

DANCE JUNE 4 &amp; 11, 2018

## KICK LINES WITH AN EX-ROCKETTE

*Mary Six Rupert recalls the girl groups of yore in a show of tap, specialty, and unison acts.*

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By Joan Acocella



Illustration by Janne Ilvonen

According to the historian William H. McNeill, in his book “Keeping Together in Time,” people seem to have been convening to move in unison, or at least on the same beat, for a couple of millennia. This has been one of our species’ surest means of sustaining communities. “Ideals,” he writes, “are always invoked; but keeping together in time arouses warm emotions of collective solidarity and erases personal frustrations as words, by themselves, cannot do.” Set a lot of people marching, and they’ll be more likely to feel O.K. about going out and killing their enemies. Get a bunch of Japanese Coca-Cola-bottling-plant employees up early in the morning to do group calisthenics—McNeill shows us a photo—and they’ll feel better about bottling Coke.

That’s when we do unison work ourselves. What about when we just watch it? Military parades arouse patriotic feelings in the onlooker. That’s surely the major reason for their existence. And, as theatre producers discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, unison dancing by women—“girl groups,” they were called—seemed to cheer people up, make them feel that they lived in a good world. The first modern girl groups were created in the eighteen-nineties, by the Englishman John Tiller, for use in religious pageants. Soon the Americans arrived in Europe with their own, snazzier version: high heels, short dresses. The great Franco-Russian dance critic André Levinson was wowed by them—sort of. “There’s nothing excessive about these women, save perhaps a surfeit of health, an absence of everything, be it morbid or passionate, that is conducive to mystery,” he wrote in 1925. They didn’t have much on, he added, “but there’s nothing modest about this nudity. Modesty is a spiritual or intellectual scruple haunted by sin. In the earthly paradise of these girls, corporeal purity is uncontaminated by such scruples” (translated by John Goodman). There, in a few words, is what many Europeans thought of Americans in the years after the First World War. To them, we were wonderful, and, very possibly, the end of their civilization.

The girl groups are mostly gone. One keeper of the flame is Mary Six Rupert, who on June 9, with her group, Legacy 36, will present a program called “Forever Linked,” at Pace University’s Schimmel Center, in lower Manhattan. The chain link, in Rupert’s mind, is America’s greatest precision-dance group, the Rockettes. Originally, they were the Roxyettes, the presiding spirits of the Roxy Theatre, on West Fiftieth Street. Then, when Radio City Music Hall was built, they moved there and became the Rockettes. Now they are just the Dance of the Toy Soldiers in Radio City’s Christmas show.

But, at Pace, Rupert is going to throw back onstage everything that the girl groups once were: tappers, specialty acts (three-legged dancers! women tap-dancing on point!), and, of course, unison acts. Rupert started her own tap career at the age of two and a half, with a song-and-dance routine set to “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window.” Later, she was a Rockette for thirteen years. She is now a professor of tap and jazz at Wagner College, on Staten Island. But she remembers. ♦

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