

**BEYOND THE BALLROOM**

Hazel Dennison

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper will examine the possibility and validity of the transposition of fifteenth century social dances into a theatrical context. It will focus on:

- Known theatrical forms in 15th century Europe containing dances
- Choreographic properties common to social and theatrical dance
- Properties needed to transpose social dance to a theatre art form
- The dancing master as choreographer
- The relevance of the paper to continuity and change

The term “theatre” will refer not to the architectural form but to the realisation of drama or entertainment.

**THEATRICAL FORMS IN THE 15TH CENTURY**

Drama references quoted will be specific to plot, action or character, not to action beyond the text or in metaphor.

The moral *interlude* or *morality* was a secular play found mainly in Northern Europe. In the English play *Mankind* 1470, *New Guise*, *Naught and Now-a-days* use a dance, “a common trase” to lure the heroine into “sinful ways”. They are accompanied by minstrels as they “leap lively”.<sup>1</sup> In *Fulgens and Luces* 1490, Cornelius invites Luces to “see a base dance after the guise of Spain”, and presents mummers and minstrels in parody of Spain and Flanders, “et deinde corisabunt” – “and then the mummers dance”.<sup>2</sup> *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaties*, Scotland, 1500 contains two dances; in the first “ane auld man cum in leidand his wife Bessy in ane dance” prior to locking her in a chastity belt, secondly as a finale and exit, the cast dance “ane brawl of France”.<sup>3</sup> The original manuscript of “*The Conversion of St Paul*” c. 1500 contains two later insertions of the word DAUNCE into the script at significant intervals. Professor Glynne Wickham sees this as a renaissance influence on a Gothic text. Dance was said to be prominent in the German *Neidhautspiel* with its *Narr* or *Fool*, but no specific dances have yet emerged.

A second secular form the *Morescha* or *Mumming* was a masked dance drama, its content varying according to the courts of London, Siena, Urbino, Lille, Bruges, Castille or Lisbon to name but a few. Its common styles were allegorical pastoral, historical, eastern, heroic or grotesque. Common themes were quests, battles, jousts, wooings and heroic reenactments. Specific references are few – a *Bassadanza* in the round for 12 nymphs and 6 queens at Urbino 1474; a *Ballata* for 12 dancers and a nun, in Siena 1465: 180 young squires “danced freely in the space like a snake” in the form of an ‘S’ at Pesaro 1475; In 1502 nine men danced disguised as animals. Dances of “daring and uncertainty” for knights were performed in 1484 at the Feast of the Pheasant in Lille. Prior to the *Festa del Paradiso* in Milan 1486, 8 masked men danced “a la Piva” with “Cavriole, Schiambetti et Salti”.<sup>4</sup> In Bologna 1487, Diana and her nymphs danced to a

cacchia. Dances were shaped to symbolise the Seven Planets, and the labours of men working in the fields. Written sources and the iconography of Maximilian I's Freydl show character dances devised for Wild Men, Giants, dwarfs, soldiers, fools, Hungarian Soldiers and Turkish Janissaries, Birds Beasts, Nuns, Hercules, Jason, even Robin Hood and Marion. The corporation of Wells, Somerset specified "puellis tripudantibus" dancing girls – as part of its "hoc tempus de Robynhode".<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere dancers performed with ribbons from a tree, and Cleopatra and sundry lascivious women of antiquity measured their steps to song.

Common to many morescha was a distinctive set dance always performed by knights and ladies, in paired sets of 6 or 8 or 12. The knights would dance alone, then the ladies, then together as in a pas de deux. All were masked. Those at the marriage mumming, 1501 at the Tudor court in London, danced "deliberately and pleasantly-many and divers rounds and new dances full curiously and with most wonderful assurance".<sup>6</sup>

The Morescha was a set choreographic form in its own right, originally being a mock danced battle between Moros et Chrystianous for religious supremacy, and Moors and Turks for a slave girl or princess. Its set pattern included a challenge, a Ruggiero, the Morescha, a feint, moor in the middle and cross. Visual evidence, particularly the carved Moriskentanzler by Erasmus Grasser c. 1490 depicts powerful deep spiralling, curves, open footwork, wide gestures, blackened faces, bells and exotic garments. Written evidence suggests bells and stamps, beats, leaps and shouts. In 1486 at Margaret of York's marriage in Bruges a team of monkeys were trained to play drums and dance morescha around the town.

A small structured divertissement known as *Intermedi*, *Intermezzo*, *Entremet*, *Entremes*, *Interlude* was performed with increasing popularity to relieve the tedium of classical plays and elaborate banquets. These were again allegorical, historical, classical, even biblical. Most dance references are to characters with little mention of form or steps. Jason in quest of his golden fleece was popular, Neptune likewise who in a political water ballet in Venice 1495 partnered Minerva whilst jumping and leaping from a mountain, and in 1493 accompanied Venus with greater dignity in a Plautian interlude danced by children.

At a Paduan wedding in 1501 a formal challenge and defeat was danced by Justice. Concorde, Victory, Peace and Abundance against Ignorance, Violence, War and Penury.

A fourth secular form was the *Ballata*, an ancient Italian dance drama performed by lines of men and women to songs, with set patterns of solo and refrains. They celebrated seasonal festivals and featured dialogues between Kings and 'Queens, Husbands and Wives, Gossips and Girls'. In renaissance Florence Lorenzo de' Medici with the poet Poliziano revived these to be performed as Canzone a Ballo. A Round dance for girls is depicted on the cover of the published songs. They also wrote Cam Carnascialeschi for the masked mythological figures to dance and sing as they descended from carnevale pageant carts. The noble Trionfi presented the Masque of Bacchus and Ariadne, The Carri showed artisans performing masques of scholars, Frog Catchers, Furies, Tinkers, Grape sellers, Old Men, Young Wives, Tortoiseshell Cats, Nymphs in Love, Nuns Escaped from Convents, Gypsies, Devils, Young Men who have lost their Fathers, Jews, Lawyers, Perfumers and Damned Souls.

Having choreographed 2 bassadanza Lauro and Venus, it is possible Lorenzo may have composed dances for some of these.

Finally the texts of the religious dramas the *Mysteries*, *Mysteres*, *Sacre Rappresentazioni*, *Fastnachtspiel* and *Farsas Sacramentales*. William A Smith believes the Italian texts to contain the most dance references. In one version of “Salome and John the Baptist” she dances a bassadanza then a saltarello with a squire. In other sources she dances a solo or with friends to a tambourine and with many “Schambetti and refined pleasing acts”.<sup>7</sup> In “Abramo ed Isaac” the family dance a round dance with angels, all singing.

In a Nativita shepherds meet the angels with a dance in which they “saltando”.<sup>8</sup> Many dances of celebration occur unspecified in form. Angels dance solo or in formation. Specific mention is made of a Morescha in the text of Santa Margherita – one of the characters is asked to “blow Giovanni so the smoke rises and add more incense. Then perform a salto near the altar while I stand still. Then fall into a deep trance until I wake you. Around , still around, do not refuse. Saltere with your bells and perform la Morescha”.<sup>9</sup>

One of the Spanish Sacramentales include a dance for 7 virtues and 7 sins, and in the *Farsas Llamada*, a danza de la Morte.

Dances were performed throughout the scripts to song, to music and to spoken verse as in the ancient choric Emmeleia of Greek tragedy.

These references are by no means exhaustive.

## **CHOREOGRAPHERS AND CHOREOGRAPHY**

A fragmented picture of dance as performance emerges. The dance manuals of the 15th century were for the nobility to perform in social and civic display. These were often performances in their own right, deliberate reenactments of wealth, power and political courtship. If the courtier did dance in a theatrical context he was always masked or disguised, as in the Mummings. Other roles were danced by dancing masters or professional dancers. Dancing masters, including Domenico da Piacenza and Guglielmo de Pesaro choreographed for and directed in theatrical performances.

Maximillian I contributed much to the creation of Moresche in Burgundian court entertainments, but dance sources are mainly iconographic. The Freydal manuscript depicts dancers performing in an extraordinary range of costuming and masks. Stella Mary Newton suggests some costumes are by design 100 years earlier than the actual performance. Were they consciously performing “early dances”?

No actual choreographers have yet been found for any of these staged dances. Were they composed in random improvisation to suit or specifically structured? Or under the reality of production pressures of time, money or human nature, did the dancing master use his existing material, part or whole and recreate it for the stage? Would his dances withstand such transformance?

This has always proved a dangerous task. Lucille Armstrong remarks in 1985 on the “recent so-called flamenco dancing for the stage. This type has been choreographed by dancing masters who draw their inspiration from folk dances. The stage knows nothing of the original meaning of the figures so they mix up the figures regardless – so long as it is spectacular!”.<sup>10</sup>

To successfully withstand transition from ballroom to stage, a dance would need to be based on a strict code of choreography, giving meaning and intention to the basic steps. A dance needs:

- **Space** – tracing certain paths and lines varied by direction, levels, proxemics, converging and separating
- **Time** – regular and irregular patterns for and against metre and music, move with varying speeds and stillness
- **Dynamics** – dancers harness energy - strong, light, fluid, fractured, staccato or sustained, to enhance mood and emotion

Changes in some or all of these would have to be made to heighten intention and meaning, in order to convey character, narrative, emotion, imagery or symbolism. Bodily alignment, gesture and facial expression could be exaggerated: numbers and groupings of dancers varied, pace and focus of presentation taken into consideration. music and dynamics altered, whilst remaining true to the steps and phrasing of the dance. Props. costume and masks could be added but should complement not replace the physical changes, thus avoiding the “merely spectacular”.

The treatises of Domenico da Piacenza c.1445 and Guglielmo da Pesaro c. 1463 yield a rich source of dances with potential for theatrical representation. Domenico states a choreographic code as complete as that of any dancing master throughout history. He gives a strict step vocabulary, contrasting dynamics of ombreggiare, campeggiare and ondeggiare, supported by meaning (aeire), imagery, inspiration (fantasmata), variety and a sense of style and performance. His breadth of creativity ranges from the minimalist to the pantomimic.

## **DANCES IN A THEATRICAL CONTEXT**

This section is based upon recent practise and performance that has taken place in classes, workshops, festivals and summer schools. Even if we are unable to recreate complete dramatic representation it is possible to dance the ballroom dances in a transposed context. This is valuable for both dancer and observer, to enter into a fresh and fuller understanding of their original structure and their potential.

Many of Domenico’s dances have inherent dramatic qualities; some such as Mercanzia, Sobria, Verceppe and Gelosia are dance dramas in their own right. It is said that a good ending is 40% of the dance, Domenico produced varied and unexpected endings, in Marxesana, Petit Rose, Leonzello for example. His two distinct forms, the Ballo and the Bassa Danza and their four measures offer many possibilities, with their contrasting forms and content.

In the *Ballo*, piva and saltarello steps give imagery for quests and journeys: quadernaria gives precision for challenge and skirmish. Take for example:–

*Belfiore* for three dancers, it can trace a journey of “daring uncertainty” for three knights, ill-matched in courage and height as they exchange courage for cowardice in rapid succession, fleeing to the back of the line.

*Spero* for three , provides strong phrasing and patterns for three Magi or three knights in giostra.

*Rossina* with its precise steps, embellishments, and heys offers a pastoral for nymphs and shepherds

*La Fialia Gulielmina* with its changing and escaping couples suggests Lorenzo’s Frog catchers or Nuns escaping from their convents.

*Anello* with added leaps and turns could offer swift exchanges for shepherds, satyrs or tortoiseshell cats. In contrast, *Pregoniera* throws up images of Orfeo pursuing Eurydice in its fluid searchings and findings.

*L Altra Fia Giuilmina*, re-aligned and interpreted with several pairs of dancers presents a miniature morescha with challenge, retreat and skirmish.

The fluid simplicity and lyricism of the *Bassa Danza* offers a different potential for interpretation. Those for couples such as *Gioliva*, *Ginevera* and *Partita Crudeli* are obvious for wooing and courtship. *Bassa Danza* for three such as *Damnes* or *Venus* provide a more dynamic relationship for Adam, Eve and Serpent or Venus, Neptune and other Immortals. *Pazienza* for four with its fluid undulation, serpentine and tramezando patterns suggests water nymphs and maids or a moment for Salome and friends. With its classical linear formation *Corona Gentile* for eight could create a set dance for Knight and Ladies.

The most creative potential and powerful images are projected in several of the *Bassa Danza* choreographed a la fila. Dances varying in number moving one behind the other in unison to original and asymmetrical phrasing. Its unique structure makes it feasible to be danced as a solo, or with separately spaced dancers. *Nobile* in its linear form can spiral, circle weave and interact whilst maintaining subtle footwork and alignment. It could be a vehicle for planets, seasons or one of the many round dances. *Mignotta Nuova* with its underlying tensions and dramatic ending, danced with a number of dancers in a spearhead or chess board formation creates a powerful entry for angels or gods. *Corona* with its intricate changes of direction and footwork is a perfect solo for Salome. There is so much potential in Domenico's work and images for interpretation are constantly emerging.

## CONTINUITY

We dance these 500 year old dances with the bodies and spirits of today, and whilst remaining true to their creation we should not lock them too safely away, or abandon them for the more virtuoso demands of later periods. It is possible and exciting to catch glimpses of their realisation in theatre dances to this present day, from the formal symbolism of the Jacobean masque and Balet de Cour, through to Ashton's lyricism. Anthony Tudor's minimalism, and the joyous circlings and leapings of Kylian and Morris, in the 20th century.

## CHANGE

Today's dancers and choreographers need to realise these dances in their original context, but should not feel intimidated into treating them as artifacts. Their strict form allows scope for fresh and honest interpretation and their unique content focuses on Domenico's own creative processes as a choreographer.

To quote Jack Anderson, "The knowledgeable dancer or choreographer is able to choose either to work consciously within a tradition or defy the tradition and go off on a new creative path. If with knowledge comes power, knowledge also grants freedom".<sup>11</sup>

There are possibilities for paths even beyond the ballroom and the stage. Hans Holbein's 41 woodcuts on the Dance of Death offer a challenge to link 15th century

dances with dramatic visual material. Lorenzo de' Medici's Basse Danza entitled Lauro has yet to be danced to the spoken text of his poem Ambra – another challenge – and there will no doubt be more.

The American choreographer Paul Taylor when making an abstract dance out of natural postures and walking" realised that the body language of the dancers and their relation in space was also telling a basic plot. He saw that "when one woman finally walks across the stage she isn't just walking, she's leaving the others. I learnt from this that posture and gesture are inseparable".<sup>12</sup>

And I see the woman walking away from the men in Domenico's Damnes:  
"Poi la donna sola se parte"

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