

Mime in Ashton's Ballets

Tradition and Innovation

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Salvatore Viganò, the creator of nineteenth-century *coreodramma*, discussing his aversion to dance compositions derived from complex, allegorical literary subjects, wrote:

I always try to structure my own works so that the spectator does not need any knowledge of either the past or of the future events to understand the content of the picture I draw.... As the plot unfolds and as the human feelings are all clearly conveyed through dance, everyone can see and understand everything, without studying or referring to programmes or written explanations. (Viganò, in Ritorni, 1838, p. 199)

More than one century later, Frederick Ashton, discussing the same topic, affirmed:

I personally do not like a ballet in which the audience has to spend three-quarters of the time with their noses in the program to try to find out what is happening on the stage. . . In my balletic ideology it is the dancing which must be the foremost factor, for ballet is an expression of emotions and ideas through dancing. (Ashton, 1951, p. 91)

It would be hazardous to claim that Ashton might have known Viganò's opinion: the latter's passage is a rare example of his writing, and was never translated into English before. Still, a parallel between the two choreographers is not simply fortuitous, for the two masters, apparently so different, present several points in common. On the one hand, Viganò created a distinctive and unique choreographic genre, that of *coreodramma*, from which Italian nineteenth-century theatre dance evolved; in addition, he formulated stylistic principles that were to characterise Italian ballet for more than one century. On the other hand, Frederick Ashton contributed considerably to both the creation and the development of British ballet, and, more particularly, to what is generally identified in the dance world as the 'English style'. The two masters, moreover, dealt with a particular use of the language of gesture, commonly and often erroneously called ballet mime. The 1981 conference on Viganò [1] demonstrated that despite what is generally written in dance history manuals, his *coreodrammi* were neither pantomimic displays, nor did they rely on the codified vocabulary of ballet mime. On the contrary, Viganò's choreographic canons prescribed a unique use of expressive gestures. These movements were fluidly interwoven with the dancing in order to render the latter more expressive and less artificial. Viganò refused to comply with both the formulae of French ballet - including those related to Noverre's *ballet d'action* - and the principles of conventional Italian mime language, namely a fixed vocabulary of expressive gestures stemming from the *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition. So did Frederick Ashton. In the same passage quoted above, Ashton affirmed that:

I personally am not fond of the literary ballet, because it seems to me that there comes a hiatus in which one longs for the spoken word to clarify the subject. And these ballets seem to lead always more to miming than to dancing, thereby invading the functions of the drama or the cinema. (Ashton, 1951, p. 91)

This statement about the nature of mime and its relation to ballet requires a careful interpretation, for it could easily be misinterpreted. Ashton was not against expressive gestures as an integral part of dancing, as he demonstrated and affirmed on several occasions, for instance when planning some mime scenes (which were eventually omitted) for *Ondine* (1958), when discussing the structure of *La Fille mal gardée* (1960), or even when describing the way Pavlova used her hands on stage. Ashton's criticism was directed to the insertion of those overwhelming and often gratuitous gestural recitatives in contemporary ballets. Although he acknowledged the importance of expressive gestures and their contribution to the narrative of the work, he regarded long, conventional mime sequences as superfluous additions, if not as detrimental to the dance's purity. It was this particular attitude

towards mime that led to both the creation and the development of an individual and distinctive language of gesture, which is worth analysing.

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Viganò experimented with a range of expressive movements that could easily be integrated with the dancing. What he obtained was a unique vocabulary of gesture, which did not interrupt or hinder the fluidity of the danced action, thus becoming an integral part of the dancing itself. Viganò derived this language from pre-existing formulae stemming from well-established Italian drama traditions as well as from the codified principles of the *ballet d'action*. He revised, adjusted and reworked those criteria to provide his dancers with a greater degree of freedom in expressing their feelings and those of their characters. An analysis of mime in Ashton's ballets reveals that the English choreographer too drew the fundamentals of his individual and unique language of gesture from pre-existing examples and formulae. Yet a conference paper cannot discuss thoroughly the various examples of mime in Ashton's ballets. This paper will therefore focus on the analysis of some significant historical and contextual factors which informed Ashton's language of gesture; its aim is to call forth further research on the topic.

It is generally acknowledged that the nineteenth-century Italian ballet mime tradition has been carefully preserved and perpetuated in twentieth-century England. It was in this country that great mime dancers from the famed Milanese Academy of Dancing established themselves as performers of great repute; among them were Malvina Cavallazzi and Francesca Zanfretta. The latter passed her art on to both Ninette de Valois, who invited her to teach at the Academy of Choreographic Art, and to Ursula Moreton. At Moreton's request, Zanfretta's classes were written by Sheila McCarthy and, as the eminent critic Kathrine Sorley Walker has affirmed, this set of notes 'was handed on in its complex and fascinating details to the Vic-Wells and its successor companies' (1987, p. 65). Zanfretta's recorded teachings became the reference source on ballet mime for many generations of English dancers. The influence of these teachings on Ashton can be detected in several ballets, where some canonic movements occur - for instance, the fairies' gesture for 'listening' in *The Dream* (1964). Still, Ashton never complied with the grammar of that language, and constantly filtered the rules of its syntax through a personal approach. Even when the most canonic gestures of the Italian tradition occur in his ballets - such as the popular gestures for 'to marry', 'to love', and 'to hear' codified by Zanfretta - they are never performed according to the precepts established by almost three centuries of practice. Ashton's choreographic rendering of these conventional signs is always smoother, less rigid than the original model. In his ballets, therefore, the use of space - an important component of Italian ballet mime - is reduced considerably, and gestures lack that flashy, flowery complexity that characterised the Italian style. The constant opposition between one gesture and another, one of the fundamentals of the Italian language of gesture - not to be confused with the balletic law of *épaulement* - is generally disregarded in Ashton's ballets, to provide the gesture with more spontaneity. The musical quality of the movements is different too: to the originally unrhythmical nature of the movements, Ashton juxtaposes an accurate phrasing which confers on the gesture an incredible musical fluidity. It is worth remembering that Italian mime dancers did not follow the rhythm but adjusted their mime actions to the melody, regardless of any possible phrasing. Finally, one should not forget that the nature of the Italian vocabulary was significantly tempered by Ashton's refined taste, by what is generally indicated by non-English people as the restrained and innately elegant manners of the English. There are many examples of how Ashton adopted and reworked old mime gestures. An interesting and controversial one is to be found in his ballet *Ondine*, where 'as he has often done, Ashton devised a characteristic port de bras for Ondine and the other water spirits' (Vaughan, 1977, p. 298). Still, that distinctive gesture - arms stretched upward with the elbows slightly bent, the hands crossed at the wrist, palms and fingertips together - bears an unmistakable similarity to one of the oldest signs of Italian ballet mime, that for 'fish'. Although there is no evidence to prove that Ashton knew that gesture derived from *Commedia dell'Arte*, the similarity between the port de bras - which conveys Ondine's 'watery' nature - and the old conventional sign suggests more than mere coincidence.

The complex range of descriptive and expressive gestures that characterise Ashton's choreography does not derive exclusively from the Italian tradition of the nineteenth century. Russian mime is another informing factor. It is generally accepted that Italian and Russian ballet mime are similar, but

such an assumption is erroneous. Although a certain contamination between the two forms can be detected, it should be remembered that Russian ballet mime of the late nineteenth century differed considerably from the Italian vocabulary of gesture. Italian ballet mime was imported to Russia thanks to great Italian ballet stars such as Virginia Zucchi, whose skills were quickly learnt — or imitated — by their Russian colleagues. Yet the Italian sign language consisted mainly of codified movements which could limit considerably the personal interpretation of the performer. This was a problem that was particularly felt by the Russians, who managed to translate that idiom into a more malleable language, more suited to the individual's rendering of a character. In discussing *La Fille mal gardée*, Tamara Karsavina recalls Mathilde Kschessinska's brilliant mime skills (Guest, 1960, p. 26). Unfortunately there are no sources documenting Kschessinska's bravura. Still, according to some of her private pupils, when she was teaching at the Studio Wacker in Paris, at the end of her classes she used to grant private students a bonus: she taught them some exercises of unusual ports de bras and some mime gestures. Apparently, while demonstrating mime sequences, she often insisted on how the Russians had modified the signs of the Italian vocabulary, making them clearer and somehow more elegant. (Incidentally, a similar claim, although in relation to ballet technique, is found in Legat, 1932, p. 22.) As an example, Kschessinska referred to the conventional gesture for 'marriage', affirming that the Russians — namely herself — had added an extra movement to the original gesture, that of adjusting the ring with the thumb and the index of the right hand. Now the combination of the two movements, the Italian sign and the Russian addition, can be seen in Lise's mime passage that Ashton received from Karsavina, his 'Goddess of Wisdom' (Guest, 1960, p. 10).

The process of modification of the old Italian canons of mime language, led by the Russians, reached its peak with Mikhail Fokine, who contributed significantly to the 'modernisation' of the art of ballet, evolving a 'freer, natural style' and requiring that 'the whole body should be expressive' (Beaumont, 1945, p. 87). Mime conventions, therefore, gradually gave way to a range of movements, which mirrored and suited the dancer's personal interpretation, often deriving spontaneously from it. An analysis of mime in Ashton's ballets cannot but take into account this other type of Russian mime. Although Fokine did not reject the old mime vocabulary, his language of gesture focused more on suggesting ideas than expressing concepts or telling facts through a codified system of signs. In many of his ballets there is a wide range of movements which, although expressive and indicative of a certain mood or feeling, cannot be related to specific words. Examples can be found in *Le Spectre de la rose* (1911) where both the Young Girl's movement of surprise and the gesture with which the Spirit 'reveals' himself to her do not belong to the Italian vocabulary. It has been suggested that, to a certain extent, Fokine's principles informed the dancing of Anna Pavlova, Ashton's muse. An investigation of the few visual sources on Pavlova demonstrates that the ballerina's language of gesture was an individual concoction of free, expressive movements and conventional, stylised gestures stemming from the ballet tradition. Yet as far as the existing source material is taken into account, Pavlova's dancing did not include the use of codified signs in the Italian style. Probably, Fokine derived some of his ideas on movement from the art of Isadora Duncan. Although the argument is still a controversial one, there is little doubt that, as far as some 'free' expressive gestures are concerned, Ashton too referred more or less directly to Duncan. Still, because of their particular nature, those movements cannot be considered as part of the mime range.

Further developments of Fokine's ideas were brought forth by two other Russian choreographers: Léonide Massine, from whom Ashton learned 'about style and about the beauty of port de bras' (Vaughan, 1977, p. 7), and Bronislava Nijinska, in whose ballets Ashton danced while a member of Ida Rubinstein's company.

A complex, rich and often redundant language of gesture is a distinctive component of Massine's choreography. Still, only a few of these movements derive from the nineteenth-century vocabulary, for the majority consists of gestures created to provide the dancing with some dramatic 'natural' characterisation. In most cases those movements are nothing but a stylised version of common daily actions. Their presence in Massine's choreography reflects the influence on early twentieth-century dance of the dramatic theories expounded by theatre theorists such as Konstantin Stanislavsky and Edward Gordon Craig, who were both against the conventions, particularly the gestural ones, of nineteenth-century drama. Some dance historians have erroneously considered Massine's gesticulation as merely ornamental. On the contrary, it is through that gesticulation that Massine's characters acquire

dramatic credibility. The boundary between drama and ballet is therefore crossed, even though this may result in an overpowering use of mime. In both *The Good-Humoured Ladies* (1917) and *La Astuzie femminili* (1920) (later called *Cimarosiana*), some of the female characters have a recurring outward movement, with arms bent, elbows down, in which the forearms move slightly away from the shoulder and the hands flap downwards, breaking the line at the wrist and ending with the palms up. This movement, which echoes the stylised manners of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conveys the superficial and whimsical nature of the characters. Interestingly, it occurs in Ashton's *A Month in the Country* (1976), where it becomes Natalia Petrovna's most distinctive and recurring gesture, performed with many variations throughout the ballet. Although both the dynamic of the gesture and its meaning are similar to those in Massine's works, it is the way Ashton uses that gesture that differs from Massine's. In the latter's works, the movement is like a caricature, and appears to be a complement to the dancing to enhance the comic effect. In Ashton's ballet the gesture becomes an integral part of the dancing; as such it can be regarded as the preparation or the continuation of a port de bras even though it retains its narrative identity.

It is difficult to state the extent of Nijinska's influence on Ashton's language of gesture, mainly because of the particular use, or lack of, narrative movements in her ballets. It could be argued that symbolic and allegorical gestures characterise Nijinska's works. Yet the nature of those gestures is never clearly defined, and one might wonder how appropriate it would be to refer to them as Nijinska's 'language of gesture'. This topic remains open to discussion.

This brief analysis of mime in Ashton's ballets would not be complete without mentioning another significant informing factor, namely the choreographer's sense of theatre. To his innate mimetic skills, such as his well-known impersonations, he combined both a great deal of practical experience — having worked in places such as music-halls — and an extensive knowledge of theatre arts. It is not coincidence, therefore, that canonic movements performed by either vaudeville comedians or pantomime actors characterise some passages of Ashton's ballets. The most obvious example is to be found in *Cinderella* (1948): Ashton's characterisation of the Ugly Sister was more in the glorious tradition of English pantomime than in the tradition of the balletic 'travesty' mime roles (Vaughan, 1977, p. 233).

Finally, a technical factor should be considered. Ashton studied and worked mainly with dancers trained according to the teachings imparted by Enrico Cecchetti. His mime vocabulary, therefore, is constantly informed by those principles, particularly in terms of geometry, posture and lines. The smoothness, the roundness and that calibrated elegance of Ashton's narrative and expressive movements derive from the application of Cecchetti's technical and stylistic formulae.

'Ballet mime' is regarded today as a lesser artistic subspecies, if not an obsolete and disturbing accessory to ballet. As far as Ashton's choreography is concerned, however, the importance of his unique and distinctive language of gesture cannot be overlooked, for it constitutes an essential ingredient of what is generally recognised as 'Ashton's style'.

Notes

1. 'Il sogno del coreodramma: Salvatore Viganò, poeta muto', Teatro Romolo Valli, Reggio Emilia, Italy, 1981.

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