

A Few Thoughts on My Work as Opera Director after Reading the Proposed Texts, Or, How to Overcome the Evidence that 'I Can't Make This Opera'

DEDA CRISTINA COLONNA

I was trained technically and artistically in Paris in the 1980s, between the school for philological early dance reconstruction led by Francine Lancelot at the Sorbonne, the advanced technical ballet pedagogy at the École Supérieure d'Études Chorégraphiques, and, at the same time, the amazing *Tanztheater* performances of Pina Bausch, at the Théâtre de la Ville, that left us all speechless.

Almost thirty years later, it seems to me that these two opposites come back to meet again in my work. A sort of philological passion and the need to express myself through my work have fought a long battle to attain supremacy among my interests, but with my so-called 'maturity' – whatever that may be – I have acquired the certainty that for me, philology is one tool among many, and not a mission in itself.

I work for the stage; I consider philological reflection a key step in a process that must, however, end beyond the line that separates the objective from the subjective, observation from creation, analysis from the creative process. I am not interested in reconstruction as a final result; I find it a futile effort to copy art forms from the past. What fascinates me is instead to look at a piece so thoroughly and deeply that, through the acquired knowledge of it and of the relevant sources, I will end up learning something about myself too.

That looking at historical sources does not mean to 'reconstruct,' but rather to 'react' was not always evident to me. In a 1995 article on the revival of a dance from Feuillet

notation,¹ I described the dance score as a "simulacrum of the truth". Today it seems to me that when we aim to reconstruct a dance from a score, or when we read an opera libretto or a play and prepare our proposal for a staging, rather than seeking a supposedly objective truth encrypted in the text, our task is to decipher and integrate it with a sort of parallel reading, in order to rebuild a context within which we can identify a subjective layer of meaning.

In particular, I have come to profoundly dislike the terms 'baroque gesturing,' or 'gesture acting,' with which we commonly designate the practice of using the actor's or the singer's body during the stage performance of an opera – supposedly, typical of the 'Baroque,' though it is rather an uninterrupted tradition common to the stage and to oratory since Quintilian. Dene Barnett also seems to underline this in the introduction to his book on eighteenth-century acting, even quoting the famous 1623 passage by Marin Mersenne.

When learning how to act, learning how to move one's hands and body is still a major issue today. My training at the Drama School of the Teatro Stabile di Genova in the years immediately following my time in Paris, and the chance I got to act internationally, in productions ranging from Shakespeare to Chekhov, Genet and German contemporary political theatre, have certainly influenced the development of my 'method', in search of what I feel I can express when working with the Baroque repertoire. To me, the context that allows the development of the idea that brings the text from the page to the stage is, after all, a mutual revelation of the inner nature of the piece and of the personality of the interpreter. A purely philological approach is the first and precious ingredient in the process, but in itself it does not necessarily lead to what I research, i.e. an artistic creation that bears the sign of the past, vivified by the attribution of meaning that happens through re-creation in our present time.

I was struck by the number of times Dene Barnett uses the word "technique(s)" in his introduction² – 32 times! – before he finally describes the art of gesture as a teachable discipline. To me, a deep practical knowledge of the chosen performing techniques – dance, acting, directing – is a necessary condition when reading a text with a view to staging it. I also regard a technique not only as a teachable form, but as a language in which both the source and the reader express themselves and communicate. The deep level on which the piece and the compositional gesture of the author are consubstantial can be approached with the aid of practice, supplemented by theory, historical information, and what we broadly term 'dramaturgical work'. Technical proficiency is the practical tool that allows theoretical and historical evidence to be applied to stage materials today. Instead, both narrow-minded intellectualism and

¹ Deda Cristina Colonna: "Il segno e il gesto; diversi modi di scrivere la danza da Domenico da Piacenza a Rameau" in *La danza in Europa fra Rinascimento e Barocco*, ed. Maurizio Padovan, Associazione Italiana per la Musica e la Danza Antiche, Rome 1995, pp. 57–65.

² *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting*, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1987.

practical stage habits unilluminated by historical knowledge are as likely to keep the performer or the director away from the inner value of the piece, at a distance that makes the staged result sterile, and, in my view, ultimately more historically 'deformed' than 'informed'.

Staging characters who dance, sing, or speak, corresponds, in my view, to finding the *actio* that informs the text, rather than putting into practice the performance rules of each individual step, the focus of a single verse, or the shape of the individual gesture.

Information is stratified, encrypted and accessible on various levels in the text. A good stage-orientated analysis of the text requires that we look for action, and that we stage that action with the help of historically informed practice, rather than apply what we know of the text itself, on the first level of reading. The text tells us what the character says, and it is our job to figure out what the character means and therefore does, so we can find a way in which these actions and words are connected and expressed in a logical and effective way. In other words, I think opera characters do not just 'speak'. My words, unsurprisingly, echo Stanislavsky's description of the concept of *subtext*, which is not directly applicable to eighteenth-century acting for obvious historical reasons. However, in Marie Börner-Sandrini's 1876 account of Luigi Bassi's memorable performance of Don Giovanni³ we find a perfect description of subtext-acting, i.e. a style of performance in which the action expressed in gestures and attitudes matches and portrays the intention of the character rather than the words per se. This seems to contradict Dene Barnett's view, expressed in his introduction, that the art of gesture "was based on the meaning of the individual gestures and words".

We must be aware of how fragmentary and incomplete the sources are; staging only what can be traced back to one or the other source does not guarantee a good result. In this almost Socratic I-know-I-do-not-know position I see a compensatory space, legitimising the creative contribution to the philological process that leads to the staging of a work. To me, the creation of a personal aesthetic system of reference – that we may call taste, style, fashion, or even ideology – is the responsibility of both the researcher and the artist, when the purpose of their work is a staging and not only an academic study.

Let me quote Feuillet himself on the use of arm ornamentation, which is not notated in his scores, although he had in fact invented signs to this purpose: "The *ports de bras* depend more on the taste of the dancer, than on the rules that can be given".

Feuillet seems to legitimise a subjective space based on the interpreter's taste more than on knowledge and on the application of the rules. We all accept that no baroque dance can be revived without supplementing the Feuillet score with the necessary, but un-notated *ports de bras*. In order to do so, according to Feuillet, we must know the rules

³ See Magnus Tessing Schneider's article "On Acting in Late Eighteenth-Century *Opera Buffa*" in this issue of the journal.

of ornamentation, but above all we must have acquired 'taste', i.e. a subjective idea of what is beautiful, balanced, and useful in the choreography and its performance. In my opinion, this can only be accomplished by taking into account the performer's own subjective desire to express something, without which the idea of 'ornamentation' quickly overlaps with that of 'decoration,' or with ornaments more applied by following the rules than emerging in the wake of a subjective expressive gesture, which is mediated by taste. How many times, at the end of a lesson in baroque dance or acting, have I not had to remind my perplexed students that in order to apply and respect the rules of ornamentation you first need to have an expressive aim!

I deeply enjoyed the many references to taste and its implications in the shaping of a successful performance practice that I found both in Jed Wentz's and in Magnus Tessing Schneider's articles. The latter even gives an extensive list of the universal parameters of good acting: "decorum, taste, gracefulness, elegance, finesse, intelligence and naturalness". These are still the goals of every contemporary actor! However, one cannot learn them from a book alone. Maybe this was a reason behind the increasing criticism of Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* in the twentieth century, when it became more and more evident to the theatre community that a gesture is so deeply linked to the word and its subjective meaning that it cannot be learned from a still picture or a drawing?

Once the historical information is collected, it is time for the modern interpreter to 'close the books' and initiate a creative process, without claiming to find the historical data in the final product in a quantifiable form. Once the equation behind the chosen scene, dance or work has been understood, it is the responsibility of the interpreter to show his/her vision courageously, right next to the motivations of the original composer. Once we are aware of the available historical evidence, we have to trust our instincts and choose the solution that best addresses the needs of our expressive gesture. Since the original cultural context is missing, the references to the function of the work in its time must be replaced with connections to the subjective context of its current interpreter, nourished with all the available historical and philological knowledge.