

Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage

The Ballet d'Action

The 'ballet d'action' was one of the most successful and controversial forms of theatre in the early modern period. A curious hybrid of dance, mime and music, its overall and overriding intention was to create drama. It was danced drama rather than dramatic dance, musical drama rather than dramatic music. Most modern critical studies of the ballet d'action treat it more narrowly as stage dance, and very few view it as part of the history of mime. Little use has previously been made of the most revealing musical evidence. This innovative book does justice to the distinctive hybrid nature of the ballet d'action by taking a comparative approach, using contemporary literature and literary criticism, music, mime and dance from a wide range of English and European sources. Edward Nye presents a fascinating study of this important and influential part of eighteenth-century European theatre.

EDWARD NYE is Fellow of Lincoln College and Lecturer in French at the University of Oxford. His research centres on the eighteenth century and on artistic aesthetics in particular, and he is also interested in the history of ideas across centuries and national borders. He is the author of *Literary and Linguistic Theories in Eighteenth-Century France* (2000), the editor of a volume of literary reflections on dance, *Sur Quel Pied Danser? Danse et Littérature* (2005) and the editor of a scholarly anthology on the literature of cycling, *À Bicyclette* (2000).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00549-5 - Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: The Ballet d'Action

Edward Nye

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage

The Ballet d'Action

EDWARD NYE



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00549-5 - Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: The Ballet d'Action

Edward Nye

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107005495

© Edward Nye 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Nye, Edward.

Mime, music and drama on the eighteenth-century stage : the ballet d'action / Edward Nye.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00549-5 (hardback)

1. Ballet – Europe – History – 18th century. 2. Theater – Europe – History – 18th century.

3. Pantomime – Europe – History – 18th century. 4. European drama – 18th century – History and criticism. 5. Music – Europe – 18th century – History and criticism. I. Title.

GV1643.N94 2011

792.8094209033 – dc22 2011009504

ISBN 978-1-107-00549-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00549-5 - Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: The Ballet d'Action

Edward Nye

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Fanny

Contents

Acknowledgements [page ix]

A note on references [xi]

Introduction [1]

PART I. THE BALLET D'ACTION IN HISTORICAL
CONTEXT [7]

1. The voice and the body in the Enlightenment [9]

Sign language and the dogma of the voice [11]

L'Épée's innovations [17]

Theories of the origin of language [22]

Warburton and hieroglyphs [24]

Condillac's action language [27]

Rousseau's language of the passions [30]

Herder, hearing, and the gateway to the soul [34]

2. A revival of ancient pantomime? [38]

Differences and misunderstandings [39]

The balance between mime and dance [43]

The appeal to heart and mind [49]

Thematic affinities [53]

Origins [59]

3. No place for Harlequin [62]

Generic differences [63]

The French *foire* [69]

The 'arte' of expressive body language [72]

The influence of reformed Commedia [76]

The mixed backgrounds of choreographers [81]

4. Decroux and Noverre: Distant cousins? [84]

Eighteenth- and twentieth-century renewal [84]

Use of the body [87]

Mask and face [89]

Mime and dance [92]

Mime and language [95]

	Deprioritising language	[100]
	Objective and subjective mime	[102]
	Towards a vocabulary of the passions	[106]
	PART II. THE BALLET D'ACTION IN CLOSE-UP:	
	DRAMATIC PRINCIPLES	[113]
5.	Character and action	[115]
	An early innovator: Françoise Prévost	[116]
	Weaver, Sallé, and connected character	[120]
	Later developments and problems	[123]
	Literary reflections of dance and character	[127]
	The poverty of instruction books	[132]
6.	Dialogues in mime	[140]
	The challenges	[141]
	The expectations	[144]
	The methods	[147]
	Performative language	[150]
	Operatic ensemble singing	[154]
7.	Choreography is painterly drama	[162]
	'Chorégraphie': a metaphor for drama	[163]
	'Die Corographie': a plot synopsis	[168]
	Angiolini and Noverre's quarrels	[170]
	From painterly to graphic	[177]
8.	The admirable consent between music and action	[185]
	(CO-AUTHOR RUTH D. ELDRIDGE)	
	Synchronising music and movement	[188]
	Beyond synchronised music	[193]
	<i>Médée et Jason</i>	[194]
	<i>Médée et Jason</i> in context	[204]
9.	Putting performance into words	[208]
	Programmes are controversial	[209]
	Multi-purpose programmes	[211]
	Programmes as paratexts	[216]
	Programmes are inherently controversial	[225]
	<i>Conclusions: What is dance? What is mime?</i>	[229]
	<i>Appendix</i>	[233]
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	[305]
	<i>Index</i>	[324]

Acknowledgements

The research for this book is based on a wide range of library and archive material from various countries which I would not have been able to gather without two generous and invaluable sources of funding: a British Academy Travel Grant, and a series of research grants from the Michael Zilkha Fund, Lincoln College, Oxford.

Chapter 8 would have been impossible without the expertise and shrewd insights of my co-author, Ruth D. Eldredge, Brigham Young University.

My thanks go to Ilona Svetlikova of the Russian Institute of History of Art, St Petersburg, Russia, who was my guide through St Petersburg libraries, and to Susanne Scheibhofer and Geoffrey Gosby for their assistance with Viennese sources. Thanks, also, to Dr Claudia Nitschke with whom conversations on the subjects involved in this book always proved enlightening.

I am grateful for permission to reproduce parts of the following articles:

Edward Nye, 'Choreography is narrative: The programmes of the eighteenth-century ballet d'action', in *Dance Research*, 26.1 (2008), pp. 42–59.

Edward Nye, 'Dancing words: Eighteenth-century ballet-pantomime wordbooks as paratexts', in *Word and Image*, 24.4 (2008), pp. 403–412.

Edward Nye, 'The eighteenth-century ballet-pantomime and modern mime', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 25.1 (2009), pp. 22–43.

Edward Nye, 'Le petit-maître dansant et le caractère de la danse: Les héritiers de la Bruyère au dix-huitième siècle', in *Sur Quel Pied Danser? Danse et Littérature*, ed. Edward Nye (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 137–156.

Edward Nye, 'De la similitude du ballet-pantomime et de l'opéra à travers trois dialogues muets', Voltaire Foundation, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (2005: 06), pp. 207–222.

I am also grateful to the following institutions:

The University of Warsaw Library, for permission to reproduce Louis Boquet, 'Lutteurs', costume design for Jean-Georges Noverre's ballet

d'action *La Mort d'Hercule*, in Louis Boquet, *Habits de Costume pour L'Exécution des Ballets de M. Noverre, dessinés par Mr Boquet, dessinateur des menus plaisir du Roi de France*, Royal Collection, Vols 795–805 (801), costume no. 31

The Bibliothèque Nationale de France for permission to reproduce Jean-Benjamin de La Borde, 'Ballet pantomime', from *Ismène et Isménias* (Paris: Lemarchand, 1770), Act II, pp. 15–47.

A note on references

Reference to Noverre's *Lettres sur la Danse* are either to the first edition, *Lettres sur la Danse, et sur les Ballets* (Lyon: Delaroche, 1760), or, when quoting from later editions that Noverre published during his lifetime, to the modern edition, *Lettres sur la Danse et les Arts Imitateurs* (Paris: Lieutier, 1952).

Attribution of anonymous works to Ange Goudar, or works published under the name of his wife, Sara Goudar, is made according to the findings of Francis L. Mars in 'Ange Goudar, cet inconnu', *Casanova Gleanings*, 9 (1966), pp. 1–64.