

Bonnets and Bullshit

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I am no dancer as many here will know, but I am an historian and have been a stager/producer of early dance for 25 years. This then is a look at the effect of current popular and participative culture on the interpretation, understanding and presentation of early dance.

The argument falls into three sections:

The effect of popular mediums' use of and presentation of early dance, principally TV and the theatre.

The public's expectations and their willingness to accept, enjoy or even watch presentations of strictly "authentic" early dance, which was only rarely a spectator-orientated activity.

The desires, skills and background of the current participants, whether choreographers, dancers or re-creators, and the possibility of authenticity.

To begin with let us look at the current day presentation of early dance in major media. Modern theatre and film uses early dance principally as light relief in or a coda to period plays, having the actors participate, while opera tends to use trained ballet dancers with little background in period movement. The result is a very limited and arbitrarily interpreted range of dances.

VIDEO 1: Extracts from Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo & Juliet* showing examples of social dancing.

TV on the other hand falls either into the "swirling skirts fill the screen" mode or the ignore authenticity and propel the narrative process. This combines with the whitewash effect of romanticising period drama (*Larkrise to Candleford* was written as a

bitter condemnation of the poverty and repression of the rural poor in 19th century Oxfordshire -- on TV it is a bonneted soap) to create an out-of-focus image of early dance at best. This produces Jane Austen as soap opera, or Becky Sharpe from *Vanity Fair* as just another bonneteer. Modern use of these melodramas as history affects not only the dances themselves, but also the understanding of any social and historical context.

Modern audiences' understanding of the physical and social context of dancing -- as couples, let alone a group -- is limited by a lack of experience or education. Line dancing is just about the only coordinated form of modern group social dancing. The idea of coordinated, trained and choreographed social dancing died with the twist. TV's "Strictly" notwithstanding, such dancing is now seen as cabaret.

Modern audiences' expectation and willingness as spectators is also conditioned (as above) by what they see as entertainment. Much early dance was not created or performed for audiences (as opposed to other participants) and so both in its style and orientation makes for difficult performance conventions if strictly "authentic". The problem can be illustrated by a promotional video for which I am partly responsible.

VIDEO 2: Nonsuch promotional video from a performance at St. John's, Smith Sq.

This, as many will have noticed, is taken from a Nonsuch production, but the music doesn't fit the events, however good it is at sweeping the process along. Can tale-telling

using early dance ever be “authentic”? A moot point.

Lastly in this section, modern participants come to early dance, in its widest sense, from a diversity of backgrounds. Some are dancers already, whether ballet, ballroom or country. Some have an academic interest, while others just like dressing up and playing (seriously or not) at history. What none of them are is a basically aristocratic group using dance for social definition, exercise and sexual and political opportunity. That puts the question of authenticity on a fairly unstable base to begin with, though dressing up may have had attractions to both early and modern practitioners. Raymond Leppard, the Monteverdi expert, saw a parallel in early music, where the instruments might be authentic, but the players and audience were not, whether in regard to their clothes or their training.

The Clodhoppers, a nickname for a South of England group, now disbanded, was taught by distinguished early dancers, BUT there is video evidence (not shown here) that they were invited to perform (in preference to more authentic groups on offer), the Fledermouse Quadrille in their favourite 15th century costumes at places as distinguished as Hever Castle and Finchcocks, because they were ‘extremely cheap and the public loved them’

The question of physical limitations is central to the issue of authenticity here. Belinda Quirey’s famous *Duke of Plaza Toro* and the psychological corset as a major limiting factor, are relevant. But there were also real corsets and sleeves held on with pins, etc., which limited and defined movement. The real participants also were not so much “rose lipped lasses and light footed lads” as wide hipped ladies and spavined dads. Limited health, life expectancy, childbearing and (in the 18th century at least) syphilis, all must have played a major limiting role in dance competency.

Then there is the problem of interpretation. To say it can be vexed would be the understatement of the 21st century.

A few years ago a series of documents were found in the British Midlands known as the *Gresley papers*. Amongst them was an extraordinary notebook with a significant series of contemporary dances and some music noted down. Not only was this very early for the material, but it left room for interpretation (and much scholarly and practical discussion).

To demonstrate how varied genuine attempts at performing “real” dance instructions from the past can be, three reputable companies have each done (unbeknown to each other) a version of one of the dances. You might imagine that a friend of the author of the notebook, (supposed to be a Mr. Baynis) sent the instructions by letter to three friends, with the music, for their delectation. Let me show you the variations from the same set of instructions.

VIDEO 3: A ‘Morris’ version

VIDEO 4: A formal version from the EDC festival

VIDEO 5: Another formal version from the same festival (the two companies did not know of each other’s versions.)

To conclude let me give you a final example. The *movimento* is a 15th century Italian dance movement or gesture referred to in the texts and variously interpreted. For some it is a step, for others a swing of the shoulders. Does it matter? Without a time machine and video no one will ever know. But if you did have the kit and went back, what you saw in the court at Ferrara would probably differ considerably from what you would have seen 70 miles up the road in Verona.

What matters is to keep early dance interesting, properly evidenced and fun for its researchers, dancers and watchers. This must include academic research and a striving for a sense of period style and

context. BUT it also requires an understanding that there may never have been a single “authenticity” and that under the bonnets, bullshit prevailed as much in the 16th century as it can do now. The challenge is to help and educate in context, style and quality of performance without destroying the pleasure.