

Heinrich, A. (2018) Review of Karen Eliot, *Albion's Dance: British Ballet During the Second World War*. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 34(1), pp. 94-95.
[Book Review]

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Deposited on: 19 March 2018

Karen Eliot. *Albion's Dance: British Ballet During the Second World War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). £??, hb. 218pp. ISBN 9780199347629.

The perception of ballet changed dramatically in Britain from the 1930s onwards, and particularly during World War II. In *Albion's Dance* dance historian Karen Eliot charts the development of various choreographers and companies throughout the period's cultural landscape and illustrates the centrality of ballet in the British wartime experience. She convincingly argues that an attempt to found of a uniquely British ballet tradition was at the heart of these popular and widely noted endeavours. In doing so Eliot's focus on "less popularly known dancers, companies, choreographers, producers, patrons and propagandists" (p. 3) is commendable as it illustrates the vibrancy and energy of the WWII ballet boom. Eliot usefully distinguishes between the tentative attempts of the pre-war years to develop a distinctly British ballet language and bring this work to wider international attention (pp. 87-90), and the subsequent development after 1939 with a rising number of companies, home-grown talents, highly popular productions and widely recognised touring.

There is much to praise in this book: Eliot's focus on the critic's voice has unearthed countless documents and her discursive section on the critic is fascinating (pp. 14-27). She successfully works out the attempts to move ballet away from an elitist form of entertainment during the war (pp. 107-109) and usefully alludes to artistic experiments which were sidelined again after 1949 (pp. 173-179). She aptly describes the hardships dancers and choreographers suffered

during the war, and the inequality of the war experience by male and female dancers (pp. 59-63).

In fact, there is a lot of description in this book as Eliot almost exclusively refers to contemporary accounts, memoirs and reviews. In many places the reader is left wondering what this rise in ballet's popularity during World War II actually meant in a wider context. For example, what kind of discourse did choreographers tap into when reviving Shakespearean texts or classical ballets? What about concepts of translation and adaptation? What about the link between performance and nationhood? And what about the political role of these popular ballet productions? Government subsidies to the performing arts, for example, are only mentioned in passing (p. 33) and existing research as well as archival material not properly investigated (pp. 87-89). There is no review of the existing research literature, no attempt to place this study in a discourse. In fact the performances themselves remain curiously absent from Eliot's book, which really is a study of the critical reception of ballet during WWII – nothing less, but certainly nothing more.

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