



# ON THE MOVE

How contemporary dance is high-kicking its way into fashion, film and our elastic hearts. By EMILIE DINGFELD

FOUR HUNDRED MILLION VIEWS ON YOUTUBE. This is a click rate that is usually reserved for cats, babies and the occasional starlet meltdown, but it was singer Ed Sheeran who scored that feat. No, the crooner didn't fall down during a concert or slur obscenities outside a nightclub; he did it simply by learning how to dance. Take the video for his recent hit, "Thinking Out Loud," which is a mini film that has him swirling around a ballroom with a leggy lady to such lyrics as "kiss me under the light of a thousand stars." In it, the pair's eyes lock while the five-minute love song punctuates their moves and the camera pans up and down like a PBS documentary on Mikhail Baryshnikov. The result is one of Sheeran's biggest hits to date, and a track that is destined to become this year's most-played wedding ballad.

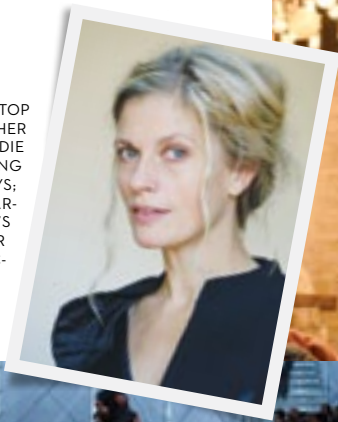
In Sia's video for her *Billboard*-topping "Chandelier," a lone dancer (Maddie Ziegler of the reality TV series *Dance Moms*) garnered similar attention by sporting a nude bodysuit and a prim blonde wig and performing a series of spastic movements. The views equalled 650 million, the artist's highest click rate to date. Which is probably why Sia employed Ziegler to go toe-to-toe with actor Shia LaBeouf in the controversial video for her track "Elastic Heart" (it went on to amass more than 230 million viewers, with some calling it inappropriate and even pedophilic). Sia tweeted her apologies immediately, though, claiming the diverse characters were meant to represent her duelling personalities.

Though Ziegler, Sheeran and LaBeouf are some of the

public faces of this dance craze, the behind-the-steps choreographers are also getting noticed. "A lot of people think Michael Jackson just danced like that," says choreographer Napoleon Dumo, known for dance shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*. "Dancers were always in the background...and all those [reality TV] dance shows made choreography step to the forefront."

Yet the choreography we're becoming familiar with on-screen is different than what's onstage at theatres, where works are meant to do more than just entertain. There's a clear disconnect between what's being created for TV, the runway and the stage, says Toronto-based dance notator Natasha Finlay, who has worked with leading Canadian choreographers, including James Kudelka and Marie Chouinard. "Sure, dance is more mainstream, but it's also becoming more focused on bedazzling and being fast-paced. It's not really about creating a mood or changing the way you feel about something," Guillaume Côté, principal dancer and choreographic associate at the National Ballet of Canada, agrees that shows like *Dancing with the Stars* have made more dance lovers of the masses, but they're not necessarily lining up to watch stage productions (his latest, *Being and Nothingness*, premieres at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto from May 30 to June 6.) "Unfortunately, I don't think that bridge has been crossed as of yet. I think there is a crazy divide between what you see on TV and how easily accessible it is, and sitting for two-and-a-half hours watching a mixed program," he says, adding that there »

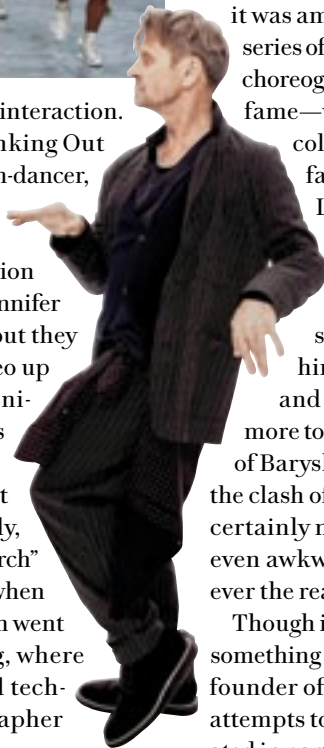
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHOREOGRAPHER CRYSTAL PITE; MADDIE ZIEGLER PERFORMING AT THE 2015 GRAMMYS; BARYSHNIKOV STARRING IN RAG & BONE'S FALL 2015 MENSWEAR SHORT FILM; DANCERS PERFORMING A STEPPING ROUTINE AT RICK OWENS'S SPRING 2014 SHOW.



moving and shaking. For his Spring 2014 show, designer Rick Owens showcased his clothing on women of various sizes and ethnicities who performed a stepping routine (the dance form originated in the early 1900s among African-American sororities and is made up of moves like stomping and clapping), which had critics claiming it was among the top shows of Paris Fashion Week. A series of slow-mo routines—entitled *Passage to Dawn*, choreographed by Benjamin Millepied of *Black Swan* fame—was released alongside Maiyet's Spring 2015 collection. Then there was the signing of world famous dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, 67, and Lil Buck, 27, for a short film for Rag & Bone's Fall 2015 menswear collection.

is one thing all audiences seek: human interaction.

Perhaps that's why Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud" was a viral success. Previously a non-dancer, he learned how to move so he could tell this love story, says Dumo, adding that the art form isn't unique, but its execution was. "You get [dance] all the time with Jennifer Lopez, Rihanna, Justin Timberlake, but they always do fast songs and chop the video up like crazy.... With Sheeran's, it's a minimal amount of shots. It's viewing it as if you're in the same room. It's seeing every expression, every move, not cut up, that helps the narrative." Similarly, Hozier's breakout song "Take Me to Church" was catapulted back into the spotlight when Ukrainian ballet dancer Sergei Polunin went to a dusky lit skeleton of a building, where he showcased impeccable leaps and technique in a video directed by photographer David LaChapelle.



Between polar opposites such as Baryshnikov and Lil Buck, the lines are blurring in so many ways. The interaction between them hints at a more widespread openness to dance, and the mingling of forms. But there's so much more to that video than meets the eye: The evolution of Baryshnikov from ballerino to street-style dancer; the clash of cultures; style that transcends the ages. It's certainly not the most alluring in choreography—it's even awkward—but it's hard to stop replaying, whatever the reason.

What classifies as "contemporary" dance is difficult to discern, as the term casts a wide net. Case in point: Dancer Charles Riley, known as Lil Buck, became famous for his mastery of jookin—a style that comprises jerky yet elastic motions (he is trained in ballet, too). His fame further soared when *Vogue* featured him in its pages for his collaboration with the New York City Ballet in *Les Bosquets*. Wearing white head to toe, including sneakers, Lil Buck's movements both starkly contrast and intelligently blend with the ballerina's pointe work and tutu, bringing to mind fashion's obsession with high/low mixes.

Though it's hard to pinpoint, the nature of emotion is something Vancouver-based choreographer Crystal Pite, founder of contemporary dance company Kidd Pivot, attempts to illustrate in her works. Her latest piece, created in partnership with Electric Company Theatre and premiering at Panamania (a 35-day lineup of arts and cultural programming that's part of the Pan Am Games) is called *Betroffenheit*, a German word that is difficult to translate. "We're talking about trauma, shock and loss," she says. "We're talking about the suspended state that follows in the wake of a traumatic event. You're hit with the limits of language."

But it's not only the stage that's benefiting from the collision of dance worlds. The runways—which fall in and out of love with contemporary dance—are once again

Côté sees this disparity between words and emotion as the reason why dance is catching on with the masses. "Everyone has seen *Transformers*, VFX and everything blow up," he says. "You could list a million things that people have seen, so people are trying to go back to basics, and that's what dance is: It's the purity. Everyone understands the universal language of emotion." □