

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BALLET D'ACTION IN FRANCE

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The concept of the “Great Divide” was propounded by Belinda Quirey to denote the moment of historical change in social and theatrical dancing between what is loosely called the baroque style of dance and the new styles that came in around the time of the French Revolution. Indeed so sudden and drastic was the change in the political and social structure resulting from the Revolution that the idea of a sudden change in the art of the dance almost naturally demands credence. But at least so far as the theatrical art of ballet was concerned, the change - and a radical change there was - had begun many years before the storming of the Bastille. The trigger that set off this change was not the Revolution, but the new spirit of enquiry and rationalisation, associated particularly with the names of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot, which history knows as the European Enlightenment.

Indeed, the *ballet d'action*, which marks the emergence of ballet as an autonomous theatre art, was essentially a phenomenon - one can even say the invention - of the Enlightenment. Long before ballet came of age in this form, writers on dance had been fascinated by descriptions in classical literature of the mimes and pantomimes of ancient Rome, and by the eighteenth century that lost art had acquired the aura of legend and was to become a beacon and an inspiration for a generation of philosophers and practitioners who conceived a vision of a new performing art based upon a fusion of the classical dance and pantomime.

This concept was already surfacing in the early years of the eighteenth century. In a popular form it could be found in the performances of the Italian comedians - the players of the *commedia dell'arte* - who interwove their expressive antics with passages of comic or grotesque dancing that often parodied the refined styles of Court and society. But it was on a more elevated level that serious thinkers were directing their minds. The *commedia dell'arte* had been a formative influence on the English dancing-master, John Weaver, but his celebrated *Loves of Mars and Venus*, produced at Drury Lane in 1717, was a serious attempt to present a familiar classical legend in pantomime performed in time to music. He himself described it as “an Attempt in Imitation of the ancient Pantomimes, and the first of that kind that has appeared since the Time of the Roman Emperors”.¹ In retrospect we now see it also as a seminal step in the development of the *ballet d'action*, although curiously it had no permanent consequence of significance in the English theatre, and its author was not to be acknowledged as an innovator, even by English theatre historians, until the present century.

Weaver was not alone in being obsessed by the lost art of the Roman pantomimes. At about the same time, across the English Channel in the Château de Sceaux, Louise, Duchesse de Maine, the cultured grand-daughter of Louis XIV, had the wealth to gratify her desire to hazard a recreation. In the presence of a select circle, two leading dancers from the Paris Opéra, Claude Balon and Françoise Prévost, performed, by gesture alone, the celebrated scene from Corneille's tragedy, *Les Horaces*, in which the young Horatius upbraids his sister for her treachery and kills her. Not only were the spectators duly impressed, but the two dancers so affected one another in the process that they were seen to be shedding real tears.

Such a daring innovation was not, however, for the Paris Opéra, where, by a long-established tradition stemming from the Court ballets of Louis XIV, the dance was an obligatory element in French opera, being usually given considerable prominence although never to the point where the narrative was taken away from the singers. In the first half of the eighteenth century the function of the dancers of the Opéra was mainly decorative, although on occasion, as in the opera-ballets of Campra and Rameau, their participation occupied a fair proportion of the performing time. At that time French opera was regarded essentially as a literary form, based primarily on the contribution of the librettist, or the *poète* as he was called, and so the very idea of a work that would diminish the importance of the text in favour of pantomime would have been looked upon as heresy.

Yet there were rare occasions at the Opéra when dance was used to express emotion as well as displaying the grace and purity of execution demanded by the *danse noble*: most notably by Françoise Prévost in *Les Caractères de la danse*, and by two rival ballerinas of the next generation, Marie Sallé and Marie-Anne de Camargo. Of these three artistes, the most influential was certainly Sallé, who had begun her career with the advantage of an unusually eclectic background, having danced professionally as a child in the less inhibited surroundings of the fairground theatres of Paris and in London. Later she returned to England to dance in the operas of Handel, making a deep impression on David Garrick; and she crowned her career by staging a remarkable *Pigmalion*, first at the Comédie-Italienne, and later in London, where she made a sensational appearance in a costume that breached established convention by its natural simplicity. Even so, such was the hot-house atmosphere within the Paris Opéra that she was considered as something of an outsider there to the end of her career.

By the middle of the century the spirit of change known to history as the Enlightenment was already evident in the radical new attitudes that were being applied to almost every form of intellectual endeavour. Where formerly the foundations of society had been accepted without question, now, under the influence of the new leaders of opinion, the *philosophes* as they were called, nothing was to be taken for granted; everything was open to reappraisal in a process of rational enquiry, even to the extent of jettisoning beliefs, formerly sacrosanct but now presented as prejudices or superstitions. The principal initiator of this philosophical revolution was Voltaire, to whom little was sacred except man's freedom to think for himself; and he was followed by a new generation of thinkers, notably Rousseau with his concept of the social contract and his call for man to return to a simpler state. The ideas they propagated were seen by some to contain dangers for the existing establishment, and indeed were to prepare the ground for the great political upheaval that brought down the Old Regime.

In this great reappraisal the dance came under scrutiny with results that were to prove prodigiously far-reaching. A corner-stone of the Enlightenment was the great *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alambert (1751-72), and in this unprecedented compendium of knowledge, the dance was given an honoured place. As well as having a section to itself, a number of related subjects - Ballet, Choregraphy (in its then current meaning of dance notation), Gesture, and Pantomime - also rated entries. It was unfortunate that these articles were prepared before Noverre had established his reputation as a theorist who, alone among his colleagues, has been rated among the great *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. Consequently the principal source for these articles was an earlier authority, Jean-Louis de Cahusac, whose book, *La Danse ancienne et*

moderne, preceded Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* by six years. Not that Cahusac was unaware of the potential of expressive dance, but the *danse en action*, as he called it, still seemed little more than a vision perceived through the mists of professional antipathy, for dancers, as he complained, were chronically reluctant to insert any meaningful expression into the performance of their steps.

While French ballet stagnated in its subservience to opera, interesting, even momentous, developments were taking place in Vienna. There two innovative ballet-masters, Franz Hilverding and Gasparo Angiolini, were pointing the way to the liberation of their art with a series of ballet-pantomimes that were additionally notable for their musical content, provided for the most part by Joseph Starzer. News of these productions may well have reached the ear of Diderot, who in a conversation piece, rhetorically posed the question: "And what is to become of our ballets?" "The dance" he went on to reply, "is awaiting a man of genius; it is everywhere in a wretched state because people have hardly recognised it as an imitative art. The dance is to pantomime what poetry is to prose, or more accurately, what natural declamation is to chant or song. It is rhythmical pantomime."²

Diderot had probably attended Noverre's season at the Opéra-Comique in 1754, and he would have been aware too of the dance activity at the Comédie-Italienne, where, between 1738 and 1756, Jean-Baptiste François Dehesse produced a series of modest pantomime ballets that found great favour with the public. These were pieces which did not relate a dramatic narrative so much as present characters from everyday life, occasionally involving them in comic situations such as pupils ragging their long-suffering teacher, or three doctors prescribing remedies for an injured wood-cutter, each more drastic than the last, before his wife revives him with a glass of wine. These simple dance scenes were in marked contrast to the classical grandeur of the ballet at the Opéra, to which they posed little threat, even though Dehesse was to find a powerful admirer in Mme de Pompadour. Noverre did not deign to refer to Dehesse in his writings, but the latter's significance in the new development taking place in theatrical dance was not negligible.

More ambitious, though less fertile, was Antoine Pitrot, a ballet-master with something of a European reputation, who a few years later produced two pantomime ballets, also for the Comédie-Italienne, *Télémaque dans l'île de Calipso* (1759) and *Ulysse dans l'île de Circée* (1764). In his preface to the latter work he pointed to what was clearly a practicable difficulty facing ballet-masters at that time, dancers' lack of experience in dramatic pantomime.

As with Dehesse, Pitrot was given no credit in Noverre's *Lettres*, but these two were in good company, for the reader will also look in vain for the more celebrated names of Weaver, Hilverding and Angiolini. But Noverre's egocentric and ungenerous silence on work done by others in his field should not blind us to his over-riding influence - as polemicist, teacher, and choreographer (to use a word that had not then acquired its present meaning) - in the emergence of the *ballet d'action*.

At the time Noverre first came to the notice of Parisians in 1754, when he revived his *Fêtes chinoises* in a memorably spectacular production at the Opéra-Comique, Paris was not yet ready to accept the reforms that he was beginning to see were needed. Later that year Noverre went to London, where his engagement by David Garrick was unhappily cut short by riots motivated by a wave of anti-French feeling. Finding himself at a loose end, he lingered in England long enough to see Garrick in some of his most famous rôles

and to become closely acquainted with the great actor and his wife. Mrs Garrick had been a professional dancer and, what is specially significant, had been a pupil of Hilverding in Vienna. So she and Noverre must have found much in common, and it is hard to believe that their conversations did not at times turn to her teacher and his attempts to restore the art of pantomime. But aside from this interesting connection, there is no doubt that the expressive power of Garrick's acting struck Noverre with the full force of a revelation.

Indeed, this visit to England was the watershed in Noverre's career, activating his artistic maturity. In Lyons, where he was next engaged, bursts of creation with his dancers alternated with solitary hours spent pondering on the problems and potential of the ballet-master's art, and setting down his conclusions in the fifteen letters on the art of dancing and ballet which were to be published early in 1760.

Noverre's concept of the ballet-pantomime was not entirely original, but no one before him had thought through the problems so thoroughly and clearly on a practical level. When Baron Grimm had read Cahusac's book on the dance he thought the author had not gone far enough; he had stated principles, but had failed to construct a theory of dance, and to show how, as a theatre art, it could be perfected.³

This was just what Noverre now set himself to achieve. Why, he asked himself, were the names of *maîtres de ballet* not as well-known as those of great playwrights and painters? The answer as he saw it was that the link that in ancient times had existed between dance and pantomime had been broken, and ballets had become ephemeral. Ballet had degenerated because nobody had suspected its expressionistic potential, or as he put it, its power to speak to the heart. Ballet, he contended, should be an "imitative" art, combining dancing and pantomime in such a way as to convey passions and sentiments in a gripping narrative, with its related elements of music, scenery and costume being brought into play to add cohesion and enhance the general effect.

At this time, ballet at the Opéra offered little promise of fulfilling Noverre's aims. More often than not a ballet was no more than a fanciful ornament that frequently interrupted the flow and the mood of the opera in which it was inserted. Noverre's vision was of the dance becoming a meaningful adjunct by making a real contribution to the dramatic structure of an opera. To achieve this, however, he recognised that the *maître de ballet* would first have to be recognised as a collaborator working alongside the librettist and the composer, and not just a jobbing tradesman to be handed a specification of dances to be supplied for divertissements.

But the connoisseurs and those responsible for directing the Opéra were rooted in old habits and apparently quite incapable of recognising the immense progress that the dance had made in recent years. The ballet-master, Lany, had here and there arranged new *entrées* in Lully's operas that were full of expression and variety, and Rameau had provided dance music of added warmth and sparkle, yet ballet at the Opéra still remained little more than a display, all too often built around allegorical figures and hardly ever presenting human characters with feelings and passions that could "touch, move and transport" the spectator.

In his youth Noverre had seen the majestic Dupré masked and wearing a full black wig reaching down to his shoulders. Wigs and masks were still obligatory at the Opéra nearly twenty years later, and were quite incompatible with his view of ballet as an "imitative" art. Simplification of costume was also needed: the stiff *tonnelet* which was obligatory attire for the *danseur noble* and the absurdly wide *paniers* that limited the female

dancers' freedom of movement had to be abolished. But there was a glimmer of hope to be found in the dramatic theatre, where costumes were becoming simpler, but for Noverre the pace of change was all too slow.

Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* also contained a wealth of sound practical advice for the aspiring composer of *ballets d'action*. In the first place he must be his own librettist; and to this end he should make a profound study of art, history and poetry to be able to select and adapt appropriate themes. He must also learn how to vary the characters that would people his ballets, and how to arrange effective crowd scenes by avoiding excessive symmetry in the interests of realism; and there was much to be learnt from a study of historical paintings, particularly in the way the artist disposed the figures on their canvasses. Anatomy and geometry were also to be profitably studied, and familiarity with the techniques of stage machinery was essential. Musical knowledge was, of course, fundamental; here the ballet-master's requirements had to be paramount, for he would be expected to select suitable music, or if new music was to be written, then to explain to the composer precisely what he required.

In the literature of the dance, no other book has been so pivotal as Noverre's. It was a manifesto whose importance rested not only on the theories it expounded, but also on their practical application. This had immediate repercussions on the art of ballet throughout Europe. Within weeks of its publication, its author took up the post of *maître des ballets* at the Court of Württemberg, where for several years he led a company of his choosing, on whom he staged an impressive succession of *ballets d'action* that demonstrated the full import of his ideas.

Now Paris could no longer remain indifferent, particularly after first Dauberval and then the elder Vestris were given leave to accept invitations to join Noverre as guest artists. Both became converts to his ideas, and both discovered a gift for pantomime which they were revealing as early as 1765 before the Court at Fontainebleau. The intimate pantomime scene by Dauberval and Mlle Allard in *Sylvie* was to inspire one of the loveliest of dance paintings, while the more ambitious *Diane et Endymion*, by the elder Vestris, was immediately recognised by Baron Grimm as deriving from the ideas of Noverre.

The *ballets d'action* that Noverre was then producing in Stuttgart relied heavily on pantomime to convey the narrative, and the mimed passages were prepared with the same care as the dances; he set the pantomime strictly to the music, adding, as he explained in his Letters, an injection of dance movement to add emphasis, animation and interest to the gestures and attitudes of the performers. In his desire to achieve the "imitation of nature", or what would today be called realism, he heightened the dramatic effect by giving his dancers more expressive and varied arm movements, and by devising steps that would relate to the action and reflect the feelings they were required to project.

Today, after the passage of more than two centuries, it is impossible to be precise as to the method of acting that Noverre demanded from his dancers. He stressed that the movement must always appear natural. However, this did not imply that the dancer was given licence to improvise at will, but rather that acting technique was to be used as a means of achieving a natural effect so as to arouse an emotional response in the spectator. In the French theatre at that time there were rules for representing passions, and rules also for achieving pictorial beauty of posture. These undoubtedly formed the basis of Noverre's pantomime passages, although he always required gesture to be used

intelligently and never beyond the point where its power to move is reduced. "Gesture," he insisted, "is a shaft that comes from the soul; its effect must be immediate, and if directed with feeling, it cannot fail to hit the target."⁴

It was not only in the ballet that reform was in the wind. At the Comédie-Française a more expressionistic style of acting was coming into fashion, marked by emphatic angular gestures accompanied by play of the countenance, and the fuller use of the body made this style particularly adaptable to pantomime. A very interesting parallel between the drama and the *ballet d'action* can be found by comparing an engraving from the 1760s of the actors, Lekain and Mme Vestris, in Voltaire's *Sémiramis*, with the well-known London print showing a scene from Noverre's *Médée et Jason* some fifteen years later.

For the dance historian, this latter engraving is unique in offering a comprehensive view of the stage with its three main characters interacting with one another in a pantomime scene from a late-eighteenth-century ballet. It therefore highlights the paucity of ballet's pictorial record during this period. Notated records of ballets from this time are also lacking.⁵ The Feuillet system, which Noverre rejected as inadequate to record the complexities of technique as it had evolved by his day, had not been replaced by a more effective method, and in the absence also of descriptions written from a technical viewpoint, the choreography of the ballets of Noverre, Dauberval and the two Gardels is totally lost to us today.

Our knowledge of dance technique as practised in that formative period would have been similarly meagre had it not been for the comprehensive manual by the dancer and teacher, Gennaro Magri, *Trattato teorico-prattico di ballo* (1779). Magri was an Italian, but ballet technique was more or less standardised under the dominant French influence, and the technique he describes is, apart from certain differences in style and emphasis, virtually what was taught and practised at the Opéra in Paris, as indeed Magri himself acknowledged. Magri offers further evidence of his indebtedness to the Paris school by the awe with which he refers to the accomplishments of individual French dancers: Pitrot's *aplomb*, Gaétan Vestris's command of the pirouette, and Le Picq's mastery of *emboîtés*. In the age of the Enlightenment, ballet technique continued to be developed and augmented, culminating in the appearance of that extraordinary virtuoso, Auguste Vestris, who mastered the particular skills of the three genres - noble, demi-caractère and comique - into which dancers were categorised; he also set a new pattern for the coming century, that of the complete dancer.

So, as the 1760s drew to a close, the dance was beginning to stir from its slumber at the Opéra and discover a new vigour. Under the inspiration of Noverre's vision, which invoked a powerful response from the generation of the Enlightenment, the dancers and the connoisseurs on whose favour they depended were sensing for the first time what the future might hold for their art. The following quarter century was to witness exciting changes. Somewhat belatedly, if account is taken of activities elsewhere in Europe, the French began to recognise the potential of the *ballet d'action* and, benefitting from the continuing existence of a company unrivalled in technical ability and recognised as a lynch-pin of national culture, to win back the lead it had been in danger of losing to Vienna and Stuttgart. Dance would not be completely divorced from opera in Paris, but alongside the service it continued to offer to its sister art of opera, it would acquire an immeasurably increased status and indeed a new persona.

The acceptance of the *ballet d'action* at the Opéra, when it came, was remarkably rapid. This new form caught on in the years before the Revolution, not only in Paris, but also in the provinces, most notably in Bordeaux, where Dauberval produced a string of ballets, some serious and others, such as *La Fille mal gardée*, in a lighter vein.

Paris, however, remained the centre, adding new lustre to its prestige as the accepted fountain-head of the art of the dance. In this Noverre played a major rôle, first because his *Médée et Jason* was the first *ballet d'action* to be presented there, albeit in a version staged by, and credited to, the elder Vestris, who had created the part of Jason, and secondly following his appointment as ballet-master of the Opéra by the grace of the queen, Marie-Antoinette.

Although Noverre was ousted after a few years by the intrigues of Dauberval and Maximilien Gardel, the ballet-pantomime as an independent form had taken root, and was to become firmly established under the brothers Gardel. It reached its first full flowering, it might be said, under the younger of these, Pierre Gardel, who dominated the Paris ballet for longer than any other ballet-master in the Opéra's long history, and who was to bequeath to his successors a school, a company and a public that in the fullness of time would discover a new inspiration in Romanticism.

NOTES

- 1 Weaver, John, *The History of the Mimes and Pantomimes*. London, 1728, p. 46.
- 2 Diderot, Denis, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by J. Assézat. Paris, 1875-7, v. VII, pp. 157-8.
- 3 Grimm, Baron F.M. von, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, edited by Maurice Tourneaux, v. I, p. 192.
- 4 Noverre, Jean-Georges, *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets*, Lyon and Stuttgart, 1760, p. 265.
- 5 A revealing glimpse into the kind of ballets given at the Comédie-Italienne can, it seems, be obtained from a volume of manuscript dance scores notated in the Feuillet system by a provincial ballet-master, Auguste-Frédéric-Joseph Ferrère, now in the reserve collection of the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris.

This paper is mainly extracted, in a somewhat condensed form, from the Introduction to the author's forthcoming book, *The Ballet of the Enlightenment*, scheduled to be published by Dance Books, London, in the late summer of 1996.