

The Ballet Performance between Tradition and Innovation

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, exactly as a hundred years ago when the art world recorded a real explosion of artistic genres and styles, all united under the phrase *modern art*, characterized by its independence from the realistic nature of imagined subjects, the art of dance exhibits today a multitude of genres, styles and types of performances, as an expression of contemporary dance, extremely diverse and innovative, characterized by independence from structure, language or representation. In this context, the present article presents the research undertaken with the aim of identifying the defining element that allows creators of choreographic performances to reconstruct the established titles that make up the international repertoire of classical ballets, from a modern-contemporary perspective. Re-visiting great classics is in itself an extremely complex process, initiated in the period of postmodernism, which contaminated, one by one, all the performing arts.

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Introduction

I confess that the topic of this research was inspired by my students, who asked me during one of the courses I teach, why choreographers like Mats Ek, Mathew Bourne, Jean Christoph Maillot or Akram Kahn choose to rework titles from classical ballets?

Indeed, the question is justified if we remember that the 20th century begins with the birth of modern dance, both as an opposition to classical ballet and its tradition of over three centuries in Europe, and as a consequence of the feminist movement in the United States of America. Surprisingly, at the end of the same century, great choreographers of contemporary dance choose to recreate classical ballet titles in a modern version: *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty* or *Romeo and Juliet*. This phenomenon, we could say, gives rise to the question, what exactly fascinates these creators and equally the audience watching these choreographic creations, because, surely, it is not a question of a lack of inspiration regarding the theme of the choreographic performances? Unfortunately, the specialized literature only records the presentation of such revisions on their opening night, without commenting on the mobilizing intellectual resources of the creators, which would justify such a choice. As a result, to support this research, let's first analyze this choreographic genre, whose peak moment is registered by the history of ballet in the 19th century.

Methodology

"The Nightmare", the painting from 1781 by Swiss painter Henry Fuseli, perhaps best represents the Romantic era, an artistic movement that begins at the end of the 18th century and lasts until the first half of the 19th century. It is an era in which new aesthetic categories are introduced, such as the sublime, the grotesque, the macabre or the fantastic; states such as sensitivity, imagination, originality, fantasy, mystery are cultivated. It is a time when Europe is torn apart by the Napoleonic wars, and artists offer in their creations an escape from this traumatic reality through dreams, in a nocturnal or exotic setting. Their sources of inspiration are tradition, folklore, the historical past of the people, especially the Gothic Middle Ages, which gives the artistic current a patriotic national character. Particular importance is given to feelings, especially love, inner feelings that are harmonized with the landscape of nature. Romanticist characters are always dominated by imagination and intense experiences. The main feature of the unfolding of the dramatic action is the antithesis. Let's see how all these aspects translate into the classical ballet performance.

What Jean-Georges Noverre wrote in the 18th century in his famous book entitled *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (1760), will materialize only a century later

in the performances by Marius Petipa and his no less famous collaborators. Today, we would classify this kind of performance as a super production: with over 130 performers on stage (ballerinas, extras and children from the Imperial Ballet School), an orchestra with at least 100 instrumentalists, sets built entirely of wood, all kinds of pulleys to help the ballerinas fly above the stage, dozens of costumes, hand-painted backgrounds for each *tableau*, stage effects, lights, etc. The structure of the classical ballet performance includes a prologue – 3 or 4 acts – and an epilogue; the acts in turn are made up of tableaux, and the tableaux contain choreographic structures and *mise-en-scène*, which makes the unfolding of the dramatic action intelligible. The duration of such a performance was up to 5 hours, including intermissions. Unlike today, when the public watches a performance for aesthetic, cultural reasons, in that era watching a show was primarily an act of socialization, an opportunity to meet in public with people of the same social rank. Wealthy families traditionally owned a opera box at the Opera House, which, due to the nature of the building's architecture, was also equipped with a small kitchen, where the personal chef prepared snacks destined to be eaten during the long intermissions between acts. Let's not forget that, at its origin, classical ballet represents a form of entertainment specific to the aristocratic class, the nobility!

The libretto is always inspired by myths, legends and folk tales, which places it in the artistic movement of Romanticism. The dramatic action takes place on two levels: real and oneiric. The choreographic score, created in a coded or standardized language, according to the principles of the Enlightenment, is hierarchical: ensemble, soloists and first soloists. Pantomime, in turn, is stylized to be integrated into classical ballet performances.

With the premiere of *Giselle* (1841), the supremacy of the male ballet dancer is dethroned, being replaced by the ballerina. From that moment, gradually, the role of the male in the interpretation of the choreographic score will be reduced to that of *porteur*, the only opportunity to stand out being within the stage folk dances, which will be integrated into the structure of the classical academic ballet performance by Marius Petipa. Unlike previous eras, the spatial unfolding of ensemble dances is relative to the vanishing point, which creates, we would say today, a 3D perception of the performance. Also, the dancers that make up the ensemble participate directly in the interpretation of the *mise-en-scène*, that is, in the unfolding of the dramatic action. The relationship between music and dance is one of subordination. Specific to this period is precisely the creation of the musical

score strictly according to the indications of the Ballet Master. Even Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, who brings the symphonic character of the musical score to the ballet performance, will adapt to these requirements.

Results

After X-raying this choreographic genre, the initial question returns even stronger: what exactly about the composition of these ballets, created two centuries ago, supports the interest of modern approaches? The phenomenon itself is not specific to choreographic art. I would rather argue that the theatre directors of the 70s-80s of the 20th century are the ones who initiated it and they also applied it in staging performances of opera with ballet, and I mention here only a few of them: Peter Brook, Silviu Purcărete, Andrei Șerban, Oscaras Korsunovas or Petrika Ionesco.

I identified the answer to the question that underpinned this research in the theme of the libretto of classical ballet performances, inspired by myths, legends and folk tales. These in turn are structured on archetypes. C. G. Jung described archetypes as forms through which instincts manifest, and instincts are like biological patterns. They are patterns of behavior shared by all of humanity. Their characteristics are:

1. *universality* in space and time, in different cultures and eras;
2. *bipolarity* – they present complementary qualities, both positive and negative;
3. *the strong impact* – they create a state of fascination, the feeling of experiencing something unique – spiritual, divine, luminous, beyond conscious, rational understanding;
4. *the absolute* – they represent an essentialization of everything that is good or bad, gigantic or something extremely small.

In the 20th century, respectively the beginning of the 21st century, there are 3 types of approaches to classical ballets: 1. **traditional** – which refers to the staging closest to the original version of the performance; 2. **eclectic** – in which a diversified choreographic language is used in relation to the original version; 3. **innovative** – in which the original libretto of the ballet is only a pretext to propose a new performance.

The most revealing example in this regard is the version by Edward Clug, a choreographer of Romanian origin, of the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, entitled *Sleeping*

Beauty Dreams, whose world premiere took place at the Ziff Opera House in Miami (USA) in 2018.

The action of his performance begins with the question, what exactly did Aurora dream during the 100 years she slept? But the theme is only one of the aspects of this production. Even more unusual is the way this exploration is staged. It is an interaction between the real and the imaginary through a combination of live action, film and virtual reality. The integration of live action and pre-filmed action, either overlaid or as repetition or completion of the choreographic phrase, are not new processes, but the results obtained are amazing. The difference here lies in the live presentation of dancers and avatars that respond, in real time, to any action of the dancers on stage (with a filmed background or projection), all in a digital world of images, film and music: we could say that, from the point of view of the technical means used, we are witnessing a fusion of the technical with the technique.

Discussion

In order to better understand this process of re-adaptation from different historical perspectives, I will analyze the staging of a classical ballet, related to all three types of approaches. I have chosen a less commented ballet, although, in the history of the development of the choreographic performance, it represents an important landmark, primarily through the theme of its libretto. It is about the ballet *Coppélia* or *The Girl with Enamel Eyes*, created in 1870 by Arthur Saint-Léon, to the music composed by Léo Delibes, with a libretto written by Arthur Saint-Léon together with Charles Nutter, inspired by the short story *The Sandman* written by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The story of this ballet is based on the archetype of the Magician, namely his Shadow – the negative side.

E.T.A. Hoffmann is considered a pioneer of both Romanticist and fantasy, horror literature. In Central and Northern European folklore, the mythical Sandman puts people to sleep and sprinkles magical sand over their eyes for pleasant dreams. But the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann gives the story a macabre twist. His Sandman throws sand in the eyes of children who refuse to sleep. As a result, their eyes fall out, and he collects them to feed his own children.

This story published in 1814 even inspired an extremely valuable essay by the renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud entitled *The Uncanny* (1919), the theme of eyes being interpreted by him as a representation of the fear of castration.

There are several performances and even feature films created over time after this short story, for example: the 2002 satirical science fiction film *Simone* directed by Andrew Niccol, starring Al Pacino, the modern work entitled *The Sandman* composed by Anna Calvi in 2017, directed by Robert Wilson, for the Schauspielhaus in Dusseldorf, or the fantasy horror drama series of the same title, directed by Mike Barker, on Netflix in 2022, to name only the most recent of these. It should be noted that the libretto of the classical ballet borrowed only a few elements of this horror story, turning the whole show into a comedy. This time, the plot develops on Coppélius' relationship with Franz, engaged in turn to Swanilda, whom he manipulates into falling in love with the doll Coppélia, created by him. Saint-Léon's original choreographic version fully respects the characteristics of the classical ballet performance, today found in the repertoire of many ballet companies around the world, in traditional settings directly inspired by it. In Romania, until now, the staging option most often assumed was the one from the traditional perspective, in the versions by Anton Romanovski, Oleg Danovski or Corina Dumitrescu.

We identify the first eclectic approach to this ballet in the version by French choreographer Roland Petit from 1976, created for the National Ballet of Marseille. Compared to the original version, Petit develops both dramatically and choreographically the character of Coppélius, played by himself, and his relationship with Coppélia, the doll he created. It is followed by another version in 1993, which also belongs to a French choreographer, namely Maguy Marin, made for the Lyon Opera Ballet. This time, the choreographer chooses to return to one of the characteristics of Romanticism, by unfolding the second act not in the puppet workshop, but in the dream of Coppélius, who gets Franz drunk with the aim of stealing his soul, in order to transfer it to the Coppélia doll. In Romania in the 1990s, Răzvan Mazilu created for the ballet of the Romanian National Opera in Timișoara an extremely brave version, in which the Coppélia doll is a transsexual. As expected, such a scandal arose around this production that there was even the question of suspending the premiere of the performance.

In 2021, at the height of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Scottish Ballet company proposes an innovative version of the ballet *Coppélia*, in a dramaturgy belonging to Jeff James, with a choreography and direction by Morgann Runacre-Temple and Jessica Wright. In this setting, the story structure remains the same, but the setting is reminiscent of the Silicon Valley Innovation Center. Coppélius this

time is a tech guru with a huge ego preoccupied with developing a new model of space rocket – the analogy with Elon Musk is obvious – and this aspect has a hypnotic effect on the audience who, in this case, gladly identify contemporary situations. In his lab, NuLife, he creates "Coppélia", an AI being that can exist in corporeal form. This is when skeptical journalist Swanhilda steps in, both fascinated and intrigued by the creations she finds in this lab.

Choreographically, much of the movement evokes the elegant ergonomics of a Jonathan Ive design, it's elegantly functional, with some smartly punctuated details. There's even a Gangnam-style TikTok dance featured at the party organized by the tech fraternity. Unexpectedly, when Swanhilda enters the lab, she doesn't find clichéd robot movements, but a strangely beautiful scene where AI robots create Rorschach-like shapes, but with extended limbs.

For their part, composers Mikael Karlsson and Michael P. Atkinson use fragments of Delibes' music in a score that "travels" from full orchestra to electronic soundscape, connecting the dramaturgy of the show with the cool aesthetic of the stage. The music and the video are synthesized into a logical narrative sustained throughout the performance, which genuinely asks some relevant questions, and boldly refuses to tie it all together at the end with a romantic *pas-de-deux*, typical of classical ballet, and a bow neatly executed to the public. Certainly, this version of Coppélia represents another successful step in the development of the choreographic performance.

Conclusions

If we had to draw a conclusion from the research we undertook, at least two ideas would certainly stand out. First of all, only classical ballet performances that have a libretto whose story is based on an archetype can support modern approaches! In the romantic era, the libretto of ballet performances often represented variations of two themes: the impossibility of fulfilling a love, due to the difference in social class to which the protagonists belonged, or the revenge of a destiny, ruthlessly diverted, through the early kidnapping of a child which usually belonged to a noble family. In this context it is quite difficult to identify the theme of the librettos that are based on an archetype. Simply updating the set, costumes and direction, in relation to the artistic elements used, does not give coherence and credibility to the production. The archetype is the only matrix that allows any kind of directorial

approach, from the perspective of any era. Secondly, it should be noted that there are also pragmatic reasons for re-staging such a performance: the success carried over time so that just the title written on the poster would fill the hall with both ballet fans and lovers of classical art. In other words, production costs can be paid of over time through ticket sales. But this choice contains a not so inconsiderable risk: ballet lovers always know what they want to see again, they know the libretto, the music and even the choreography. Anything that goes against their expectations can instantly turn them into the most vehement objectors. This is perhaps the reason why, in most revivals, the musical score remains the same, as a single landmark that recalls the original ballet performance. It is really both a marketing and target development strategy, the young audience is primarily targeted, tempted to watch a performance made with state-of-the-art technical means, which is familiar to them, therefore accessible.

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