

The spirit of REMEMBRANCE

Marianka Swain explores dance during World War I and recommends centenary events

EVERYBODY'S DOIN' IT NOW

"The Great War was key to breaking down the elite divisions of dance styles," explains Darren Royston, dance history expert and artistic director of Nonsuch. "It's a time when old meets new: the upper-class English waltz with its string orchestra coming up against one-step and jazz." And, as Irving Berlin's 1911 comic song observes, "Everybody's doin' it now", from high society to low and everyone in between.

World War I transformed social interaction. "Priorities shifted from maintaining the status quo to surviving unimaginable turmoil," says historian Dr Jenna Lowe. "All those certainties are taken away, as men never return from the Front, women go from a passive role to working in factories, and whether you're in battle or back

in Britain, under threat of bombing, class distinctions are no longer so insurmountable. It's a democratising period where people are thrown together, living for the moment, and embracing entertainment as a means of escape."

Dance halls were key to this melting pot. Darren notes some were closed at the beginning of the war, considered inappropriate, "but they became an important way of keeping spirits up". Some songs offered a recruitment rallying cry, with patriotic compositions like "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and "Pack Up Your Troubles"; others processed major changes, like the new contribution of women.

It was a time of accelerated innovation. Ragtime became king, and Edwardian animal dances like the Grizzly Bear, Turkey Trot, Bunny Hug and Camel Walk were reworked and lifted from lower-class entertainment to fashionable crazes under the leadership of US-based couple Irene and Vernon Castle.

The Castles also introduced the one-step, nicknamed the Castle Walk. "They danced it entirely on their toes, with one step to every beat, so they were constantly moving with the ragtime rhythm," explains Darren. The one-step's simplicity made it accessible to everyone and easy to personalise, matching the freewheeling vibe of the music.

"Progressive women were more active in society, and more active in 'dance crazes', expressing their personality and dancing as equals. These styles were a precursor to the Charleston"



A working party of the Manchester Regiment moving up to the trenches near Serre in France, January 1917

Photographs (above and top right): *From Street To Trench: A World War That Shaped A Region* at IWM North

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The Late Captain Vernon Castle, R.F.C. The famous dancer who, after proving himself a splendid aviator at the Front, met his death at Fort Worth, Texas, while training American cadets. He and his wife have had an extraordinarily good influence on ball-room dancing.

After centuries of Americans adopting European dances, those roles were reversed, a trend augmented by US troops flooding into Europe, says Darren. "They helped popularise jazz, and friendly dance styles broke the ice when all these different people were brought together."

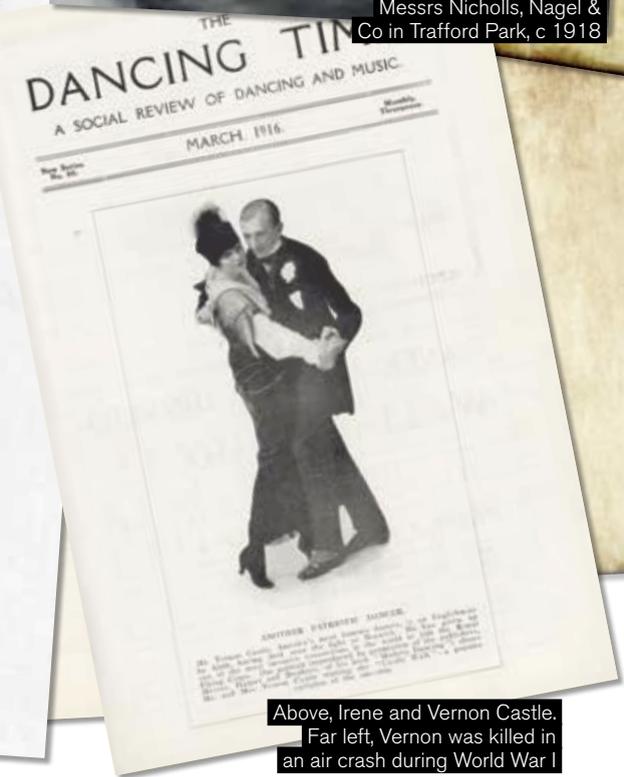
Jenna adds: "Before this period, it was unusual to interact with someone fundamentally different

to you – from another background, class or nation. Dance gave people a common language, and dance halls then became a primary point of socialising post-war."

Those halls held a wide variety of styles, explains Darren: "Dozens of new dances came flooding in. You had the Boston waltz, which involved a box step rather than Viennese turning; the polka variant Maxixe, otherwise



A group of women workers of the glucose factory of Messrs Nicholls, Nagel & Co in Trafford Park, c 1918



Above, Irene and Vernon Castle. Far left, Vernon was killed in an air crash during World War I

known as Brazilian tango; and the foxtrot, which was seen as very scandalous, because you dipped your partner to the floor.

"The establishment quickly accepted ragtime, with the Savoy hotel employing Murray's Quartet in 1915, but you would still do a waltz if there was an orchestra; you had to be flexible. I've got a dance manual from 1914 which lists numerous styles, including ➤

Photographs from the Dancing Times archive

Turkey Trot, Maxixe and waltz, so the key development was accepting diversity."

"It was also reflective of changing relationships off the floor," observes Jenna. "Progressive women were more active in society, and more active in 'dance crazes', expressing their personality and dancing as equals. These styles were a precursor to the Charleston, which worked as a partner dance but also a form of solo expression, and, in the 1920s, the rise of the flapper, personifying female liberation.

"Dance was a vital way of uniting disparate groups and holding a society together. However, it also contributed to a wave of revolution, with the young rebelling against the old, embracing new influences, and sowing the seeds for even greater changes to come."

WE MUST NEVER FORGET

This month, English National Ballet makes its first visit to the Barbican with work commemorating World War I. Toni Racklin, head of theatre, was inspired by the passion of artistic director Tamara Rojo: "She felt the Barbican was the right place for this landmark project, and we felt it would be perfect for us.

"It's a really extraordinary, rich evening of work. There are lots of great plays and poetry connected



Above, Akram Khan rehearsing with ENB dancers
Below, *Lest We Forget*



Irene and Vernon Castle

with the war, and compelling documentary evidence, but dance engages audiences in such an unusual, visceral way."

Lest We Forget features George Williamson's *Firebird* and new choreography from Liam Scarlett, Akram Khan and Russell Maliphant. It's the first time Khan has worked with a classical ballet company.

"I was apprehensive, but when Tamara approached me, I fell in love with her vision," he reveals.

THE BEST OF 2014

LEST WE FORGET
April 2–12
Barbican Theatre, London
www.barbican.org.uk

FROM STREET TO TRENCH: A WORLD WAR THAT SHAPED A REGION
April 5 – May 31
Imperial War Museum
North, Manchester
www.iwm.org.uk

THE ECHOES OF WAR
May 16
Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery
www.plymouth.gov.uk

LATE SHIFT EXTRA: IN PARENTHESIS
May 16
National Portrait

Gallery, London
www.npg.org.uk

AN AUGUST BANK HOLIDAY LARK
Until June 14
National tour
www.northern-broadsides.co.uk

THE GREAT WAR
June 24–26
Southbank Centre
www.southbankcentre.co.uk

BIRDSONG
Until July 5
National tour
www.birdsongthetour.com

WAR HORSE
Until October 11
National tour
www.warhorseonstage.com

Find more in your area at: www.1914.org

"We did some workshops and I was amazed by how open the dancers were. I've adapted my approach, because what I normally do wouldn't look right – they have higher centres than contemporary dancers – but it's been exciting to see how the material evolves with them. And I love their precision: I give a note once, and it's absorbed immediately!"

Khan was inspired by the cycle of war, "life and death", and "its muddiness – no clear right and wrong". His piece considers social and physical shifts: "You have men confined in the trenches for long periods of time, while women

grow from housewives to factory workers – I found that fascinating.

"But it's not purely literal. What I love about dance is its ambiguity, its ability to suggest, to rise above specifics and reach universal experience, to conjure up narratives within the audience. It's a great way of reflecting and relearning stories.

"My generation hasn't experienced war in the same way; we've always been at a distance, watching on TV. It's important to reflect and be reminded, to engage with our past and consider how that feeds into our own experience. We must never forget." ●