Farce and Ballet: *Le Bourgeois* Revisited

by
Claude Abraham

However obscene and burlesque some early *ballets de cour* may have been, by the time Molière incorporated ballet into his comedies, that art, with the help of Beauchamps and his peers, had reached such a level of sophisticated metaphoric expression that it is easy to see in it the evolutionary pattern which was to lead to what we know as ballet today. In my brief monograph on the structure of Molière's *comédies-ballets's* structure I endeavored to show how the genre developed from a purely comedic entity to one integrating comedy, ballet and music into a coherent whole. I also tried to show how the carnaval into which the more successful of these plays dissolve is the result of that very fusion. In what might be considered a belated postscript, I would like to focus today on a very specific aspect of that fusion, that of two seemingly opposite elements, dance and slapstick, and to facilitate this exposition, I would like to draw all my examples from the best known of these plays, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme.*

Dance is one of the most elemental, if not *the* most elemental mode of expression, common in the animal world as such. It "takes on a new function with the ascent of human beings--that of expressing abstract ideas" (Lange 54). Dance thus takes on an additional function, that of implying more than what it mimes or mimics, becoming a vehicle for a metaphor without the clutter and artifice of words and their externalised codes. What man also adds to this primeval and biological ritual is flow, or at least the understanding of flow as a tool of representation in and of itself. As Roderyk Lange says, the phenomenon of dance is evoked by its continuity. "Without respecting the continuity, without stressing the element of 'flow' in movement, there is no dancing action; the flow of movement is the warp of dance. Therefore a dance only exists as long as the dancer is actually dancing. This does not mean that he has to travel constantly--even when holding a pose the dancer is able to maintain the attitude of continuity--but if this is dropped he will immediately be eliminated from the context of dance" (57). Dance, and

specifically that most stylized of dances, ballet--the development of which was given special care by the King and his favorite choreographer, Beauchamps, in the Royal Academy of Music--thus becomes a fitting complement to all the arts "useful" in the task of glorifying the State and its royal incarnation. Whatever allegorical tales and figures are evoked, they, like their counterparts in marble or on canvas, are representations of the elements of an entire social order, but here it is a flowing representation, one which uses time as well as space to better manifest the relationships governing that order. There is no doubt that Louis XIV loved ballet--indeed all forms of dance--and that this love contributed to his including that art in those which were to be codified by and taught in the Royal Academy of Music, but I am convinced that the main reason for this inclusion--and for the very creation of this academy and its sisters--was the King's vision, and his understanding of the potential of these arts as representations and surrogations of the power and the glory of the State.

So defined in its conception and its role, ballet could easily be seen as the very antithesis of slapstick which, after all, is violently boisterous horseplay detrimental to flow and to decorum. And yet, it is precisely these two elements, ballet and slapstick, which Molliere amalgamates so felicitously in his later *comédies-ballets* to produce a comic tension which gives us some of the funniest moments in these plays, and it is this amalgamation and the ensuing merriment which makes the balletic representation of the social question so effective. In *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, for instance, there is no question that dances such as Jourdain's massacre of the minuet or the entire "turquerie" represent social functions or relationships. A far more important question, however, and one more akin to the action and plot of the play, deals with the divergence between the dancer or dancers and the world the dance purports to represent. Dance, as Lange says, provides not only aesthetic satisfaction, but satisfaction by binding people to life, the life represented in and by the dance (58). Why should this be funny? Why is Jourdain's dancing funny? Is it simply because he dances badly? This is certainly true in the early case, that of the minuet; but not in the later ones, which are nonetheless equally funny. The answer is more complex.

Jourdain may prefer a non-aristocratic song to a courtly one, but he would not think of rejecting or tampering with a courtly dance or any aristocratic ceremony--and indeed, every dance, even one as simple as a bow, is a ceremony as awesome to the burger as the ethos it represents. Were Jourdain to sing an *air de cour*, he would be as funny as when he performs a courtly step, and the resulting hilarity would depend less on the quality of the performance than on its incongruity. These dances, like all dances, are meant to tie the dancer to life, or to *a* life, and in this case, we immediately sense that the dancer and the life in question are not compatible.

But here again, it is dangerous to oversimplify: are there not fundamental though subtle differences between, for instance, the minuet of the beginning of the second act and the ballet which ends the fourth? Why, in the first, do we laugh *at* Jourdain while in the second one we laugh *with* him? The answer lies in two apparent but deceptive sets of contradictions. First, since the ballets of *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* represent social incongruities their very flow--or the nature of that flow--makes us aware of a static *Weltansicht*. Second, while it is the nature of comedy to be iconoclastic, to destroy, and while by definition a comic monomaniac is incapable of transcending the contingencies of his surroundings, this play deals with a transformation, a ludicrous transcendance of social order which, however perverse, is an affirmation. In my monograph on the *comédies-ballets* I endeavored to show that carnaval, *fête*, predominates in Molière's last masterpieces. In *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, we witness the creation of just such a new reality, one which Jourdain finds to his liking and in which he intends to live happily ever after, happiness to be shared by all those who helped in the establishment of that carnavalesque world.

In comedy, an aspect or member of society is isolated in order to be destroyed through laughter. In carnaval, on the other hand, society offers itself as a spectacle to itself without isolating any of its members or elements to destroy them (Duvignaud 53-56). Rather than destruction we have a generation, or rather a regeneration: an old world is destroyed to give birth to a new one. "In this game, there is a protagonist and a laughing chorus. The protagonist is the representative of a world which is aging, yet pregnant and generating. He is beaten and mocked, but the blows

are gay, melodious and festive" (Bakhtin, 207). It would be easy to see in this a theory drawn from the *turquerie* of *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, but a word of caution is in order. If one compares *L'amour médecin* with *Le bourgeois*, the obvious difference insofar as carnaval is concerned is the ending, the people who participate in the final *fête*. In the first play, society is not altered, the world retains its old codes, and the monomaniac, the protagonist, is thus excluded in spite of the concerted efforts of Music, Ballet, and Comedy. The beating and mockery may be as gay, melodious and festive as Bakhtin says, but not for Sganarelle, who refuses to enter--who cannot enter--into the dance. In the second play, on the contrary, Jourdain can be said to be pregnant, to carry in him the embryonic *Mamamouchi*, and the laughing chorus of Bakhtin is of course the one led by Covielle and composed of everyone with the possible exception of Mme Jourdain. The new world is not the work of Covielle for Jourdain, but a collaborative endeavor for universal merriment and happiness. It could even be said that in this new world, it will be Mme Jourdain who is the protagonist, and her senseless intransigeance indeed makes her the target of laughter ... until her reluctant capitulation which allows a truly general *fête*.

This collective participation is of paramount importance, for it generates the "collective responsibility" (Lange 83) so essential to the stabilisation of society. Note that when Jourdain dances alone, society (those around him, as well as the audience) can mock him; he will not dance again until drawn into a dance by a socially recognizable group, and that dance will then be a rite of entry rather than an exclusionary ordeal. Thus, Jourdain is "dissolved into the whole group's doings. This allows an intensity of action to build up to a far greater height than could ever be attained by one individual alone (Lange 83).

As Jourdain/*mamamouchi* and his court enter into this new world of their creation, we become aware of another characteristic of *carnaval* which, in the words of Jean Duvignaud, "provoque un dynamisme interne et un mouvement d'innovation qui échappent l'un et l'autre au langage ou qui ne prennent qu'accidentellement le chemin ou le détour du langage" (56). What this means is that carnaval cannot be engendered by comedy, verbal or physical, without the help of dance. Molière worked very

hard--and successfully--to amalgamate the balletic and comedic elements of his plays, but this does not mean that these elements lost their respective properties or functions. Blocking, however thoroughly it may be "choreographed," movement supporting speech. It is thus an accretion to what is already an external code. Ballet is, of course, not added to a text, but a more direct method of communication. The minuet with which Jourdain begins the second act is nothing more nor less than an metaphoric yet direct restatement of what had been--and will be again--expounded at great length in words and gestures. Blocking adjusts movement to the text, making for a better representation. But it cannot go beyond that. For the sort of creation required of carnaval, representation is not enough: we also need creation, and for that, the flow of dance is best.

Looking at the *comédies-ballets* chronologically, it is easy to see how Molière learned from his mistakes, how he improved on the joining of the arts involved in this new and short-lived genre, how, in short, he managed better and better to make us believe in the carnavalesque world created before our eyes, and how he centered the play around this creation to make it a coherent entity. What is less readily perceived, but no less important, is the contribution to the play's aura made by the interplay of the balletic and the comedic modes.

In the opening scene of the play, we learn much about the shortcomings of the master of the house. As he enters, he vindicates his distractors somewhat by his inability to cope with the vocabulary of the arts he is trying to master, arts and vocabulary necessary for his invasion of a society totally foreign to him. However, charity may allow us to entertain some doubt in his favor: his poor taste and limited vocabulary may not be entirely debilitating. It is not until he demonstrates his skills that such doubt is removed once and for all. Though Jourdain readily admits his ignorance in most matters, he is genuinely and thoroughly convinced of his ability to learn quickly and competently--"les menuets sont ma danse"--an ability we doubt mainly because of the ineptitude of his demonstrations. In the first of these, the song he opposes to the pastoral air, he is mainly laughable because of the incongruity of his musical offering. Unable to grasp the essence of the aristocratic ethos, he of course cannot

understand the raison d'être of a song which is a metaphoric statement of an aspect of that ethos. Though we will later learn that Jourdain is enamored of the ritual of the class he is trying to enter, at this point, we only see a rejection of a ritual because it has not been identified as such. In his second attempt to show off, the comic element is no longer the same, though it betrays the same ludicrous estrangement. At the very onset of the secnod act, Jourdain declares that he has mastered the minuet, and proceeds to demonstrate that mastery. What we see--and what a reader knows from the dancing master's corrections--is pure slapstick, funny in itself, but all the funnier because it is grafted onto the earlier awareness of Jourdain's inadaptability to aristocratic mores. These two elements are eventually going to be combined in the famous "révérence pour saluer une marquise" which Jourdain asks about immediately after he has shown himself quite satisfied with his minuet. The reverence is, of course, an obvious metaphor for a most complex social relationship between two people of gentility, one courting the other with a mixture of daring and deference. It is a courting dance, as elemental as that of animals, yet highly sophisticated in that it betrays an awareness of concepts of relationship completely beyond the grasp of any animal--or of any Jourdain. This is why it has so many stages with subtle differences. And this is why Jourdain is so funny when he perverts that exact dance with giant steps. To be sure, we laugh at the clumsiness of the man, and even more at his embarrassment when, having taken two giant steps, he finds himself face to bosom with his marquise. But that is not all: is not our merriment enhanced by the discovery that Jourdain has once more, while trying to demonstrate his gentility, massacred the very ritual which is so essential to that demonstration?

Jourdain's major participation in a dance is in the famous "turquerie," a preparation of sorts for the final ballet, without which it cannot be fully understood. Covielle, in his embassy which immediately precedes this all-important fourth *intermède*, shows that he has understood not merely Jourdain's mania, but even more the hindrances to the fulfillment of that mania. He sees that Jourdain's concept of a given class is predicated not on a set of rites, but on the very notion of ritual. As I have said elsewhere, "for him, the ritual is the proof of the

thing. That is what Covielle has understood from the outset. If his mission to Jourdain is to have any chance of success, it must be endowed with a ritual" (*Structure*, 67). What he makes us understand through the ritual, is that one of the major themes of the play--indeed, one underlying both plot and action--is that of incommunicability. Jourdain wishes to enter a world of which he neither speaks nor understands the language, verbal or other. In all his attempts, so far, he has only been able to give a barely recognizable caricature of the modes of expression familiar to those he wishes to emulate and to join. Much of the laughter which Covielle now elicits is due to his use of analogous caricatures and of Jourdain's inability to see them as such. Covielle systematically warps all norms of communication because he senses that this is the only way to communicate with such a maniac. "The extent of this demolition of communicative norms is made particularly obvious in Covielle's translations: a brief banality in French gives rise to a veritable torrent of senseless syllables," while "Bel-men" is rendered by a seemingly interminable French sentence. By using gobbledegook, Covielle manages to communicate with Jourdain and makes possible the creation of another reality, another world, that into which the naïve burgher wishes to be transported. In short, by destroying linguistic norms, Covielle has prepared the way for the realization--and the assimilation by Jourdain--of something which, by normal means, was completely beyond that man's conceptual capabilities.

But of course, that is just a preliminary. The transformation, indeed Jordain's social transcendance, occurs in the *intermède* itself, where that destruction of language is coupled with the demolition of every other norm. This is not an attack on aristocratic values; on the contrary: Jourdain can never become an aristocrat because he can never hope to live and act like one. For him to dance in a real ballet, the ultimate aristocratic dance, is therefore out of the question. The mountain and Mohammed: if Jourdain can not change to meet the requirements of ballet, then ballet will have to be brought to Jourdain's level. Ballet become farce begets laughter all the more when it is perceived as another manifestation of social incongruity and jordanesque incommunicability. As I said earlier, the beatings in the "turquerie" are an

intrinsic part of Jourdain's rebirth (at another level); so are all the other aspects of this balleto-farcical ritual which, of course, cannot be described or explained to the uninitiated, since it is to them what ballet is to Jourdain. This is why he cannot explain it to his wife with mere words and must try to do so with songs and dances from the ceremony which, as can be expected, are totally beyond her comprehension.

Thanks to this *intermède*, and no less to Jourdain's efforts to perpetuate it, ballet (or its farcical *travestissement*) now invades the comedy, becomes an integral part of it. With ever escalating Aristophanesque buffoonery, this farcical play-within-a-play becomes the overruling reality which leads, in spite of Mme Jourdain's recalcitrance, to the euphoric conclusion which is its balletic recapitulation, the "Ballet des Nations." Now, everything that has been said about the warping of social values by people who do not understand them, about incommunicability between people who wish to consort with others without bothering to understand them, is restated in song, but even more directly, and with less ambiguity, in the dances of this farcical yet highly metaphoric ballet. If ballet is controlled movement, and farce dis-control, then the "Ballet des Nations" is the perfect amalgam, true quickening of *fête* in which a birth is celebrated, the birth of Jourdain-*mamamouchi* and no less that of his disjointed yet euphoric world in which the only tension is a comic one. Jourdain's clumsy attempts to recreate a minuet or a simple reverence demonstrated his basic alienation from the ethos these rituals represent. If the final "ballet" is considered the logical culmination of *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, it is less because of the plot of either the ballet or the comedy than because it is such a marvelous metaphoric recapitulation of the central themes of the comedy made apparent by the juxtaposition of farce and ballet.

University of California, Davis

Works Cited or Consulted

Abraham, Claude. *On the Structure of Molière's Comédies-ballets*. (Paris/ Seattle/Tübingen: Biblio-17, 1984).

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

Duvignaud, Jean. *Le théâtre et après*. (Paris: Casterman, 1971).

Lange, Roderky. *(The Nature of Dances*. London: MacDonald & Evans, 1975).