

Desecrations and new figurations in early 18th century ballet pantomimes

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The research on which I am focusing concerns the production of pantomimes and ballet pantomimes in Paris from 1729 to 1745. These years limit a first season of experimental creation in mime performance genres, which fortune has a considerable development since 1750. My work consists in the critical edition, with an analysis and contextualisation of fourteen manuscript unpublished synopsis or *librettos* of pantomimes and ballet-pantomimes and thirteen programmes printed (even in partial form)¹ at the time of the first performance, and never reedited.

The frame for experimentation are Fair theatres, by their nature independent from political-cultural central control, and at the same time adversary of «official» stages. Forain artists are certainly influenced by, but demolish canonic artistic and literary models, and particularly those which are consecrated by Court spectators. In their fringe position, compared to performance centre of power (Académie Royale de Musique, Théâtre Français), they are particularly receptive to social changes, to variations of taste and of requests from the public, to cultural tensions and they are permeated by all this; they change their form and foresee a development of their genres, advancing modern shapes. This aptitude is reinforced by exchanges and friendships between French and foreign artists, – a real movement from an European country to another establishes contact between knowledges, themes, texts.

Fair theatre finds its identity in exchange dimension, in innovation (although it maintains archaic elements), in mixing of forms, in parody of theatrical models. It constitutes² itself as a whole of essentially mobile structures, always in the fringes and in opposition to the steadiness of the dramatic genres practiced at Théâtre Français and Académie Royale de Musique.

¹ Partial publication was practised by *Mercure de France*, and is present in the volumes of *Dictionnaire des Théâtres de Paris* by the first French theatre historiographers, Claude and François Parfaict (Rozet, Paris 1757, 5 voll.).

² We can find a synthetic and interesting expression of baroque Fair aesthetics, closely linked to the specific function of the places where performances developed, in the essay by Katrin Kröll, “Spectacles de foire à Strasbourg de 1539 à 1618”, in *Théâtre et spectacles hier et aujourd’hui. Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, Actes du 115e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes (Avignon, 1990), Éditions du CTHS, Paris 1991, pp. 245-257. For Kröll fair space characterizes firstly as a meeting point of foreign people, who brings authentic and different experiences; it is a showcase of technic innovations (as aspect of material culture) that find there their first «marketplace». Fairs are consequently the stage of fusion between tradition and novelty: the various kinds of entertainment do not aim at cancel the heritage of an archaic and popular culture, which persists, but at the same time they act as a welcome space of modern and foreigner, along with the old.

During the second quarter of the eighteenth century middle class *taste*³ takes place and it looks for a mirror of its reality and its values in artistic features.⁴ This phenomenon is associated with the development of a sort of first «show business» in private French Fair enterprises; the process started during the previous decades and led to the ups and downs of Opéra Comique, always hated by the official theatres because of the public success increased by its continually renewed repertory which was able to arouse interest⁵ and was repeatedly hit by orders that limited its expressive means that were considered as a real «privilege» by the stages protected and managed by the central power.

The history of pantomime genres mingles in fact several times with the imposition of prohibitions, from 1699 to 1752. Partially, recurrent restrictions, concerning allowed artistic means, incite actors creativity and encourage systematic resort to gesture as sense vehicle, in a stage so often deprived of verbal text.

During the 1730s and the 1740s, in their continuous renewal of forms, *forain* performances combine:

a) knowledges, techniques, figures of centuries-old tradition that are read and exercised as universal and poetic elements and at the same time as metaphors which meaning can change throughout history. (Commedia dell'Arte, by its nature an European form, is assimilated by intellectuals of Enlightenment period in an ideological key; rope dancing and acrobatic art, explained in France in a treatise by the Italian Arcangelo Tuccaro at the end of the sixteenth century, play a non secondary part in the representation of archaic scenes and supernatural events and they represent living forces that clash with rational impulses during the first half of the century);

b) performance structures, shapes, knowledges and techniques derived from «major» models that were in great favour in *ancien régime* theatres and that are employed at Fair theatres with a critical or parodic intention, not only regarding the

³ Really, the word and the concept of taste define themselves in the middle of the century; David Hume publishes *Standard of Taste* in 1757. But already in 1733 Voltaire published the critical poem *Le Temple du Goût*, which was soon parodied at the Opéra Comique in *Polichinelle dieu du goût* and by Romagnesi at the Comédie Italienne with a comedy having the same title; the year before, Carolet had produced *L'Allure*, at the Foire Saint-Laurent, in defence of taste against ephemeral fashion.

⁴ One of the most enterprising directors of the Opéra Comique talks about Fair theatre in the second quarter of the eighteenth century with these words: «avec sa préoccupation ou son besoin d'entrer dans le détail des mœurs, de rechercher le pittoresque au lieu de le fuir, d'évoquer des décors et des types parisiens, de prendre comme héros non pas un consul romain, un roi d'Argos ou un guerrier de Troie, mais un bon bourgeois du Marais, un commis aux barrières, une harengère, un clerc de procureur, un raccolleur, un soldat du guet, avec sa haine de l'emphase, avec son ironie malicieuse, qui ne se laisse duper ni par les hommes ni par les choses, avec ce goût de terroir qui le parfume comme un vieux vin de France, ce théâtre de la foire, c'est notre vrai théâtre national» (*Mémoires de Jean Monnet, directeur du Théâtre de la Foire*, éd. par Henri D'Alméras, Louis-Michaud, Paris [1908 according to Auguste Rondel], p. 31).

⁵ See the *Préface* by Carolet to volume IX, second part, of the collection edited by Alain-René Lesage, *Théâtre de la Foire*, Gandouin, Paris 1737: during the years, the peculiar quality of the plays had excited the rivalry of other theatres but it had also transformed the *forain* production in a «théâtre des honnêtes gens». This enterprise could survive thanks to the economic engagements also it undertook. Carolet's remarks confirm the changes I referred to.

proposed themes, but also the dramatic structures and the composition. (Opera ballet formed of independent *entrées*, pastoral genres which themes and language meet at the beginning of the century in the *fêtes galantes*, allegorical court ballet, French burlesque ballet, Italian theatrical dance performed between the acts of operas, Molière's *comédie-ballet*);

c) music repertory and composition processes proper to *opéra-comique*, the main theatrical-musical genre produced at Fair theatres since 1714;

d) forms, structures, figures and themes developed on contemporary English stage (harlequinade, dramatic ballet pantomime), in their turn new elaborations of pre-existent continental models.

Many pages should be given up to different components that are to be considered as *precedents*, with all the problems of this concept⁶.

If during the first decades of 18th Century hypercritical issues against the faults of society were among the most interesting elements for Fair performances, liked by aristocratic public himself also, who willingly deserted royal halls and went laughing close to people on the outskirts, – with the passing of time, dramaturgical choices by Lesage, Carolet, Pontau, Favart, from 1720s, go towards the expectations of a public mainly composed by bourgeois. Comic quality outdistances, in a way, from low bodily and carnival dimension. We must remember that Jean Monnet's management policy imposes changes precisely in the composition of public at Opéra Comique, by prohibiting the entry to servants in the theatre. A no return point, for a long time.

Meanwhile, ceramics and tapestry factories propose dancing characters of Fairs theatres; they come from Arcadian landscapes turned into rustic one, or directly from fairs, from stalls full of mountebanks phials, or ropes tightened in the air.⁷ A private and domestic landing contributes to prolong the life of little works certainly destined to oblivion, while critical operation of favourable reception cross the frontiers of France. European dimension of pantomimic comic genre emerges indeed from several factors, as the attention brought on the phenomenon by authoritative critics and dramaturgs like Lessing or his epigons (Strodtmann), or from intertextuality (concerning narrative, thematic, iconic aspects), which is evident for instance in Anglo-French exchange; rare iconographic documents also help to find common threads.⁸

⁶ See the reflexions by Marco De Marinis in *Mimo e teatro nel Novecento*, La Casa Usher, Firenze 1993, p. 15 foll.

⁷ François Boucher draws subjects presents in Fair ballet pantomimes for Beauvais tapestry, for Sèvres porcelains: little shepherds like those of *Les Vendanges de Tempé* by Favart (1745), magic lantern showers, *opérateurs* and sellers of song sheets like those who animate *La Foire de Bezon* by Favart and Pannard (1735). But out of France also houses are decorated with *forain* acrobats images, and «Magito tiles» series are created reproducing Dutch rope-dancers of the family Magito, performers in Mainbray's pantomimes at Foire Saint Germain in 1740s.

⁸ In particular, German printed matter, with gravings of subjects related to Commedia dell'Arte, allows to perceive some itineraries of pantomimic performances. On Commedia dell'Arte reception in European countries, see Alberto Martino, Fausto De Michele, a c. di, *La ricezione della Commedia dell'Arte nell'Europa centrale 1568-1769. Storia, testi, iconografia*, Fabrizio Serra Editore, Pisa-Roma 2010.

It must be considered that *forain* pantomime genre preludes the development *ballet d'action*, of *ballo pantomimo*, events that are accompanied by exchanges of opinions, polemic also, between theorizers from France (Noverre), Italy (Angiolini, Arteaga), Austria (Hilverding), in the climate of reforms, during 1770s and 1780s. We are talking of short plays, rarely made up of more than one act, a kind of after-piece, the last and awaited section of shows formed by three or four parts.

Forain production, that is the result of a team of artists, preserves for a long time a positive ethics of artistic work peculiar to artisanship (that is to say: two or three author names for one performance, but also the publication of anonymous synopsis and *librettos*, certainly not only because of censorship, and the silence, too frequent, on music, dance, scenes composers).⁹

My study in progress (as I noted in the book that precedes it)¹⁰ is the logic continuation of that one about *pièces par écriteaux*, the displays of a first form of *forain* pantomime. A modified cultural and social-historical context, and different goals in authors and performers intentions are to be explored.

The workshop of Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent experiments again, after the season 1710-1715, theatrical forms where gesture has a supporting part. Differently from the *pièces par écriteaux*, the works that are realised in the following decades, regain possession of singing and words on stage, and at the same time try to develop gestural elements in less heterogeneous directions, in each play.

Public can see then new expressive «agglomerations» like ballet pantomime or *ballet coupé de scènes*, which frequently are autonomous sections, composed by dance and singed scenes, in modular shows, and the first pantomimes, which model is more structured and homogeneous.

Specific studies are lacking about *forain* pantomime. Fundamental lines, for a map and a recognition of pantomime genres in 18th Century are marked in three articles by Henry Lagrave¹¹ and Nathalie Rizzoni,¹² the author of a monograph on Charles-François Pannard.¹³

⁹ The pantomime and choreographic works I am studying are composed by the playwrights Charles-Simon Favart, Charles-François Pannard, Boisard de Pontau, Denis Carolet, Colin fils, Grandvoinet de Verrière. Among the choreographers, there are artists who have marked dance history, like Marie Sallé or Jean-Barthélemy Lany, but also others who have stayed in the background, like Mainbray, Roger, Boudet, Raymond-Balthasar Dourdé, Pierre-Louis Lachaussée, Mlle Violente. Traditionally, the Fair actor was also a dancer, a mime, an acrobat; the names of dancers as Mlle Prévost, Jean-Georges Noverre stand out beside the ones of brothers Sallé, in troupes in activity during those years. Music was mostly represented by *vaudevilles*, partly based on known tunes, with comic texts adapted to new objects, but it included instrumental original parts also; the authors were Gilliers, Corrette, Mouret. Even less the sources tell about scene-painters: since 1743 the famous painter François Boucher is engaged in order to draw the ceiling decoration and create the scenes and costumes of Opéra Comique; programs quote a painter named Charmoton.

¹⁰ Paola Martinuzzi, *Le pièces par écriteaux nel teatro della Foire (1710-1715). Modi di una teatralità*, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, «Le Bricole», Collana del Dipartimento di Studi Europei e Postcoloniali dell'Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2007.

¹¹ *La pantomime à la Foire, au Théâtre Italien et aux boulevards (1700-1789)*, «Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte», 3-4, 1979, pp. 408-430.

¹² «Le Geste éloquent: la pantomime en France au XVIIIe siècle», in *Musique et geste de Lully à la Révolution*, Actes du Colloque international (Genève, 2003), textes réunis par Jacqueline Waerber,

I believe it is necessary to approach a minor and old matter as this one with a philological method, in order to give it back dignity in the first place, after the oblivion. That does not signify bringing back texts to their silent death. Their examination leads us on one hand to approach the social reality of a period and with it, the aesthetic and «ideological» incentives of a kind of performance mostly popular and critical again, subject to continuous formal changes. On the other hand, available inedit theatrical materials, with their contextualisation, might encourage artists to bring to life again old forms of gestural theatre. (I think for instance to philological research initiatives concerning 17th and 18th Centuries performance, with didactic-scenic reconstructions, realised by the Association pour un Centre de Recherche sur les Arts du Spectacle aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles).¹⁴

I think also that semiotic tools may help historical research in the analysis of existent traces. The programmes and synopsis, the descriptions of movements they contain, the engravings and drawings, the popular airs find a readability and a sense when they are considered each one as a *text*, as well as in a mutual relation as layers of bigger text that is largely unknown to us (the performance); in its turn, naturally it is linked to the social and cultural reality which engendered it.

To do this, the problem of reception is not secondary. Although they are full of gaps, our sources let us near a historical reality and grasp its tendencies, its impulses towards innovation, its oppositions and its relation to dramatic theories of past and contemporary politics.

The thing most arouses my curiosity are those signals, although often very small, that talk to us of ways of making dance in that context, of the part it had in the performance, of the meaning it brought. What is certain, is that choreography and choreutic execution had a share in the critical intent we have underlined.

A short foray in the ballet pantomime texts allows us to perceive some significant elements on this matter. Above all, the terms authors and critics of the time used to define the choreography of the plays. About *Don Quichotte chez la Duchesse* by Pannard,¹⁵ brothers Parfaict say: «C'étoit des Acteurs habillez, comme sont peints les Rois, les Dames, et les Valets des quatre couleurs d'un jeu de cartes, qui dansoient autour de Dom Quichotte. On vouloit représenter par des danses figurées,

Peter Lang, Bern 2009, pp. 129-147; “*Le Nouveau Spectacle Pantomime à Paris, une réplique transparente à la censure (1746-1749)*”, in *Pantomime et théâtre du corps. Transparence et opacité du hors-texte*, Actes du Colloque international (Toulouse, 2006), textes réunis par Arnaud Rykner, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2009, pp. 33-48.

¹³ *Charles-François Pannard et l'esthétique du “petit”*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, «Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century», 1, 2000.

¹⁴ Pantomime has not yet been the object of a reconstruction on stage, in the Association. “Problèmes concernant la restitution des pantomimes créées aux foires Saint-Germain et Saint-Laurent, dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle”, in *Restitution et création dans la remise en spectacle des oeuvres des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Actes du colloque international (Versailles-Nantes, 29-31 mai 2008), éd. par Jean-Noël Laurenti, «Annales de l'Association pour un Centre de Recherche sur les Arts du Spectacle aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles», 4, June 2010, pp. 249-258.

¹⁵ Foire Saint-Laurent, July 10th 1737. BnF, Ms. f. fr. 9323, ff. 211r-214r.

les différentes folies de ce Chevalier Errant chez la Duchesse, pendant le séjour qu'il y fit. Ce Ballet étoit fort ingénieux, et fut très-bien exécuté». ¹⁶

The expression «figured dance» strikes: at that time, it did not mark a geometrical abstract dance, as we could imagine in this case, if we consider the absence of referentiality in cards game. (It can remember allegorical and horizontal dances that were created during 16th and 17th Centuries)¹⁷. The «danse figurée» in 18th Century was a *representative*, theatrical dance, as we can read in the article *Ballet* written by Cahusac for the *Encyclopédie*; Cahusac introduces the matter by choosing these words: «danse figurée exécutée par plusieurs personnes qui représentent par leurs pas et leurs gestes une action naturelle ou merveilleuse, au son des instrumens ou de la voix»¹⁸. And the word «madness» used by Parfaict, referring essentially to novel episodes, clear up the representative and narrative character of dances, linked to the novel generated them. But in this case, it is not a «natural» action, close to real life, verisimilar, but a fantastic one.

The centre of mimic action in *Don Quichotte chez la Duchesse* by Pannard may be read as a metatheatrical subject, not lacking in meaning: Don Quichotte is designated sultan of a pantomime world (the Dumb Island); the performance celebrates, through dance, pantomimic expressive mean. And Madness, with its long past in theatre history since Middle Ages, reigns in this country.

A few years later, Favart gives to Madness a demiurgical function; it has to be the creator of performance. With the assistance of Chance, the *Ambigu de la Folie* is created, which subtitle is *Le Ballet des Dindons*,¹⁹ a parody of Rameau-Fuzelier's *Indes Galantes*. If the reference to dancing turkeys on embers in occasion of Saint

¹⁶ Claude et François Parfaict, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des spectacles de la Foire par un acteur forain*, Briasson, Paris 1743, t. II, p. 94.

¹⁷ In *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilii* (1499, tr. fr. 1546) by Francesco Colonna, dream narration, representing an imaginary reign, includes the description of a ballet, given in occasion of a court banquet, where choreographic movements form a chess game. «Ce fut un bal ou une danse à la maniere qui s'ensuit. Par la porte des courtines entrèrent trente deux damoyselles vestues de drap d'or, asavoir huit d'une parure, l'une en l'habit de roy, l'autre de royne, deux capitaines de places fortes, deux chevaliers et deux folz et le reste en femmes de guerre. Puis en entra autres seize, vestues de fin drap d'argent, toutesfois acoustrées de la mesme façon des premieres. Lesquelles séparées en deux bandes, se mirent selon leurs qualitez sur les quarreaux de la court, faitz en forme d'eschiquier: les seize d'or d'une part en deux rangz, et celles d'argent à l'opposite en pareil ordre. Ce fait, trois damoyselles musiciennes commencèrent à sonner de trois instrumens d'estrange façon, accordez en douce harmonie, aux mesures et cadences desquelz les damoyselles du bal se mouvoient ainsi que leur roy cornmandoit et en luy faisant révérence et à la royne pareillement, marchoient sur un aultre quarreau en braveté inestimable. [...] Les huit pareilles vestues d'une sorte, mettoient autant à se transporter d'un quarreau à l'autre et ne leur estoit permis de reculer, si elles n'avoient passage ouvert pour saulter sur la partie où estoit leur roy, ny prendre de front, mais seulement en travers, par les lignes diagonales. [...] La royne pouvoit aller sur tous les quarreaux de la couleur de celuy sur lequel premièrement elle avoit pris place; mais il estoit bon que tousjours suyvist son mary». (*Hypnerotomachie, ou Discours du songe de Poliphile, déduisant comme amour le combat à l'occasion de Polia*, publié par Bertrand Guégan, d'après l'édition Kerver, Payot, Paris 1926, Livre premier, pp. 68-69).

¹⁸ Denis Diderot and D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, Paris 1751-1765, t. II, p. 43.

¹⁹ Charles-Simon Favart, *L'Ambigu de la Folie ou Le Ballet des Dindons*, Foire Saint-Laurent, August 31th 1743. BnF, Ms. f. fr. 9325, ff. 413r-435r.

Martin's festival²⁰ is a fierce satire against Opéra and its dancers who staged stories set in Peru, the term and the practice of *ambigu-comique* parody in their turn the fragmented composition of *opéra-ballet*. By singing on the air *Du pouvoir*, Folie that longs to replace the Muse Thalie, exclaims:

Le Hazard conduira la scene,
Tout viendra
Comme il pourà.
De nos jeux bannissons la gêne;
La Raison
Est un poison.
Je pretens hurler, barlu,
De deux opera faire un ambigu.²¹

And its follower Calotin²² adds:

Du bon sens plus on s'écartera,
Plus à l'Opera, l'on ressemblera.

Fair theatre widely mocks lack of verisimilarity characterizing music theatre repertory of Académie Royale de Musique; in the following *entrées* of *Ambigu comique* nothing of what appears ridiculous in Rameau-Fuzelier's opera is spared, nor Occidental presumptions, until, in third *entrée*, the good savage Adario himself appears (as if he sprang from Lahontan's dialogues), to mock Europeans, with no mince words.

The same humorous charge, which passes from parody of contemporary official theatre to world portrait, animates allegorical ballets pantomimes performed in the 1730s. So, the most singular among these ones, *L'Industrie* by Pannard and Carolet (1737) stages a series of characters issued from Boissy, Marivaux, Meville, La Chaussée's comedies, and creates for them and for more common subjects, gathered from everyday life, character dances. And these newly-coined expressive dances combine with others already practiced in French regions, as *la Cabaretière*,

²⁰ Caylus, Montesquieu, Crebillon, Maurepas, Moncrif, *Les Étrennes de la Saint-Jean*, Seconde édition, revûë, corrigée et augmentée par les auteurs de plusieurs morceaux d'esprit, Vve Oudot, Troyes 1742, pp. 84-88.

²¹ Charles-Simon Favart, *L'Ambigu de la Folie*, cit., f. 415r.

²² In 1721 spectators had seen in an opéra-comique by Lesage, Fuzelier and D'Orneval, the Calotins, members of a crazy «Régiment métaphysique, inventé par quelques esprits badins, qui s'en font eux-mêmes les principaux Officiers. Ils y enrôlent tous les particuliers nobles et roturiers qui se distinguent par quelque folie marquée, ou quelque trait ridicule. Cet enrôlement se fait par des brevets en prose ou en vers, qu'on a soin de distribuer dans le monde». (Lesage-Fuzelier-D'Orneval, «Préface» to *Le Régiment de la Calotte*, reproduced by Chamfort in his *Dictionnaire dramatique*, Lacombe, Paris 1776, t. III, p. 21).

les Rats, les Sept sauts.²³ Narrative choreographic thread in *L'Industrie* never breaks, although the performance is structured in *parade* form; it is always supported by the renewal of choreographic composition which mingles with pantomime to let performers «marcher en caractères»²⁴ and it shows modern world, with its craftsmen, soldiers, workmen that are partially relieved in their work by new methods of production, thanks to machines. Marie Sallé composes a contradance entitled *La Découpe*²⁵ on this subject, for Pannard and Carolet's ballet pantomime. The *vaudeville* that accompanies the contradance takes us again to the vital and modern principle of *forain* theatre: «[...] On part sur le champ, faire un tableau changeant».

²³ On character dances see ethnological studies by Yves Guillard: *Les danses de caractère en Sarthe*, La Fricassée, Le Mans 1987-1991, 3 vol.; *Danse et sociabilité. Les danses de caractère*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1997.

²⁴ Charles-François Pannard and Denis Carolet, *L'Industrie, Ballet mêlé de scènes*, Foire Saint-Germain, April 13th 1737, BnF, Ms. f. fr. 9323, f. 426r.

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, f. 426v.