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Research Article

From court to theater in the 18th century: birth of the ballet d'action (dramatic ballet)[1]

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Article Info

Abstract

Ballet which headed towards an intellectual and cultural change in the 18th Century, became a performing art reflecting all kind of emotions. The 'opera-ballet', which emerged from the ballet entrées of the early 17th Century and which was a combination of opera and ballet arts, became a genre of the French Baroque Lyric Theater in the 18th Century and continued to develop over time from the first half of this period. In the second half of the 18th Century, the Ballet d'Action was born as a product of choreographers who wanted to make ballet independent from opera. Jean-Georges Noverre, who wanted to tell a story through dance and mime, was the creator of the Ballet d'Action. According to Noverre; a ballet must be technical, at the same time be able to make the audience feel emotional depth, combine the plot of the stage and music within the story, and the pantomime must be simple and understandable. Noverre's book, "Letters on Dance and Ballet", a popular dance guide, contains his manifesto explaining how a Ballet d'Action should be. According to this manifesto; the theme of a ballet piece should be rational, symbolism and abstractions should be eliminated, light clothing should be preferred to bulky costumes, and the use of masks that hide facial expression should be stopped. With the reforms it went through in the 18th Century, ballet became an art branch independent of opera, and together with dramatic ballet, it formed the foundations of today's ballet art.

To cite this article

Introduction

Ballet first appeared in the 17th Century in Italy, during the Renaissance period. The palace dance and folk dance steps used in this entertainment have taken a new form and turned into a palace ballet. Therefore, ballet, which was a determinant of the social status of the period, was examined not only as a dance but also with all the influencing elements. The person who made ballet a fashion trend of its time, was the Italian art-lover Catherine de Medici. When she married the French King Henry II, she moved the court entertainment to France and contributed to the development of the ballet by providing the necessary financial support. In fact, Ballet Comique de la Reine, an engagement celebration, which was organized under the order of Medici, took its place in history as the first ballet show. Palace entertainment, including ballet and opera, reflected the King's power especially in events such as wedding celebrations and were displayed in exaggerated costumes, sometimes all night long. The theme of the dances is inspired by ancient Greek and Roman mythologies and fantasy worlds and supported by pantomime (Knecht, 2014).

Ballet became a performance-oriented art form towards the end of the 17th Century by the King Louis XIV, an art enthusiast. Being a passionate dancer, Louis XIV founded the Royal Academy in 1661 and made significant contributions to the development of ballet by collaborating with the most talented artists in the country.

By the 18th Century, a cultural and intellectual enlightenment is observed in ballet. Rational feelings came to the fore in dance and ballet, now became a stage art and met with the society. This was because the people who longed to create a democratic society, still perceived ballet as an aristocratic dance. This period of pause ended with the

emergence of ballet as Dramatic Ballet (Ballet d'Action), embracing different ideas and costumes, imaginary worlds and human-oriented themes, and declaring its independence from opera (Nye, 2011; Homans, 2010).

France Palace Dance in the 17th Century

Ballet and opera were born from marriage celebrations in the 17th Century and palace entertainment organized to show the power and wealth of the ruler. Featuring spectacular effects and extravagant costumes, these ceremonies were a mix of dance, music, word and pantomime, with the themes inspired by ancient Greek and Roman mythologies and focused on the fantasy world. The costumes were decorated with fantastic and exaggerated symbols, and the movements of the dancers were limited to these costumes. These ballet shows were initially performed in aristocrats and royal families palaces. The dances were presented with graceful arm and upper body movements. There performances brought a color to the monotonous palace life, allowing the members of the palace to have fun and took their place among the social events of the period.

In France, during the King Louis XIII period, ballet performances consisted of only one row of entrées[4] and exits. The themes did not follow a clear subject, the number of acts varied between two and five, and nearly thirty stage entrances formed the structure of these works. The entrées of that period correspond to the current divertissements[5].

The entrées in these ballets, however, have only one purpose: to enable the dancers to take the stage in flashy dresses. The dancers complemented these flamboyant dresses with feather crowns, masks and various accessories. The dance figures they performed were in the form of mutual compliments to communicate with other dancers (Beaumont, 1964).

Ballet was developed as a performance-oriented art form in the 17th Century by the French King, Louis XIV who was a dance enthusiast and became more noble and artistic (Bland, 1976). Also known as the King of the Sun, Louis XIV was a passionate dancer in all respects. At the age of fifteen he played Apollo, the Greek God of peace, art and the sun in "Le Ballet de la Nuit" (Ballet of the Night). Because Louis considered the power of the were mighty Gods such as Apollo, Neptune and Jupiter (Beaumont, 1964). This interest in ballet also included dance and made it one of the most important elements of social life. In line with his own opinion, he gained authority over the nobles and succeeded to be the longest standing King of France (Homans, 2010).

Figure 1.
Apollo role costume in "Le Ballet de la Nuit" designed by Henri de Gissey, Louis XIV, 1658 (Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet, p. 666)

Louis XIV founded the Royal Academy of Dance (Academie Royale de Danse) in March 1661 and appointed Pierre Beauchamps as ballet director to reinforce his ambition to control the nobility and reverse the decline in dance standards. Beauchamps made important contributions to the birth of the palace ballet between 1650 and 1660 an found five basic foot positions (Anderson, 1974). Beauchamps techniques were taught by private teachers in all secondary schools in France at that time (Cohen, 1998). In the 17th Century, ballet ceased to be a performance given

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[4] It means "entrance". It can be the entrance of a dancer or an entrance to a particular dance or movement.
[5] One or more dance episodes that are not based on a specific story or planning. An entire ballet piece may consist of divertissements, or there may be short periods of divertissement in a thematic ballet. These short solo or group dances are often added to ballet performances the dancers talents.

to palace aristocrats and started to be exhibited to the public. However, it still could not reach the structure we know today and could not go beyond being the dances accompanying the songs in operas. The dancers were chosen only from men and young children were taken into the female roles, and the themes of these works were mostly inspired by Greek and Roman mythology (Beaumont, 1964).

National Paris Opera (Garnier Palace)

In 1669, the Paris Opera, which was established by Louis XIV, managed to be the main center of dance throughout the 18th Century although the monarchy which negatively affected the ballet, prevailed in all European countries (Sadie, 1992).

Figure 2.
Paris Opera (https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/news/spectator-information)

Another development in Paris Opera was that professional dancers danced in the lead roles rather then in character roles. In the opera, professional male dancers (they were called "noble dancers" and this term was used for the next two centuries) took the lead roles in ballet works, while female dancers made significant changes in costumes, making their roles more effective. The dancers used movements that were difficult in technique and from mythology to realism (Kassing, 2007).

Paris Opera and the Ballet School

In 1713, a new art school associated with Paris Opera and known today as the Paris Opera and Ballet School was opened by Louis XIV. Here, professional dancers of both genders, equivalent to today's "corps de ballet" (group dancers), were trained, and with the innovations they added to ballet, ballet began to be known as a stand-alone art branch (Kassing, 2007).

In 1780, at the request of Louis XIV, a decree was issued for a school that only includes ballet students to admit students by exam and provide free professional training. Following this, with a second decree by Louis XIV, a special class for children under the age of twelve was created. With this new class, the importance of giving ballet education at an early age has once again emerged and concepts like examination jury have been carried over to the present day ("Ballet School History" 2021).

Political History of France in the 18th Century and Art-Society Relationship

The roots of the French Revolution, which is the first most important event in modern history are based on the fact that the kings after Louis XIV spent the money wastefully and caused the bankruptcy of France. Other factors that led to the revolution were unfair tax system and the demand to end slavery with feudalism.

Louis XV (1715-1774) became the King of France when he was only five, and Louis XVI (1774-1791) took the throne after him. During this time, France became the country with the highest population among European countries and ranked first in economic growth. With the power of the capitalist bourgeoisie, which is trying to gain political power, the influence of the monarchy started to disappear gradually. After the French Revolution, the classical period started with Napoleon's throne (Schama, 1989; Kassing, 2007).

In the first three quarters of the 18th Century, the power of the French palace and the nobility declined, and the members of palace dedicated almost all of their time to art because of their devotion to taste. The French ladies of the period participated in some elite ceremonies like tea ceremonies and had a great influence on the artistic tastes of the period. In fact, they were so influential that they created an almost entirely woman-oriented culture. With the

death of Louis XIV, the Baroque Period ended and the Rococo Period started, which lasted until the French Revolution (Kassing, 2007).

Rococo art was born as a result of the Baroque Period and was dedicated to the mighty monarchy and lifestyle of Louis XIV. In the second half of the 18th Century, Rococo art gave its place to Neo-classicism, a more serious style, due to the reaction some artists who were bored with the excessiveness in art (Selvi, 2012).

Ballet from Palace to Theater

Ballet experienced an intellectual and cultural enlightenment in the 18th Century, when the mind, emotion and artistic traditions were questioned. With 18th Century reforms, the "mechanical" dance technique that reduced ballet to steps and movements was rejected, and it was now aimed to become a more rational art that was reflecting emotions and was performed on the stage instead of ordinary dance steps (Nye, 2011).

As a result of the superior efforts of the French, who were the creators of these reforms, ballet met with the public and performances that emphasized aesthetics and elegance began to be organized in front of large audiences on an theater stage (Fairfax, 2003).

In the 18th Century, dance was technically divided into two: theater performance and palace performance. In France, between 1700 and 1750, the popularity of the minuet, which was thought to have a tight connection with monarchy, started to increase. Later, the palace dances which were performed first in the baroque style and then in the rococo style and which emphasized the sophisticated style of the palace began to gain importance.

Opera-ballet works, taking part in theatrical performances , inspired from Gods and mythology. After the death of Louis XIV, classical ballet became widespread in countries such as Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Habsburg Kingdoms, German States, Poland, Russia and Italy. However; this development was criticized in many places, including Paris, the capital of ballet, and towards the middle of the 18th Century, it entered a period of stagnation. This was because ballet, which was reflecting the French aristocratic style, was targeted by those who wanted to create a more democratic society. Especially for philosophy enthusiasts, ballet was no longer a symbol of elegance, but was an art branch that was representing decline and collapse.

For dancers and ballet masters, the only way to get rid of this collapse was to make some reforms. Thus, artists in Europe started to make some radical changes during the 18th Century (Homans, 2010).

Being an extremely complex period, the 18th Century deeply affected both dance and other arts with many sociopolitical events. In the period between the death of Louis XIV (1715) and the French Revolution (1789), both the church and the French State began to lose their influence and thus French art increased its popularity in England and Europe.

With the age of the Enlightenment, the monarchy began to collapse and contradance took the place of minuet. The French Revolution was a turning point for ballet and France, and dancers began to dance both in palaces and theaters in England and throughout Europe (Kassing, 2007).

At the center of this development was Jean-Georges Noverre's book "Letters sur le Danse" (Letters on Dance and Ballet-1760). The book included a groundbreaking work in which the dancers movements should help storytelling by expressing the characters and ballet, as an international art form, should work as a whole with all the fields that nourish it (Beaumont, 1964).

The important changes seen in the themes, movements and costumes of the ballet works since the first period of the 18th century are listed below in chronological order:

In 1730, female dancer Marie Camargo (1710-1770) created the entrechat quatre movement. To gain the freedom needed for entrechat movement, Camargo opted for a dress that ends at the ankle and wore shoes without heel. This traditional clothing created a scandal, but it was soon accepted as it allowed many new movements to be performed in dance.

Figure 3.
Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo (1710-1770) (m.blog.naver.com, 2021)

In 1733, dancer Marie Sallé (1707-1756) wanted to bring costume innovations to the French Opera, but could not be successful and moved to London in order to apply what she had in mind (Beaumont, 1964, p. 11). The cosmopolitan culture of London, the commercial possibilities of theater, and the popularity of the art of pantomime had positive effects on Sallé's career. She danced in Covent Garden (Theater Royal), John Rich's theater, and worked with Handel, especially on Italian operas such as Alcina. In London, Sallé abandoned her classical education, which included masks and corsets, and focused on storytelling and the transmission of emotions without words, with pantomime, facial expressions and free movements that did not depend on a particular technique.

Figure 4.
Louis Michel van Loo's portrait of Marie Sallè (1707–1756) (Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet, pp. 667)

In addition, she designed most of the choreographies she danced, and in 1734 she appeared on the stage at the Pygmalion ballet by the order of the king, without fluffy skirts and flashy hair accessories, but with messy hair and a simple outfit. This innovation in her dress created a great excitement and formed a whole with Sallé's elegant and characterful expression. The audience was so impressed by Sallé's performance that they wrapped the golden guinea (British coin of the time) in colored paper, tied them with ribbons and threw them on the stage (Homans, 2010).

In an article written in the French newspaper "Mercure de France", Sallé's clothes were interpreted as follows:

"When Sallé appeared on the stage, she was not wearing a long dress and a sash, her hair was hanging down and there was not the slightest ornament on her head. She was only wearing a corset and petticoat; she wore a simple muslin dress and the cloth was wrapped around it, just like the old Greek sculptures (Beaumont, 1964, p. 12)."

Dramatic Ballet (Ballet d'Action)
The dramatic ballet that tells a story through dance and mime has been the product of choreographers who have wanted to make ballet independent from opera. Dramatic ballet was the next step in the development of ballet as an

art form. The work of Jean-Georges Noverre, who played an important role in this new form, was influenced by the Austrian choreographer and dancer Franz Anton Christoph Hilverding (Kassing, 2007).
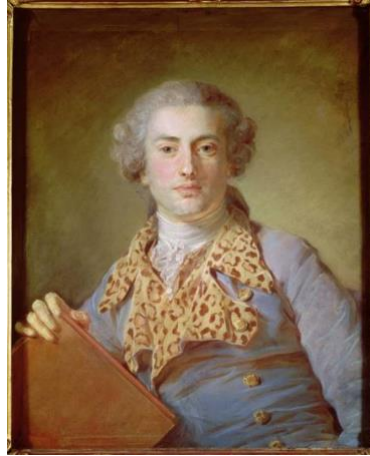

Figure 5.
Jean-Georges Noverre's portrait by Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, 1764 *(https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/magazine/350-years/jean-georges-noverre-1727-1810)*

Noverre is the creator of the dramatic ballet. The theme described in these ballet works was expressed only with dance and facial expressions, without the aid of any lyrics or songs (Beaumont, 1964). According to Noverre; a ballet work should be technical, but at the same time should make the audience feel emotional depth, should combine the plot of the stage and music within the story, and the pantomime should be simple and understandable (Kassing, 2007, p. 151). Noverre was a very successful choreographer; He had a tremendous knowledge in his field and he reformed his profession by adding common sense and intelligence to his work. Noverre spoke of the new form of ballet as follows;

"Those ugly masks must be broken off, those ridiculous wigs must be burnt, and those annoying wadding on the hips must be removed. Instead of the usual structure, things with subtle taste should be replaced, and a more noble and pleasing dress style should be created. Movement and expression should be given importance while dancing, and the gap between a mechanical technique and the ballet genius which turns dance into art, should be exposed (Beaumont, 1964, p. 12)."

In 1760, Jean-Georges Noverre wrote "Letters on Dance and Ballet", a widely published and highly popular dance manual, which was published simultaneously in Lyon and Stuttgart in 1760 and included details of the dramatic ballet. In this work, Noverre explored new possibilities of expression by addressing all aspects of dance and insisted on a search for harmony that connects all elements of ballet. Not satisfied with the outdated ballet patterns, Noverre called for serious reforms in the dance art form. Noverre's manifesto describing the aspects of the dramatic ballet includes the following:

-Logical events: No more irrational events and intrigues in ballet, themes should follow a rational path, their actions should be interconnected, consistent, and diversity should be emphasized throughout the work.
- Supernatural realities: The symbolism and abstractions in the palace ballet should be eliminated, and mythological figures should be used only if they are motivated by human emotions.
-Use of masks: The use of masks should be discontinued, and joint communication should be established by reflecting the expressions on the face to the audience.
-Costume reform: Dancers should prefer light clothing that does not restrict their movements on stage, rather than bulky costumes such as "épanier" or "tonelet", and the costumes should match the character being portrayed.
- Artistic collaboration: Choreographers, dancers, composers, stage props and costume workers should be in close corporation; because a harmonious creation process is the key to success in ballet.
-Education: Choreographers should improve themselves in every aspect in order to stage more realistic ballet works. For example; He should do painting studies for a better stage decoration and observe people from all areas of life in order to make gestures more realistic (Nye, 2011, p. 229-232).

Conclusion

Our study examines the historical development of ballet in the 17th and 18th Centuries, in terms of political, social and artistic reforms, and the famous dancers of the period who accepted the innovations that occurred with the dramatic ballet and the way they started to adapt these innovations in various stages. Compared to any other art form, the

influence of women in the reforms that took place in ballet during this period was much greater. In this respect, Marie Sallé and Marie Camargo, two important female dancers of the 18ᵗʰ century, spread ballet to society as a fashion.

The French Revolution brought many changes to the world of ballet. The French revolution reinforced the idea of real life themes in dance. Absolute monarchy was rejected and women took their place on the stage again. The costumes were plain unlike the aristocratic costumes worn before (Homans, 2010).

In order to show the technique of foot movements in dance, even shortening the skirt lengths at the ankle was scandalous for that period. When ballet was performed in restrictive clothing, most of the dance consisted of transitions from pose to pose and arm movements. Thanks to these two female dancers, ballet has attained an art form that can now allow physical creativity. At that time, Camargo's addition of his jumps of strokes to his dances was also a reform. And female dancers have begun to wear satin shoes in order to make their foot movements softer and more impressive. The efforts to bring the ever-increasing imagination to life have laid the groundwork for the works dealing with the supernatural creations of the ballet repertoire. The art of ballet improved in terms of technique and dancer quality until the end of the 18ᵗʰ century, and the dancers in Paris had a great impact on this spread of the art.

With the success of its investments towards the end of the 18ᵗʰ century, France became number one in terms of both ballet dancers and choreographers, and ballet came to life everywhere from London to Moscow, and these artists took part in the main stages in Europe (Beaumont, 1964).

The foundations of academic ballet education were laid in Paris, ballet found its identity as an art form and got rid of the verbal, heavily dressed and masked pantomime form that only entertained aristocrats. Undoubtedly, the art of ballet, which survived from being a palace entertainment after Noverre's manifesto, also prolonged its life because when this regime of the country came to an end one day, it was highly possible that the ballet would remain as a palace entertainment ritual.

The female dancers of the period prevented gender discrimination on the stage with the technical achievements of the movements such as entrechat quatre and pirouette, perhaps inspired by the revolutionary spirit of the period.
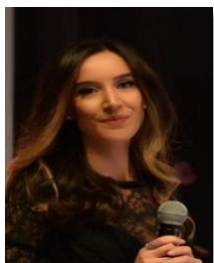
The French Revolution ended with the desire for compromise in France, and this feeling spread to many areas. The audience who came to the theater wanted to watch ballet itself, not a ballet within the opera. In addition, when the theater doors opened to the public, the art of ballet with a new audience potential, not only adapted to the innovations within itself, but also presented works that could be spread all over the world with this new audience. The artistic line desired to be achieved was in the direction of elegance. Character choices, lighter costumes and especially women's getting rid of the high heels they used on stage, drifted ballet in a direction that allows the formation of dramatic ballet expressed by Noverre, that is, imagination.

Consequently, considering that Noverre's dramatic ballet manifesto was not revealed by Noverre or any other name at that time or later, the ballet would perhaps remain just a form of baroque dance, and the artistic journey of ballet to its later evolution would never begin.

Acknowledgment

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