

Tracing the Achievements of Augusta Johannesén, 1880-1895

Anne Margrete Fiskvik

ABSTRACT

Dancer, choreographer and teacher Augusta Johannesén was an important figure in several capacities for Nordic theatrical dance. She danced, taught and choreographed in Sweden, Finland as well as in Russia. Between 1860-1878 she was a member of the so-called *Johannsenske Balletselskab*, which toured extensively in the Nordic countries. The Johannsenske family settled in the Norwegian capital Kristiania in 1880, and Augusta Johannesén slowly established herself as a professional dance artist at the most important theatres in Kristiania. Over the years she became a dancer, choreographer and teacher of great significance, and her contribution to the development of Norwegian theatre dance cannot be overestimated. She was active as dancer well into the 1910's and "arranger of dance" up until she died in 1926. As a ballet teacher, she trained hundreds of dancers, including several of those who later went on to play a role in the Norwegian dance- and theatre scene.

In many ways, Augusta Johannesén is representative of a versatile dancer that can be found on many European stages, the versatile ballet dancer that was also typical of the Nordic dance scene around the "fin de siècle". She typically also struggled with stereotypical notion of the "ballerina". This article focuses on only a part of her career, her first fifteen years in Norway. Between 1880 and 1895 she established herself in Kristiania, dancing at the *Christiania Theater* and later at the *Eldorado*. The article also forefront an especially important event in Norwegian Nordic dance history instigated by Johannesén: The establishment of a "Ny Norsk Ballet" ("New Norwegian Ballet") at the Eldorado theatre in Kristiania in 1892. This is probably the very first attempt at creating a professional ballet company in Norway, and Augusta Johannesén's contribution is only one of many ways she made a difference to professional theatre dance in Norway.

SAMMENDRAG

Augusta Johannesén – "excellent dancer with dramatic fantasy". Danseren, koreografen og pedagogen Augusta Johannesén har vært en sentral figur på ulike områder innenfor den nordiske teaterdansen. Hun danset, underviste og koreograferte i Sverige, Finland og Russland, og var mellom 1860-1879 medlem av det *Johannsenske Balletselskab*, som reiste mye rundt i de nordiske landene. Den Johannsenske familien slo seg ned i den norske hovedstaden Kristiania i 1880, og der etablerte Augusta Johannesén seg sakte men sikkert som profesjonell danser på de mest sentrale teatrene. I årene som kom, ble hun en viktig kapasitet i hovedstaden og hennes betydning for Norsk teater dans kan ikke overdrives. Hun var aktiv som danser langt inn på 1900-tallet, arrangerte danser og underviste frem til sin død i 1926. Som ballettpedagog trente hun hundrevis av dansere, mange av disse ble senere viktige for norske og utenlandske teaterscener. På mange måter var Augusta Johannesén representativ for den typen fleksibel danser som var vanlig på Europeiske scener i tiden rundt "fin de siècle". Hun kjempet også med stereotype holdninger til hva som var en riktig "ballerina".

Selv om hun kanskje er mest kjent som pedagog, tar denne artikkelen for seg hennes dansekarriere mellom 1880 og 1895. I disse årene etablerte hun seg og fikk oppdrag på *Christiania Theater* og på *Eldorado*. Artikkelen fokuserer også på en særlig viktig hendelse for den norske teaterdansen; etableringen av den såkalte "Nye Norske Ballet" på Eldorado i 1892. Dette er sannsynligvis det første forsøket i norsk dansehistorie på å etablere et profesjonelt dansekompani i Norge. Augusta Johanneséns bidrag i denne sammenheng var betydelig, og bare en av de mange måtene hun bidro til utviklingen av norsk teaterdans.

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Anne Margrete Fiskvik

What can a ballet dancer of real capacity do in this country? Look for instance at Miss Augusta Johannesén, this excellent ballet dancer who also possesses a lot of great dramatic fantasy. – Alas! The many ballets she has composed and staged: Miss Johannesén's rich skills have never been allowed to shine rightfully, because our limited conditions did not allow for a steady ballet company. (Critic and writer Peder Rosenkranz-Johnsen, *Ørebladet*, 11 May 1909, author's translation).

Between 1880 and 1895, Augusta Johannesén established herself as dancer and “arranger of ballet” in Norway, working at venues such as the *Christiania Theater* and the *Eldorado*.¹ She was one of Norway's most important ballet dancers in the latter part of the 19th century. Even though the above quotation sums up the limitations she had to work under, Augusta Johannesén was a highly skilled dancer, well known and respected in the Norwegian capital Kristiania.² Despite the fact that there were no theatres offering steady employment for ballet dancers in the city Augusta Johannesén created, during the years 1880 – 1895, opportunities not only for herself but also for the many dancers who were involved in her projects. She was responsible for initiating a first professional Norwegian ballet company, which did not last but lived on as the ballet company of the

Eldorado. Thus, there *were* opportunities for a ballet dancer of Johannesén's calibre, and this article accounts for some of these and traces some of Johannesén's achievements during her first 15 years in Norway. I especially aim to bring to the fore an important event in Norwegian dance history that was instigated by Johannesén: the establishment of a *Ny Norsk Ballet (New Norwegian Ballet)* at the *Eldorado* in Kristiania in 1892. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the very first attempt at creating a professional ballet company in Norway.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, some space is given to an account of previous research on Augusta Johannesén, as well as to more in-depth considerations on source material used for this article. Given that a great deal of this article relies on the analysis of newspaper material, I have added reflections on the use of this material. In the second part of the article, Johannesén's background is contextualized through some biographical information and a short overview of the theatre situation in Kristiania during the period 1880–1895. The third part of the article analyses a few selected examples of Johannesén's achievements at the *Christiania Theater* and *Eldorado*, the two theatres that were most important for her career during her first 15 years as ballet dancer in Norway.

Source material and previous research

My interest in Augusta Johannesén stems from

extensive work trying to document the Norwegian theatre dance history from 1700 up to 1950. Despite the fact that Johannesén was a well-known dance personality in Kristiania and a teacher of great significance, very little research has been done on her. Theatre historian Valdemar Hansteen summarizes her endeavours in his *Historien om norsk ballet*, (1989, 48-49) and he most likely has based some of his information on interviews with the dancer and actor Per Aabel, who took lessons with Augusta Johannesén and her sister Jenny.³ Hansteen emphasizes her activity as dance teacher and offers little detailed information on her dancing career. A few other published sources mention Augusta Johannesén in some capacity or another. Theatre historian Trine Næss has written a brief section on Augusta and the Johannesén family in her book on the *Christiania Theater* (Næss 2005, 135-136). Næss has examined contracts and copybooks of the theatre, thus piecing together some of August Johannesén's activity at the *Christiania Theater*. Vivid and highly personal descriptions of Johannesén can be found in Rudolf Rasmussen's *Rulleboken* (1935) and *Tutti Frutti* (1941). Theatre director and impresario Rudolf Rasmussen is a significant source, as he worked with Augusta on several occasions, most importantly as artistic director of the *Eldorado* in 1892. He seemed to have known her fairly well, but there are some questionable "facts" in his description of her and her achievements as will be seen later in the article.⁴ A short account of Johannesén is given in Haakon Nielsen's book *Byorginaler (City originals)* (Nielsen 1966, 123-124). However, Nielsen relies heavily on Rasmussen's accounts and offers little new information.

Augusta Johannesén was part of a family of itinerant dancers who performed throughout the Nordic countries, the *Johannesénske*

Balletselskab.⁵ For the Nordic perspective, Sven Hirn's *Våra danspedagoger och dansnöjen*, (1982) is invaluable. A more recent book, *Theater i Norr* (2005, edited by Claes Rosenqvist), analyses some of the activity that the *Johannesénske Balletselskab* undertook in the northern regions of Norway, Sweden and Finland (Rosenqvist 2005, 82-85, 140-155, 340 f).⁶ Augusta Johannesén was a member of this ensemble from early childhood until 1881. She was also active in Sweden parallel to her work in Kristiania. Swedish dance researcher Lena Hammergren has collected some material on Augusta Johannesén's work at the *Tivolibolaget* in Stockholm and writes about her work there in 1895 (Hammergren 2002, 12).

Working with newspapers as source material

The above-mentioned sources do not offer much information on Augusta Johannesén's first years in Norway, probably because few of her Norwegian activities and achievements have so far been documented in detail. This article therefore tries to remedy this "gap" and relies heavily on archival material found in newspapers from 1879 onwards.⁷ The material used consists of notices, advertisements, reviews, chronicles, interviews and portraits in Kristiania newspapers.⁸ This is material that, to the best of my knowledge, has not previously been read and analysed in a dance context.

Even though one must never trust sources blindly, newspaper material has been helpful in assembling some of the missing pieces of the "Augusta Johannesén puzzle". American newspaper-researcher Lucy Salmon points out that the historian is concerned not simply with accounts of material events, but is equally interested in the interpretation of the spirit of a time or locality. This spirit is revealed both by the true and by the false accounts given by the press

(Salmon 1973, 25). In light of this, newspapers can be a valuable source for the dance historian, but one must always analyze its truth-value, as well as contextualize it. The material analysed in this article has been found and selected through reading newspapers on microfilm. I have spent countless hours in front of the microfilm-reader, a task tiring on the eyes as well as the brain. An attentive mind is needed, and consequently there is always a risk that something significant may be overlooked or misread.

Working with newspapers is a bit of detective work, one piece of information offering up new clues that beg to be investigated. What material to emphasize, which papers to select and what lengths of period(s) to be studied are among the fundamental choices in all historical work. Each newspaper offers a slightly different perspective and socio-political orientation of which the researcher must be aware. When investigating a person or phenomenon, you learn, through experience, which newspapers offer what type of information (Salmon 1973, 25). For instance, the newspaper *Verdens Gang* did not print any cultural information whatsoever in between 1880-1890, but from 1890 it started to publish this type of material. *Ørebladet*, on the other hand, was especially attentive to the variety theatres when the paper was launched in 1892.

Newspapers are also, in the words of historian Jerry Knudson, the *lingua franca* of society, and therefore a valuable index in measuring popular attitudes. This is a two-way street as the picture the mass media draw is a response to a predisposed public opinion, which is both satisfied and moulded by it (Knudson 1993, 2). *Ørebladet's* attentiveness to popular entertainment can attest to this interest in popular culture among many of its readers. It is also worth noting that newspapers present what the journalist or editor

saw as being relevant. Thus, many aspects of a situation could either be left out entirely or be superficially or insignificantly presented. This again must be measured against the needs and interests of the readers. For instance, it could be that the *Ørebladet's* attentiveness to the *varieté*- and vaudeville theatres was due to the fact the journalist *Moustache* took a special interest in this type of entertainment.⁹ He/she reported on the activities of the vaudeville theatres several times during the week and also made skilful comments about new and continental trends within the entertainment business. My research into later periods has shown that *Ørebladet* continued to be attentive towards dance.

Knudson also points out the wider significance of the press in both reflecting and shaping society. Newspapers unearth historical facts, and contextualise the same facts socially and politically. They aim to strike responsive chords with the public; without doing so, they could not exist economically (Knudson 1993, 1). Thus the analysis of the material collected has also contributed to an understanding of how theatre dance was viewed and of what positions ballet, vaudeville dance and new phenomena such as the barefoot dance and "Plastik" actually held in Norway.

While some historians use an entire newspaper as a basis for their research, others might use particular features of several publications. Knudson uses the expressions *cluster-* and *longitunal* to describe how newspaper sources can be used (Knudson 1993, 1). My tracing of Augusta Johannesén has been done through both *cluster-* and *longitunal* studies. The newspapers investigated have all been of the same format: four pages (in today's standard a small outlay. When documenting a specific event, for instance the *Ny Norsk Ballet* at the Eldorado, I have done cluster studies, investigating all the

newspapers that existed in Christiania in the fall 1892: *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Morgenbladet*, *Morgenposten*, *Kristiania Intelligenz-Seddele*, *Verdens Gang* and *Ørebladet*. This cluster study has aided in finding the “what, when and where” facts about the performances. The type of material collected consists of notices, advertisements and reviews as well as other cultural material that aid in contextualizing an event. In addition, I have done *longitudinal* studies with the aim of covering a longer period, from 1879 to 1895. For this I have read all daily editions of *Aftenposten* in order to get an overview of different types of dance events taking place during 1880-1895. During this investigation, I have collected material connected to or about Augusta Johannesén, the *Johannesénske Balletselskab*, and the Johannesén family’s dancing school(s), the first of which started in Kristiania in the fall of 1879. This article relies on material collected that relates particularly to Augusta Johannesén’s dance career.

Before moving on with the article, a word about how I use the newspaper material. Most of the reviews and notices published in Norwegian newspapers prior to 1920 were not signed, but published anonymously. When referring to or citing relevant material, I indicate a known writer by giving his/or her signature; otherwise citations or references are all anonymous. Note also that all quotations have been translated from Norwegian into English by me, and this is indicated in the text. Moreover, emphasis or alterations that are not found in the original text are given in italics.

Augusta Johannesén - a highly skilled and versatile dancer

When Augusta Johannesén settled in the Norwegian capital with her family in the fall of 1879, she was 23 years old and a very experienced dancer. She had, in fact, spent most of her life

on Nordic stages as a ballet dancer in her father’s ballet company, the *Johannesénske Balletselskab* (*The Johannesénske Ballet Ensemble*). Augusta was born in Sundsvall, Sweden in 1857, during a series of performances that the company gave there.¹⁰ She was one of (at least) four biological and two adopted children of ballet master Johan Fredrik Johannesén, a Norwegian, and Catherine Altenburg.¹¹ The ensemble, founded around 1850, turned into a true family business when ballet master Johannesén married and formed a family. The children became dancers of the ensemble, literally being brought on stage in children’s roles from a very young age. Upon moving to Norway, the family continued to work closely together in various projects. The father would for instance arrange dances for Augusta at various theatres, while also running a series of well-renowned ballet schools. The first school was named *Johannesénske Plastik og Danseinstitut* and opened in the fall of 1879, and Augusta and Jenny took over the responsibility for the school when their father retired. Because the school’s name changed several times during the years discussed in this article, I will refer to it as the Johannesénske dance school (without italics).¹² Augusta Johannesén was active as a teacher in this school from its very beginning, and taught there while at the same time pursuing her performance career. Like so many dance artists, then as well as today, she maintained parallel careers as both dancer and pedagogue.

In the source material Augusta Johannesén is repeatedly noted for being a highly technically skilled dancer. In fact, most reviews in Nordic and Norwegian newspapers report solid technical abilities for the entire *Johannesénske Balletselskab*. Where did Augusta learn to dance so well? This remains somewhat unclear. The version offered in several Norwegian newspapers is that the Johannesén children were educated

in Russia.¹³ A few sources mention the royal Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg as the educational site. I have not been able to verify this, but the family performed in St. Petersburg on various occasions. A theatre poster from 1862 portrays the company in action, with a drawing of what Sven Hirn assumes to be Augusta and her brother Alfred dancing a folkdance (Hirn 2002, 157-157). The most direct reference about Augusta Johannesén's education comes from a portrait of her sister Josefine (Johannesén) Gullberg in the Swedish journal *Idun*. The journal explained that she [Josephine] made her debut at the Imperial Alexander Theatre around the age of 5, and that she studied with the famous ballet master Christian Johansson, who was originally Swedish.¹⁴ Thus it was pointed out that Mrs Gullberg belongs to another "school", not the Bournonville School, which was common in Sweden (*Idun*, 17 April 1891, 127). Josefine was two years younger than Augusta, and both sisters (as well as the other siblings) could have studied with the same ballet teacher.¹⁵ It is also possible that Augusta received a different education than her sister. Nevertheless, Augusta herself refers to the period spent in St. Petersburg as the best period of her life. She recounts watching the Imperial Ballet dance and how this has remained with her as a "rosy dream". She does not, however, offer any details about her stay or education there (Portrait of Johannesén in *Tidens Tegn*, 28 July 1910). Her Russian training thus cannot be verified, but what matters for this article is that the rumour of solid Russian training cast an aura of both mysticism and respect around her. Most importantly, the source material leaves little doubt that she was technically skilled. Regardless of her education, Augusta Johannesén's skills

were shaped by her long-time career as an itinerant ballet dancer. She seems to have had character dance as her forte and was often listed as performing different national dances. She is also reported to have had comical talents, which she used in the many different pantomimes that were part of the *Johannesénske Balletselskab's* repertoire. She can thus be identified as a "demi-character dancer", versatile, technically able and well versed in several dancing styles.¹⁶

A respectable dancer

In 1880, Augusta Johannesén was probably the female dancer with the best training and skills in Kristiania. She had a possible drawback; she apparently did not have the looks of the ideal



Illustration 1. Augusta Johannesén drawn as a caricature by Thoralf Klouman (approx. 1909)

ballerina. No photos of her dancing have been found, but the actor and artist Thoralf Klouman drew a caricature of her in 1909, as can be seen on the previous page.

The drawing does not exactly flatter Augusta Johannesén as it emphasizes a characteristic, but not beautiful face, and this overshadows her otherwise gracious posture. The theatre director and impresario Rudolf Rasmussen, who played an important role in the cultural life of Kristiania around the “fin de siècle”, retrospectively described her in the following manner: “She was not really beautiful, but she had an expressive mimic, shining eyes as black as coal, and, above all, an excellent dance technique.” (Rasmussen 1934, 103, author’s translation). From this I read that she had a strong, lively and charismatic face, which, in my opinion, is also reflected in Klouman’s drawing. According to Rasmussen, the theatre directors and instructors did not value Augusta’s characteristic looks. He claimed that when she was given dance engagements, it was often in scenes where her face could be blurred, either by mist or behind/with veils: “She [Augusta Johannesén] was indeed a most magnificent dancer and an excellent instructor. She was not really beautiful [...] At the theatres the instructors usually let her dance behind a curtain or with a veil or mask [...]” (Rasmussen 1941, 65, author’s translation). Rasmussen’s descriptions of Augusta Johannesén were done retrospectively in the 1930’s and 1940’s, when looking back on his long career as a key figure in Kristiania’s cultural life. His evaluations were obviously coloured by personal opinion. Still, as theatre director and Kristiania’s leading impresario, he was used to making judgements on what would “sell”, and his appraisal must be understood in that context. It must not be forgotten that Rasmussen also emphasized her competence as invaluable to the dancing community: “Augusta

Johannesén’s capacity as solo dancer and instructor was quickly discovered, and the theatres often made use of her abilities.” (Rasmussen 1934, 103, author’s translation).

If solid skills did not suffice to give her permanent employment, it was simply because at this point in Norwegian theatre history, no such opportunity existed. No position was created for her even at the most relevant theatre, *Christiania Theater*. However, the very same Rudolf Rasmussen created opportunities for her at the *Eldorado*, as will be seen later in the article. To what degree her looks played a role in limiting her work prospects is difficult to evaluate though her appearance could of course have hampered some of her possibilities in Kristiania. There is, however, no material in newspapers attesting to this in a direct manner. What is clear from several sources is that a female dancer would be scrutinized and evaluated for her degree of “anstendighet” – “propriety”, and on that scale Augusta Johannesén fared very well.

Questions of propriety and respectability were very much at stake in the latter part of the 19th century. A new theatre law was passed in Norway in 1875, and of special interest for this article is a paragraph stating that permissions should be granted in such a way that law and order as well as *decency* were maintained. That these were new and better times for theatre and entertainment in Norway can be attested to by the fact that the old laws against theatrical performances outside of the few privileged theatres were abolished. Archivist Torkel Bråten at the Norwegian *Riksarkivet* in Oslo points out that the new law finally ended the monopoly of Norwegian theatre, but at the same time, provided detailed guidelines as to how the Norwegian theatre field should be regulated. Questions of respectability and high morale were at stake (Bråten 2014, 2-3).¹⁷

My research has shown that questions of decency and morality were especially pertinent for ballet companies and dancers performing in Norway. For instance, a review in *Stavangeren* emphasized that the *Johannesénske Balletselskab* was morally sound:

This Ballet Ensemble [*Johannesénske Balletselskab*] distinguishes itself from most other ballet ensembles by the fact that propriety is paid attention to in a sufficient manner. Therefore, the performances can safely be recommended to be seen by everybody, even the most sensitive person. (*Stavangeren*, 23 September 1878, author's translation).

The focus on decency is not surprising, given that ballet dancers worked with their body and showed more flesh than performers in other art forms. Similar concerns about keeping the morals up and avoiding any indecency can be found all over Europe. Female dancers were scrutinized even more than men in regards to decency. Dance researcher Christy Adair points out that moral issues were especially fronted during the Victorian age (Adair 1992, 36). Thus the bodily display of flesh that dancers often showed was especially prone to attacks: "Traditionally, in keeping with dualist notions, women have been portrayed stereotypically as either the 'virgin' or the 'whore'. In dance history a number of acclaimed ballerinas have been described by these two stereotypes. [...] this is the male fantasy of women and 'femininity.'" (Adair 1992, 72). If we adopt Adair's rather "black and white" notions, Augusta Johannesén would certainly have belonged to the "virgin" category of dancers. She would not show more flesh than absolutely needed and compliments were paid her in the newspapers on her respectable dressing, for

instance in *Morgenbladet*, 6 October 1892. The upkeep of modesty and propriety was surely a heritage from her career as itinerant dancer, when decency was constantly commented on in Sweden, Finland and Norway. It was also an issue in the Kristiania theatres.

As a result of the new law on entertainment, theatres of all kinds were established in Kristiania. Some of them were short-lived, whereas others more lasting. The 1880's and 1890's was a period in which theatre-life blossomed and as new theatres were opened, many offered repertoire that called for dance numbers. The advertisements for Kristiania from 1880-1910 show an amazing activity, every day audiences could choose between a variety of "high brow" and popular entertainment.¹⁸ Several theatres employed dancers in their various productions. Dancing would be a part of vaudevilles, revues, and variétés, as well as operas and operettas. As such, the theatre-life in Kristiania was similar to that of the other Nordic capitals. What was absent in Norway was of course a professional opera and ballet company similar to those of Copenhagen and Stockholm.¹⁹ However, there was an awareness of this lack, and there were heated discussions in the leadership of the *Christiania Theater* about what the obligations of this semi-state-supported theatre constituted. The debate was mostly about the lack of a professional opera and went on from 1870's and onwards (Naess 2005, 129-135; Kindem 1941, 50-75). There were hefty debates about whether *Christiania Theater* had the responsibility for giving Norwegian audiences opera, but the newspaper material I have examined rarely addresses the issue of dance.²⁰

Augusta Johannesén at the Christiania Theater

When Augusta Johannesén settled in Kristiania, it is quite understandable that she aimed to be hired

at the *Christiania Theater*. Established in 1827, it was the oldest theatre in Kristiania, in fact founded by a Swedish dancing master and actor, Johan Peter Strömberg. *Christiania Theater* functioned, at least informally, as the Norwegian national theatre until it was replaced by the newly built *Nationaltheatret* in 1899. *Christiania Theater* thus tried to uphold a certain literary standard, but the directors were also aware of their responsibility towards opera and operettas. The opera debate mentioned above was mostly about the responsibility of Christiania Theater towards opera and ballet. Not all agreed that the national theatre had obligations towards opera or ballet, but some directors were more favourable towards these art forms than others. However, even if the theatre never had a permanent ballet ensemble, quite a few ballet performances were given there by visiting companies or troupes, for instance by August Bournonville and Adrian Gredelue (Næss 2005, 136).

With the Johannesén family in town, the theatre had access to highly qualified dancers.²¹ Augusta Johannesén's position at the *Christiania Theater* can be described as that of a "faithful freelancer". She was never on a permanent pay roll, but was used in various projects from 1880 onwards. Her off-and on engagement continued also at the new *Nationaltheatret* when this replaced *Christiania Theater* in 1899. She danced in operas, operettas and theatre pieces that contained dance. In Johan Ludvig Heiberg's *Elverhøi*, she created one of her more memorable interpretations and became especially noted for her point shoe dancing in the play (*Tidens Tegn*, 4 January 1926). When *Elverhøi* was given with a new cast in 1886, Johannesén and corps de ballet performed the ballet divertissement in the fourth act. The play received good reviews and *Morgenbladet* made a special comment on Johannesén's dancing:

The staging of the piece is thoroughly done and creates a good impression. It is worth to make a special mention of the ballet divertissement in the fourth act, here the solo parts were very handsomely performed by Miss Johannesén. She had also put together a very well instructed corps de ballet, consisting of young girls. The Minuet in the fifth act was under her guidance arranged in a very successful manner. (*Morgenbladet*, 12 January 1886, author's translation).

This review is rather typical for its time: The Kristiania newspapers would write positively, but they seldom elaborated on Johannesén's strengths or weaknesses. *Morgenbladet* in fact gives a little more detailed information than what was common. We learn that the corps de ballet consisted of young girls. It is possible that these were recruited from the Johannesénske dance school as this was not uncommon practice: In later projects that Johannesén engaged in, for instance at the *Eldorado* in 1892, it is known for a fact that her students were engaged as dancers.

Maybe it was her success in *Elverhøi* that encouraged Johannesén to apply to the management of *Christiania Theater* in September 1887. She asked to be given the opportunity to stage her own dance evening:

Kristiania, 19/9 87. To Theatre director Schrøder.²²

Due to the fact that I recently have composed a new dance, I very much hope that it can be performed at the Kristiania's Theater. If this [dance] should not please the audience, I will not ask for any compensation. I will supply the costume myself. I kindly ask to be given an answer soon.

With high regards. Augusta Johannesén (Copy of Document 30/31, 1886, from the copy books of the *Christiania Theater*, author's translation).

The tone of the letter is far from assertive, but hints to a modest dancer making a timid request. There would have been little risk involved in her planned enterprise. Still the management politely turned her down: She was thanked for her offer, but told that due to the situation of the repertory at the time being, no such occasion was available. However, the letter ended on an optimistic note: "The directorship will remember this offer, should there later in the winter turn up possibilities to use Your valuable skills." (Document 31 1886, from the copy books of the *Christiania Theater*, author's translation). Thus we can infer that the *Christiania Theater* administration did

appreciate her, but did not have resources enough to allow her an entire solo evening. Given the fact that the management was under heavy criticism for showing too much opera and operetta, it is not difficult to understand that a solo dance evening could not be prioritized. Allowing for an entire dance evening would probably have been met with severe reproach//disapproval from those who felt that the theatre should be reserved for the traditional spoken theatre.

In the years to come, no further opportunity turned up for a solo evening at the *Christiania Theater*, but Augusta Johannesén continued to be used as dancer in various performances. She danced in several operas, for instance in *Carmen* (1891) and *Mefistofeles* (1893). She was also hired as instructor and arranger of a variety of dancing in plays, operas and operettas. To my knowledge, both Johannesén, as well as the other dancers, were hired for each production. Thus she was offered continuous engagements, but no steady employment at the *Christiania Theater*. However, the work was especially valuable because it brought her status and a positive reputation as a dancer and instructor. During the 1880's, Johannesén was, in the newspaper's advertisements and reviews for other theatres, mentioned as being the ballet mistress and premier ballet dancer of the *Christiania Theater*. Thus other theatres, such as the *Eldorado*, *Folketeatret* and *Tivolihagen*, regarded her as "belonging" to *Christiania Theater*. She was, for instance, referred to as the première-danseuse of the *Christiania Theater* in a notice that advertises her dancing at the *Eldorado* (*Kristiania IntelligenzSedler*; 12 November 1892). Advertisements for the *Christiania Theater*, however, politely emphasized that the dancing was

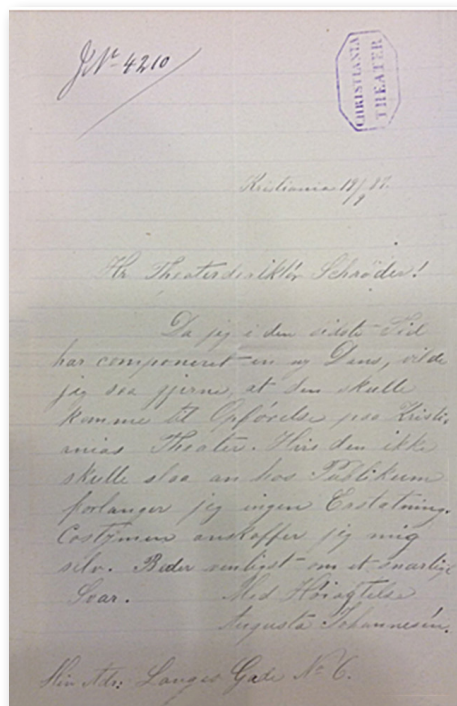


Illustration 2. Copy of Document 30/31, 1886, from the copy books of the *Christiania Theater*, held in the theatre collection at the National Library of Norway.

done by her, but did not give her credit as ballet mistress or ballerina. Despite this, engagements at the *Christiania Theater* were invaluable. They made her visible as dancer and instructor, and gave her a status that though vague inside the *Christiania Theater* itself, helped lead to other work opportunities. When the *Eldorado* opened in 1891, Augusta Johannesén was soon hired as ballet mistress and solo dancer. It was also at the *Eldorado* that she was given the opportunity to launch a ballet ensemble in the fall of 1892, an ensemble that set out to become a *New Norwegian Ballet* and was noted as a great achievement in the press.

The New Norwegian ballet at the Eldorado theatre

The *Eldorado* opened in 1891, and rapidly became a theatre to be reckoned with in the Norwegian capital. The *Eldorado* attracted audiences mostly from the middle- and upper classes. It featured a variety of entertainment, including classical concerts, vaudevilles, operas, operettas, and plays. (Odd Bang-Hansen 1961, 39-40, advertisements and notices from the Kristiania newspapers 1891-1895). Johannesén was closely connected to the establishment from the very beginning. In the fall of 1892, advertisements show that the *Eldorado's* "*Nye Norske Ballet*" – *New Norwegian Ballet* – was introduced to the Kristiania audience. The event was announced in all the major newspapers in Kristiania, two days prior to the premiere that took place on 24th of October 1892.

The appellation *new* is interesting - it could either refer to similar, earlier attempts at creating a professional ballet, which my research so far has given no evidence of. However, it could be that the title is hinting at the famous violinist Ole Bull's *Norske Ballet* in Bergen in 1853. Bull attempted to

establish a national ballet at the *Nationale Scene*, with an ensemble consisting of highly skilled, but not professional folk dancers. They danced *Halling* and other folkdances to Ole Bull's accompaniment on the *Hardanger fiddle* (Hansteen 1989, 33-35). Similar attempts at showing Norwegian folk dance on stage were quite common; the second half of the 19th century was a time when the audiences favoured folk dance.²³

Most likely, however, "new" was referring to the establishment of a *ballet ensemble*. For the first few performances the ensemble was given the theatre entirely to themselves, performing a variety of dances. Presumably the orchestra accompanied the ensemble, even though nothing is mentioned about this in the advertisements.

We see from the advertisement from *Morgenbladet* on the right that Johannesén was announced as both dancer and "arranger" of the different numbers. Not surprisingly, national dances – Polish ones – were part of the repertoire, together with a *Grande Valse* in which Johannesén danced solo. This program was repeated three days in a row. Thereafter, in subsequent performances, the ensemble was featured as part of the larger variety that was offered every evening, performing shorter ballets. Ballet divertissements and pantomimes were included, for instance in *I Ungarens Land* (*In the country of Hungary*), *Marionettene* (*The Marionettes*), and *Najaderne* (*The Najaderes*).

Most newspapers mentioned the premiere of the *New Norwegian Ballet*. *Verdens Gang* announced that the first performance of the ballet would take place at the *Eldorado* "this same evening" (*Verdens Gang*, 24 October 1892). None of the papers gave a review of the event the day after the premiere on 24 October. But the critic in *Morgenposten* was very positive in a review published a few days later:

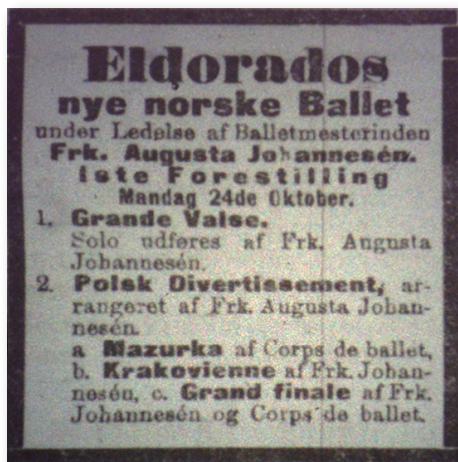


Illustration 3. Advertisement for the Eldorado's New Norwegian Ballet, *Morgenbladet*, 23 October 1892

The paper was, however, optimistic about the enterprise, pointing out the newness of the enterprise:

So now one has done a modest beginning with a Norwegian ballet here [in Kristiania]. It has not achieved any great results so far, but results can come, and the important solo dancer Ms. Augusta Johannesén can always be counted on to be rewarded the grace of the public. (*Kristiania IntelligenzSedler*; 27 October 1892, author's translation).

Eldorado does all that it can to prove that even in the area of *variété*, we can compete with foreign resources. The latest attempt in this direction is a Norwegian Ballet under the directorship of Miss Johannesén. The Ballet, which made its debut the other day, was very respectable, even excellent when considering the short rehearsal time. The dancers were beautiful, the costumes likewise and the decorations, made by [Jens] Wang grandiose. (*Morgenposten*, 29 October 1892, signed o, author's translation)

Note the reference to the ensemble's respectability that is mentioned as a positive feature of the new ballet. Being judged respectable in addition to excellent would make the audiences feel "safe" about going to see dance. Note also that the ballet ensemble was praised for its beautiful dancers, thus good looks were something that obviously also mattered, perhaps especially in a *revue*- and *vaudeville* theatre like the *Eldorado*.

Some more information about the quality of the ensemble can be gleaned from other reviews. According to the *Kristiania IntelligenzSedler*, the ensemble was young and inexperienced.

Johannesén was pointed out by *Kristiania IntelligenzSedler* as the major attraction of the ballet ensemble, but no further details about what made her dancing so "important" was offered. However, already the day before the premiere, *Ørebladet* shed light on where the dancers came from: they were students of Johannesén (*Ørebladet*, 22 October 1892). The Johannesénske dance school was located in the Eldorado-building at this time, an arrangement that must have been convenient for both the *Eldorado* and Johannesén in terms of rehearsals and training. A week after the premiere, *Dagbladet*, like most of the other newspapers, paid respect first and foremost to Johannesén's performance: "Miss Johannesén dances to the full satisfaction of the audiences. Her Norwegian students are still very young in the *terpsichorean* worship, but create success with the *Najadernes Dans*." (*Dagbladet*, 9 November 1892, signed *Sasin*, author's translation). From this we learn that even though the ensemble was inexperienced, it nevertheless charmed the audiences in the eyes of *Dagbladet*. Regrettably,

no details as to why the ensemble's performance of *Najadermes Dans* was successful were offered.

The short-lived New Norwegian Ballet

In 1892, the artistic director of *Eldorado* was the before-mentioned Rudolf Rasmussen, who at the age of 26 was already a prominent figure in the cultural life in Kristiania. He was essential in giving Johannesén the opportunity to create the *Eldorado's New Norwegian Ballet*. Whether it was Johannesén's idea or his is not known because Rasmussen does not offer details about this endeavour at all in his memoir books. Instead he gives a lengthy account of the next project that Johannesén was involved in, the revue *Tutti Frutti* (Rasmussen 1941, 59-69). Both Johannesén and the ballet ensemble were heavily involved in *Tutti Frutti*, a large-scale production that played for a sold out house 101 times during the spring of 1893. The *Eldorado* had 2 000 seats at this time, so this was no small achievement.²⁴ The revue was the invention of Rudolf Rasmussen, and retrospectively it has been cited as a major event in Norwegian popular theatre history (Odd Bang-Hansen 1961, 39-45). Rasmussen, pulling together a team of well-known artistic forces, including Johannesén and the ballet ensemble, aimed to create a revue according to European standards.²⁵ Advertisements show that Johannesén both danced and arranged corps de ballet numbers, but no details of the dancing in *Tutti Frutti* were offered in the reviews. At the most we are informed that the dancing was highly competent (Reviews and notices in *Aftenposten*, *Morgenbladet* and *Dagbladet* 2 January 1893).

Retrospectively, the launch of the *New Norwegian Ballet* was an important first step towards the establishment of a professional dance ensemble in Kristiania. The *Eldorado* was, in

1892, the largest theatre in Kristiania. Despite the relative low status of dance in the entertainment hierarchy, it was probably a conscious decision on the part of the directorship to establish a more permanent ballet ensemble, because a good variété theatre needed a ballet. The source material makes it possible to piece together a picture of an ensemble of inexperienced, yet charming and beautiful female dancers. Johannesén was the "prima ballerina" and major attraction of the ensemble. The repertoire was varied, but several pieces had a folkloristic touch, quite in keeping with balletic trends of the time. The ballet ensemble was used in subsequent productions, for instance in *Tutti Frutti*, which played for the entire spring of 1893. At this point, however, the ensemble was not presented as *New Norwegian Ballet* any more, but as the *Eldorado Ballet*. Thus the *New Norwegian Ballet* was a short-lived enterprise, lasting only a few months in the fall of 1892. It is not clear to what degree the dancers of the *Eldorado Ballet* continued to be supplied by the Johannesénske dance school. Rasmussen mentions the ensemble briefly in his book *Tutti Frutti*: "We did have a ballet as well, a permanent ballet, and at the core of this danced Augusta Johannesén, the Russian-Swedish dancer, who had settled in this town with her family." (Rasmussen 1941, 65, author's translation). Rasmussen refers to the "new and permanent ballet" but does not offer any more information on the ensemble's life after *Tutti Frutti*.

Johannesén was soon again engaged at the *Christiania Theater*. Other ballet masters took charge of the *Eldorado Ballet* in the years to come.²⁶ So far, my research has not shed light on why Augusta did not continue working with *The New Norwegian Ballet*. Maybe she was only meant to establish the ensemble, then move on to other engagements. It could also be that she did not

work well with Rudolf Rasmussen, who preferred to keep her face veiled up during dance numbers. In any case, soon after its founding, Norway's first attempt at a professional ballet fell into oblivion, and it took almost 20 years before actress and dancer Gyda Christensen made a similar attempt at creating a professional Norwegian ballet at the *Nationaltheatret*.²⁷

The achievements and legacy of Augusta Johannesén

Johannesén was a multitalented artist: dancer, choreographer and pedagogue. When her family settled in Christiania in November 1879, she established herself as both performer and teacher, and until she gave up active performing, she worked with several projects. She was a “freelancer”, but with a tenuous base in *Christiania Theater*. Her teaching was done at the Johannesénske dance school(s). Her career did not differ so much from the average freelance dancer of today: She found dance engagements where opportunities emerged. Her work at such different venues as the serious *Christiania Theater* and at variety theatres like the *Eldorado* 1892-93 and *Kristiania Tivoli* from 1903, is testimony to her flexibility – so typical of the type of versatility that was needed of a ballet dancer at this time, both in Norway and other Nordic countries. She was part of a transnational business where dancers often travelled and worked in other countries. She was used continuously as a dancer and “arranger of dance” in Christiania, as well as in Sweden. In 1895, Johannesén was, for instance, given the responsibility for staging a ballet pantomime at the *Tivolibolaget* in Stockholm. This was a huge project, involving 25-40 persons. She danced the leading role, in addition to being responsible for the choreography, music and

costume of the pantomime (Hammergren 2002, 121). The engagement indicates that she was recognized as a capacity not only in Norway, but also in Sweden. In fact, Augusta Johannesén could have chosen to live and work in Sweden like her sister Josefine. In a portrait of Johannesén published by the newspaper *Tidens Tegn* in 1910, the journalist commented that had she worked in Sweden, she would have had more artistic opportunities and received more respect as a dancer than she had in Norway. Instead she chose to continue her career mostly in Kristiania. (*Tidens Tegn*, 13 July 1910). It is likely that she decided to keep Kristiania her hometown because her parents and several of her siblings lived there. Most importantly, perhaps, was the fact that she was needed as a teacher in the Johannesénske dance school, and later took over the school together with her sister Jenny around 1895.

At the beginning of this article, we saw that critic and writer Peder Rosenkranz-Johansen in 1909 implied that the lack of a Norwegian Royal Ballet had a negative impact on Norwegian dance culture (*Ørebladet*, 11 May 1909). Rosenkranz-Johansen claimed that Johannesén therefore was forced to find work that, at least in his opinion, was not always “up to standard”. But in this Johannesén was not alone: versatility was required for most professional dancers at the “fin de siècle”. Ballet dancers in all the Nordic countries would work in different venues. Some dancers even preferred the more popular ones because they paid better.²⁸ Rosenkranz-Johansen attributed the lack of appreciation of Augusta Johannesén to the lack of understanding of ballet as an art form and – the paucity of dance performances (Rosenkranz-Johansen *Ørebladet*, 11 May 1909). Perhaps there was a scarcity of a “trained” ballet audience in Norway, but my research has revealed

that the Kristiania audience was given ample opportunity to see ballet at the more popular venues. Numerous ballet companies, such as the *Svenske Balletselskab*, *Götha Balletselskab*, and *Antonios Balletselskab* visited the *Tivoli* and *Eldorado* (Newspaper advertisements, 1880-1910, see also Fiskvik 2014a, 159-182).

Maybe Johannesén's achievements were not always given enough attention in the newspaper material as seen from today's perspective. But the Kristiania papers did not ignore her; they just seldom found it necessary to report any details outside of stating that the dancing was good. It is my distinct impression that Johannesén was well respected by the press. They often mention her dancing in very favourable terms in informative notices, but offer few real reviews. Dance was, at this time, generally low on the artistic hierarchy, and this attitude is probably reflected in the relatively few writings on ballet compared to other art forms. Also, dance was often covered by music and theatre critics who would not be dance experts. What can be established is that the source material, the reviews and notices in the newspapers, reveals that journalists valued Johannesén. They appreciated a dancer who could be relied upon to make proper appearances and presentable choreography when called for. There is ample mention in the source material of her as being highly skilled. Also, she kept her dancing appropriately unprovocative. Respectability was important for a woman supporting herself as a dancer and teacher. Perhaps for this reason, she shunned away from the working class venues such as *Alahambra* and *Bazarballen*. These offered variety shows and vaudevilles that included dancing, and were mostly frequented by audiences from the working class. (Odd Bang-Hansen 1961, 39-40). Apparently Johannesén was not opposed to working in vaudeville theatres as such, because the source material shows that she danced at the

Eldorado (1892) and also at the *Kristiania Tivoli* (1903). But these were venues frequented by the middle and upper classes.

Johannesén's first 15 years in Norway were important for Norwegian theatre dance. According to dancer and actress Gyda Christensen, she was a natural talent, "simply born into the art form" (Christensen, *Tidens Tegn*, 4 January 1926).²⁹ But in Norwegian theatre dance history, she, as a dancer and "arranger of ballet", has more or less fallen into oblivion, despite that fact that she was well known in her own time. More attention has been called to her to her achievements as a teacher, as for instance seen in Hansteen's book. Johannesén created opportunities, not only for herself, but also for the many dancers who were involved in her projects. She was responsible for initiating a first professional Norwegian ballet company, which did not last but lived on as the ballet company of the *Eldorado*. This article has given a first analysis of some of her achievements. Needless to say, a lot more research is needed in order to fill several gaps in her activity and obtain a better understanding of her career both in the years 1880-1895 and in the periods after. Having spent a great deal of her professional life performing in Nordic cities prior to moving to Norway, she was an established artist with a solid reputation and important connections. It is therefore feasible that she could have been engaged in other Nordic countries as well in Sweden after settling in Kristiania. More research is needed in order to document and analyze Johannesén's work in Norway, as well as her achievements in Sweden, and possibly Finland and Denmark. Her work as a teacher of ballet and of "Plastik", as well as an "arranger of ballet" also needs to be documented in more detail. In short, more research will hopefully contextualize Johannesén and give a fuller picture of her place in the history of Norwegian and Nordic theatre dance.

Notes

1 The word choreographer was not used in newspapers, programs etc of this time. Usually it would be stated that the dances/ballets were "arranged by".

2 The Norwegian capital was, from 1877, called Kristiania. Prior to this it was spelled Christiania, and the older spelling is reflected in several names, for instance Christiania Theatre. The press would often use Christiania and Kristiania interchangeably. In 1925, the name of the capital was changed to Oslo.

3 Per Aabel describes studying with Augusta Johannesén in his self-biography, *Du store verden!* (Aabel 1950, 18-21).

4 Rasmussen wrote several books, reminiscing about his experiences as artistic director of several theatres as well as impresario for Kristiania. These books are written retrospectively in the 1930's and 1940's, therefore one must take into account that he might not have remembered everything correctly.

5 A separate article on this significant ensemble will be published in *Nordic Theatre Journal*, 2015. In order to avoid overlap, I include minimal information on the Johannesénske Balletselskab in this article.

6 I am grateful to Claes Rosenqvist who, in email correspondence has guided me in the tracing of the Johannesénske Balletselskab Nordic endeavours.

7 Augusta Johannesén's name has frequently come up in various sources previously found in connection to other research projects, especially when researching the dancer and actress Gyda Christensen and her importance in bringing modernism in dance to Norway. (See Fiskvik 2014b, 343-357).

8 I am grateful for all the help I have received from the Gunnerus library in Trondheim, particularly I want to thank librarian Tore Moen.

9 On 9 April 1892, the journalist Moustache for instance gave a lengthy account on the Variety theatres in Kristiania.

10 Augusta's mother was 41 years at the time, which was not unusual for childbirth. However, because the church books of Sundsvall were damaged in the fire in 1888, it is not possible to verify whether Augusta was a biological or adopted child.

11 The father, Johan Fredrik Johannesén was born in Kristiania in 1826, and supposedly travelled to St. Petersburg where he

was educated as acrobat and dancer. (*Aftenposten*. 11 September 1900). I have so far not been able to trace or verify the Russian connections to Johan Fredrik Johannesén.

12 The Johannesénske ballet school had a variety of different names, with different combinations of Dands, Dance, Ballet and Plastik, but always keeping the word Johannesénske (Advertisements in the Kristiania newspapers, 1879-1926).

13 There are quite a few references to their education in Russia in various source materials, especially in the papers that covered the tour of the Johannesénske Balletselskab in 1878, and 1879, for instance *Romsdals Budstikke*, 6 June 1878.

14 Christian Johansson (1817-1903) was originally Swedish, danced under Bournonville and continued his career at the Imperial ballet in St. Petersburg where he became a distinguished teacher with great influence.

15 Speculations can also be made about a possible earlier connection between Johan Fredrik Johannesén and Johansson; it could have been that Johan Fredrik studied with Johansen for his own education.

16 See Fiskvik 2014a, 159-182 for an analysis of the versatile dancer in the Nordic countries between 1890-1930.

17 In 1875, after seven years of back-and forth in the political and bureaucratic system a new law was passed on 22nd May 1875. Archivist Torkel Bråten at the Norwegian Riksarkivet has investigated the laws concerning the Norwegian theatre monopoly. See Bråten (2014, 1-10) for a more detailed account of the theatre monopoly. This is so far unpublished article.

18 For a discussion on "serious" and "popular" theatre culture, see Fiskvik (2014a), "Working in Nordic Dance Venues", in Vedel and Hoppu (2014, 159-182).

19 For more information on the various theatres in Kristiania, see Fiskvik 2014a, 159-182.

20 See for instance *Aftenposten*, 25 October, 1889, *Morgenbladet*, 13 April 1890.

21 Augusta was not the only member of the Johannesén family that hoped to work at the Christiania Theatre. Already in January 1879, Augusta's father, the ballet master Johannesén, applied to the directors of the Christiania Theatre, asking them to hire the Johannesénske Balletselskab over the market-week. The theatre management politely turned this down. Later, both

Johan Fredrik and Edmund Johannesén were used as arrangers of dance in various theatre pieces. (Næss 2005, 136).

22 Hans Schrøder was director of Christiania Theatre from 1879 until 1899.

23 One such example is from November 1892, when Eldorado announced in an advertisement in Dagbladet that their Variété would feature Hallingdancers performed by a "well known couple". (Dagbladet, 29 November 1892).

24 Tutti Frutti premiered on 1 January 1893 at the Eldorado.

25 Rasmussen brought in the highly skilled writer Hans Wiers-Jenssen to write the texts for the revue, and the music put together folk melodies and vaudeville tunes from European productions. (Rasmussen 1941, 59-69).

26 Ballet master Axel Kihlberg's efforts as ballet master at the Eldorado were, for instance, given good reviews in 1898. (Aftenposten and Dagbladet, 8 November 1898).

27 See Fiskvik (2014c, 67-90) for more information on the semi-professional ensemble at the Nationaltheatret.

28 See for instance Hammergren (2002), Vedel (2008), Fiskvik (2014a, 159-182) for more information and discussion on this versatility.

29 For more information of Gyda Christensen and her importance for Norwegian theatre dance, see Fiskvik (2014a), and Fiskvik (2014b).

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BIOGRAPHY

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