

My Beginning as a Dancer in New York and Paris

By Miss Loïe Fuller

How I Created the Serpentine Dance:

In 1890, I was in London with my mother when an impresario hired me to travel to the United States and play the lead role in a new play titled *Quack, Doctor-Physician*. In this play, I was to perform alongside two famous actors, Louis de Lange and Wil Rising.

I purchased the necessary costumes and took them with me. Upon our arrival in New York, rehearsals began immediately. During one of our rehearsals, the playwright had the idea of adding a scene where Dr. Quack hypnotizes a young widow. At that time, hypnotism was highly popular in New York. To enhance the effect of the scene, we requested the theater electrician to install green lamps at the footlights and asked the orchestra conductor to play soft, subdued music.

The next challenge was to determine what dress I would wear for the scene. I couldn't afford a new one, as all my money had already been spent on costumes. Looking through my wardrobe, I found a silk muslin skirt, as light as a spider's web. It was pleated and extremely wide at the bottom. Since it was far too long, I raised the waistband, pinned it to a low-cut bodice, and turned it into an Empire-style dress. The outfit became unique—perfect for the hypnotism scene, even though we weren't taking it too seriously at first.

To ensure the play's success, we first performed it in small towns before bringing it to New York. My debut as a dancer took place in a small-town theater that New York knew nothing about. At the end of the play, on opening night, we performed our hypnotism scene. The stage was set as a garden bathed in pale green light. Dr. Quack made a mysterious entrance and then summoned me. The orchestra played a soft, melancholy tune as I floated onto the stage, trying to appear like a spirit responding to his commands.

As he raised his arms, I followed, entranced, my eyes fixed on his. My dress was so long that I kept stepping on it, so I instinctively lifted it with both hands as I twirled and moved across the stage. Suddenly, someone in the audience shouted, "A butterfly! A butterfly!" I started spinning and running from one end of the stage to the other when another exclamation rang out: "An orchid!"

The applause was immediate and overwhelming. The audience called for an encore, and then another. My movements, the flowing silk, and the lighting created an effect no one had seen before.

For the next six weeks, we continued traveling. Eventually, we arrived in New York, where we performed in a theater owned by Oscar Hammerstein, who would later become a famous impresario. Unfortunately, the play failed, and even our hypnotism scene couldn't save it. No New York theater would accept it, and our troupe disbanded. I was left without work and without a penny.

The next morning, I woke up early and eagerly read the local newspaper. To my surprise, an enthusiastic review described my performance in the hypnotism scene in glowing terms. As I read, I realized I had stumbled upon something extraordinary—if only I knew how to harness it.

That morning, as sunlight filtered through my bedroom curtains, I put on my silk skirt and stood in front of a mirror. The golden light illuminated the fabric, casting ethereal shadows. I gently moved the silk and saw an entirely new world of motion, one that had never been explored before.

At that moment, I knew: I was about to create a dance. How had I never thought of it before?

Two of my friends, Mme Hoffman and her daughter, Mme Hossack, visited me from time to time to check on my progress. Whenever I discovered a gesture or movement that looked promising, they encouraged me to refine and repeat it. Through trial and error, I realized that each movement of my body produced a predictable, mathematical effect on the folds of the fabric and the shimmering drapery.

The extraordinary length and width of my silk skirt required repeated movements to establish a fluid, spiraling effect. By lifting my arms while spinning and reversing direction, I created patterns in the fabric that followed a precise and artistic rhythm.

I categorized my movements into twelve different steps and assigned each one a unique lighting effect: blue for the first dance, red for the second, yellow for the third. I envisioned a spotlight with colored glass in front of the lens, and I wanted the final dance to take place in complete darkness, with only a single yellow beam illuminating the back of the stage.

Once my dances were fully developed, I set out to find an impresario. I knew them all—I had worked under many as an actress and singer—but none were willing to take me seriously as a dancer.

One director laughed in my face: "You? A dancer? That's too much! If I need you for a role, I'd be happy to call you. But as a dancer? No thanks! When I hire a dancer, she has to be a star. The only ones worth considering are Sylvia Grey and Letty Lind from London. You can't compete with them. Good evening!"

He no longer respected me as an actress and openly mocked me as a dancer.

Despite repeated rejections, I was determined. I had discovered something entirely new, yet I had no idea that it would one day captivate the entire world.

Eventually, I found an opportunity to perform in a small New York theater. The audience response was overwhelming, but my director refused to put my name on the advertisements. Instead, he prepared another dancer to imitate my style.

When I discovered that my dance had been stolen, I was devastated. My entire future depended on this success, and now others were reaping the rewards. But instead of giving up, I secured a better contract at the Madison Square Theatre, where my performances were so successful that my former director's imitation act failed, and his theater shut down.

In 1892, I traveled to Paris with my mother, hoping to introduce my dance to European audiences. However, the director of the Paris Opera dismissed my request, claiming that a version of the Serpentine Dance was already being performed at the Folies-Bergère. My heart sank.

Determined to prove myself, I managed to secure an audition at the Folies-Bergère. Though the director was skeptical at first, he allowed me to perform. As I danced, I watched his expression change from boredom to amazement. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "This is the real Serpentine Dance!"

I was given a contract, and within days, I debuted at the Folies-Bergère. The audience's enthusiasm grew with each dance. When the curtain fell, the applause was deafening. I had never experienced such an ovation in my life.

The next morning, the newspapers were filled with praise for my performance. My name, Loïe Fuller, was on everyone's lips. I had finally succeeded.

Years later, I continued to innovate, introducing new performances such as *The Fire Dance* and *The Lily*. I will never forget the moment when the famous opera singer Calvé, after watching my performance, embraced me with tears in her eyes and said: "Loïe, you are a genius."

And that is the story of how I began my career as a dancer in New York and Paris.