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Preserving Dance, Making History
The Role of the Historian in the Preservation of Dance Performance

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Abstract

In dance, where there is generally no recourse to score or script, issues of preservation have been extensively explored. The position taken here, however, is not that of the reconstructor or of those who record performance but that of the historian. In order to illustrate the strategies adopted by the dance historian, a case study is offered of ballet in London at the end of the nineteenth century. This is a pertinent example, for no dances from the period are extant. How, then, does the historian deal with the 'traces' of the dance, left not in performance itself but in written and visual sources? Artistic convention distorts the visual image; written accounts are personal and conflicting; vested interests colour the record. Nevertheless, it is the historian's role not to describe but to interpret and it is the very instability of the dance event produced by these sources that is of prime interest. For the historian, the 'performance' resides not in an attempt to construct an accurate account, but in the many versions of 'the' dance. The preservation of performance is, therefore, about the preservation of perception. It is this which keeps the history of dance always 'on the move'.

Keywords

Dance preservation, dance historiography, nineteenth-century ballet

Over the last decade or so we have seen, in the fields of practice and scholarship, a concern with the preservation of dance performance. By performance, I mean both the stylistic aspects of dancing and the 'original' choreography. The project of reconstructing and thus preserving choreography has 'become a minor industry' (Thomas in Carter 2004, 32). In the ballet world, preserving dances through reconstruction is a commonplace event; it is the basis of most ballet companies' repertoire. In modern dance, however, the very notion of its modernity, its position 'in the moment' has mitigated against any will to preserve the repertoire. Modern dance has been seen to be very much of its time, and when the time passes, the dance passes. The recognition, however, that the people who made the dances are passing, that the twentieth century itself was also passing, spurred an interest in the business of reconstruction, often from the physical memories of the dancers and choreographers themselves. In many dance genres, however, works and/or styles have been reconstructed from iconographic evidence, such as in Alessandra Iyer's research wherein she made close analysis of the sculptures on a temple in order to inform the reconstruction of ancient Javanese dance. In the early dance field, of course, scholars and

practitioners resort both to visual images and the written text as well as the complex genealogy of the dance movements, in order to reconstruct what is known as ‘historical dance’. Scholars have also been active in exploring the many conceptual issues which arise from preserving performance and notions of originality, of authenticity, of authorship have all been vigorously contested (see Jordan 2000, Thomas in Carter 2004). The debates continue. They resonate across the performing arts, of course, but dance is a particularly interesting case for it tends to lack a score as in music or a script as in theatre. Works can be notated but this is a rare skill and in this respect, the dance community is not a literate one. What is of interest, however, is that in all the activity and scholarly interest paid to preserving the dance repertoire, the role of the historian is neglected.

This neglect is partly to do with how dance history has been constructed. When studying for my first degree, I read so many books about my subject’s heritage yet gleaned little sense of what actually happened on stage. The chronologies, the creators, the performers, even the narratives of the works were described but there was only a slippery sense of the actual choreographic event. It may be that historians did not feel equipped to deal with the language of dance analysis or that their own primary sources were not revealing of such detail. Most likely it is the case that they have not seen it as in their remit to preserve performance. In recent years, this has changed, and in texts such as Susan Manning’s *Ecstasy and the Demon* the works of Mary Wigman are described in great detail. This description is arrived at through what Manning calls the ‘traces’ of performance. Each of these ‘traces’ she argues, ‘marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving through an endless series of distorting reflections’ (Manning 1993, 12). Although this sentiment might seem so much common-sense, I would argue that the notion that the evidence or source material, which comprise these traces, somehow ‘distorts’ the ‘original’ event can be contested when dealing with historiography. Using a case study, I wish to demonstrate that any historical project which tries to somehow see ‘through’ the sources, tries to trace back through them to a ‘true’ event, is misconceived. The historian, I will argue, does not deal with evidence that ‘distorts’ a performance which is no longer extant. This evidence reveals the ways in which performance was received; ways which often conflict. The historian cannot lock this evidence together to make a neat jigsaw, revealing a clear picture, for everyone saw the picture differently and the pieces won’t necessarily fit. Nevertheless, the historian can make an important contribution to preserving our performance heritage, in ways which are valuable but distinct from the analyst or the reconstructor.

Before pursuing this argument it is important to note that this paper will not be venturing into macro debates about historical truth, subjectivity, relativity and the many other contested issues which arose from postmodernism and post-post modernism in the move from an exploration of ‘the past as it was’ to ‘the past as we see it’. It is worth reminding ourselves of two key issues, however. The first is the notion posited by **writers such as Jenkins** (1991) that whilst we might access ‘facts’ - in our case, about a performance – these facts are literally ‘meaningless’; they are not, and logically never can be, the same as the ‘event’ itself. We may discover that there were 200 dancers on stage or that the soloist wore a white gauze skirt but – so what? It is the historian’s job to offer meaning(s), by placing this information in context, by investigating the contemporary significance of the ‘facts’. How did the audience ascribe meaning to the 200

dancers on stage? How did the critics write about the spectacle? What did it mean to the management, to the designer? Most importantly yet oft neglected, what did it ‘mean’ to be one of those 200 dancers? It is the job of the historian to write the stories which give meaning to evidence for, as Jenkins says, ‘sources are mute’ (Jenkins 1991, 38); facts alone have very little to say. Second, it is important to say that we should ‘steer clear of the modernist belief that there are facts which have to be discovered as well as the postmodernist belief that there are no facts and that the past can be invented’ (Muntz in Bentley 1997, 855). As said, the historian does not ‘discover’ an unmediated performance nor do they invent it on an arbitrary basis. They may speculate on evidence and on the gaps between evidence for the historiographic project is a creative one – but it is one based on evidence.

The evidence for the case study which will be used to illustrate how the historian contributes to the preservation of performance is both rich and impoverished. I have chosen the period of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century when ballet was presented in the music halls of London and other large provincial cities. It provides a useful study in that, of the hundreds of works presented on the stages of London, none survive – nor do any of the collaborating artists or dancers. There is, nevertheless, a richness of testimony to the performances – witting and unwitting - which I will go on to mention. It is impoverished, however, if one wished to build up a single picture of the dance event for the purpose of reconstruction. Nevertheless, what the historian can do is reconstruct a flavour, many flavours, of the performance events which embrace many different public and private perceptions. The fact that these are often contradictory does not send the historian on a road down the quest for truth but provides a multi-layered account wherein all evidence tells us something about both the performance and the personal, critical or commercial stances of the people who left their evidence to history. Although these are primary sources, traditionally privileged in historical research, we must be circumspect. As Muntz (in Bentley 1997) argues, the notion that primary sources are somehow closer to the ‘truth’ of events is problematic, for historical actors had their own bias, own self-interests, own stories to tell about the performance. The point of this case study is to reveal how those stories – and of course, the historian’s own story – do not, as Manning suggests, ‘distort’ performance but in their multiplicity, they destabilise the solidity of performance as a ‘fact’.

The case study

During the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and in to the early twentieth, ballet was a key component in pantomime, and a common feature in mid to large scale music halls of London and the provinces. It was the main attraction at two of London’s famed palaces of varieties, the Alhambra and the Empire, both situated in Leicester Square. Its position in popular entertainment, rather than ‘high art’ has resulted in neglect by dance historians and it has almost disappeared from our heritage. And yet, it played to full houses, six nights a week, for over 30 years. Although there are some music scores, none of the ballets are extant and we have to take recourse to written and visual sources. These are problematic for there was no analysis of the works (why would anyone bother?) and no specialist dance critics with access to the language which describes ballet’s movement vocabulary. On first entering this field of research, in fact, I nearly gave up before I started, there seemed such paucity of sources. I soon discovered,

however, that there were sources a-plenty – in theatre programmes; in newspaper criticism of the performances, which tended to focus on what the dance and dancers looked like rather than how they moved; in general articles on the ballet which often explored backstage from the very personal perspective of the (male) writer. Popular song and poetry added artistic licence to the recording of what happened on stage. As we shall see, artistic licence was also exploited in the pictorial evidence of programme covers and sketches in newspapers and journals. Photographs were more ‘true’ in one sense, but were posed rather than ‘live’. An initial attempt to build up a neat picture of the ballets was not only soon revealed to be highly problematic but, as I have discussed, it was philosophically and historiographically impossible. In what ways, therefore, could I access the ‘performance’ of the ballets? Performance could be accessed through the perceptions of these very writers, artists and performers: different people, different stories, different ‘performances’.

A simple question. What did the dances look like? Here is some visual evidence, taken mainly from the 1890s but the ballets did not appear to have changed fundamentally in visual presentation across the period. (SLIDES FROM BALLETS 1890s–1900s.) It is clear that artistic licence has been used in the sketches and drawings of the dancers, not only in terms of what they look like but what they are doing. This is not unusual, of course; throughout advertising and media history, image rather than actuality is all. But these are very deceptive images in terms of what might have happened on stage. The first sketch of the dancer in mid air is not only incorrect in the type of costume – tutus only rose to that brevity later in the twentieth century – but also in the movement indicated. A feature of the Italian school, which formed the basis of the principal dancers’ training, was *terre à terre* movement – complex, swift but much more earthbound than the Romantic school of the 1830s and ‘40s which is hinted at in this image. By the end of the nineteenth century the dancers, although they were cast in roles of fairies or sprites, were not the ethereal beings of the Romantic period – they did not fly through the air. Furthermore, the cumbersome costumes seen in the photographs, a necessary component of the ballets which contributed to the spectacle for which they were renowned, plus the fact that the *corps* were usually given something to carry in the hands as they were not skilled in the traditional *port de bras*, would have mitigated against the display of Dionysiac fervour which the programme covers present. Critics often mention that they performed with ‘gusto’ but the dominant critical response is that they were ‘well drilled’.

The *déshabille* of Britannia (Empire programme cover, 1897) and the general privileging of seemingly naked legs and arms are contradicted by one of the dancers, the first English *première danseuse*, Phyllis Bedells. In her memoirs she recalls ‘an occasion when the *corps de ballet* were so shocked at being given dresses to wear without sleeves that they threatened to go on strike. If bare midriffs or bare arms were to be shown the girls were given flesh-coloured leotards to wear’ (Bedells 1954, 23).

These images of the barely dressed dancers on the programme covers and the ‘shocked’ dancers themselves can be reconciled in a comment from Laura Ormiston Chant, a Victorian social reformer who brought a complaint against the Empire for what she claimed was the moral laxity of the ballets. She describes, ‘one central figure...in flesh coloured tights, who wears a light gauzy kind of dress and when she comes to the front of the stage it is as though the body of a

naked woman were simply disguised with a film of lace' (Chant in Donahue 1987, 58). This would explain the apparent nudity revealed on the programme covers. The 'fact' is that the dancers did not display actual flesh but flesh-coloured undergarments. What this means in terms of the performance, however, is that (I generalise here) the dancers were covered but complied with the production imperatives of the management, whose main concern was box office sales. Programme designers had to boost those sales by enticing audiences with representations of exciting, lusty movement – and exciting, lusty young women. Audiences saw, in effect, semi-naked bodies. For moral reformers, in the blossoming age of women's rights, the vision on stage was an immoral one which compromised the dancers; for a theatre inspector concerned with licensing compliance, he 'saw nothing in the dancing that I considered suggestive or to which exception could be taken and the dresses...were of the character usually provided in the ballet' (LCC/ MIN/ 10,769 5 December 1891). All different perceptions about what the dancer wore on stage.

Theatre programmes give us the 'facts' of performance. They proudly claim *corps* of 150 - 200 performers. Photographs depict the *corps* framing the ballerina and written sources describe how they made complex spatial **patterns** – dancing, marching and galloping in strict **formations**. We can reconcile these sources with our contextual knowledge of the ballet, for in the 'classical' ballets that derive from the same period, the *corps* is used (at least spatially) in a similar way. The international circuit for dancers and choreographers tells us that the ballet of London's music hall was not 'out on a limb' from other productions across Europe, so we can affirm our visual image of the spatial configurations of the dance by recourse to the traditions of the time. But what did this 'fact' signify? For the theatre management, via their programme covers, large casts were part of the attraction that drew audiences to the spectacle of the ballets. For Wilhelm, the costume designer at the Empire who was also a painter/water colourist in his own right, these large casts became convenient units of colour which he manipulated on stage as on an artist's palette. For a dance historian of the time, it was the chief function of these masses to 'look pretty' (Flicht 1912, 65). In a poem, Thomas Hardy saw the humanity beneath the unison of spectacle, observing that 'though all alike in their tinsel livery; and indistinguishable at a sweeping glance...a world of her own has each one underneath...' (Hardy in Gibson 1976, 492). We do not know what meanings the dancer herself ascribed to being one in such a crowd, for her voice is silent. But, as historians do, we can speculate (see Tranders in Carter 2004). The 'fact' of large numbers on stage has, therefore, not just choreographic but commercial, artistic, poetic - and sexual significance. For the historian, it is all of this which comprises the performance event.

The contribution of the historian to the preservation of performance is to render it unstable; there is no such thing as 'the' performance. They attempt to record an event, but one which is constructed through the perceptions of the various actors who participated in that event – and, of course, through their own critical stance and historical imagination. The preservation of performance is, therefore, about the preservation of perception and it is this which ensures that the history of dance and performance is never static, but always 'on the move'.

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