

Introduction

Eighteenth-century spectators found the ballet d'action slightly bizarre. It was a wordless performance, lasting sometimes more than an hour, of some of the greatest works of literature, theatre, and mythology staged, not in the street fairs where the bizarre was cheek-by-jowl with the conventional, but in the most revered theatres of Europe. The musical accompaniment was sometimes complex and unmelodic, and the more conventional dance scenes did not always provide enough relief from the effort of understanding the mimed scenes. And yet spectators and theorists were thrilled that at last dance had become 'expressive', that it was more than 'motion without meaning', and that it had joined the pantheon of so-called 'imitative' arts, those arts which were a reflection of something profound within us and which therefore had something to say about human nature. The ballet d'action was, for the eighteenth century, 'modern dance'.

The ballet d'action was very much an Enlightenment phenomenon, produced in the context of the eighteenth-century intellectual, cultural, and artistic concern with the importance of reason, sentiment, and the need to question conventions. It thrilled audiences because it seemed to make rational sense of otherwise meaningless dance steps, because it was powerfully emotive, and because it challenged established practices of stage dance. Throughout this book, therefore, the practice and reception of the ballet d'action is placed in the context of contemporary ideas about the aesthetics of the arts.

Given the scale of the eighteenth-century phenomenon of what was variously known in different countries as 'pantomime ballet', 'ballet d'action', 'ballo pantomimo' or 'Ballettpantomime', it is odd that it is omitted from modern histories of mime. As a rule, they start with ancient Greek mime and Roman pantomime, continue with medieval 'jongleurs', then go on to the tradition of the Court Masque and the Commedia dell'arte in the early modern period, at which point they leap to the famous nineteenth-century white-faced Pierrot, before reaching the father of modern mime in the twentieth century, Étienne Decroux. Perhaps it is one half of this hyphenated art, the 'ballet', which has encouraged historians of dance rather than historians of mime to claim it as their own. Most forms of mime,

however, are conceptually hyphenated, even if the name they conventionally go by does not necessarily reveal as much, so there is no reason to exclude the ballet d'action on the grounds that it is not 'pure'. Part I of this book rectifies this omission.

Part II is the corollary of Part I, since it explains the ballet d'action primarily in terms of drama rather than dance. The underlying hypothesis is that the ballet d'action emphasised drama in the manner of twentieth-century luminaries such as Martha Graham or Pina Bausch, rather than prioritising dance in the style of seventeenth-century 'ballet de cour' or nineteenth-century Romantic ballet. The difference of emphasis was manifest in many ways, not the least of which was the persistent and novel contemporary tendency of referring to performers as 'actors' rather than 'dancers', and to compliment their acting skills as well as their dance technique.

As with many innovations, there was, and still is in modern criticism, a certain ambiguity about where it starts and stops. From our point of view, this makes the object of study sometimes difficult to define precisely. This is most evident in the range of names for the genre in different countries which we mention above, and also in the bewildering variety of permutations of these names used in contemporary reviews and in subtitles to works. 'Heroic ballet' is the most well known to modern critics, but there are dozens more, such as 'tragic ballet', 'tragi-heroic ballet', 'heroic pantomime', 'tragedy in pantomime', 'drama-ballet-pantomime', and so on. On closer inspection of the works and their reception, however, there is more similarity than the terminology might suggest. The eighteenth-century propensity to invent a variety of names arose from a tendency to try to make the ballet d'action fit into a concept of the arts based on genre, when in fact it was not so much a genre in itself as a dramatic practice. It would be better to understand it as a translation of works from different literary, theatrical, or mythological genres into the language of mime and dance. In this sense, it was an artistic parasite, and like the most successful parasites it was capable of adapting to different hosts: spoken drama, opera, poetry, history, or ancient mythology. Original themes were rare. In order to shed light on common aesthetic principles which could become obscured by the bewildering contemporary terminology, I have chosen to use the French contemporary term which spread to a certain extent to other countries, and is frequently used by modern critics: the ballet d'action.

Not only does the object of study appear unclear for terminological reasons, but the extant evidence is, from some points of view, thin. It is unlikely that the ballet d'action was ever transcribed, as the noble dance of court and theatre was transcribed in Beauchamp–Feuillet notation. The

only evidence to the contrary is a manuscript of a series of works by Auguste Ferrère, dating from 1782, but the unique nature of this manuscript means that it is a moot point whether it represents common or idiosyncratic practice.¹ With this one exception, therefore, it is impossible to reconstruct the ballet d'action, and impossible to adopt a narrowly empirical method of study. It was an intensely visual, physical art which nevertheless left almost no evidence of exactly how it was performed. This may be a blessing in disguise, since it was based on a matter of principle as much as practice. It prioritised 'expression' and 'meaning' over and above technique, and it is therefore important to understand the underlying principles of the genre, not only how, in practice, it was performed. At the heart of eighteenth-century reforms was the rejection of a purely 'mechanical' conception of dance which would reduce it to steps and movements easily catalogued and reproduced. Hence, even if more transcriptions or even instruction books came to light, they would not necessarily be the best means to do justice to the spirit in which the ballet d'action was conceived and performed.

The iconographic evidence is more problematic than useful. In the first place, it is scarce in comparison with other visual, physical arts such as the Commedia dell'arte for which researchers have an embarrassment of iconographic riches. Secondly, it brings with it interpretative difficulties common to much early modern theatrical iconography. It tends to depict static moments, which is especially unenlightening in the case of an art such as the ballet d'action which was characterised mostly by speed and movement and only partly by static poses. It is an interesting and challenging task to hypothesise on the basis of the picture of a moment what the sequence of movement might have been, or whether the moment depicted was ever part of a sequence in the first place, but this is a complex issue worthy of independent study, and quite beyond the subject of this book. There are too many existing studies of historical dance that take too much for granted on this subject, and too many specialised studies of theatrical iconography which have shown how much space one needs to do justice to it.² A

¹ Auguste-Frédéric-Joseph Ferrère, 'Partition et Choreographie Ornée des figures et habillements des Balets donnee Par Auguste, frederick, Joseph, ferrere. A Valenciennes en 1782' [*sic* throughout], Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Rés 68 MSS. See Marian Hannah Winter, *The Pre-Romantic Ballet* (London: Pitman, 1974), p. 164; and Chapters 7, 8, and 9 in *The Grotesque Dancer on the Eighteenth-century Stage. Gennaro Magri and his World*, ed. Rebecca Harris-Warrick and Bruce Alan Brown (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

² See Thomas F. Heck (ed.), *Picturing Performance: The Iconography of the Performing Arts in Concept and Practice* (University of Rochester Press, 1999), particularly Chapter 3.4, 'Theatre iconography: Traditions, techniques, and trends', by Robert Erenstein, who discusses the challenge of interpreting iconography in terms of Benedetto Croce's three steps to evaluation: 'verify, contextualise, be well versed' (p. 139).

contemporary example will serve to make the point. When Noverre's star pupil, Charles Le Picq, performed the part of Apollo in London in 1782, a reviewer compared one particular moment in the performance to the painting by Joshua Reynolds of David Garrick standing between the figures of Tragedy and Comedy.³ The reference is presumably to Reynold's *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* (1760–62), one of the artist's allegorical portraits of actors which was not primarily intended to reflect Garrick's stage practice. If the reviewer was aware of this, then he meant to draw an analogy between Le Picq and the principles of painting set out in Reynold's *Discourses*. If he was not, if he thought like so many of his contemporaries that Garrick was a model for mime dancers, then he meant to draw an analogy between the acting styles of Le Picq and Garrick. The ambiguity means that a modern researcher could choose either to make an in-depth interpretation of the reviewer's analogy based on cultural context and the conventions of painting, or else make a straightforward comparison between the poses in Reynold's painting and Le Picq's stage performance. The first option would be beyond the scope of this book, and the second would clearly be inadequate.

What evidence is there, then, which allows us to study the ballet d'action? The most closely related to performance is annotated musical scores, usually in manuscript, used by composers and choreographers to time the music to the action. Given the difficulties inherent in using some other evidence of performance such as iconography, given the almost complete absence of choreographic transcriptions, it is curious that annotated scores have not received more attention by modern critics.

One can more easily understand why modern critics have made relatively little use of the largest source of performance-related evidence: performance programmes. They often contained a synopsis of the plot, but they were written in so many different styles, and used in so many different ways by choreographers and critics, that it is hard to judge which styles and uses are a reliable insight into the ballet d'action. This difficulty, however, turns out to be an important sign of how innovative the ballet d'action really was. The diverse styles and uses of programmes suggest that a lot of effort was made to explain and justify the ballet d'action. Programmes were attempts to bridge the gap between an innovative form of fast-moving, visual theatre and the sometimes more conventional expectations of spectators.

³ See the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Monday 6 May 1782, column 'Operatical intelligence'. Le Picq was dancing in Noverre's *Apollon et les Muses* at the King's Theatre.

In contrast to these two under-used sources, the writings of certain choreographers or theorists have been over-used, notably Noverre's *Lettres sur la Danse* and Cahusac's *La Danse Ancienne et Moderne*. Both have received disproportionate attention in modern criticism, as if the ballet d'action were purely a French phenomenon, and as if Noverre's pronouncements in particular could be taken for granted. The gap between what Noverre wrote and what he and others performed is not a new observation. At the height of the Europe-wide success of the ballet d'action, Johann Friedrich Schink commented that 'traditional pantomime' was disappointing after reading Noverre's book, but then so too were Noverre's productions.⁴ Even though Noverre's book was a landmark in many ways, it needs to be interpreted alongside other contemporary material, notably the writings of his rival Gasparo Angiolini and, most importantly, the profusion of writing by spectators in books, periodicals, journals, and private letters all over Europe. This book therefore draws substantially on contemporary reception in a number of countries.

We are lucky in the sense that the ballet d'action was sufficiently controversial that it provoked a great deal of contemporary discussion. Controversy, however, brings its own difficulties of interpretation. As Sonnenfels pointed out in 1768, the problem with eighteenth-century criticism was that it often followed a herd instinct,⁵ and it is difficult in retrospect to judge the extent to which the consensus was justified. The ballet d'action also attracted the opposite problem of maverick critics such as Ange Goudar, who took manifest pleasure in mocking and satirising contemporary dance and music. His comments often touched a contemporary nerve, but they were also frequently idiosyncratic.

Whether consensual or maverick, contemporary criticism can obviously not be taken at face value. Comments by individuals are best judged in the context of comments by as many other contemporaries as possible, making the need to go beyond prominent figures such as Noverre and Cahusac all the more necessary.

The evidence for the ballet d'action would only be thin, therefore, if we were to insist on a fairly empirical methodology, the kind often applied to 'danse noble' for which the scholar can refer to contemporary transcriptions in Beauchamp–Feuillet notation. On the contrary, it is rich if we take an

⁴ Johann Friedrich Schink, *Dramaturgische Fragmente. Erster Band* (Graz: mit von Widmannstättenschen Schriften, 1781), pp. 61 and 74.

⁵ Joseph von Sonnenfels, *Briefe über die Wienerische Schaubühne*, ed. Hilde Haider-Pregler (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1988), p. 294 (entry for 17 December 1768).

approach more common to the study of the history of ideas, comparing and contrasting available sources of different kinds and different provenances in order to identify the underlying concepts of the ballet d'action rather than the physical practice of it. Thus, we can understand some of its principles by considering it in the light of contemporary developments in acting, theatre, opera, music, and the aesthetics of the arts in general. In this way, we can discuss motives and intellectual driving principles of the ballet d'action, even if we can hardly discuss what they actually did on stage.

Although this is less straightforwardly empirical than some schools of research, it is nevertheless different to the approach taken by researchers in the field of cultural studies, who have brought about a renewal of interest in dance research since the 1980s. This book is mostly about aesthetic history rather than ideology or socio-political agendas. It is about how the mute body in motion was admitted into the pantheon of high arts rather than how that same body might have borne the marks of contemporary ideology. It does not contradict the primary premise of cultural studies, which is that culture is not neutral and that the arts do not exist in a socio-political vacuum. It would be a brave early modernist indeed who would deny any complicity between art and politics in the Ancien Régime, and Chapter 1 does, in fact, suggest some of the ideological background to the ballet d'action. Nevertheless, this book sets out to do what cultural studies often chooses to avoid: to discuss the object of study as much as possible in terms of what mattered to contemporary eighteenth-century observers rather than what matters to us. Studying the past is a little like translating into another language: similar-looking words in different languages do not necessarily have the same meaning, and neither do similar-looking artistic phenomena. Before we translate the word or phenomenon into our own language, we need to ask the question 'what did it mean to them?'. There is a tendency not to do this in many cultural studies approaches to mime and dance; too many conclusions are based on undetected *faux-amis*.

This book emphasizes the need above all to consider the object of study in its contemporary context and in its historical perspective. In other words, it is important to understand the ballet d'action in terms of its intimate contemporary relations and in terms of its antecedents and successors. Studying the ballet d'action in both a diachronic fashion in Part I and a synchronic fashion in Part II is a way of identifying its particular aesthetic characteristics and the particular reasons why contemporaries thought it was an important new form of artistic expression.

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Excerpt

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PART I

The ballet d'action in historical context

1 | The voice and the body in the Enlightenment

The ballet d'action was one of those artistic phenomena which was as popular as it was controversial. It is easy to attribute its popularity to a heightened contemporary interest in the expressive body, but less easy to explain the controversy it provoked. There are analogous trends towards the expressive body in related arts, such as Garrick's physical acting, or in different arts, such as the libertine novel, or in different domains, such as Diderot's philosophical materialism.¹ Such is the momentum of interest in the body and its expressive potential in the eighteenth century that the popularity of a new somatic art, the ballet d'action, seems trivial. It would seem to be part of an obvious tendency.

The ballet d'action may indeed be part of a conventional contemporary interest in the body, but it was also acutely controversial because it did something which no other somatic art form did: substitute the body entirely for the voice. No matter how expressive body language seemed to some, others thought that eliminating the words from classics of contemporary theatre fundamentally undermined them. It turned great theatre into a dumb show. The ballet d'action presented an audience with the almost unique spectacle in theatre and literature of mute heroes and heroines. Unlike literary blindness, there are few examples in art or literature of heroic muteness. The ballet d'action was unusual in that it muted the greatest heroes and challenged the spectator to watch them with undiminished appreciation. For some spectators, voiceless heroes and heroines seemed deprived of their fundamental characteristics. Don Juan was less of an atheist freethinker without his calculated eloquence. Medea was not quite the witch that she could have been if she could not verbally curse her unfaithful lover and his mistress. The Elder Horace did not have the same uncompromising sense of honour if he could not verbally wish his son had died in defence of Rome. Mute heroes seemed dispossessed of their heroic qualities.

¹ For a survey of the subject, see Angelica Gooden (ed.), *The Eighteenth-century Body: Art, History, Literature, Medicine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002).

The underlying reason why mute heroes challenged the aesthetic pre-conceptions of the eighteenth century was because they also challenged ideological principles. There was, perhaps always had been, and arguably still is a considerable tendency to associate the spoken word with the rational mind, as if one were a necessary and unique sign of the other. The folk metaphysics of the voice as an 'expression' of a rational mind is persistent and powerful, partly because it often goes unnoticed, disguised as the more abstract-sounding 'language' when in fact the examples we tend to give of 'language' are almost always *articulated* language. What other grip could we get on language if not its external manifestation in articulation? The problem with this is that it leaves those without articulated language also without reason. They are 'dumb', in more senses than one.

In order to understand that the resistance in the eighteenth century to mute drama was ideological as well as aesthetic, we will draw a parallel in this chapter between the ballet d'action and the contemporary development of sign language for the deaf by the Abbé de L'Épée. He was by no means the first in his field, but his pedagogical approach was unparalleled for its open-mindedness and freedom from ideological distortion. He recognised that the improvised system of manual signs used by untutored deaf mutes (what modern deaf signers call 'home sign') was a genuine language. He learnt it in order to converse with deaf mutes in their own terms; subsequently used it as the basis of his more elaborate, 'artificial' system of signs which he taught to his deaf pupils; and, in the process, dispensed almost entirely with the need to teach lip-reading or articulation. He thus challenged his contemporaries to consider the humanity of a dumb signer, just as the ballet d'action challenged audiences to consider the virtues of a dumb hero.

L'Épée's challenge was refuted by some of his most eminent contemporaries. Kant, whose succinct essay 'Was ist Aufklärung?'² is doubtless one of the most forceful eighteenth-century statements of the 'intellectual maturity' which modern philosophical man had reached, also claims elsewhere that the deaf mute can never reach intellectual, enlightened maturity; he or she can only attain an 'analogue' of reason, not reason itself. Without speech, he or she is not entirely human.³ Herder concurs, relating an unsubstantiated anecdote about a deaf mute, incapable of the most basic rational

² Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784). Translated in James Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, ed. Reinhard Brandt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2000), p. 45. Translated by Robert B. Loudon, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

reflection, who sees a butcher killing a pig, and later, in imitation, dispassionately disembowels his own brother.⁴ Like many others in the eighteenth century, Kant and Herder did not accept that a language of manual signs, such as that taught by L'Épée, was a true language, and they therefore refused to believe that it could be the expression of a rational mind. In the process, they dispossessed deaf mutes of their humanity.

The ballet d'action, sign language, and also contemporary theories of the origin of language have often been interpreted by modern scholars as symptomatic of eighteenth-century intellectual support for somatic expression. They are, in fact, double-edged, revealing as much about the ideological primacy of the voice as they do contemporary interest in the body. Sign language and the ballet d'action are two powerful ways of challenging what Derrida calls 'phonocentrism'.⁵ They do so implicitly by affirming that spoken words are no different from written words and somatic language: all are representational gesturing. They also do so explicitly by claiming for themselves some of the authenticity and naturalness which is so often associated with oral language. In effect, they have their cake and eat it: they would deprive the dogma of the spoken word of its defining characteristic, and at the same time claim that the principle of naturalness defines their somatic languages.

Sign language and the dogma of the voice

The analogy between mime and sign language in the eighteenth century tended to be used to criticise rather than endorse them. L'Épée's system of manual signs was mocked by his major contemporary rival in France, Jacob Rodrigues Pereira (often known by the French spelling of his name, 'Péreire'), who called it 'comic pantomime', with the clear implication that his own emphasis on articulation was a more serious method.⁶ Ange Goudar, who wrote more extensively on the ballet d'action than almost any of his contemporaries did, compared it unflatteringly with sign language,

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Martin Bollacher, in *Werke*, 10 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1985), Vol. VI, p. 139. Translated by T. Churchill, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (London: J. Johnson, 1800).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

⁶ See Charles-Michel de l'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets par la Voie des Signes Méthodiques: Ouvrage qui Contient le Projet d'une Langue Universelle, par l'Entremise des Signes Naturels Assujettis à une Méthode* (Paris: Nyon l'Ainé, 1776), p. 119.