

## Structural shapes and patterns of choreographic direction in the art of ballet (19th-21st centuries)

Anelia Yaneva

**Abstract.** The text reveals various constituents of choreographic direction: structure of dramaturgy, construction of conflict, dominant dance forms, genre features and changes in genre characteristics. The aim was to derive recurring principles that would form patterns of choreographic direction. This analysis is based on works from the 19th century - romantic and classical ballets, and created in the 20th and 21st centuries - drama ballet, dance theatre and total dance theatre.

**Keywords:** choreography, ballet directing, ballet, drama ballet, dance theatre

Choreographic direction<sup>1</sup> aspires to build a hierarchy of individual constituents: choreography, dramaturgy, music, stage design and costume. It monitors the leading line of the production, the relationships between the characters, the concept of the choreographer-director. The structure of dramaturgy in the respective production, the construction of the conflict, the dominant dance forms, the juxtapositions between the different dance and non-dance techniques - all these make merely a part of the differences that mark the individual periods in the development of ballet art and the patterns of choreographic direction.

In the 1830s and 1840s, trends of romanticism entered ballet art, with this fundamentally having changed the pattern of any individual ballet work.

**Romantic ballets** would typically feature a two-act structure where the first act would unfold in the real world, whereas the second act would be dedicated to an unreal world of dreams and visions. Dance would predominate, with character dances in the first act and classical dances in the second act. The pantomime would typically epitomize the bad character who would not dance,

---

<sup>1</sup> I would here like to remind that *choreographic direction* exists uniquely in the *narrative dance show*.

such a bad character would be unable to overtop the ordinary to rise in the dance. Therefore, they would only remain a pantomime “speaker”. The conflict would be resolved by means of comparisons between dancing and non-dancing, respectively rich in spirit - poor in spirit.

In the second half of the 19th century, however, due to economic upheavals, the art of ballet in Western Europe lost its power. Where it did find a new haven was Imperial Russia. In the work of Marius Petipa, a large part of the romantic ballets was transferred and staged again in St. Petersburg, however the aesthetics altered and *the romantic ballets* became *classical ballets*, as they are known today.

*The classical ballets* would usually consist of an increased number of acts and would typically have three to four. The presence of pantomime would grow into entire episodes - at the beginning and at the end of each act, pantomime would tell what has happened. However, a large dance fragment would be placed in the centre of the act - then the eventfulness would stop and, in the dance, form known as *Grand pas d'ensemble*, the characters would indulge in their feelings and dreams. And this is how eventfulness (in the pantomime episodes) and lack of eventfulness and timelessness would alternate, in the dance *Grand pas d'ensemble*. The conflict would be resolved through comparisons of dancing and non-dancing performers.

“*Season of Russ*” (1909-1929) organized by Sergei Diaghilev played an important role in the development of ballet art in the 20th century. Diaghilev, without being a choreographer, inspired some new searches in ballet art and provoked choreographers, musicians and artists to go into experiments well beyond the established styles. The merit of Diaghilev and the “*Season of Russ*”, managed by him, lies in reducing any work’s timing to one act<sup>2</sup>. This automatically would rule out any large-screen elaborate dance scenes where the character would indulge their feelings, with nothing happening in terms of eventfulness. In order to understand the plot, attempts were made to fit the pantomime into the dance without dividing them into separate layers. The role of montage of individual episodes tended to be growing. New genre forms surged in the oeuvre of Mikhail Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, etc., although the choreographers themselves were carriers of different dance styles.

In the case of *Mikhail Fokine*, the emphasis would be on building dances closer to the real lifestyle and real life<sup>3</sup>. Attempts at authenticity and closeness to reality would extend to the ensemble as well. Fokine created a colourful ensemble in which everyone was supposed to bring their individuality. Typically, the plot would rest upon on a mosaic of situations, and it would be **the situations (the eventfulness) that would give rise to the dances**, and pantomime effects would be intertwined in the different ways of dancing (this is especially visible in *Petrushka*, the *Ballerina*, and the *Moor* in the ballet “*Petrushka*”).

---

<sup>2</sup> The reason being these would need to be easily movable during their tours around Western Europe.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of choreography and the ability to elegantly and aesthetically present different feelings, Fokine is considered an impressionist in ballet (with this especially being the case of “*The Dying Swan*” and “*Chopiniana*”).

*Vaslav Nijinsky* would move in a direction quite opposite to Fokine's. He tended to unify the ensemble, turning it into a common mass, united in a group of men, a group of women or a group of elders ("The Rite of Spring"). It appears as if dance was purged of emotionality ("The Afternoon of a Faun"), or else, overloaded with emotions ("The Rite of Spring")<sup>4</sup>. What dominated was dance rather than situations. Vaslav Nijinsky was a discoverer of new techniques in dancing. His interpretation of the dance possessed some sort of primal nature and a sense of devotion and connection with the divine and the Cosmos<sup>5</sup>. There was no conflict. No comparisons between the various styles of dancing were sought. His productions would consist of individual fragments, and the montage of fragments would outline a certain storytelling.

*Bronislava Nijinska* would make some attempts to **stylize some folk customs** by getting back to the symbiosis of dancing and singing characters<sup>6</sup> ("Le Renard", "Les noces"). Each scene appeared as a standalone *étude*<sup>7</sup>. There was no conflict, and the sense was achieved by means of the montage of individual scenes. The impression was that of a street theatre performed by itinerant actors<sup>8</sup>. In "Romeo and Juliet", Bronislava Nijinska juxtaposed past and present (the play "Romeo and Juliet" as performed and the relationships between the actors themselves participating in the play), which was a concept that would be further reflected in later productions staged by Béjart and Neumeier.

Around mid-20th century, two opposite tendencies were noticeable in the plot productions.

*Drama ballet* would continue the quests of Fokine and Alexander Gorsky (from the beginning of the 20th century) for situational realism and a colourful ensemble, each featuring his own individual plasticity and behaviour, but would extend these searches to larger forms - ballets in three or four acts. *Drama ballet* actually returned the scale of *classical ballets* (meaning the times of Petipa), however adding to this the intention to saturate the movements with more content. A distinctive feature of *drama ballet* is the attempts at punctual dance translation of well-known literary works such as plays or novels, among others. What was leading there was the director's concept, i.e., the ability to devise situations. Dance there would appear as secondary, movements would be interpreted in a new way, saturated by expressiveness of pantomime.

On the other hand, *Martha Graham* was quite uninterested in eventfulness. The plot was only marked, but without being brought out in the familiar narrative

---

<sup>4</sup> Nijinsky, particularly in "The Rite of Spring", is a clear example of expressionism.

<sup>5</sup> That direction would find its continuation in part of Maurice Béjart's productions.

<sup>6</sup> Bronislava Nijinska was someone who definitely showed interest in synthetic works.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in "Les nocés", some individual stages of a typical folklore-base Russian wedding were reincarnated: entanglement of the bride's hair, preparation of the groom by his friends, saying farewell to the relatives, a wedding party, however, women dancing en pointe, despite of using some depicting elements resembling what were then Russian habits and dance.

<sup>8</sup> The same tendency would continue in some productions staged by Feodor Lopukhov ("The Nutcracker", etc.).

form, built on the principle of exposition-complication-climax-resolution. The emphasis was laid on what the female character was living through. What prevailed was expression<sup>9</sup>, while the juxtapositions between different ways of dancing made visible the conflict between the characters and the events.

In the second half of the 20th century, the directions were set by Maurice Béjart.

**Maurice Béjart** mixes historical eras and deities from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism into one. Sometimes they are refracted through the Christian world-view; other times - through the eyes of modern man, for whom beliefs are blurred and valued as exotic. Interactions or even **conflict between different civilization patterns or between generations**, are often achieved in the comparisons, which predetermines the differences in the way of dancing.

In this respect, Béjart is closer to the searches of Bronislava Nijinska. It is no coincidence that the ballet "Romeo and Juliet" as staged by Béjart (to music by Hector Berlioz) recalls the same title of Bronislava Nijinska, i.e., juxtapositions between rehearsing artists and a rehearsed play, but Béjart takes this line to terrifying proportions, including in the dance episodes both live spoken words and audio recordings of speech, explosions, automatic weapons fire or bombs falling. Béjart would juxtapose dance and spoken word (as with Bronislava Nijinska), but would add some video projections and audio recordings to them. The conflict there is not direct, instead, it is presented by means of a **montage of large civilization fragments and opposition of world-views** - of love and hatred.

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the productions of several choreographers such as John Neumeier, Mats Ek, Matthew Bourne, and Boris Eifman, would arouse interest.

**John Neumeier** interweaves different time and civilization segments, but with him they are clearly marked as present, past and even earlier times. This allows him to comment in his works on the contemporary vision through the eyes of the past (memories) or even earlier times such as the effects of read books or plays. For this purpose, Neumeier uses the principle of *theatre-within-the-theatre*. And the montage.

**Matthew Bourne** also uses the principle of *theatre-within-the-theatre*, but he is considerably more detailed in his narrative, with more even naturalistic details.

**Boris Eifman** recalls the approaches of Matthew Bourne in the direct, almost naturalistic presentation of some scenes. Similar to *drama ballet*, the starting point for its productions are literary primary sources, but what distinguishes it from *drama ballet* is its authorial reading - the action is brought into modernity and is subordinated to today's perceptions of events.

**Mats Ek** often changes the relationships between characters by presenting them through the lens of the grotesque.

---

<sup>9</sup> The expression was also leading for the productions of Marie Wiegmann, but they completely denied the event (plot) and for this reason are not considered in the present text, since they do not fall into the framework of plot works.

\* \* \*

Traditionally, **conflict between characters** is illustrated through **contrast in choreography**. For this purpose, various patterns are used:

- The first pattern achieves contrast in choreography through the opposition “dance-pantomime”. This is most often the case of romantic and classical ballets.

- The second pattern compares (confronts) a number of different dance styles, i.e., classical dance, character dance, modern dance, historical dance, with more modern productions often resorting to even disco, break dance, dancesport or acrobatics.

- There is another pattern that builds contrasts against individual plastic characteristics for each of the protagonists. Especially for the respective character, distinguishing marks are sought in the details such as tempo of movement, how he/she holds his/her hands, tilt of the head, bending of the body. This pattern is important for Fokine, Alexander Gorsky, and representatives of *drama ballet*.

- In more recent times, contrast is also achieved when different styles of dance (or individual plasticity) are juxtaposed with other stage means such as speech, singing or multimedia.

To illustrate the contrast (conflict), the second pattern is most often used. Moreover, in ballets from different periods of development - those staged by John Neumeier<sup>10</sup>, Maurice Béjart<sup>11</sup>, John Cranko, Yuri Grigorovich, Boris Eifman, Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne.

The third pattern is characteristic of the productions of Mikhail Fokine, Alexander Gorsky, Rostislav Zakharov, Leonid Lavrovsky, Ninette de Valois, John Cranko, Kenneth MacMillan, Birgit Cullberg, and others. They rely on the individual plasticity of the protagonists, which, of course, can combine elements of classical, modern or other types of dance, but the dominant emphasis is on the differences in stepping, bending of the body, manner and tempo of movement, etc., which shape up distinguishable individuality of the character.

In the fourth pattern, in addition to contrast in dance styles, contrast is also achieved in dance-speech-multimedia combinations. This is most characteristic of the works of Maurice Béjart and Mats Ek. The speech is performed live by the artists who dance. But gradually the interactions between dance and speech give way to the interactions between dance and multimedia. Again, the juxtapositions are real vs. unreal, with multimedia taking on the functions of an “unreal world” - episodes from the past (memories) or dreams (for the future).

For example, Matthew Bourne’s “Cinderella” shows the bombings of the Second World War through archival footage. In Eifman’s ballet “Onegin”, archive footage of the riots in Russia at the time of the 1991 coup is played. On the

---

<sup>10</sup> Neumeier’s style of staging is characterized by a contrast in choreography laying across the three timelines, where each timeline would be solved using a stylistically different choreography, i.e., modern dance, classical dance or historical dances.

<sup>11</sup> Béjart’s style of staging would also achieve contrast in choreography by comparing the styles of dancing in each individual view, however as Béjart would present three civilization timelines, dance would demonstrate modern disco, Indian (or Japanese) ritual dance (in “Bhakti” or in “Legend of the 40 Samurai”), and modern dance.

other hand, multimedia visualises the dream of paternal protection in Matthew Bourne's "Swan Lake"; another example being Tatyana's dream of intimacy with Onegin. To some extent, this contrast is reminiscent of the pattern of the romantic ballet - "real vs. unreal world", but here the unreal world is presented through the achievements of another kind of art - cinema rather than through any kind of specific choreography.

\* \* \*

**Choreographic forms** are structure-determining in the dance work and in the patterns of choreographic direction. A technique is often used in which the same choreographic form appears periodically in the fabric of the production, and each time the form is the same, but the content and the feelings have changed. What the use of the same form achieves is balance in the structure of the work, on the one hand, and on the other, it makes the change in moods and interactions between the characters more visible. Over the centuries, however, the preferred choreographic forms have changed.

While in romantic and classical ballets the main structural unit is the **variation**, with Mikhail Fokine and Martha Graham, it is the **monologue** (again a solo performance, but imbued with much more and conflicting feelings).

The prevailing form, which is characteristic in productions staged by Maurice Béjart, Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne, is the **duet**.

The main structural unit in John Neumeier's staging tends to be the **trio**, which naturally, is in accordance with the three timelines viewed in his productions. But there are three timelines in Béjart's works, too. The difference is that the three timelines with Neumeier are present, past and even earlier time, while with Béjart everything is happening now, but the characters come from three different cultural and civilization patterns. For example, in "Legend of the 40 Samurai", there is a European couple - young people; an elderly Japanese couple; the legendary samurai presented as exhibits of the historical museum visited by both the Japanese and the Europeans. This can also be read as present (the European couple), past (the elderly Japanese couple), even earlier time (the samurai legend). The juxtapositions between the lover Don Juan and the canonized saint John of the Cross (in the ballet "À la recherche de Don Juan"<sup>12</sup>) follow the same principle. However, this principle in the other Béjart's ballets is not so distinguishable.

For Yury Grigorovich, a **trio** is like thinking "for themselves", when the story action has stopped, and the characters visualize their dreams. But the presence of a trio and the location, i.e., "which character is at the centre", make visible the relationships in the love triangle. In fact, Grigorovich "triples" the monologue and turns the trio into three parallel monologues.

The "role" of **ensembles** was also on the rise. Protagonist-antagonist interactions were no longer sufficient, it seems.

Ensembles can be composed by real actors or taken from unreal visions and dreams of the character.

---

<sup>12</sup> In French, which is the original language of this work (see Craine, Mackrel 2010, 54-55).

In the romantic and classical ballets, the **real ensembles** were the same both in terms of their dramatic function and behaviour and therefore less noticeable than the unreal ones. What dominated in the productions of Mikhail Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska and throughout the *drama ballet* period were the real ensemble scenes, where each of the group would stand out with his/her distinguishable individuality and would thus contribute to the multi-colour nature of the ensemble even when the ensemble is interpreted as a collective actor.

Real ensembles would also prevail in works treated as *dance theatre*, with Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne; production with Boris Eifman and Yury Grigorovich, who worked with the scales of large real ensembles, often functioning on the principle of “theme and variations” - with an additional increase in impact.

**Unreal ensemble scenes** would usually represent the dreams or visions of the characters.

One of the main approaches was to “**multiply**” the character. This pattern would acquire its shape in the times of the romantic ballet, when the ballerina (in her role of an unreal creature such as a sylphide or a fairy or a vilisse) would be surrounded by her doppelgänger (their number would be usually 32), who are also unreal creatures. The protagonist was supposed to find his beloved among the rest of her copies, and this is a test of his love for her.

The same pattern is observed in the classic readings of romantic ballets - as staged by Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

But even modern ballets would apply the “**multiplying**” of the character, which is a principle borrowed from the romantic ballet. The idea persists that such “multiplying” is a sign of a richer spiritual life and a variety of feelings that a dancer alone cannot express. Their function is also preserved, i.e., unreal ensembles arise only when the character experiences stronger feelings (as in “Sleeping Beauty” as staged by Mats Ek).

However, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether the ensembles are **real actors or unreal dreams and visions**. For example, the pairs of lovers who enlarge and repeat the combinations of Romeo and Juliet in Béjart’s production are read as unreal, but by the same token they could be the real dancers rehearsing Shakespeare’s play. This move allows for a fusion of their functions - that of real vs. unreal.

With Neumeier, the structure is so complex that it is not necessary to introduce unreal ensembles, because anyway the past and even earlier time (in memories) are unreal compared to the present. The real in the present also participate as unreal in the memories.

In modern ballets, there is also such a variant: the protagonists formed in a **duet** are opposed to **ensemble** antagonists. This changes the familiar model of previous periods, when the ensemble (real or not) supported the protagonist, duplicating some of his movements. The meaning changes as well, read as two against society.

\* \* \*

And here we come to the **ways of creating choreography**.

In the first, **the movements are dominant**.

For the second, **what is leading is the situation**. It is from the specific situation that the movements appear, already as secondary movements.

When those movements constitute a priority, choreography will be built upon the principle of **choreographic symphonism**, which means interactions between the female character's dance and the dance of the accompanying ensemble. This approach makes part of both romantic and classical ballets, but is also present in some modern productions ("Sleeping Beauty" by Mats Ek, "Spartacus" and "The Legend of Love" by Yuri Grigorovich, "Onegin" by Boris Eifman, to name a few). At the same time, *choreographic symphonism* does not necessarily rest upon classical dance only. In recent decades, it has also been used in productions with a predominant presence of modern dance.

What is considered as primary in the second variant is **making up situations**, while movements stemming from a specific situation would remain secondary. What can be observed here is the interaction with dramatic theatre and particularly with Fokine and Alexander Gorsky, in the *drama ballet* or in the *dance theatre*. Even then though, some varieties may be found: while the *drama ballet* will mainly use movements typical of classical and character dance, the *dance theatre* will recourse to the toolkit used in modern dance. This is the case of Mats Ek, Matthew Bourne, and Boris Eifman's staging.

\* \* \*

According to **the way how the plot is presented**, two variants may be observed: chronological and retrospective order.

Most choreographers prefer the **chronological order** of the presentation. But even in this chronological order there may be some modifications. For example, the ballets of the 19th century would present the plot in a sequential chronological action that passes from episode to episode, and those episodes would never overlap. With this pattern applied, the juxtapositions that would stand out would be those of soloists and ensemble and of different dance and non-dance techniques. They may be easily traceable because of the chronology of their exposure.

While in the 20th century, especially in the productions of Matthew Bourne and Mats Ek, partly also of Boris Eifman, the chronological order would develop on several levels - when, before the previous action is over, a new one is included; or when two or more parallel events occur in the scene. Thus, in chronological order, **parallel action** is achieved.

With Neumeier and Béjart (partially in "Sleeping Beauty" by Mats Ek and "Cinderella" by Matthew Bourne), there is not only parallel action, but also **parallel timelines**, combining characters, situations, civilization models from different historical times. This is how each timeline will have an action chronology of its own.

**Retrospective (non-chronological) order** would be less frequently used. For example, in "Carmen" staged by Mats Ek, action starts from the finale



and returns to the beginning, with the central narration going according to its chronology before eventually getting again to the finale. “Cinderella” as staged by Matthew Bourne was structured in large arrays going from the middle to the beginning, yet not following their chronology.

\*\*\*

20th century features **montage**, which is increasingly frequent and applied as a principle of structuring the components of a choreographic work.

Unlike chronological order of narration, montage will juxtapose (or collide) forms and episodes that *do not follow a pattern of chronological sequence*, they are scattered across the entire show at shorter or longer distances. In Sergei Eisenstein’s opinion, “montage is not a thought composed of interconnected fragments, but a *thought arising from the collision of two independent fragments* (dramatic principle)” (Eisenstein 2012, 623). Furthermore, montage is also treated as a form of building contrasts, but formulated as a *collision*, it is much more effective and visible. It is on this dramatic principle of *collision* between two (or more) scenes (forms/emotions) that the choreographic direction of recent decades would be typically built upon.

It is a matter of a montage (or “collision”) between separate scenes; between separate worlds and religions; between “real” stage action and unreal multimedia action broadcast on screen; between present, past and even earlier time; between events occurring at different times, differing in style, impact, religion or world-views. Therefore, the choreographic director’s concept would not rest upon the sequence of the episodes (like in the chronological model), it would rather seep through the seams joining the episodes.

If we apply Eisenstein’s wordings of montage (Eisenstein 2012, 357), montages in choreographic direction would look as follows:

- *Parallel montage* of two (or more) parallel actions that are performed at the same time on the stage, this being the most common form. Here again, the placement of the characters on the stage is important: often the more important events and interacting characters are brought to the fore.

- *Montage in counterpoint* is when actions or inactions are presented at the same time on stage, but in two opposite emotional (dynamic/tempo) flows, relying specifically on the juxtaposition between them. This model also exists in classical ballets<sup>13</sup>, but in the 20th century, montage in counterpoint was used much more actively. The comparisons between the actions of the Chevalier des Grieux and Manon, on the one hand, towards Marguerite and Armand in Neumeier’s “The Lady of the Camellias” are indicative; or the performances of the young Nijinsky, in which the already fading Nijinsky is included through his memories (in Neumeier’s “Nijinsky”).

- A *pictorial montage* is montage that confronts the same dance forms (duets, trios, quartets) with varying emotionality and in a different time context: an example thereof would be the trio in “The Legend of Love” by Grigorovich.

---

<sup>13</sup> A further example of this would be the variation of *Nikiya* lamenting the betrayal of *Solor*, and at the same time the happiness of *Gamzatti*, the betrothed of *Solor* in Petipa’s “La Bayadère”.

- A *meaningful montage* of separate, repeated actions (Tatyana's letter to Onegin and Onegin's letter to Tatyana) separated by another stage action, which helps the audience to follow both the chronology of events and repetitions, even though they are not in chronological order.

In the 20th century, when cinema implemented the *principle of montage* as the main one, it also migrated to choreography through its more complex varieties, namely, the *pictorial montage* and the *meaningful montage*, while juxtapositions were at much shorter distances.

In addition, the choreographer "collides" the important dance forms, types of dance, dance themes, but also directs the viewer's attention by means of *accents* that are specific to the art of ballet such as a visual-compositional centre<sup>14</sup>; stop motion<sup>15</sup>; game with movement-statics interchange; then dance-mise-en-scène interchange; interchange of dance - pantomime; frozen gestures; and compositional juxtaposition of episodes (Eisenstein 2012, 229-230). These all make the conflict visible at shorter distances.

In fact, the *principle of montage* begins to operate when ballet art accumulate enough specific codes, which the audience more easily begins to decipher. Therefore, we can say without a doubt that with their appearance, the cinema and the computer have contributed to the complication of dramaturgy and direction in choreography. Because they allow the "opening of new windows": installation of several semantic layers, parallel actions, combining past, present and future or different civilization models.

\* \* \*

As a whole, four basic **models of choreographic (ballet) directing** may be distinguished:

- *Romantic/classical ballet directing*, where dance is the dominant means of expression, and the plots are so constructed as to allow for as many dances as possible: character (demi-character) dances for the real creatures, classical dance and pointe technique for the unreal creatures, and pantomime or grotesque for the negative characters. And the protagonist is a mediator between the real and the unreal world and successfully dances both classical and character dance.

- *Drama ballet*, whose predecessors can be found in Alexander Gorsky's *mimodramas* and Mikhail Fokine's *dance pantomimes*. *Drama ballets* by Zakharov, Lavrovsky, MacMillan, and Cranko are attempts to achieve a meaningful and functional fusion between drama, mime, pantomime and in general dramatic theatre with dance art. A hallmark is the invention of parallel situations that pad the story action with multiple parallel storylines. The situations are leading, and the dance (condensed with the help of pantomime) appears as a consequence of

---

<sup>14</sup> Important actions, events, characters being placed in the centre, and unimportant actions, events, characters being on the periphery of the scene.

<sup>15</sup> Emphasizing the poses of the participants while the others continue to dance.

the fictional situation. Montage becomes the main concept, which also aims to approach drama theatre and cinema.

• *Dance theatre*, which, according to Patrice Pavis's opinion, aims at achieving a theatre-like impact<sup>16</sup> and where the fusion of dance and theatre is much more convincing. Dance theatre tends to draw from the precedent models. Quite much like the drama ballet, the main line is thickened introducing multiple parallel happenings/situations and it is precisely those situations that trigger the dances. There is a difference though and it is that drama ballet is dominated by classical dance (with embedded character dances) (albeit with the idea of saturating drama ballet with new meanings through pantomime), while dance theatre is dominated by modern dance. In addition, dance theatre borrows means from romantic ballet - "multiplying" doppelgänger, when the protagonist experiences a variety of feelings. The difference here (versus romantic ballets) is that dance theatre never opens a second, unreal world, and the whole narration remains within the real action. Dance theatre also includes speech, either live or playing an audio record<sup>17</sup>.

*Total dance theatre*, which, in addition to dance and speech, includes multimedia and audio recordings with specific noises - explosions, shooting, planes taking off, combinations between live speech and speech broadcast through audio recordings<sup>18</sup>. This complicates the structure of the performance as it also relies on a better prepared audience that is capable of synthesizing the separate messages into one.

\* \* \*

Gradually, using combinations of "neighbouring" genre forms, the boundaries begin to blur. Fokine's *Dance pantomimes* and Alexander Gorsky's *mimodramas* feed drama ballet. And some of the drama ballet productions<sup>19</sup> feed productions featuring the genre characteristics typical of dance theatre<sup>20</sup>, which in turn makes use of the approaches embedded in romantic ballets.

However, this is far from implying that precedent genre forms have disappeared having fed the subsequent forms.

*Drama ballet* continues to exist even today, moreover, is never treated as a dying genre form. A very successful example is the ballet "**The Winter's**

---

<sup>16</sup> "Dance theatre is not so much theatre transformed into dance, movement and choreography as it is a dance acting as theatre" (see Pavis 2002, 394).

<sup>17</sup> And it is here that we need to make the sense distinction between *dance theatre* and *Tanztheater*. *Dance theatre* may be considered the successor of the ancient mysteries, when speech, dance, music, and pantomime had the same purpose and suggestion. *Tanztheater* is a product of Pina Bausch, composed of fragments, where speech and dancing are pregnant with different (frequently diametrically opposed) messages.

<sup>18</sup> Mostly in Maurice Béjart's productions.

<sup>19</sup> Some examples thereof would include Cranko's "Onegin", Lavrovsky's "Romeo and Juliet", with the same ballet later staged by MacMillan.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Eifman's "Onegin" (2009, 2012), Béjart's "Romeo and Juliet" (1966), and also the same ballet as staged by Sasha Waltz (2007), Mats Ek (2013), and Matthew Bourne (2019).

**Tale**<sup>21</sup> after the eponymous work of Shakespeare (2014, The Royal Ballet, London). Christopher Wheeldon's choreography<sup>22</sup> rehabilitates the big form - the three-act ballet. The production involves sufficient detail (in the first act) while narrating the story of the birth and friendship of the two future kings, Polixenes and Leontes, the love between Leontes and Hermione, which turned them into a happy family, awarded with a son heir to the throne and expecting their second child. Leontes's suspicion that his wife is cheating with his friend Polixenes is recreated through an alternation of real and unreal scenes that change literally in seconds - Hermione shows Polixenes various sculptural groups in the royal museum, while Leontes hides behind the sculptures and instead of their secular conversation sees the two characters in sexual poses. This alternation of real action and unreal representations is achieved without the introduction of additional characters, but only by changing the lighting and changing the positions of the characters. Simultaneously with the strengthening of the sexual subtext in the poses that Leontes imagines, the plasticity of Leontes himself also changes, and he begins to look more and more like a spider. This effect is also heightened when Leontes receives the newborn baby (Perdita) and barely refrains from strangling it. As in the best drama ballets, the props help to recreate the fable - at the birth of their first child, Leontes presents his wife Hermione with a locket, which she subsequently places in the little girl's basket, which, by order of Leontes, must be thrown out of the palace. Perdita's growth, found by a shepherd who raises her and adorns her with her locket when she comes of age, is recreated in detail (in the second act); her love for Florizel, not suspecting that he is the son of King Polixenes; the reluctance of Polixenes to consent to this marriage; the flight of the young. Also detailed (in the first and third acts) is recreated the gradual madness of Leontes, and after the sea storm, when the two youths end up in Leontes's palace, it is the medallion that prompts Leontes and he recognizes his grown daughter Perdita and consents with her marriage with Florizel, only realizing at the end that he is the son of his friend King Polixenes, who would later become his enemy. The wedding of the two young people is also strengthened by the unexpected revival of Queen Hermione, who everyone thought was dead, but in fact was hidden by the lady-in-waiting Paulina. The choreography is glamorous - in the style of classical dance (the women dance en pointe), but with the exception of the second act, where the dances "turn weightier", the production is highly dramatic and has the effect of a theatrical performance thanks to the thoughtful gestures and poses, the thoughtful montage of parallel actions, montage in counterpoint and meaningful montage. It is another proof that the drama ballet is not out of date, as long as it is set correctly.

---

<sup>21</sup> Music by Joby Talbot.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Wheeldon was the author of the ballet version of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (2011) at The Royal Ballet, London.



**Fig. 1.** Vasily Medvedev’s “Pilate’s Dream”. Music by Stefan Dimitrov. Stara Zagora State Opera, 2022 - the Master (Yeshua) mourned by Margarita (Mary Magdalene) and crucified in the hands of Behemoth (Judas) and Woland (Photo: Stara Zagora State Opera)

This is also the direction of how the ballet “**Pilate’s Dream**”<sup>23</sup> (2022, Stara Zagora State Opera) acts on the public, with Vasily Medvedev being credited for both the choreography and direction thereof and produced after Bulgakov’s “The Master and Margarita”. This is a two-act production, with “present” and “past” intertwining in the images of the Master (who also performs Yeshua), of Margarita (who is also Mary Magdalene), of the cat Behemoth (who is also Judas) (Fig. 1). Only Woland and Pilate remain without a second artistic image. In keeping consistency with drama ballet traditions, ensemble scenes dominate, but not so much as independent actors, but rather as a feature of the central characters or of the historical time of action. Those who dance on the stage are pioneers (schoolchildren who are members of the Communist All-Union Organization of Pioneers in the Soviet Union, sort of peers to the scouts in the West, *Translator’s Note*), students, agents of the State Political Directorate (Fig. 2), citizens, madmen - all of them together represent the socialist reality in Moscow; apostles and followers surround Yeshua (Fig. 3); legionnaires, priests,

<sup>23</sup> Music by Stefan Dimitrov, libretto by Yana Temiz, choreography and direction by Vasily Medvedev, stage design and costumes by Pavol Jurash, première 16 October 2022 on the stage of the National Palace of Culture, Sofia, a production of the Stara Zagora State Opera.



**Fig. 2.** Vasily Medvedev’s “Pilate’s Dream”. Music by Stefan Dimitrov. Stara Zagora State Opera, 2022 - agents of the State Political Directorate burn the Master’s books (Photo: Stara Zagora State Opera)



**Fig. 3.** Vasily Medvedev’s “Pilate’s Dream”. Music by Stefan Dimitrov. Stara Zagora State Opera, 2022 - Yeshua and the Twelve Apostles (Photo: Stara Zagora State Opera)



**Fig. 4.** Vasily Medvedev’s “Pilate’s Dream”. Music by Stefan Dimitrov. Stara Zagora State Opera, 2022 - Woland’s ball (Photo: Stara Zagora State Opera)

dancing hetairai are Pilate’s entourage. The most impressive, of course, is the ball, where, in addition to Woland, Behemoth, Hella, Margarita, Woland’s guests dance in truly lavish and extravagant choreographic canvases (Fig. 4). Vasily Medvedev has attempted to modernize the classical dance with his incredible air jumps and pointe effects, combining them with elements of modern dance - mainly unturned legs and shoulder movements. I would not say that a homogeneous fusion was achieved, but the ability to portray so many characters, different in style and historical residence, without resulting in “a mess” is really impressive. Especially when the show is enhanced by Pavol Jurash’s spectacular costumes. This is a further proof that great multi-act ballets are not to be ignored; that *drama ballet* is not a relic compared to its more modern sibling, i.e., *dance theatre*<sup>24</sup>.

There is, of course, the opposite option, i.e., not every inclusion of speech and multimedia would automatically turn a work into *dance theatre*, or else, into *total dance theatre*. The choreographer-director’s lack of concept makes their production a “blind” copy of the literary original or of another choreographer.

---

<sup>24</sup> The same would apply to the classical dance, which also finds a place in the new drama ballet works; in the neoclassicism of George Balanchine; “disguised” as polycentricity in the productions of William Forsythe, Wayne McGregor, etc. Through the aerial flight of classical dance and the earthy tumbling of modern dance, a parallel between the elevated and the degraded is achieved in more than one contemporary choreography.

And when gimmicks are used just for the sake of effect, the performance often turns into “the many”, aiming to impress, just as children use loanwords from foreign languages just to meaninglessly demonstrate their skills.

A recent example thereof is the première of “**Anna Karenina**” at the **Sofia Opera and Ballet (2023)**<sup>25</sup>. The said production has a genre characteristic of *drama ballet*, strictly following the literary source, Leo Tolstoy’s eponymous novel. A host of actors are included that are difficult to distinguish due to the fact that they all express themselves in classical dance (and pointe technique for the women). The ensembles impress with a variety of jumps and turns, interesting and unusual supports, and although they are quite unified, through many appearances and hidings, they create an impression of polyphony in the dance. The presence of the protagonists - Anna Karenina, Alexei Karenin, and Alexei Vronsky - is impressive. To all these marks of *drama ballet* some taken from the *dance theatre* were added, which seem illustrative - periodically the ballet dancers would shout loudly or laugh hysterically, or deliberately sigh. But that does not make these speech scenes meaningful, they look as they are a sort of “garnish”. Following the same principle, multimedia of horse races is also included, which the ensemble follows with its back to the audience, and again this multimedia has no function in the dramaturgy of this production. The combination of real objects (chairs and armchairs that are carried around the stage) with unreal cups and spoons, with which the artists stir the tea through pantomime movements, is puzzling. The attempt the production to appear more theatrical makes it ambiguous as a genre, and by no means does the main feature of *drama ballet* cross the border into *dance theatre*. The general impression is of “gaudiness”.

\* \* \*

Therefore, it is a basic requirement that the techniques used are in harmony with the concept of the choreographer-director. Then there is a benefit to them as they make the art of ballet alive and appealing, whether it is the première of a newly created work or one with a centuries-old history, but interpreted in a different way. It is through their concepts that the productions of Mats Ek, Matthew Bourne, Grigorovich, Eifman, and Béjart are remembered.

And considering that, in addition to story ballet with its varieties<sup>26</sup>, there are also ballets without a plot, thematic and abstract ballets, the variety of forms and techniques is really promising. That is why the road remains open.

---

<sup>25</sup> Choreography and direction by Leo Mujić (formerly a dancer of Béjart). Music by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Première on 27 January 2023 at the Sofia Opera and Ballet.

<sup>26</sup> Which I analyze in this text.



## References

- Craine, Mackrel 2010:** D. Craine, J. Mackrel. The Oxford Dictionary of Dance. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Eisenstein 2012:** С. Айзенщайн. Монтажът. София: Изток-Запад, 2012. (S. Eisenstein. Montazhat. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2012.)
- Pavis 2002:** П. Павис. Речник на театъра. София: Колибри, 2002. (P. Pavis. Rechnik na teatarata. Sofia: Kolibri, 2002.)

**Prof. Anelia Yaneva, DSc**  
Institute of Art Studies  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
21 Krakra Str.  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria  
Email: anyana@abv.bg