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***Dance Libretto as Social Text (The Italian dance librettos in the Cia Fornaroli Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts)***

**a) Background:** ‘Libretto’ means ‘little book’ and is from the Italian, used mainly to denote the words, as distinct from the dance and the music, of a dance performance or opera or musical play.

The dance libretto is a written text, mostly in prose or (less commonly) in verse, of the complete plot of a dance performance. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the libretto listed, with the summary of the story, also all the names of the individuals who participated in making the dance performance. It was sold at theaters to help the audience understand the performance and to establish a kind of early copyright for the choreographer. Occasionally, the librettos mention specific gestures and dramatic movements. Typically written by the choreographer, the dance libretto was often inspired from mythical, literary, or historical sources. But whatever its putative source, the libretto was also a very special kind of literature that resulted from the interaction among socialised norms of existence, cultural politics, body ideologies, stage theories and individualised senses of identity. At the risk of anachronism, the libretto is the “hypertext” of the past. As such, the libretto can be considered as a social text from which one can understand the social tensions between performing arts, literature, movement, gesture, and the relationships on which society is based.

**b) Objectives:** The project centers on the in-depth study of the Italian dance librettos of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century collected at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The aim of this proposal is to use these librettos as a lever for understanding the world in which they arose – to improve my skills on recent social and critical theory, carrying out new methods of research in the fields covered by the project, and to write a book about performance and society in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, with the eventual permission of the Library, I would like to make available new philological and critical text editions of a large part of these Italian dance librettos. I previously edited the critical edition of SALVATORE VIGANO’s *Prometeo* (Turin, Legenda, 1999; Marino Moretti Prize’s 1999) and, more recently,

a collection of music and dance italian librettos on the myth of Adonis (MACEDONIO, TRONSARELLI, VENDRAMIN, FATTIBONI, GROSSATESTA, CAMBI, FABIANI, ROMOLI, NOVERRE, CANZIANI, BERTI, TRAFFIERI, PITROT, LEFEVRE, DUPORT, DUTARQUE, CASATI, BLASIS, VESTRIS and two lyrics by D'ANNUNZIO and LUCINI, *Variazioni su Adone. I libretti musicali e di ballo (1614-1844)*, Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 2009). Here, I propose to expand this research to explore the theoretical and social relationships between texts and performative practices, and to extend my earlier efforts to link dance theory and practice. My training has been both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. An approach to multidisciplinary methods are here presupposed in the areas of critical theory of the text, philological and textual analysis, dance history, sociological theory and sociology for the performing arts, all necessary fields of work to define and operationalize all the key concepts of the research. But every paradigm shift has been investigated by me with an interdisciplinary approach, to make a comparative investigation of textual, cultural and social ideas in the centuries covered by the project, and finally to integrate what can be shared from these disciplines.

### **c) The 'state of the art'**

The research on dance librettos has been carried out so far chiefly by North American scholars, such as Mark Franko, Judith Chazin-Bennahum, and Susan Au (*Libretti for dance, s.v. in International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. by Selma Jeanne Cohen, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 4, pp. 172-178), just to mention a few names. For these scholars, the history of the dance libretto is to some extent the history of society's ideas about the communicative powers or purpose of dance. In their studies, they note that 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century ballets often told elaborate stories crammed with incident and complicated by characters who were not always what they appeared to be; to tell these stories, choreographers accepted the aid of conventional mime and the written word, and dance librettos were often many pages long. In this perspective, the dance libretto is more than a text, it is a social text, able to testify to all the cultural tensions between society and performing arts.

For the European researchers in the field of Dance History, the dance libretto is more often «useless and insignificant» (as stated by Gino Tani in the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Rome: Le Maschere, 1960, vol. VII, pp. 960-5), and «they can take in neither the work nor the annotations properly, and certainly the balletic impression

cannot emerge with the literary commentary» (as written by Irving Deakin in *At the Ballet. A guide to Enjoyment*, Toronto-New York-Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & sons, 1956, p. 166).

At best the dance libretto could be recognized «as an example of the imagination of the choreographer» (Flavia Pappacena in the introduction to Jean-Georges Noverre, *Programmi dei balletti. Selezione di libretti 1751-1776*, Rome: Audino, 2009), or could be a way to understand «choices not only poetics but more meaningfully theatricals of the choreographic works» (Claudia Celi, *Connotazioni del libretto di ballo*, in *Musica in scena*, edited by Alberto Basso, vol. V. *L'arte della danza e del balletto*, III. L'epoca del corodramma (1800-1830), Turin: Utet, 1995, p. 90).

In Italy, more attention has been dedicated to the musical librettos, but the question of the dance librettos is always completely ignored (as in the last books: *Dal libro al libretto. La letteratura per musica dal '700 al '900*, ed. by Mariasilvia Tatti, Rome: Bulzoni, 2005 and *L'opera prima dell'opera. Fonti, libretti, intertestualità*, ed. by Alessandro Grilli, Pisa: Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press, 2006).

**d) The Collection:** The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts includes in its Dance Collection over a thousand books as a gift from the distinguished bibliophile, Walter Toscanini. This generous donation includes many rare and handsome volumes and is part of the Cia Fornaroli Collection which Mr. Toscanini donated to the Library as a memorial to his late wife, celebrated ballerina of the Italian and American dance world. The donation has the distinction of being unique in this country: no duplicate copies are known to exist in any library in the United States, and what few librettos available in Italy are dispersed and fragmentary. Many items in the collection are dedicated to the very rare Italian librettos of dance, with texts, biographical datas, commentaries and criticisms, musical scores, iconography, etc. All the outstanding figures in the dance performance world of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century are well represented in the collection: from Gasparo and Pietro Angiolini (1731-1803) to Salvatore Viganò (1769-1821), from Gaetano Gioja (1764-1826) to Carlo Blasis (1795-1878).

## **Research methodology and approach**

In order to overcome the above-mentioned limits in the 'state of the art', since 1999 I have been mapping through extensive archival research the most important and influential Italian dance librettos. With the present research proposal, I worked on three different but interdependent levels: textual criticism, cultural theory and sociology. These levels will be finally integrated in a future monograph. It will be organized to 3 main sections:

• **Section 1 (Textual criticism) New reconsideration of dance libretto's analysis:**

The libretto constitutes an integral part of every dance performance, but it is also a text in its own right and therefore can be analyzed both in isolation (i.e., as literature) and in conjunction with the action, and sometimes with the music, which make up the rest of the performance. The libretto as a verbal construct implies a theoretical foundation and calls for a detailed philological analysis. This kind of study will include information about the text: its genesis, its structure, its authenticity and its originality. The applicant will investigate structural properties of a dance performance (including those associated with text adaptation) in relation to ordinary drama. Historically specific factors affecting the libretto must be taken into account, such as pieces written for a particular dancer or audience, along with the many changes to the text that naturally arise during its setting to music. In the absence of formal dance notation or extensive descriptions of the historical performance, analyzing the words of the libretto (the lexical meaning with which they describe presences in order to acting or performing) it's possible to provide the notion of time and space working in an historical performance. The libretto is, also, part of the process of interpreting the possible meanings within the dance performance. This kind of analysis forms the basis for me to enreach poststructuralist textual criticism strategies (like those of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man), and to map resonances between specific texts or tradition of text-making, as dance librettos, and the larger cultural context in which they occur.

This section try to reach the first objective of the proposal: a new reconsideration of dance libretto's analysis as a central reference for the study of ballet history and theory.

• **Section 2 (Cultural theory) Libretto's staging of tradition and culture:**

By referring to this reconsideration, I will investigate how dance librettos, as narrative descriptions of the past, are related to the construction of tradition and culture ideas. According to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, high culture is the way the dominant class retains political ascendancy. High culture is a part of symbolic and cultural capital, which objective show is differentially possessed. The immediate relevance of this orientation for dance research lies in the fact that the ballet and its world are typically construed as high culture phenomena. They have sometimes represented inexplicable phenomena such as the unconscious, desire, libidinal or sexual impulse, or irrational, whimsical, or perverse action; otherwise, it has been regarded as merely decorative, pleasurable, or fashionable. In all these capacities, the dancing body remains a natural object, incapable of agency or intelligence. Through its persistent interrogation of a large theoretical and methodological perspectives, Cultural theory has begun to overturn these assumptions about the body and to insist that non-verbal aspects of human experience deserve serious consideration in the humanities' inquiries into human identity and behavior. In the same effectiveness, the critical examination of language of a dance libretto as a verbal description of a non-verbal agency in a performance experience, relevant to both cultural theory and dance research, could help me to reveal an inedit relationship between signs (no more al the level of the lexical meaning, as in Section 1, but at the level of the signifiers), and the capability of the dancing body's staging of tradition and culture ideas.

This section try to reach the second objective of the proposal: to use these librettos as a lever for understanding the world in which they arose, for elucidating the cultural identity of the dancing body, the dancing individual, and the dancing group.

• **Section 3 (Sociology) Dance libretto as social text:**

Moreover, the history of the dance libretto is to some extent the history of society's ideas about the communicative powers or purpose of dance. Through the libretto, dance can be analyzed in the socioeconomic and political contexts of its creation and performance, together with an understanding of the development of its various forms in modern societies. As a form of social and cultural production, the dance libretto participated in the global exchange of goods, serving as a symbolic text of regional or national identity and participating in projects of colonization and decolonization

through which power relations among governments and businesses are articulated. For example, in the *Ballo secondo di Americani* of Vincenzo Monari (1770), set in a generic American country («Campagna Americana»), and in which unknown Europeans captured by superstitious people from Northern America («Popoli dell'America Settentrionale») are saved from ritual sacrifice thanks to a providential exchange of new Europeans goods for their freedom. Or, for the ideology of the conquest in the project of colonization, we can see among others the dance librettos of Gaspare Angiolini, *Alzira o gli Americani* (1782), Giambattista Giannini, *Gli Europei nell'isola de' Cannibali* (1793) or Lorenzo Panzieri, *Orangzeb o sia la conquista della Guinea* (1821). A new area of inquiry that promises to be very rich for the present of my research is the sociology of the performing arts: as an emerging subfield, the sociology of the performing arts touches on many core themes of sociological theory, the rise of modernity and its accompanying processes of rationalization. The sociology of the performing arts can broaden our understanding of the social context of theater, motion picture, drama, music, dance and opera. The relevance of the performing arts as part of, rather than separate from, social life is discussed in recent research on the significance of dance (Helen Thomas, *Dance, Modernity, and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance*), particularly its overlooked role in everyday political activism (Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography. Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). The “cultural objects” studied in the sociological of the performing arts (dance, opera, theater) also contribute to a better understanding of how they, as all the arts, are part of a social system (Niklas Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 2002). This notion can be very effective for the study of dance libretto as social text, and can lead to a better understanding of the global context of artistic work and the realization that ballet world, like other artistic fields, are social worlds with their own power dynamics, yet subordinated to larger power structures in society.

• **Referred works:**

The theoretical foci from which these three sections will arise are derived above all from Edward Said, for the idea of the text as a process rather than a finished product (*The world, the text, and the critic*, Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University

Press, 1983); Walter Benjamin (*On the concept of history*, New York: Classic Books America, 2009) and Michel de Certeau (*The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), for a “materialist” conception of history, society and everyday life; Jacques Derrida (*Margins of philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Judith Butler (*Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory* [1988], in *The Performance Studies Reader* [Second Edition], ed. by Henry Bial, New York and London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 187-99), for the connections between gender and performative acts; Homi K. Bhabha, for configuration as a mimicry of the colonial subject (*The location of culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994); Susan Leigh Foster, for the close relationship of dance with the narrative and imagination (*Choreography and narrative. Ballet’s staging of story and desire*, Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Pierre Bourdieu for the theoretical foundations which challenge conceptions of the body as a mere object by focusing on the relationships between personal identity, the human body and social practices (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, and *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984). Bourdieu’s theoretical insights are particularly important, for my present research, in grounding embodiment within sociological analysis in order to argue for a new understanding of the body as an agent actively involved in world making and in the production of thought and knowledge.

### **Nature of the project**

In the field of Dance History this study of the Italian dance librettos within a broad cultural and sociological framework has never been done before, and also we know little how the libretto sheds light on the larger social context; and how that context makes sense of the libretto. Here, for dance history in general, the novel setting (the libretto as hypertext) allows for the continued development of innovative research methods. In contrast to other forms of writing, the dance libretto, by virtue of its multivocality – through the invocation of languages of words, music and motion – provides a powerful lever for understanding the contemporary world.

But also they are a perfect vehicle for understanding culture broadly construed, because they stage popular values and ideas (including fantastic and magical

themes), understandings of gender differences (as in the construction of idealized bodies on stage), the colonial gazes (as in the character of the female slave) or racial repressive policies (the male slave, the cannibal, or the subaltern, in general). The focus on race, sex or ethnicity, and the analysis of how on stage the objects of the desire were constructed into a menacing threat to the social order, can help to set the terms of major cultural and political debates in Italy, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the field of the philological studies, this cultural and sociological approach will also be innovative and profitable. Here, one of my goal is to bring these dance librettos to life as full literary texts in critical editions with commentary and textual history. Necessarily this will involve consideration of the literary sources upon which the librettos were drawn and the social influences, cultural practices, and stage theories which shaped them. Developing ideas from recent social and critical theory, this study will proposes a new way of understanding the librettos as literature and as hypertexts. It is my hope that other scholars, not simply those interested in dance history, but those whose focus is on Italian culture and cultural artifacts more generally will be able to find new insights into issues of memory, gender, race, popular culture, spirituality and identity politics in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Relevance of the project**

The research proposed is based on the acquisition of new methodologies from cultural and sociological studies, to improve the possibilities of valuation of dance librettos as a special literature, in the area of dance history, that resulted from the interaction among socialised norms of existence, cultural politics, body ideologies, stage theories and individualised senses of identity.

In Europe, this project can help to change strategies of reading and studying this special kind of texts. In the absence of formal dance notation or extensive descriptions of the performance aspects of European dance entertainment in the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century, librettos continue to be a major source for the study of ballet history and theory, and without new ways of reading and evaluating of these texts, it would have been very difficult indeed to know what those ballets were about. A major benefit will be gained at European level with to explain the significance of dance as a mode of communication in its sociocultural context and to provide the conceptual



apparatus for analyzing dance literature and movement at all levels of social interaction.