

Participative Theatre and the re-creation of early Stuart masque

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Introduction

Traditional theatre usually can be regarded as ‘passive’ in that the audience is generally expected to just sit and watch – or listen. Any participation is supposed to be cerebral rather than physical. Although passive theatre still forms the bulk of all theatrical productions (and covers cinema and concerts as well as the straight theatre of plays, opera, musicals, etc.) there has been a growing interest in recent years in the development of more participative forms. These generally involve the audience in some kind of sustained and structured interaction with the performers (in addition to the usual applause, heckling or arm waving – according to the nature of the event).

The varieties of participative theatre that have emerged are endless: ranging from the interactive experience of productions such as Punchdrunk Theatre’s *Masque of the Red Death*, to the numerous and varied antics of the ‘flashmob’ genre. The reasons for this development away from passive entertainment are equally varied, ranging from the demand on the part of audiences to be more involved, to the demand from sponsors (such as Arts Councils) that performance companies have an ‘outreach’ programme to engage with ‘the community’ in ‘the artistic experience’.

The focus of the present paper, however, is on a much older example of participative theatre; namely, the masque entertainments of the early Stuart period. Although, as court entertainments, these were restricted as to who might be directly involved, the boundary between audience and performer was

decidedly flexible and porous: amateur aristocratic dancers were an important element of the performance, while the whole event was framed by the entry (to a musical accompaniment) of the high nobility and the communal dancing of the ‘revels’ at its conclusion.

The question to be addressed here is to what extent this model of performance can be made relevant to a modern theatrical context? Unfortunately, we can no longer depend upon royalty to play their part as the ‘Presence’ nor on the aristocracy to spend the requisite amount of time and effort in learning their dances. Even the general public has only a limited knowledge of communal dances that might be suitable for the concluding ‘revels’. On the other hand, to seek to re-create the masques from existing material as pieces of ‘passive theatre’ is to lose the most essential element of this art form.

What will be described here is one recent attempt at the resurrection of masque as a genuine form of participative theatre, with amateur involvement alongside high-level professional performance. Its modest success leads to the suggestion that ‘masque’ can prove to be a viable theatrical form even on the modern stage.

Masque as participative theatre

It is worth noting that many of the forms of participative theatre listed above involve some form of dance – from the masked ball climax of Punchdrunk’s *Masque*, to the dance days involving the general public during Big Dance Week. The most successful of these may require considerable preparation

on the part of the participants, as in the case of the Flashmob-style clog dancing event staged recently and documented on TV. Others are less demanding of preparation and consequently more variable in terms of successful outcome.

Indeed it has long been the case that dance is the one activity that is most amenable to some form of audience participation. Folk dance societies have been for years involved in just this sort of thing, with callers in the role of 'animateur' and musicians as accompanying 'professionals', even more so where this involves the participation of high level professional dancers and musicians, along with well-schooled amateurs, but may also include the general public. The question is, can such involvement be worked up to the level where one might reasonably call it 'high art' rather than just 'folk entertainment'?

One historical genre that well exemplifies this transition from simple audience involvement to high art is the 17th century Stuart Masque that flourished for around 65 years, from 1600 until the first decades of the Restoration period. Much has been written about the Stuart Masque, but serious attempts at reconstruction are few and far between. In my own experience, the wonderful productions over many years at Hengrave Hall by Anne Daye and the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society, though strictly amateur, were an immensely valuable opportunity to study the practical workings of this theatrical genre.

Authentic reconstruction of such events, however, is virtually impossible as they depend to a very large extent upon context (participation of royalty – essential to the original – is now difficult to arrange, and a modern audience being asked to join in the 'revels' and dance the 'old measures' is all but unimaginable except in the context of an early dance workshop). Yet many of its most important structural elements still remain valid:

- Poetic elaboration of some high-minded theme and its expression in song and spoken dialogue

- Musical segments in the form of fanfares or symphonies punctuate or introduce each of the specific events as the masque evolves
- Stylized versions of historical dances re-created by well-schooled amateurs further elaborate the basic theme
- Skilled professionals perform the 'grotesco' dancing of the anti-masque scenes, acting as a foil or contrast to the more formal role of the other dancers.
- A reasonably uninhibited audience may be encouraged to join in some simple group dance as Farandole or Branle

These provide a good proportion of the nine or ten items generally considered essential for a Jacobean or Stuart masque as listed by Andrew Sabol in his article for the *Encyclopedia of Dance*.¹

The missing elements are largely those that relate to the general historico-political context in which masque took place, such as the demonstration of fealty to the Royal Presence by the Lord and Lady masquers and the response from the King in acceptance of their greetings and display. The grand entrance of the Court was similarly an essential ingredient of the original masque, but difficult to replicate in modern times except as farce. Much of the remaining structure, however, is easily transferred to a modern theatrical context, though not perhaps in the constrained environs of a conventional theatre building or conventional theatrical organisation (the NT's Olivier theatre is not conducive to audience farandoles and Equity still frowns upon the engagement of amateurs!)

What can be achieved, however, in the context of public performance (as opposed to private entertainment) was recently illustrated by the author's experience in producing a Masque for a renaissance music festival in Moscow.

Case Study: *The Masque of Time*

This was an entertainment contrived by its three principals (Bill Tuck, Barbara Segal and Natalia Kaidanovskaya) and presented by students and others associated with the Moscow Music Conservatory as the final performance in a three-week long festival of renaissance music held in April of 2011. The production was well-resourced in that it had a number of professional dancers (including several ex- or current members of the Bolshoi company) and the services of a large body of excellent musicians, some professional, others students at the Conservatory. A number of professional actors and singers were also available from among Natalia's dance company. It also had the use of a small experimental theatre – with large stage – for the final performance. In addition it had access to the costume resources of the Bolshoi if needed – though Natalia's own extensive collection covered most needs. What it lacked was rehearsal time and rehearsal space!

The text and music were largely prepared in London several weeks before the event, although it was difficult to anticipate exactly what resources would be available in Moscow. Translation was another problem – whether the author's sub-Jonsonian verse could be turned into comprehensible Russian was unknown. This led to the first major decision: to limit the text to the minimum necessary to convey the 'plot'.

As mentioned earlier, the masque texts usually involved high-minded themes, such as the triumph of good over evil, but with the intended object of demonstrating the fealty of the aristocratic retinue towards their all-powerful monarch. While this overtly political objective is less relevant nowadays, the idea of an over-arching theme of some significance remains a meaningful objective.

Rather than try to re-create or re-construct one of the existing Stuart-era masques (with all of the problems that that would entail in terms of locating source material, etc.) it was decided to start from scratch and write a story that would suit the resources available. Natalia's students had been learning a number of the standard renaissance dances from the Negri &

Caroso repertory, and had begun to learn the steps of several baroque dances. This led to the idea of framing the 'plot' in terms of a conflict between the two. Anachronisms, such as the fact that the baroque style of dance did not emerge until the second half of the 17th century, well after the decline of the early Stuart masque, were ignored – it is the generic structure and not the content that is important in our consideration.

Synopsis

Our Masque takes as its theme the idea that dance is an important cultural identifier. Any cultural group in any particular period – whether 1450s or 1950s – will have its own characteristic dances. These can even lead to 'tribal' conflict if two different groups, with different identifying dance styles meet (as happened in England during the 1960s when 'mods' and 'rockers' regularly fought on the beaches at Brighton). A similar theme was acted out in the musical 'West Side Story' and no doubt the Capulets and Montagues had different dances in the Italian original. Love, of course, can cross such tribal boundaries, but can also provoke a savage response from conservative authority at the infringement of class or cultural boundaries – represented in our Masque by the Furies attack upon the Lovers.

For our Masque we have chosen the two periods 'Renaissance' and 'Baroque' and imagined a similar tribal conflict that might arise if two such groups – separated by time – were to meet. Of course, this is entirely hypothetical, but it does serve to point out the important function of dance as cultural identifier and the need for both tolerance and forbearance as one dance style gives way to another in the course of time – conflict between generations is no less real than between tribal groups. Animals, of course, appear to have no such problems (though closer investigation might well reveal otherwise!). They play the role of innocent bystanders in this drama. The final scene is one of reconciliation, in which the two generations or cultural tribes agree to

compromise and accept with tolerance the behaviour of the other.

The spoken parts are for Harmony, Discord and Time itself. These are intended to carry the narrative, explain the ‘device’, or comment upon the action represented in the dance. It was intended that both Harmony and Discord might also be singing roles – or if played by actors then singers might further elaborate the argument. In the event this proved difficult due to the time constraints on the performance (well under one hour) and the indisposition of the singer who was to perform the Harmony part. The role of Discord was played by a professional actor (adept, as well, in both dance and mime). Time provided a spoken Prologue and Epilogue, along with occasional comments on the action.

Called *The Masque of Time*, our model for this re-creation was Sabol’s reconstruction of a score for *The Lord’s Masque* by Thomas Campion.² Some of the music for our own masque was unashamedly lifted from this work, partly in tacit acknowledgement of the enormously valuable contribution that this work (and the author’s work in general) has made to our understanding of the detailed structure of early Stuart masque.³

After the initial entry of the royal party in Sabol’s re-construction, the masque begins with the entry of Orpheus with his lute, who then begins to charm a rather motley collection of animals (a camel, a bear, a hare, a hound, a bee, and a swan – none of which appear in the original libretto). In our case, after Time’s brief welcome and introduction, the piece proceeds similarly, with an entry for animals (including cat, chicken, swan, frog and bull) danced to the music of Heinrich Biber’s *Representatione Sonate* for violin and continuo. This satisfies the structural requirement of beginning with an Anti-masque (and additionally provides a useful role for child performers – ensuring their early release from the proceedings!). ‘Time’ follows this Anti-masque section with musings upon the function of dance in the Animal Kingdom and its comparison to that within human society. The first entry of the

Masquers then follows. This is the troupe of baroque dancers, suitably costumed in the elaborate fashions of the late 17th century. They perform their entry dance (choreographed to two minuets from Marais’ *Alcyone*). ‘Harmony’ comments on the idyllic nature of this Arcadian scene, but is interrupted by the Loud Band playing a version of the *Battle Pavan* to which the second troupe of masquers (in renaissance dress this time) enter. This is the signal for conflict, represented by the character of ‘Discord’ who enters at this point to express his delight at the potential for disharmony.

A sequence of dances follows, alternating renaissance and baroque, as each side attempts to assert its superior prowess. This culminates in the entry of a ‘mock’ band playing rough music which disrupts the proceedings but leads eventually into the *Buffens* music at which the renaissance side takes up sticks and dances the familiar Arbeau sequence. Discord is overjoyed at the promise of a real fight!

The *Buffens* dance is, in fact, derived from the earlier *Morisco* dances (and clearly also has links to the later Morris stick-dance tradition). It is best regarded, therefore, as an anti-masque dance and would ideally be performed with a convincing level of professional skill by specially trained dancers, perhaps in the costumes of soldiers. In our case, a slightly tamer version of *Buffens* led into a simulated conflict: the ‘renaissance’ group doing a suitably aggressive *Canario* while the ‘baroque’ responded in kind with a *sissonne* variation to *Contrefaiseur*, alternating eight bars each, with no break in the tempo or music (the two tunes eventually running together in riotous cacophony). At this Harmony interjects her plea for peace, that both owe allegiance to the goddess Terpsichore, which they should honour. Discord is suitably dejected. During the ‘battle’, a love interest is sparked between a man and woman from each side, who are left alone on stage as the others are dismissed by Harmony. This solitary couple then execute suitable duet dances – in our case, a pavan to *Belle qui tiens ma vie* followed by an 18th century minuet. This is followed by the

second (or third) Anti-masque. Adopting the dances of another tribe is an infringement of cultural boundaries ('mods' never danced rock-n-roll and 'rockers' never did the hand jive). Breaking this taboo brings condemnation from the tribal authorities, in this case represented by the Furies who descend upon the hapless couple to torment them in an attempt to dissuade them from their unholy alliance. This danced Antimasque was fully choreographed and performed by professional dancers (some currently with the Bolshoi itself).

Once again Harmony must intercede with a plea for peace and tolerance within the tribe – cross-cultural relationships are to be encouraged, not prohibited! This perhaps might be taken as the one overtly political message of the piece.

With the Furies and Discord dismissed, the entire assembly begins its final number – an extended and growing version of Playford's *Dargason* with each pair formed of one 'renaissance' and one 'baroque' partner. A concluding Epilogue spoken by the character of Time brought the performance to a close. Had (physical) time permitted, then a series of 'Revels' for cast and audience would have provided an appropriate Afterpiece. As it was, an enthusiastic Farandole involving 'as many as will' had to serve this function.

Conclusion

The central idea of our Masque is the problem of reconciling the present with the past, or respecting the past while acknowledging the authority of the present. It is also about the ephemeral nature of dance – unlike music, the records are faint. But there still remains enough of a clue to re-create these images of a past life, a valued heritage. Just as there can be no quarrel between the dances of the renaissance and baroque, so too should there be no quarrel between the present and the past in general. The past has gone in all but memory – brief shadows in the mind of Time. The present rules, and rules absolutely – we cannot recover more than a shadow of the past. But that shadow is also valuable as it

enables us to evaluate the present and place it in some kind of perspective. The *Masque of Time* is about the interplay of time, memory, identity and dance. You are the dances that you know (whether jive, line dance, or 15th century Ballo). Dance is thus a tribal or cultural identifier in the same way that one can identify birds by their song. And just as among primitive peoples each tribe has its own dances, every generation has its dances, though they may change with the seasons (ie. with Time). In fact, there is no better way of identifying a period than by its dances – whether 1450s or 1950s.

Our conclusion from this experiment is that Masque is an ideal medium for participative theatre. It requires the involvement of professionals (as dancers, musicians and *animateurs*) along with trained amateurs. It also provides a participatory role for the audience – albeit somewhat more restricted than 'dancing the Revels' would have been in the original productions. It would be of great interest, not only to the early dance world, to see more of this type of production.

Notes

¹ Andrew Sabol, article under *Masque* in the *Dance Encyclopedia*

² Andrew Sabol, *A Score for "the Lords' Masque"* by Thomas Campion, Brown University Press, 1993

³ Our selection was limited, in fact, to just two items: the introductory fanfares. These were themselves taken by Sabol from works by William Brade. Had our piece been enabled to run for its full length of two hours or so, much more of the resource from Sabol would no doubt have been utilized.