Pantomime in Early 18th Century London: its Perception & Reception

Barbara Segal

What could be more fitting for a conference on the reception and perception of early dance than a discussion about early 18th century pantomime? The reception of these pantomimes was astoundingly varied: on the one hand, they were the most popular kind of performance on the stage, while on the other, they were considered "monstrous medleys" [1] that not only threatened to subvert the very moral fabric of the nation, but they were leading to the complete annihilation of serious drama on the English stage. What is more, they contained a large amount of dance – in fact they were the principal medium for the display of dance on the English stage at the time. Unfortunately, our perception of 18th century pantomime is coloured by our acquaintance with modern pantomime and this in turn has led us to downgrade its significance as a medium for dance in the 18th century.

In the early 18th century, dancing on the London stage was usually part of short entertainments that took place between the acts and at the end of plays and operas. These entertainments, or *entr'actes*, comprised dances and songs – not to mention rope walking, strange animals, and so on. These interludes were very popular, sometimes being so numerous that the play had to be shortened to accommodate them.[2] Eventually, some of these *entr'acte* entertainments evolved to become independent works in their own right, so they were placed at the end of the main performance, and became known as 'afterpieces'.

A particular genre of afterpiece, usually including commedia characters, and in particular Harlequin, became known as *pantomime* afterpieces, or simply *pantomimes*. These pantomimes were very different from pantomimes today in England, which are shows for children. In the 18th century, they were for adults; they used the best singers, dancers, composers and choreographers of the day and, what is of most relevance to us, they provided a stage for the performance of dance in its many forms – heroic, noble, comic and grotesque.

The word 'pantomime' was first revived by John Weaver, the dancing master at Drury Lane Theatre. Weaver wanted to bring back the pantomimes of classical antiquity, where the story line was carried by dance and mime alone, with no words. In 1717, Weaver staged '*The Loves of Mars and Venus'* as an afterpiece at Drury Lane Theatre; he described it as a "New Dramatick Entertainment of Dancing after the Manner of the Ancient Pantomimes. . . and performed all by Gesture and the Action of the Hands, Fingers, Legs, and Feet, without making use of the tongue."[3] Unfortunately, Weaver's pantomimes enjoyed only a modest success, but his concept was revived later in the century, becoming *ballet d'action* and then 'classical ballet'.

Meanwhile John Rich, manager and performer at the rival Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, and later at Covent Garden, was developing a different version of the English pantomime. Rich took the best bits from everywhere - serious opera, dancing, amazing special effects and dazzling costumes – and to this mix was added an English version of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*.

Rich was not the first to produce these pantomimes but he developed them to spectacular heights, becoming known as the "God of Pantomimes, Jubilees and Installations."[4] The pantomime was a mixture, in almost any combination, of the comic and the serious. These parts were frequently interwoven, with the comic part often parodying the serious part. The comic part may be described as English Commedia. Commedia had already been seen on the English stage, firstly as performed by visiting Italian troupes, and secondly as interludes featuring native commedia performers, and as 'night scenes,' mute comic sketches in dance and mime, in the first decade of the 18th century. The comic part of the pantomime was played entirely in dumb show, there was no dialogue, just dance, mime and the occasional song. It was this lack of speech in the English commedia that made it very different from its Italian counterpart, where speech was the mainstay of the show. There was music throughout, called the 'comic tunes'; both the dancing and all the mime was done to music. The comic (or grotesque) parts usually portrayed the adventures of Harlequin and his courting of Columbine; a tap of Harlequin's baton produced amazing scenic effects, changed animals into people, people into animals (always a plus when you need to get out of a sticky corner).

The serious parts were usually based on some mythological story, contained Italian-style opera arias and recitatives, but without *castrati,* and were almost always sung in English – to make them more 'accessible'. John Rich claimed that serious Italian opera in England did not have a big following because it was presented with few dances, stage effects and so on, thereby rendering it unappealing to the English taste. He wanted to save Italian opera by adding all these extras, to make it popular to a wider audience.

"Though my Inclination to Musick frequently leads me to visit the Italian Opera; yet, I confess, it is not in the Power of the present excellent Performers to prevent my falling into the very common Opinion, that there are many essential Requisites still wanting, to establish that Entertainment on a lasting Foundation, and adapt it to the Taste of an English Audience… It is evident, that the vast Expence of procuring foreign Voices, does necessarily exclude those various Embellishments of Machinery, Painting, Dances, as well as Poetry itself, which have been always esteemed (except til very lately in England) Auxiliaries absolutely necessary to the Success of Musick**."[5]**

He was not alone with such thoughts. In 1728, the critic James Ralph wrote of the operas mounted by the Royal Academy of Music: "The Whole being Meer Musick, not diversify'd with Grand Chorusses, Dancing, Machinery, and all the other Theatrical Embellishments, which are look'd upon as the very Limbs of the Body of an Opera; which it not only allows, but demands; and so essential are they to its Nature, that the Neglect of them shews us at best but a lame, imperfect Figure." [6]

The performance of Italian-style opera in Rich's pantomimes was not a second-rate affair. Rich used the same singers and composers who worked for the Opera at the Kings Theatre - the best of the day. There was also a lot of dancing in the serious part of the pantomimes, dances in the highly stylized French manner that often demanded a virtuoso performance. The comic part of the pantomime also contained virtuosic dancing, but of a very different kind. Rich usually had about twenty dancers on the payroll, comprising 25% of the performer budget.[7] The female dancers were mostly English, but possibly half the male dancers had originally come from France.

Not the least part of the success of early pantomime was due to John Rich's own dazzling performances as Harlequin: " ... they may say what they will of the Hero of Drury Lane [David Garrick, the famous English actor]; ***he*** only imitates men, whereas the Covent-garden chief [our Harlequin, John Rich], converts himself into a wild Beast, a Bird, or a Serpent with a long Tail, and what not"[8]. "His gesticulation was so perfectly expressive of his meaning, that every motion of his hand or head, or any part of his body, was a kind of dumb eloquence that was readily understood by the audience".[9]

Figure 1. John Rich as Harlequin

Another reason for the great success of pantomime was its use of spectacular scenery, special mechanical and lighting effects, extravagant costumes, and tricks. We see a typical trick in *Harlequin Dr Faustus*, when a money-lender cuts off Faustus's leg, and immediately legs of all sizes, shapes and gender fly into the room, and one of them, a woman's leg, comes over and attaches itself to where Faustus's missing leg was – he then dances![10]

Elaborate stage machinery produced magical effects: dragons pulled chariots through the air, earthquakes destroyed palaces, flames spurted out of mountains, thunderbolts hurtled across the stage. Theatres advertised increasingly ambitious special effects, sometimes to their financial ruin – but usually they were very profitable.

Let us turn now to the perception & reception of these pantomimes. Not surprisingly, they were enormously popular - ticket sales usually quadrupled on nights when a pantomime was being performed after the main-piece. And they appealed to every class of society, from the King and Queen downwards. The King and Queen and various members of the Royal Family frequently commanded performances of pantomime both in the theatre and at their royal residences. At the other end of the class divide, pantomimes were enormously popular among the London apprentices, who could enter the theatre for half price to see the afterpiece, without having to sit through the mainpiece, the drama.

Despite their popularity with the public at large, however, much of what was written about pantomimes was very un-favourable. James Ralph criticised the pantomimes for their "monstrous loads of harmonious Rubbish",[11] while Pope snidely describes:
"…the charms, that smite the simple heart
Not touched by Nature, and not reached by art".[12]

Why were there such disparate perceptions of pantomimes? There would have been many in the audience, indeed the majority, who simply wanted to be entertained, and pantomimes certainly would have fulfilled that desire. What could be better than
serious dance and song for edification, intermixed with a large dollop of comedy, all set with lavish costumes and dazzling scenic effects?

Judging by their volume of complaints, there also would have been playwrights in the audience. They were appalled by the fact that audiences preferred the pantomimes to their dramas, or rather, that they preferred a " loose-jointed combination of mimicry, foolery, machinery, mythology, music and dance"[13] to their worthy dramas (usually long and turgid 5-act plays).

A dancer in *Pasquin* (1736), Henry Fielding's satirical comedy on pantomimes, nicely sums up the situation: "Hang his play, and all Plays; the dancers are the only People that support the House; if it were not for us they might act their Shakespeare to empty Benches."[14] Satire, but containing a grain of truth. Playwrights were often the reviewers of pantomimes, which would account for the many harsh reviews left for posterity concerning the reception of pantomimes.

Even John Weaver, purveyor of serious pantomimes in the classical style, attracted accusations from Richard Steele, the famous essayist and dramatist, for banishing words:

"Weaver, corruptor of this age,
Who first taught silent sins upon the stage."[15]

Yet others in the audience were prudes, who criticised pantomimes because they disapproved of its indecorum, said to be offensive to Polite Society. One reviewer explains:

"The indelicacies I mean, are the frequent and significant wrigglings of Harlequin's tail, and the affront that Pierrot is apt to put upon the modesty of Columbine, by sometime supposing, in his search for her lover, that she has hid him under her petticoats… Another impurity that gives me almost equal offense is Harlequin's tapping the neck or bosom of his mistress, and then kissing his fingers."[16]

For female dancers, there was a special problem: the increasing demands on their technical skills meant that when they held their legs up high, or did multiple pirouettes, their petticoats flew up, revealing their legs. Hogarth caricatured female dancers and their rising petticoats.

Figure 2. William Hogarth ***The Charmers of the Age*** 1742
Barbara Campanini (La Barbarina) & P. Desnoyer,
Clement Crisp Collection, London

To return to the perceptions of our audience: yet others in it were serious moralists, who believed that pantomimes posed a threat to the morals of the country. Pantomimes were full of Parody. They lampooned everything, from The South Sea Bubble and current affairs to the productions at rival theatres. And in these parodies, Harlequin always triumphed, despite his often outrageous behaviour, thereby allowing the audience to feel that they were cocking a snook at authority figures. Many worried that they were subverting the very moral fabric of society. Surely responsible theatre should promote virtuous behaviour, not behaviour that mocked morality.

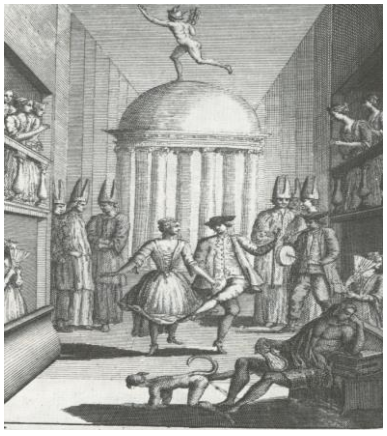
These concerns were depicted by Hogarth. On one side here you see people going in to a masquerade ball at the Opera House. On the other side, folks are going in to see a Pantomime, *Harlequin Dr. Faustus,* at Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre. You see Harlequin enticing them in from the balcony. The words below the picture mourn the fact that "the English Stage [is now] Debauche'd by fool'ries, at so great a cost".[17]

Figure 3. Masquerades and Operas, Burlington Gate, 1724
William Hogarth, in the British Museum

Not only are morals subverted at the pantomime, the serious spoken word is also totally disregarded. Were words full of meaning going to be replaced by the frivolity of mime and song? In the middle of the Figure 3 you see a wheelbarrow containing the works of Shakespeare, Dryden, Ben Johnson and Congreve; at the top is a sign saying – Waste Paper for Shops.

Here is another picture of John Rich as Harlequin. On the floor, you see books by Shakespeare, Rowe and Johnson, all thrown away.

Figure 4. John Rich as Harlequin in *Apollo & Daphne,*
from Harlequin-Horace, or The Art of Modern Poetry by
James Miller, London 1735 British Museum Prints



Here is another caricature of pantomimes. This scene is a composite of several scenes from the pantomime *Perseus & Andromeda,* starring John Rich as Harlequin. At the front Harlequin is seen transformed into a dog, urinating on the leg of Orpheus, and at the top he is seen again, at this stage he has transformed himself into Mercury and he stands atop the cupola.

Figure 5. Francis Nivelon & Madame Laguerre
Frontispiece of Harlequin Horace 1731 by James Miller,
a satirical poem that attacked pantomimes

Were the pantomimes really corrupting the populace, or were they merely a reflection of the morals of the day? As Edward Ward wonders in his satirical verse on the *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* pantomimes:

Pray tell me, whether, in a vicious Age
The Stage corrupts the Town, or Town the Stage?

For both concur, when Folly makes its way;
But where the Fault begins, 'tis hard to say.[18]

While many thought that pantomimes debased the moral values of the age, others regarded them more as a safety valve for society, believing that cocking a snook at a strict moral code in the pantomimes served rather to preserve that morality in society in general. A commentator from an earlier age nicely sums this up: "Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air."[19]

Pantomimes got a very poor reception from playwrights, from prudes and from moralists. But two other factors influenced the reception of the English pantomime, and these are of particular interest for the dance historian, since they concern the very nature of dance itself. The first factor is the status of virtuoso dancing, and the second is that of comic or grotesque dancing. Should either of these be considered as ***true*** dance, or are they merely acrobatics and vulgar antics?

Choreographers were emerging in the 18th century, Weaver, Hilferding, Noverre, Angiolini and others, who wanted dance to be expressive. Furthermore, they wanted dance to be considered a serious art, eligible to gain admittance into the Pantheon of higher arts. These expressive choreographers imagined that for dance to gain acceptance into the Pantheon, it had to be pruned of both its virtuoso and its comedic elements. How threatening must the ever popular English pantomimes have seemed to them, being full of both these elements. Was the association of dance with the pantomimes going to lower the status of dance?

Virtuoso dancing was becoming increasingly popular on the English stage, and much of this was in the serious parts of the pantomime. Yet Weaver spoke of such dancing as "ridiculous senseless Motions, insignificant Cap'ring, and worthless Agility."[20] Noverre likewise wrote that "the practice introduced by dancers of employing capers in the noble style of dancing has altered its character, and deprived it of its dignity."[21] "It is morally impossible to put soul, truth, and expression into movements, while the body is ceaselessly convulsed by violent and reiterated jerks."[22] Angiolini, discussing virtuoso jumps, said that "this style (of dance) is the slightest of all. It can excite in the beholder nothing but amazement mixed with fear, in seeing the likes of them exposed to deadly danger at every moment."[23] Statements pointing to the vulgarity of virtuosity abound, be it excessive capering, high jumps, high leg extensions or multiple turns. Even more threatening to the expressive choreographers was the comedy in the pantomimes, particularly what they termed vulgar antics. There has always been a tension between the serious and the comic. Can a serious intellectual art form accommodate the comic within it? Can comedy enter the Pantheon of the Arts?

But why was comic dancing anathema to the classical choreographers? The Grotesque dancers were by far the most skilled dancers on the stage, and their comic dancing was full of the expression, passion and meaning that the choreographers desired. Perhaps the main objection to virtuosic and comedic dance was that these had traditionally been associated with low class professionals and fairground performances, so surely they could not be considered as high art. Moreover, they did not conform to the ideals of classical harmony and proportion. Both the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance Humanists thought that dance had to be elegant, because the "movements of the body were an outward manifestation of the movements of a person's soul."[24] Virtuoso and grotesque movements were a sign that the dancer's soul was "out of step

with the movement of the cosmos that bound heaven and earth together". Weaver and others wanted dance to represent "the Beauty of Imitation, and the Harmony of Composition and Motion."[25] Dance in the comic pantomimes deliberately parodied the harmonious movements of noble dance, so no matter how skilled or expressive this was, it had to be banished by the classical choreographers.

In conclusion, what has been learned about the reception and perception of pantomime in the early 18th century? Did these pantomimes degrade the English stage, debasing it with subversive behaviour and vulgar antics? Did John Rich allow the Stage to corrupt the Town? Did John Weaver, producer of ballets with heroic stories and noble dancing, "corrupt the age," as Richard Steele claimed, by replacing meaningful prose with mute actions, leading to the possible annihilation of serious drama on the stage? Was all narrative dance, even when free of the grotesqueries associated with many pantomimes, to be discarded simply because it might displace drama? This was a serious concern for dramatists of the time. In 1731, *The Universal Spectator* bemoaned the fact that "the most applauded Pieces for some years past in our Theatres, have not been the Composition of *Poets*, but of *Dancing Masters*."[26]

In 1710, Charles Johnson described drama as the food for serious nourishment, and the afterpieces as the sweet desert, but regrets that:

"the Actors may design it as a Desert, but they generally find the Palates of their Guests so vitiated that they make a Meal of Whipt Cream, and neglect the most substantive Food which was design'd for their Nourishment."[27] And finally an important concern for dance historians, did the association of so much dance with the pantomimes, whether noble or grotesque, devalue the art of dance in the eyes of the public?

On the other hand, surely John Weaver should be esteemed for introducing Classical Ballet to the world, and John Rich likewise for presenting both serious and comic dance in a programme of entertainments that rendered them accessible to the whole populace, from the King and Queen down to the apprentices?

John Rich has perhaps been ill-served by history. He has usually been depicted as debasing the stage with the vulgarity of pantomimes. David Garrick on the other hand has been well-served, being thought of not only as the manager who brought Shakespeare to contemporary audiences, but who was himself the greatest Shakespearean actor of the 18th century, promoting a style of realistic acting that was very different from the pompous and turgid acting style of the day.

The facts are somewhat different. John Rich produced almost as many Shakespeare plays in his theatres as did Drury Lane Theatre;[28] he was also a great admirer of Italian-style opera. His production of the pantomime *Jupiter and Europa* at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1723 was billed as "An Entertainment, part Serious, and part Grotesque, mixt with Singing, &c." It was Rich's first pantomime with singing, and it has been credited with marking the start of a new revival for serious English stage music.[29] Moreover John Rich was an enthusiastic supporter of Handel, and he allowed him to produce several of his operas at Covent Garden, including a revival of *Il pastor fido* in 1734, for which Handel wrote a dance and song prologue, *Terpsichore*, a showcase for Marie Sallé, a famous French dancer who was very popular in London. Rich must have hoped that Sallé's dancing would increase the popularity of Handel's opera. This is hardly

the legacy of a debaser of the English stage. Indeed, the output of the two rival theatres was very much alike, with a similar number of plays and pantomimes at both.

It is often claimed that Garrick hated pantomimes, and was forced to produce them to prevent his theatre losing custom to John Rich's theatre; pantomimes were both popular and lucrative. But maybe he had a secret respect for them – and of course he did marry a dancer. On the death of John Rich (stage name Lun), David Garrick wrote of him:

When Lun appear'd, with matchless art and whim,
He gave pow'r of speech to ev'ry limb;
Tho mask'd and mute, convey'd his quick intent,
And told in frolic gestures all he meant. [30]

Of interest is that the famous 18th century choreographer Jean-George Noverre, often credited with being the originator of *ballet d'action* and father of classical ballet, wrote a similar eulogy in praise of David Garrick: "He was so natural, his expression was so lifelike, his gestures, features and glances were so eloquent and so convincing, that he made the action clear, even to those who did not understand a word of English".[31] Noverre worked with Garrick in London on several occasions, and he credited Garrick with being his model for depicting the passions in his narrative ballets. [32]

Might David Garrick's style of acting have benefited from his engagement at Rich's theatre for a season or two before he went to Drury Lane? John Rich was reportedly a very good teacher of mime. There is a fact little-known to most people today (and also in the 18th century), that the very first performance of David Garrick on a public stage was as a mute Harlequin in a pantomime at Giffard's Playhouse.

Figure 6. David Garrick as Harlequin

Endnotes

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