filled the Hippodrome's enormous stage ("Ballet and Ice" 1921, 6). "Fokine has done a gorgeous piece of choreography, and Mr. Pogany has given it setting and costumes that surpass anything he has heretofore done, not even excepting his 'Coq d'Or.' The story of the princess released by love from the power of a wizard and of her union with her warrior lover is beautifully told" (6). By contrast, Alexander Woollcott (1887–1943), the famously acerbic theater critic then working for *The New York Times*, alerted his readers that Fokine's ballet was "pretentious" (1921, 15). He added that, while he found some of its early scenes "charming," and Fokina "while not startling as a dancer . . . a lovely vision to behold," he thought *Thunderbird* "a good deal of a bore and in terms of beauty and rhythm and all that a ballet is supposed to give, it is dulled by comparison with the pageant on the ice."

## The Noche Triste de Moctezuma

The pseudo-Aztec dances of the American popular stage saw their apogee in the 1920s; but Shawn returned to the Aztecs once more in the following decade, after the modernist "vogue of things Mexican" which followed the nation's revolution had begun to dissipate (Delpar 1992, 193–208).



When Denishawn dissolved in tandem with the marriage of Shawn and St. Denis in the early 1930s, they sorted through the company's physical remains—its sets, its costumes, and its props—selected a few keepsakes and burned the rest in a massive bonfire (Sherman and Mumaw 2000, 63). Far more enamored of the feathered cape he had once worn as Tepancaltzin—a role he took for himself in 1921—than Kosloff had been of his cape for *The Woman God Forgot*, Shawn spared it from the flames. He donned it again, this time with his Men Dancers (1933–1940) in “The Noche Triste de Moctezuma” (The Melancholy Night of Moctezuma) segment of *O Libertad!* (1936). *O Libertad!* may have been the first evening-length modern dance work (Sherman and Mumaw 2000, 271), yet it provided the clearest example of Shawn's conceptual foundation in Prescott's nineteenth-century worldview.

What Shawn called “an American saga” opened not with the Jamestown settlement or the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock (Shawn 1960, 273); it was set, instead, before Moctezuma's “throne” (“*O Libertad!*” 1938). Shawn thoroughly muddled Prescott's recounting of the final days of Moctezuma in his dramatization and imbued its human sacrifice with elements of Roman haruspicy that were lifted from Wallace (Wallace [1873] 1898, 322), yet his scenario conveyed Prescott's underlying political message with precision.

Rather than depict the Noche Triste that Prescott presented—the Spanish escape from Tenochtitlán in June of 1520, during which they lost their golden loot—Shawn created an ahistorical Spanish ambush of Aztec “chieftains” during a lavish banquet (“*O Libertad!*” 1938). When Moctezuma and his retinue of “princes” receive this news, they sacrifice the messenger and read the ill-omened future of their empire in his heart. Left alone in his grief, the Aztec leader is confronted by Father Olmedo who presents him with a cross to kiss. This Moctezuma refuses to do, preferring death and the faith of his fathers over Christianity. Shawn concluded his program notes for the “Noche Triste,” by asserting that in “choosing this episode as the crucial moment of the impact of European civilization upon the indigenous one, Mr. Shawn has created a dance of barbaric splendor and bitter tragedy.” Just as Prescott had proposed, Shawn presented the “barbaric splendor” of the Aztecs as that of a necessarily doomed people.

As if to consciously underline Prescott's political stance, Shawn also set the second and third scenes of *O Libertad!* in Spanish America as well. The second scene depicted what Shawn called the “fanatic” Hermanos Penitentes and their ritual crucifixions, apparently drawing on some of the same heavily sensationalized sources that Martha Graham was using in her own evocations of the Southwestern United States, *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) and *El Penitente* (1940) (Snow 2017, 16–19). Although he was not specifically describing Prescott's work, historian Ramón Gutiérrez captured a significant element of the cultural context from which it sprang: “Protestant authors in the nineteenth century focused on the brutality and barbarity of the bloody flagellants and their crucifixion rite to validate Anglo-American presuppositions . . . namely, that centuries of Roman Catholic rule in what became the U.S. Southwest had bred a backward, primitive, and savage piety that hampered the civilizing mission of the Anglo capitalist gospel” (Gutiérrez 1999, 253).

These economic concerns, shared by Prescott (Franchot 1994, 41–42), formed the core of *O Libertad!*'s third scene. As Shawn described it, the ensuing dance was “based upon a labor rhythm of the Mexican peons working in a sugar refinery peonage being another result of the Spanish domination of Mexico. . . . As the peons exit, there comes dashing in a ‘*Hacendado de California*’ of about 1830. Living upon sweated labor, the Spanish grandees and their sons were rich beyond measure, and lived in regal splendor” (“*O Libertad!*” 1938). The indolent Hispanic grandees, described as having the same faults that Prescott ascribed to his “Oriental” Aztecs, were finally displaced by the “rousing, rowdy . . . Forty Niners,” marking the victory of Anglo-America in obtaining California from its backward, feudal overlords.

Having decided that his Men Dancers had fulfilled its purpose of legitimizing the male theatrical dancer, Shawn dissolved the company in the spring of 1940, bringing full performances of *O Libertad!* to an end (Shawn 1960, 275). He continued to perform part of the “Noche Triste” as a stand-alone piece as late as the summer of 1942 (Jacob’s Pillow 1942, 1). By that time the United States was fully engaged in its Good Neighbor policy with Ibero-America. The United States consciously abandoned its nineteenth-century imperialist rhetoric as part of a concerted effort to ensure that Nazi Germany failed in its attempts to establish a beach head in the Americas (Delpar 1992, 205–06). The views Prescott had espoused, and which Shawn’s dance had embodied, were set aside in favor of a hoped-for hemispheric unity.

## Afterimages

One of the central characteristics of the hegemonic Orientalism which Said identified was its systematic silencing of the voices of its putative subjects, whose “great moments were in the past” ([1978] 1980, 41), a stance which echoed nineteenth-century characterizations of Mexico in the United States. The Good Neighbor Policy, temporarily at least, altered that situation. It did so at the same time that Mexican theatrical dance was beginning to gain a recognizable “voice” of its own as it were—an event in which the efforts of Shawn and Kosloff as educators played a supporting role.

Shawn and St. Denis established the Denishawn School in Los Angeles in 1915. The school and its affiliated dance company would produce three of the four dancers regarded as the founders of modern dance in the United States, Weidman, Graham, and Doris Humphrey (1895–1958).<sup>18</sup> One of Denishawn’s lesser-known students was Texas-born Lettie Carroll (1888–1964), who moved to Los Angeles to work as a Spanish interpreter during World War I and studied under Graham before moving to Mexico City to open her own dance school (Aulestia 2003, 25). Carroll would train Nellie Campobello (1900–1986), who, with her half sister, Gloria (1917–1968), also a Carroll alumna, as principal instructor, would go on to lead Mexico’s Escuela Nacional de Danza (National School of Dance) for nearly half a century (Aulestia 1987, 8ff.).

With financing provided by his participation in a string of DeMille productions, Kosloff opened a chain of ballet schools in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the nation in the 1920s (Levine 2009). His best known student was DeMille’s niece, choreographer Agnes de Mille (1905–1993), but he also trained Waldeen Falkenstien (1914–1993), who would go on to develop a career as a modern dance instructor and choreographer in Mexico (Tortajada Quiroz 2008a, 218). Her *La Coronela* (The Lady Coronel, 1940) became a touchstone in the development of Mexico’s national theatrical dance (Tortajada Quiroz 2008b, 54–60).

Mexico had adopted theatrical modern dance as a state-sponsored style and it was on the invitation of its Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Education) that Waldeen and Graham protégé Anna Sokolow (1910–2000) traveled to teach there in 1939, mostly to students who had initiated their studies at the Escuela Nacional de Danza (Tortajada Quiroz 2008a, 194–246). Waldeen taught her students a style based on what she called Mexican “physiognomy, philosophy and psychology” (223). Sokolow provided her disciples with a foundation in her own version of Graham’s technique, which Kendall argues had its beginnings in Graham’s performances of Shawn’s *Xochitl* (1979, 168).

Waldeen became a Mexican citizen and was a constant presence within its dance community. Sokolow returned to the United States, though she revisited Mexico regularly throughout her career to encourage her students and create new works. The followers of both became passionate advocates for the differing approaches to dance creation of their instructors, and the relations between the so-called Waldeenas and Sokolovas deteriorated to the point that they refused to appear on the same stage together (Covarrubias [1952] 2002, 413). When polymath caricaturist Miguel

Covarrubias (1904–1957) assumed the leadership of the newly created Dance Department of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA, National Institute of Fine Arts) and its Academia de Danza Mexicana (Academy of Mexican Dance) in June of 1950, he was determined to bring their fighting to an end. Part of his temporarily successful strategy on this front included finalizing the government’s invitation to the José Limón Company to perform at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City and teach at the Academy in 1950 and again in 1951. During the company’s 1951 visit, Limón focused his efforts on creating choreography for the first production of INBA Director Carlos Chávez’s (1899–1978) Aztec ballet *Los Cuatro Soles* (The Four Suns, 1925). Limón’s epic Aztec work failed with both critics and audiences (Covarrubias [1952] 2002, 415). His far more intimate *Tonantzintla*, which he described as dances “transmuted from the Spanish . . . by the Indian imagination” proved to be the success of his second Mexican season (Limón 1951, 12).

Dance audiences in the United States saw the results of Limón’s labors later that same year on the stage of Jacob’s Pillow when the original cast of *Tonantzintla* performed there, nearly a decade after the final appearance of Shawn’s “Noche Triste” (Limón 1951, 12). The following year, kinesiologist Josefina García presented a work she called *Mosaico Mexicano* at the Pillow (Tortajada Quiroz 2013, 44–46). She brought dancers from Mexico with her and augmented her cast with students at the Pillow to present her work which, with its mix of traditional dances from across the nation, anticipated the future folk dance spectaculars of Waldeen’s disciple Amalia Hernandez in the 1960s (Jacob’s Pillow 1952, 1–2). Shawn himself joined García onstage to dance “La Bamba” from the Mexican State of Veracruz. He was no longer performing as a pre-conquest “emperor,” but as a contemporary rural Mexican as seen by an urban Mexican. With the emergence of a cadre of modern dancers from Mexico trained in a tradition that had descended from his own work at Denishawn, Shawn was presented with, and even presented himself, a distinctly different perspective on the Mexican that was no longer based in the imagination of an expansionist America. Mexico was beginning to claim the right to “speak” on its own on the international dance stage.

## Notes

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for *Dance Research Journal* whose insightful comments helped provide a clearer picture of the pre-conquest world that the filmmakers and choreographers claimed to have presented and of the cultural milieu of early twentieth-century America in which these works emerged.

1. Not quite a year earlier *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, which targeted record dealers, reported that the “Hula Hula girls” and “American style” Hawaiian music had “taken the country by storm” (“Hawaiian Music” 1916, 3). A related story in the same issue of the magazine promised dealers high profits through the sale of what it called “a class of music that, at the present time, seems to have the musical fancy of the record-buying public captivated” (12).

2. Jacqueline Shea Murphy treats the larger group of Shawn’s works inspired in Native American sources as an affirmation of the “successful colonization of Indigenous people and land” by Anglo-Americans (2007, 115).

3. Juan Ortega y Medina focused his attention on Stephens, who began his travels within what was then the Federal Republic of Central America (1823–1841)—today’s Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador—on an official diplomatic mission (Stephens [1841] 1848, v). For Ortega y Medina, Stephens “through artistic magic . . . converted the Maya people into a people of the United States” (Ortega y Medina 1962, 80; all translations herein my own). Stephens also took action to literally convert the Mayan ruins of Copan into a US landmark, asserting simply that “they belonged of right to us” ([1841] 1848, 115). Logistical challenges frustrated his scheme to dismantle its pyramids and stelae, which he had purchased for \$50, and rebuild them in New York City as part of a national museum. Stephen’s projected museum was also to have included painter George Catlin’s (1796–1872) “Indian Gallery,” consisting of several hundred

portraits and scenes from the life of the Plains Indian groups of the United States, to provide a “unified ‘memorial’ to the nation’s noble past” (Evans 2004, 54, 72).

4. Although DeMille’s film largely followed the plot of Wallace’s novel, his production team did adapt an element drawn from Prescott for a scene depicting the looting of Moctezuma’s treasury, which did not form part of Wallace’s book. Prescott reported Cortez had presented some of the emeralds taken from the “unfortunate Montezuma” to his intended, Juana de Zuñiga, inadvertently arousing the enmity of the wife of Charles V, Isabella of Portugal (Prescott [1843] 1936, 666). In its quest to promote the film’s commitment to authenticity, the studio’s publicity materials for *The Woman God Forgot* went so far as to assert that DeMille had secured the loan of several of these emeralds, which were supposedly then part of the “crown jewels of Spain,” for shooting this sequence (“Crown Jewels” 1917, 6).

5. In March of 1916, Villa attacked and razed Columbus, New Mexico, in retaliation for US support of his political foe Venustiano Carranza (1859–1920). Shortly thereafter, the US War College proposed the “occupation and pacification of Mexico.” President Wilson organized an ultimately unsuccessful punitive expedition to find and punish Villa, which managed only to arouse anti-US sentiment south of the border. It was the offer of German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann to Carranza to return all the territories Mexico had lost to the United States if it allied with Germany that prompted the US Senate to declare war on Germany in April 1917. Carranza realized that Germany was too far away to help if Mexico challenged the United States and, consequently, remained neutral (“U.S. Involvement in the Mexican Revolution” n.d.).

6. Despite art historian Michael Morris’s assertion that Kosloff, Rambova, and Vera Fredova, (1895–1989, born Winifred Edwards in London) oversaw choreography for the film, the language in Kosloff’s *Artcraft Advance* article also suggests that the Aztec dance he referred to was yet to come (Morris 1991, 50; “Aztec Dance Coming” 1917, 10). It is possible that Kosloff served as a consultant on the film’s crowd scenes as he did for other DeMille productions (Garafola 2005, 69).

7. The *Daily Nebraskan* credited this piece to the *Los Angeles Times*, though my search of the *Times*’s digital archives failed to locate any such text. Regardless of its actual authorship, the text was marked as an “adv.” at its conclusion, so it had been inserted as a paid advertisement.

8. The pages of the Salt Lake City, Utah, newspapers, which covered the screenings of DeMille’s film in local cinemas, also contained articles about Kosloff’s appearance at the city’s Orpheum Theater (see, for example, “The Stage and the Screen” 1917, 66–67). Although DeMille’s film did not achieve blockbuster status, it is not true, as Namia Prevots repeatedly asserted in *Dancing in the Sun*, that the film was a flop (Prevots 1987, 119–132). It took in nearly three times the costs of production at the box office (Birchard 2004, 112).

9. In the time period under discussion here, Mexican composer Carlos Chávez created scores and sought productions for his ballets *El fuego nuevo* (The New Fire, 1921), loosely based on an Aztec religious ceremony, and *Los cuatro soles*, a version of the Aztec creation myth recounted in the pages of the *Codex Vaticanus* (Parker 1985, 180–85). As part of his ultimately unsuccessful early marketing of these works Chávez suggested that choreographers study the Mexican codices for their “invaluable concrete suggestions as to . . . choreographic composition” (as cited in Aulestia 2013, 148–49). Subsequently, a company of four dancers that called itself *Interpretaciones Aztecas y Mayas* (Aztec and Maya Interpretations, 1934–1936) appeared in Mexico City’s Palacio de Bellas Artes. Its program notes included endorsements from the nation’s leading academics, government archeologists, and museum directors for the dancer’s studies of ancient art and architecture and the consequent “archeological exactitude” of their performances (as quoted in Aulestia 2012, 373–74). Dance historian Paul Scolieri references the Aztec codices as containing a kind of “bodily writing,” but focuses his discussions of Native American dance in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America in his *Dancing the New World* on the detailed descriptions of actual dances witnessed by Spanish chroniclers of the conquest era (2013, 20).

10. If Weidman missed Kosloff’s Lincoln appearance, he certainly saw DeMille’s film, in which Kosloff wore the same costume. Weidman idolized its star, opera singer Geraldine Farrar (1882–1967) (Lancos 2007, 56).

11. See Terry (1971), illustrations following page 82, for a photograph of Weidman in his Aztec costume.
12. Shawn's book-length exposition on his ideas about the formation of a uniquely American dance, his 1926 *The American Ballet*, specified the "Indian" as an "obvious theme" of "American art production" (15).
13. Shawn acknowledged that Wallace's book served as his introduction to the Aztecs and led him to read Prescott's retelling of their conquest (Shawn 1926, 19). If he had read Prescott at the time he created his *Dagger Dance*, he missed a key feature of Aztec religious thought. Prescott was revolted by the practice of human sacrifice, but he did report that the Aztecs believed that individuals who were so offered received a "most glorious death, and one that opened a sure passage into paradise" ([1843] 1936, 51).
14. The Denishawn Dancers used a flattened style in the "Belshazzar's Feast" scene from D. W. Griffith's (1875–1948) *Intolerance* (1916), which may provide some idea of what the court attendants in *Xochitl* looked like in performance.
15. The Hopi of Arizona speak a Uto-Aztecan language distantly related to the Nahuatl spoken by the Aztecs. Most peoples of the various Pueblos of New Mexico speak languages from the Kersan and Kiowa-Tanoan language groups, while the language of the Zuni is unrelated to any other linguistic group ("Pueblo Indian Languages" n.d.).
16. The nearest analogue to the Thunderbird for the Aztec people was Tlaloc, a composite being with goggle eyes and jaguar-like fangs who personified rain (Aguilar-Moreno 2006, 327).
17. While the producers of *Thunderbird* could have plucked the name Aztlan out of either Prescott or Wallace, the term Nahua, as such, appears in neither. The source for the character names in the Fokine ballet remains unclear.
18. The fourth, Hanya Holm (1893–1992), trained under Mary Wigman in Germany.

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