

## The Banquet as Performance Art

*Hazel Dennison*

### A New muse for an Old Text

Waiting for a muse to inspire one's work can be like waiting for a London bus. Nothing comes for ages and then two or three come at once. Initially they arrive in a seemingly random bag of images, words, sounds, steps, some waiting to be coaxed into fresh patterns, some hustling for centre stage. And so it was in the making of this workshop for the Early Dance Circle Conference in 2016.

The workshop originally evolved in 2014 for a Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society summer school with a Shakespearean theme. My original material for this has been augmented to construct this workshop for Terpsichore and Her Sisters. The intention has been to devise an entry for Act 3.Scene 3 of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* c.1611. At this point in the text a group of shipwrecked noblemen on an unknown island witness a magical happening in which (according to stage directions in the First Folio text c. 1623):

Solemn and strange music, and Prospero on the top (invisible). Enter several strange shapes bringing in a banquet, and dance about it with gentle actions of salutation, and inviting the king etc. to eat, they depart.

The key words informing the form and content of the entry were "strange" and "gentle" suggesting a unique juxtaposition of the bizarre and the benign in a re-enactment of the formal rituals of a Renaissance court banquet in the vulnerable isolation of a

seashore beach, a liminal space in which anything could happen.

### Shadow, Dream, Chimera.

These words were used to describe the work of Cristoforo di Messisbugo for the d'Este court of Ferrara in the sixteenth century. He created celebrated banquets in which "a wealth of amazing courses were alternated by entertainments and musical performances". Cristoforo was elevated to a "*scalco*", a ceremonial cook and gained a reputation throughout the courts of Europe as "the grand choreographer of sumptuous banquets and feasts conceived as "princely feasts, entirely made of shadow, dream, chimaera, phantasy, metaphor and cheerfulness". This fusion of "choreography and food" would inspire the workshop.

To create and sustain the ritualistic structure of the banquet I drew upon Cristoforo's own records of a court banquet he created for the feast of *Carnevale* on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1549. He focuses on the "*prima Tavola*" the top table with twenty-seven place settings for the elite nobility. Following a theatrical performance the proceedings open with a formal ritual in which the table is covered with two cloths one above the other. All is illuminated by four splendid silver lanterns suspended from a sun roof so as not to impede the view of four silver salt servers. For each of the twenty-seven guests is placed a napkin, a knife, a round of bread, a crescent of butter, sugar and a "*torli*" of eggs. Then follows an extraordinary list of four main removes each with up to twenty dishes, opening with salads, salami and savouries, followed by "*Altra Vivanda*" of roasts, fish and fowl, then "*Frutti et altro*" including ices and sugar confections

and finally “*Confettioni*“, sweet dishes of many sorts. All is accompanied with a great variety of wine. Each remove has settings of fresh cloths, napkins, knives and perfumed water for fingers. Fresh flowers are strewn whilst they eat. Each remove is interspersed with dancing and entertainment.

### **Gentle Acts of Salutation**

To begin the workshop, dancers were prepared with a transitional and benign warm up. They danced in a line, very slow *piva* interspersed with *riverenze*. This was in emulation of a ceremonial entry and presentation of food by “80 youths in gilded dress with matching hats” each one carrying a long basket of confectionary or a gilded sugar castle. “In certain sequences of the *piva* they all knelt and bowed together at the same time whilst dancing and the all rose together simultaneously.” This was a brief glimpse of banquet ritual performed as part of wedding celebrations at Pesaro in May 1475.

### **Strange Shapes- dancing the food.**

To recreate *The Tempest* entry 3.3 with its elements of the bizarre and the absurd it was decided that performers would use steps, gesture and gait to embody the essential qualities of the rituals and the food and dance as both. Within the restricted time factor of the EDC programme four items were selected:

1 The ritual of lighting and setting the top table danced with solemn measure and graceful gesture.

Followed by three dishes:

2 The Herbs and Spices - to embody the fragrance, the strewing, the exotic through nimble galliard variations

3 The Roast Peacock - to embody the renaissance notions of display through *pavoneggiarsi*.

4 The *Confettione Bianche* - to embody the lightness, turning and *sprezzatura* of meringue.

The steps used were taken from the original Italian sixteenth and early seventeenth dancing manuals of Cesare Negri and Fabritio Caroso.

The music used for these dances was specifically selected from the antimasque music created for the English court masques of the late Renaissance. With its frequent changes of metre and tempo and contrasting moods it reflects Ben Jonson’s description of antimasque dances as “a spectacle of strangeness” and so very appropriate to the contents of this workshop.

### **Bibliography**

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