The uneasy rise of English ballet

Ward, Edward (1667-1731). The Dancing Devils: or, the Roaring Dragon. A dumb farce. As it was lately acted at both houses, but particularly at one, with unaccountable success. London: A. Bettesworth at the Red-Lion, J. Bately at the Dove, in Pater-Noster-Row; and J. Brotherton at the Bible in Corhil, MDCCXXIV [1724]. ESTC Citation no. T32046; Foxon W56. Also issued as part of The Wand’ring Spy (London, 1724).

8vo. Modern calf, antique, ruled in blind, raised bands, red morocco label. Leaf of title, verso blank; pp. 3-18 The Dancing Devils: or, The Roaring Dragon, etc.; commentary in verse on the pantomime; pp. 19-70 summary in verse of the three-act pantomime.

The Dancing Devils accurately describes the characters, plot, settings, and elaborate special effects of a pantomime staged by John Rich, The Necromancer or Harlequin turn’d Doctor Faustus, in 1723 at Lincoln Inn Field, which has been called “one of the most elaborate pantomimes ever staged” (Troyer, 192).

Edward “Ned” Ward, an accomplished satirist and “humourist, of ‘low extraction,’” attended a performance of this pantomime. Disgusted by the inanities to which the old story of Faust had been subjected, and also to pantomime itself with its “dumb Action and Grimaces” (Dancing Devils, 18),
he wrote his own burlesque account which includes details of the competing pantomime by John Thurmond then playing at Drury Lane, Harlequin Doctor Faustus, with a Masque of the Deities.

Ward describes the elaborate special effects of the pantomime: a singing Helen of Troy, disappearing tables and exploding wines, a huge windmill in scene four (the structure used for most of the action of the scene), as well as dancing by the miller and his wife Joan. Faust, having turned to magic to defend himself from the devil, dresses as Punch and dances equally well without a head. A huge dragon appears, “monstrous as a Trojan Horse or Greenland Whale with glaring eyes and wings like a man of war [and] descends onto the stage.” Devils pour out of the dragon’s mouth and begin to dance. Finally, Faust is swallowed by the dragon, amid lightning and thunder.

Ward’s Dancing Devils provides not only a valuable account of Rich’s production at Lincoln Inn Field, but also his ridicule of the pantomime craze. As Troyer notes of its accuracy, “Ward’s account of the pantomime is substantially correct, both in the outline of scenes and in the details of the spectacular display. . . . Any spectator in the theatre must have seen the show unfold substantially as Ward presents it” (193).

Pantomime is described in one contemporary work as “Dancing, Gesture, [and] Action, intermix’d with Trick and Show” (Weaver, History of Mimes and Pantomimes (1728), p.1, qtd. in Troyer). With a decline in interest in serious classical works, the pantomime craze of the early 18th century began as playhouses struggled to fill their theatres. Playbills of the period showed a rapid abandonment of serious drama with the rise of light entertainments, often with commedia dell’arte type skits filled with stage comedy, special effects, and dancing.

For all their extravagance and use of spectacle for its own sake, these pantomimes provided the rich soil from which the English ballet uneasily grew at the hands of theoreticians who rethought the nature of theatrical dancing. John Weaver, the dancing master at Drury Lane, is credited with the first pantomime produced on the English stage. By 1716, he had produced The Loves of Mars and Venus—a new Entertainment in Dancing after the manner of the Antient Pantomimes. The same year he produced a pantomime of the same name on the subject of Perseus and Andromeda. After this, pantomime became a regular feature at Drury Lane.

In the early 18th century, while dancing was proper in court circles and popular in dance halls, it had not found a respectable place on the stage. Weaver influenced the social acceptance of dance, the professional training of dancing masters, and the way in which dance would be written about in England for nearly two hundred years (Cohen, 372). He was responsible for rethinking the theoretical and theatrical nature of dance. Weaver wanted theatrical dance to share the lofty and edifying aims of tragic drama. He introduced serious dramatic dance entertainments into the English theater, basing his experimental productions on the practice of ancient pantomimes and contemporary Italian harlequin dancers from French fairs. “Pantomime ballet, a drama in dance form that became formalized as the classical ballet d’action later in the century grew out of his
efforts. The new art form . . . thus found in Greco-Roman pantomime an ancient and authoritative antecedent, which granted intellectual and aesthetic propriety to the new dance form; even more importantly, ancient pantomime provided firm evidence that dance had once been an independent and dignified art able to narrate complex stories as well as express a wide range of human emotions” (Zanobi).

John Rich, author of *The Necromancer or Harlequin turn’d Doctor Faustus*, and his competitor John Thurmond of Drury Lane were well aware of the pioneering ballet theories of John Weaver. In fact, Thurmond had studied for years under Weaver, who in many ways was responsible for the rise in popularity of the pantomime genre, although he was not at all happy about the direction downward into extravagance and embellishment that the spectacles had diverted.

Like many others of his time, Ned Ward was not in favor of stage dancing, including ballets. He had written a satirical essay in 1703, *The Dancing School*, in which he attends a dance recital in hopes of seeing “fine Faces, Charming Bubbies, Plump Hips, [and] Soft Bellies.” Such was his perception of ballet studies. *Dancing Devils* was his attack not only on excessive spectacles of pantomime, but also of “dumb farce” stage actions, as he puts it. Ward’s satire reflects, unknowingly or not, the two roads that English theatrical dancing were traveling in the first part of the 18th century: low popular entertainment with elaborate pantomimes on the one hand and the beginning of the high art of English ballet on the other. This was the conflict between art and spectacle which English ballet would fight throughout the 18th century.

Edward Ward (1667-1731), humourist, of “low extraction” and with little education, was born in Oxfordshire in 1667. A tavern keeper and journalist, he created the immensely popular *London Spy* (1698-1700). A man of “considerable natural parts and with a gift of humor, ‘Ned Ward,’ as he is frequently called . . . Though vulgar and often grossly coarse, his writings throw considerable light on the social life of the time of Queen Anne, and especially on the habits of various classes in London; but much allowance has to be made for exaggeration” (“London in 1699”). Ward’s crude verse found a place in Pope’s essay “Peri Bathous, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry” (1727).

References:


Kirstein, Lincoln. *Four Centuries of Ballet: Fifty Masterworks* (Courier, 1960), 94-95;


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