



Pantomimes

Pantomime, art in its primordial state

Pantomime, the art of telling a story and of expressing ideas and emotions without using words, relies on body language. This age-old art, which was already present in Greco-Roman Antiquity, is indispensable. We need only observe individuals in their daily lives to discover the myriad of expressive possibilities that a silent human alphabet can produce. Another aspect that sets pantomime apart, as it creates a valuable artifice for the stage: the speed with which it takes place. “In a split second, everything had been said, and a single glance was all it took to give an explanation”, this is how Maurice Lefèvre described a moment of pantomime in a play in the 1892 *Revue d’art dramatique* (*French Dramatic Art Review*).

1. Pantomime and dance

It makes perfect sense that the paths of dance, the art of the human body in motion, and of pantomime cross. Pantomime first appeared in France in the 17th century in a spectacular choreographic genre, the Ballet de Cour; yet short spoken passages marked the openings of the dances. During the 18th century, pantomime became increasingly widespread on French stages where, against a backdrop of fierce competition among official theatres and private itinerant stages, the actors of the latter, who were forbidden from speaking, invented silent (“à la muette” in French) performances.

In 1760, in his *Lettres sur la danse* (*Letters on Dancing and Ballet*), Noverre initiated a sort of union between dance and pantomime when he theorized “pantomime-ballet” (or ballet d’action), an autonomous choreographic genre. As a result of his libretto, this new type of ballet would totally incorporate narration. Consequently, only the dancers’ movements would express the feelings of the character whose role they were performing and would help understand the narration. Noverre suggested to his dancers that they should draw inspiration, for their performance, from nature. He, himself, was strongly influenced by the technique of the English actor David Garrick, whom he saw performing in London: “(...) in tragedy he terrified with the successive movements with which he represented the most violent passions. And, if I may so express myself, he lacerated the spectator’s feelings, tore his heart, pierced his soul, (...)” (9th letter). This move towards expressive dance, which shook up the formal rules of ballet, paved the way for passions to be expressed, exalted in the Romantic ballet of the 19th century.

2. Classical pantomime, modern pantomime

During the 19th century, pantomime in ballet became codified and brought into play an ensemble of defined gestures, which were passed on to subsequent generations. Marius



Petipa's academic ballet pursued pantomime-ballet but privileged virtuosity at the expense of the expressiveness that was so dear to Noverre. At the same time, pantomime, as an autonomous art form, evolved and was reflected in modern dance as well as in the nascent cinema, prior to talking motion pictures – in particular through its two ingenious representatives, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. According to Arnaud Rykner, from the end of the 19th century pantomime established itself by creating its own niche – primordial corporeality: the roots of modern dance can also be found here. Modern pantomime, modern dance: consequently, the body breaks away from verbal language and becomes the silent setting of drama and of dance.

“Les petits riens” (*The Little Nothings*), Noverre

In 2006, Marie-Geneviève Massé, choreographer of the baroque dance company l'Éventail, recreated the ballet *Les petits riens* (*The Little Nothings*), originally composed by Noverre in 1778 and for which very few traces remained. Noverre is best-known as a pantomime-ballet theoretician, through his *Lettres sur la danse* (*Letters on Dancing and Ballet*), where he advocates a natural role that expresses feelings in ballet. The music was created by a young composer, who was not very well known back then: Mozart. *Les Petits riens* reflect a moment in the history of ballet where ballet was seeking to become an autonomous art: the story is told exclusively through gestures, using expressive pantomime. This ballet, created in the Anacreontic style, draws its inspiration from Greco-Roman mythology and emphasizes its fanciful and courteous aspect. The various figures of Love, one of Mozart's favourite subjects, appear in this ballet. This extract, known as “pantomime”, is part of the third scene: *Espièglerie* (*Mischief*) or *Le Travesti* (*Transvestite*). Following on from *l'Amour en cage* (*Love Caged*) and *Colin-maillard* (*Blind Man's Buff*), it relates the charade initiated by *l'Amour fou* (*crazy love*) which switches the outfits of a man and a woman lying on the ground after having been stunned during *Blind Man's Buff*. *L'Amour fou* introduces the young woman disguised as a man to two Shepherdesses, whilst making the former move like a puppet; by using magic on the latter two, he makes them fall madly in love with the transvestite who then uncovers her breast to undeceive them.

“La Fille mal gardée” (*The Wayward Daughter*), Ivo Cramèr

La fille mal gardée (*The Wayward Daughter*) was the first French ballet to integrate Noverre's ideas, in particular the choice of a realistic subject. Choreographed by Jean Dauberval in 1789, this ballet combines danced passages with flashes of pantomime or action, in a series of sequences that are often witty and very rhythmical; music (a pastiche of popular French airs of the period) punctuates the gestures and heightens the dramatic intensity. When this ballet was recreated two hundred years on, by the choreologist Ivo Cramer, Laurence Louppe said that it was the turning-point to “a form of autonomous danced performance where the naturalistic imitation of life's little gestures triumphs (...) and the realism of everyday topics...”. Lison (Lise), in love with the



young farmer Colin (Colas), much to the discontent of her mother, Widow Simone – who wished to marry her to their rich neighbour’s son, manages to sneak away continually to meet her lover. This ballet illustrates the various social classes including soldiers of the Revolution. The mother, overwhelmed by a fit of anger, accidentally locked Lison in the barn along with Colin but, after many twists and turns, eventually accepted her daughter’s choice. Widow Simone is what we call an entertaining figure, providing a more specifically theatrical note. This role is traditionally performed by a man to highlight the grotesque and caricatural aspect.

“Les Enfants du Paradis” (*Children of Paradise*), Marcel Carné

Marcel Carné’s 1945 film, *Les enfants du paradis* (*Children of Paradise*), exploring the performance scene of the 19th century, is a *mise en abîme* of different theatrical genres: pantomime, mime, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, carnaval... The central character of this immense tableau is Baptiste, played by Jean-Louis Barrault, who pays tribute to the famous mime artist Jean-Gaspard Deburau. The key backdrop for the action of *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*), which begins in 1828, is the Boulevard du Crime, where the various theatres established there attracted the public by staging parades. Baptiste, abused by his father who presented him to passers-by as a lackadaisical good-for-nothing, turns out to be less empty-headed than at first glance, when he rescues the beautiful Garance – whom he has just set eyes on and fallen madly in love with – from the clutches of the police. She has been wrongly accused of having stolen a pocket watch from a potbellied bourgeois. Through his silent testimony, Baptiste offers the audience a precious moment of first-rate pantomime.

“La mort du cygne” (*The Dying Swan*), Michel Fokine

Michel Fokine can, in many respects, be called the successor of Romantic ballet as well as of Maurice Petipa’s academic ballet, which, throughout the 19th century, pursued in their own way the danced narration that was so dear to Noverre. He moved away, however, from pantomime-ballet and went on to create short ballets and looked at pantomime in a variety of ways depending on his choreographies. In 1907, he created *La Mort du cygne* (*The Dying Swan*) for Anna Pavlova, to the music from the thirteenth movement of Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Carnaval des animaux* (*The Carnival of the Animals*). This short ballet deals with the Romantic themes of death and ideal, as the figure of the white swan symbolizes purity. The various elements of expressive language - the bust and the head surrendering to the Earth’s gravity, the rupture of the lines of the arms and the hands, the dance terminating on the ground – embody the transition from life to death (in the same vein as other famous Romantic deaths portrayed through ballet, such as those of the Sylph and Giselle). *La mort du cygne* (*The Dying Swan*) is emblematic of Anna Pavlova’s genius, although several dancers, following in her footsteps, have performed the role brilliantly. Here, Dominique Delouche films Yvette Chauviré reliving her ballet performance as she hands the role over to Dominique Khalfouni. At certain



moments, the camera zooms in, showing her searching deep inside herself for the kinaesthetic and emotional memories of this dance.

“Phèdre”, Serge Lifar

Nina Vyroubova, accompanied by Cyril Atanassoff, passes on to Delphine Moussin and Yann Saïz, two young dancers from the Opera of Paris, an extract of the ballet that she performed in when it was created by Serge Lifar in 1950: *Phèdre*. Heir of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, Lifar worked hand-in-hand with avant-garde artists on this ballet (Jean Cocteau, using Racine’s tragedy for the argument and, George Auric, for the music). Moreover, he established himself as a neo-classical choreographer by introducing stylistic innovations. Yet, he pursued the ballet tradition through narration: the pantomime embraces a pre-existing text. In this extract, the heroine has to reckon with her husband Thésée’s son, Hippolyte, whom she has secretly fallen in love with. The pantomime is portrayed through a myriad of gestures that have a precise meaning (for example, the “Ô toi salut” at the beginning) and theatrical purposes – authority here for Phèdre, respect and obedience for Hippolyte, as well as muted love. The reliance of the gestures on verbal language can be seen during this transmission: each gesture and each bodily intention are accompanied by a sub-text, like stage directions in a theatre play.

“Tänzerische pantominen”, Valeska Gert

Valeska Gert, the German modern dancer, embodied various figures in solos presented in cabarets, several of which she also directed. Constantly torn between dance and theatre in her artistic career, she eventually found the solution by dancing human characters. Drawing her inspiration from social reality, she had a predilection for anything that held the bourgeoisie in contempt and a certain taste for provocation. Defined by Philippe Ivernel as a “dancer-monologist”, Valeska Gert based her “danced pantomimes” on her own body: the source of all her dances, her body embraced a tension which, one day, was liberated by exploring a dance. This extract of Suse Byk’s 1925 film, *Tänzerische Pantomimen*, illustrates the performances of three of her most famous solos. In “la Mort” (*Death*), she portrays death “authentically, with veracity”. Her whole body is consumed by alternating movements of tension and relaxation. Her head thrown backwards, her mouth opens wide to portray a silent scream, representing the struggle of life up until the dying breath, where her head finally surrenders to the Earth’s gravity. The two other dances centre stage specific figures, taken from contemporary reality: in “L’entremetteuse” (*the procurress*), Valeska Gert displays her talents for pulling faces and the ever-so-rapid transformations of her whole body. As for the solo “Canaille” (*Riff-raff*), it brings to life a prostitute who sways her hips to attract customers and makes bourgeois society look at its own peculiarities.

The “Table verte” (*The Green Table*), Kurt Jooss



Again, in keeping with expressionist lines, Kurt Jooss, Rudolf Laban's assistant and the creator of the *danced theatre*, developed a gestural dramaturgy by drawing his inspiration from postures of everyday life. Jooss fashioned a dance that was keenly aware of the "right gesture", which linked together inner truth and outer form. His *danced theatre* is illustrated through characters who use expressive dance alone to tell a story. In 1932, his ballet *La Table verte (The Green Table)* denounced the absurdity of war and the dangerously hypocritical role of politicians. He portrayed the latter wearing old men's masks, designed by Hermann Makard, dressed in black tuxedos and wearing white gloves (they would never dirty their hands in the conflict that they were about to ignite). At the end of a heated discussion, these "men in black" fired a shot in the air, thus embracing war. Death, originally danced by Jooss himself, resulted in many casualties and, following a 'dance of death', we see the politicians around the "Green Table", on the point of initiating a new game for demonstrating power, totally out of touch with reality. In a movement contrary to Noverre's – who advocated removing masks and letting physiognomy shine through, Jooss, in his modern pantomime, focused on bodily gestures, accompanied, in this extract, by a tango composed by Fritz Cohen, which highlights, note after note, the absurdity of this conversation.

La Argentina, Kazuo Ohno

Kazuo Ohno, cofounder, along with Tatsumi Hijikata, of *butoh*, a modern dance created in Japan at the end of the 1950s, carried out intensive research on the spatial disposition of the most intimate emotions. In an improvised dance, exploring the depths of the body, where permanent marks and memories persist, this dancer illuminates the stage through his extreme presence. According to him, *butoh* is created through the continuity of one split second to another and, as such, requires extreme attention. Devoid of an ocular and bodily point of focus, his dance is completely connected to his life, death is a true master. Kazuo Ohno became known in France in 1980, with his "*Hommage à la Argentina*" (*La Argentina Sho*) where, in spite of himself, he undertook the Japanese tradition of "onnagata", where a man performs a feminine role to express the heart in a stylized way. Ohno's essence is the memory of an intense emotion when, as a young man, he watched Antonia Mercé y Luque, known as "la Argentina", dancing on stage. Fifty years on, this emotional memory came to the fore when he saw a painting depicting the dancer and he heeded a call from his body to dance this emotion. In this extract, we can see the nuances when switching from one emotion to another, as well as death at work, felt physically.

It's going to get worse and worse my friend, Lisbeth Gruwez

Lisbeth Gruwez, one of Jan Fabre's exquisite performers, created hand-in-hand with the composer Maarten Van Cauwenberghe, the Voetvolk Company, which means the "infantry", so that she could tackle specific issues head-on, in particular those related to bodies overwhelmed by the forces that bring them into play by moving them deeply. In



her 2012 work, *It's going to get worse and worse, my friend*, she focuses on the ecstatic effect that speech can have on a body. This choreography came into being from an interview she had watched where John Cassavetes talked about his film "Opening Night". The filmmaker was upset by the little recognition given to his work: and, in reaction, criticized Hollywood and the television and, as his response develops, we can see that his gestures become increasingly caustic, his eyes bulge more and more and his face darkens with rage. After having watched this video, Lisbeth Gruwez wanted to look further into the issue of the way in which the body of a speaker changes as their speech develops. She watched several other examples of speeches and, by observing the speakers' gestures and postures, she "harvested", with the idea of really incorporating what she had seen as the basis of an abstract choreography. By removing the content of these speeches and by focusing on the body language, the dancer reveals violence at work in all its splendour, the compulsive desire of persuasion, which turns the body of the speaker, who seems friendly and calm, into a form of clamorous, vociferous trance.

To go further:

Publications

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Excerpts selection

Sarah Nouveau

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Author's biography:

Sarah Nouveau has a contemporary dance career with various choreographers (Haim Adri, Jean Rochereau, Nadège Macleay, Régis Bouchet-Merelli, Michele Etori, Elisabeth Schwartz, Monique Duquesne) and directors (Brigitte Mounier). After a long training in corporal theater (The path of the Theater), she was a clown for the Elixir Company, and actress for the Company Detours. She holds a state diploma for teaching contemporary dance and has experience teaching dance to a variety of audiences. She also studied at the Sorbonne in Sorbonne and in choreographic culture with Laurence Louppe at CEFEDM Aubagne. She teaches the history of dance, regularly hosts conferences, and has published L'Harmattan editions "The Wigmanian Body after 'Adieu et Merci'", "Danser l'ailleurs", and "La culture choregraphique au coeur of dance teaching ". Since 2010, she has created shows within her company, the quadrille of lobsters, and develops dance conferences: the show "C.O.R.P.u. ", About the beginnings of modernity in dance, created with the actors of the company of the Bird-Fly, people with mental handicap, turned in Poland and Russia. Having practiced yoga since 2003, she also trained with Bénédicte Pavelak ("Transmitting an art of the body and the voice"), and her research led her to position her teaching differently, the dance becoming privileged medium of a discovery of itself.

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