19

Dance and the muse of Comedy

Bill Tuck

Introduction

Thalia was the muse of Comedy and is generally depicted as "a young woman with a joyous air, crowned with ivy, wearing boots and holding a comic mask in her hand. Many of her statues also hold a bugle and a trumpet (both used to support the actors' voices in ancient comedy), or occasionally a shepherd's staff or a wreath of ivy"[1]. It is interesting to note how stern she looks in some of the earlier representations (Greek or Roman)[2]. Clearly to the Greeks or Romans, comedy was a serious business.

Fig. 1. Thalia, Muse of Comedy

The most obvious starting point for any exploration of the link between dance and comedy is the well-known publication by Gregorio Lambranzi *New & Curious Theatrical Dance School* (published in Nuremburg 1716)[3]

Fig. 2. Fronticepiece of Lambranzi's *New & Curious Theatrical Dance School*

This is taken as the source for much of our understanding of what 'comic' dance meant in the 18th century. But of course the tradition of comic dance goes back much further than that. English comedians, such as Will Kemp, Richard Tarlton, and the travelling troupes that went abroad to Europe, were well-versed in dance as part of their basic skill set.

Fig. 3. Will Kemp & Tom Slye

Earlier still, we have accounts of morisco dancers entertaining with displays of virtuosic skill in movement [Fig. 4].

Fig. 4. 15th century Morisco dancer

What is the thread that links all these different manifestations of 'comic' dance? Can we define it in such a way as to make sense of the very idea of dance and comedy? The following paper will explore this notion in broad detail and will bring forward some suggestions as to what it means as a performance style and how it relates to more 'serious' forms of dance.

This begs the obvious question "What exactly do we mean by 'comedy' and how might dance be related to it?"

Comedy and the Grotesque

The one feature that seems to link all the examples that immediately spring to mind of comic dance, whether 15th century morisco, 17th century commedia, the stock comic characters of classical ballet (such as the old woman in *La Fille Mal Garde*) and modern manifestations such as the dances of Max Wall or Laurel and Hardy, is this idea of the 'grotesque'.

While it may be the case that not all humour is about the grotesque, it does seem to be an element in much of it, whether or not it involves dancing (think of Roald Dahl and his farting giants or Giles's cartoon grannies, for example).

The dictionary definition of grotesque as "comically or repulsively ugly or distorted" is a useful guide to what is meant by this style of representation (synonyms: malformed · deformed · misshapen · misproportioned – the opposite being suggested by the antonyms: ordinary and normal). Thus, any very ugly or comically distorted figure or image may be defined as grotesque.

It might also be applied to behaviour that is incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree (synonyms: outrageous · monstrous · shocking · astonishing)**.** The farts of Dahl's BFG or the non-PC outbursts of Giles's Granny, for example, would clearly fall into this category.

But the misshapened and deformed are not in themselves funny. Something else must be added to transform the pathetic into the humorous. The first factor is, of course, that the deformity must not be 'real', it is a creation of the actor or dancer and can be undone at any time. The second factor I believe is that the context in which the deformity is created must contain some contrasting element of 'beauty' or 'elegance' by which the deformity can be measured.

Fig. 5. A Morisco dance

An example of this is the 15th century morisco in which the deformed characters of the dancers surround the stationary 'lady' figure, in an act of homage or supplication [Fig. 5].

Much the same effect is achieved by the contortionists of the Chinese Opera (or of Cirque du Soleil) – what you witness is the miraculous transformation of beautiful female forms into strange contorted shapes that appear almost monstrous.

Fig.6. Acrobats from the Peking Opera

Classical ballet offers a similar contrast, for invariably the grotesques (witches, old women, monsters) are featured in the context of elegant ballerinas.

Fig.7. The Grandmother's dance in *La Fille Mal Gardee*

In the 18th century world, it was the contrast between the elegant performers of the 'belle danse' and the grotesque creations of the 'grotesco' dancers that provided the humour, along with much of the intrinsic drama – just as in 'beauty and the beast'.

This pattern is most apparent in the creation of 18th century pantomime, where the antics of the commedia sections are rendered humorous largely because of their juxtaposition alongside the serious drama and dance of the 'classical' section: Perseus and Andromeda act out the classic dramatic tale (virgins to be devoured by sea monsters to appease the gods – beauty and the beast once again) only to be interrupted by the actions of Harlequin and Columbine as they seek to avoid the clutches of the elderly Spanish nobleman (grotesque) to whom she has been promised. The novelist Henry Fielding made frequent satirical and derogatory comments about pantomime at the time:

> *"The comic part of the English Pantomimes being duller than anything before shown on the stage could only be set off by the superlative dullness of the serious portion, in which the gods and goddesses were so insufferably tedious, that Harlequin was always a relief from still worse company."*
>
> *"The Serious [part] exhibited a certain Number of Heathen Gods and Heroes, who were certainly the worst and dullest Company into which an Audience was ever introduced; and – which was a Secret known to few – were actually intended so to be, in order to contrast the Comic Part of the Entertainment, and to display the Tricks of Harlequin to the better Advantage."* [4]

In all these cases it is the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness that creates the humour, transforming the 'grotesque' into the 'comic'. The role of dance is to animate the grotesque, bringing the static deformed image – whether of sea monster, or decrepit nobleman -- to life, and to enhance the elegance of the opposite 'beautiful' figure.

That comedy can arise from such a juxtaposition is born out in the author's personal experience by theatre company *Chalemie's* reconstruction of one of the more famous scenes from the 18th century pantomime *Perseus and Andromeda*, in which the heroine Andromeda is "tied to a rock with iron bands / the destined prey of a monster foul / that from yon' cave doth e'en now growl". The audience invariably laughed at the improbable juxtaposition of beautiful maiden with grotesque but hapless monster.

Comedy and the Whimsical

While a number of the dances described in Lambranzi, along with the examples shown above, might properly be described as 'grotesque', others are of a style that might be more appropriately described as 'whimsical'.

According to the dictionary, the term describes things that are "playful, quaint or fanciful, especially in an appealing and amusing way or of acting or behaving in a capricious manner (synonyms: volatile · capricious · temperamental · impulsive)".

The majority of the scenarios in Lambranzi's collection could be considered to fall within this category: farmers and their wives bumping their belly's, fat peasant girls catching kisses in their aprons or cooks quarrelling with wooden platters. Such actions do not really count as 'grotesque', but are simply 'whimsical'. But again, what exactly is it that makes them humorous?

My argument once again is that it is the explicit or implicit contrasting of these 'base' characters with the more 'refined' characters of the 'ordinary' world that creates the humour.

Following Fairfax in *The Styles of Eighteenth Century Ballet* -- and based on the descriptions of authors such as Angiolini, Noverre and Gallini -- one can distinguish four broad styles of theatre dance (or ballet) cultivated in the eighteenth century (and even into the nineteenth) and these "characters", as they were sometimes called, were distinct "not only in the kinds of personages portrayed or the sorts of costumes typically used but also in the choice of steps, ports de bras, and attitudes, and even in the manner of executing these movements or positions."

According to Gallini (1762) these four types may be listed as:

- the 'serious' or heroic (and identified with the 'belle danse' style of dance)
- the 'half-serious', demi-charactère or galant
- the comic
- the grotesque

Other contemporary writers (including Noverre) often merged these last two classes into one, the 'grotesque'. My own subdivision into the grotesque and the whimsical seems more in line with modern language usage and allows us to view comedy (and the comic) as a separate phenomenon that arises out of the interactions **between** these four divisions.

Comedy, Dance and Social Class

One form of interaction between our four basic groups is that between the 'elegant' (read: 'heroic', 'serious') and the grotesque, which has already been touched on above.

Another, and more subtle form of interaction, is that between the whimsical and the 'galant'. The best example I can find of this is Hogarth's well-known illustration of dancers at a ball. Here he shows both the 'whimsical' dancers (sometimes verging on the 'grotesque') interacting with more practiced, elegant, or 'galant' dancers at a grand social ball. The whole is framed by representations of Hogarth's own attempt to formalise the components of the 'beautiful', reduced to its essence in his idea of the 'line of beauty'.

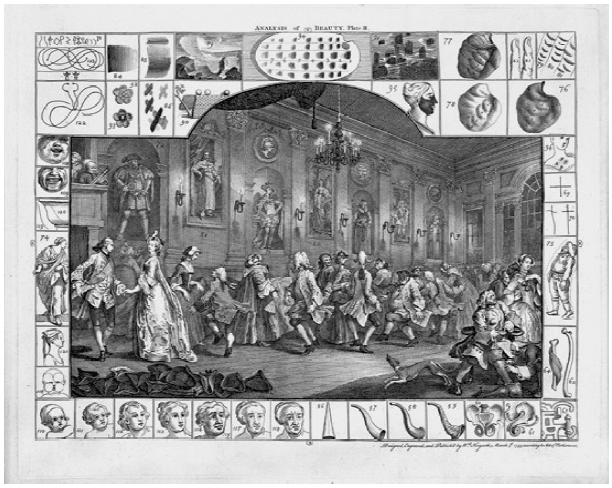

Fig. 8. Dancers at a Ball in Bath (by William Hogarth)

Much of Hogarth's humour is in fact derived from just this sort of interaction between the whimsical and the galant – though he does on occasion move to include the heroic and grotesque, such as in his illustration of country virgins and decrepit old men.

In summary, dance is used to delineate character, and each character thus defined can be assigned to one of the four primary classes. Comedy follows largely from the interaction – whether explicit or implicit – between these

classes. While they do not need to both be present at the same time or location, this often serves to heighten the comedy. For example, Max Wall creates a wonderful grotesque in the impersonation of *Professor Wallofski*, but I often think it would be even funnier if it were danced alongside a ballerina such as Debora Bull!

Fig. 9. Max Wall as Professor Wallofski

Thus, I would argue, mixing the sublime and the ridiculous is a primary means of achieving a comic effect. Even in the muted form of whimsical versus gallant, the effect is generally humorous.

The final example of this kind of juxtaposition leading to a wonderfully comic sequence is a short video of the Cuban dancers Adalberto Martinez (known as "Resortes" – which roughly translates as "Rubberlegs") and his partner, the American actress and dancer Joan Page.

Fig. 10 Resortes and Joan Page dancing to Perez Prado's *Mambo no. 8* in the film *Al son de mambo* (1950)

They are dancing to one of the great 'Cuban' hits of the late 1950s by Perez Prado (who by then had moved to Mexico) *Mambo No. 8*. I have no wish nor time to analyse this in detail here, but it works as humour on so many different levels: social satire (both intentional and unintentional), masterly comic timing from both dancers and band leader, and pretend enthusiasm from quaintly dressed musicians. Brilliant!

It only leaves me to point out that Resortes was possibly the inspiration for perhaps the finest of our modern comic dancers, the late great Michael Jackson: many believe that it was from a Resortes film that he copied the famous 'moonwalk' (though it is known to have been used by Cab Calloway as far back as 1932).

Fig. 11. Michael Jackson and his trademark 'Moonwalk'

End Notes

[1] Wikipedia on Thalia. Cf. picture: *Thalia, Muse Of Comedy* by Louis-Michel van Loo.

[2] Roman statue of Thalia from Hadrian's Villa, now at the Prado Museum (Madrid)

[3] Gregorio Lambranzi *Nuova e curiosa scuola de' balli theatrali - Neue und curieuse theatralische Tantz-Schul* (Nuremberg 1716)

[4] Henry Fielding *Tom Jones* Book V ch.1


EARLY DANCE CIRCLE
Registered Charity no. 1097746