

Choreography in operetta performances – Case study: The ball of Prince Orlofsky from *Die Fledermaus* production by Johann Strauss – The Son, act II

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Abstract: Operetta is a musical and dramatic performance similar to, yet shorter than opera, composed to a dramatic libretto with humorous elements. It is a complex production engaging the viewer in an appealing visual and audible experience marked by a harmonious blend of movement, colour and form. From a choreographic perspective, operetta brings a particular approach in that nearly the entire performance consists of planned dance sequences or ample parts of scenic movement. The research topic is the ball organised by Prince Orlofsky of *Die Fledermaus* (*The Bat*) operetta by Johann Strauss – The Son, a part of Act II, staged by Matteo Mazzoni, choreographed by Roxana Colceag and acted out by Victor Bucur. The wide range of sequences of dance steps in an operetta performance is due to the themes of such performances which allow and even impose the existence of choreographic moments, on the one hand, and to the rhythmic, danceable music often inspired from various dances specific to the geographical area where the action takes place, on the other. The performers must accurately execute the dance technical elements. The method used in creating the choreographic moment under research is imitation-based learning. Imitation is the best-known and frequently used dance composition means and consists in the reproduction by the performer, as faithfully as possible, of a dance phrase given by the choreographer. The scenic movement and the planned sequences of dance steps are the valuable fruit of the choreographer's searches and of the performers' endeavours towards achieving a flawless creative behaviour on stage, always starting from the director's perspective. In embodying their character, the performer does not truly rely on the external models they refer to, but on a great amount of spontaneity and creativity.

Keywords: operetta, choreography, scenic movement, director's perspective.

1. Theoretical foundation

Operetta, a performance genre emerging in France and Austria in mid-19th century, is a musical and dramatic production similar to opera, only shorter, composed to a dramatic libretto with humorous elements (Bughici,

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1978). The themes of operetta performances generally involve artificial, most of the times implausible situations in which the singers' solos alternate with the musical parts performed by the choruses, with spoken dialogues and especially with dance phrases. The entire performance is accompanied by instrumental music. Some authors state that operetta is a *popular, less serious* version of *opera*¹ (Ștefănescu, 2018). Nevertheless we have in view that *less serious* refers to the fact that the topic addressed is of a humorous and not tragic nature as in case of opera performances, yet in point of the musical composition, operetta remains a highly complex work. A complex musical production, whether it's operetta or opera, requires advanced knowledge in the field.

The elements composing an operetta work are overture, arias, ensembles (duet, trio, quartet, quintet, sextet), choir and ballet ensemble. We must mention that the ensembles are the collective character of these musical and dramatical productions, actively participating in acting out a story before the viewer. In her work, *The Extended Character*, Bogdana Darie highlights the importance of the choir: *Most often the choir embodies a pregnantly musical character; however the choreographic part can also be successfully performed, as the recitative parts can be most of the times determining.*²

The core characteristic of operetta, conceived as a pamphlet, is the importance and the extent of the spoken parts against a musical background and interrupted by light, pleasant and entertaining music. Through its structure, operetta is a complex production engaging the viewer in an appealing experience both audibly due to the harmony of sounds, and visually due to a harmonious blend of movement, colour and form (Negrin, 1984). Naturally, this is the fruit of a collaborative effort of a group of artists covering a composer, a director, a conductor, a choreographer, a set designer and the performers.

All throughout its history, operetta has developed and explored a wide range of music styles bearing the influence of the culture in their countries of origin. The same operetta production can be staged in numerous versions to tailor the audience's preferences.

Along its three centuries of existence, operetta has been promoted by a great number of composers through their creations. Among the notable composers of operetta performances we mention Jacques Offenbach (1819 – 1880, a master of Paris operetta), Johann Strauss – The Son (1825 – 1899, who carefully creates entertaining and melodious music for operetta performances

1 Ioana Ștefănescu, *O istorie a muzicii universale, vol. II – De la Bach la Beethoven*, Grafoart Publishing House, București, 2018, p. 287.

2 Bogdana Darie, *Personajul extins*, Estfalia Publishing House, București, 2011, p. 120-121.

which turn to be genuine models of this genre), Franz von Soubé (1819 – 1895), Karl Zeller (1842 – 1898), Edmond Audran (1840 – 1901).

From a choreographic perspective, operetta brings a particular approach in that nearly the entire performance consists of planned dance sequences or ample parts of scenic movement conducted by both singers and the ballet. This type of performance requires constant choreographic constructions for the emphasis is placed on the bodily expressiveness of the performers, making scenic movement almost as important as singing. Regardless of whether the duets or the scenes in an operetta performance are of a lyrical or humorous nature, they are accompanied by various dances and encourage the dance phrases and the sequences of movements. For dancing, as Maria Zărnescu states, *makes the action develop more naturally than language does: a few seconds of dancing may equal minutes of line exchange*³ (Zărnescu, 2015).

2. Research method

In order to exemplify the existence and importance of the choreographic parts in operetta performances, we will address a scene from the best-known operetta production, *Die Fledermaus (The Bat)* by Johann Strauss – The Son (1825–1899), a masterpiece of its genre. Strauss is the core representative of the age known in the history of music as *Viennese Golden-Age Operetta*⁴.

Die Fledermaus (The Bat) operetta performance is the masterwork of Johann Strauss – The Son, characterised by historian Richard Traubner as follows: *The Bat is definitely one of those everliving creations that define a genre while, at the same time, offering the most extraordinary moments.*⁵ (Traubner, 2003) This production is unrivalled due to the artistic value of Johann Strauss II's music, but also to the well conceived libretto by Karl Haffner and Richard Genée, based on *Le Reveillon* short story written by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. (Lieberman, 1994).

We notice that Strauss uses waltz as a primary motif. This couples dance in triple metre performed to specific accompaniment roots in the Austrian folk dance called *ländler*. Waltz emerges in the European royal landscape back in the 17th century, yet enjoys full recognition due to the successful creative endeavours of Joseph Lanner and particularly of the Strauss family.

3 Maria Zărnescu, *Muzici și Muze – de la piesa de teatru la musical*, Nemira Publishing House, București, 2015, p. 97.

4 Anastasia Belina și Derek Scott, *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta*, Cambridge University Press Publishing House, London, 2020, p. 32.

5 Richard Traubner, *Operetta – A Theatrical History*, Routledge Publishing House, London, 2003, p. 111.

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This paper addresses a performance staged in Romania, in 2016, at the National Opera, directed by Matteo Mazzoni and choreographed by Roxana Colceag, a production created on the occasion of bringing back into use the *Ion Dacian* Operetta Theatre in Bucharest. The story, centred on a joke played by Falke on his friend, Eisenstein, to get even for letting him sleep in the bat costume at the end of a ball, develops in three places, namely the salon of the Eisenstein family, the ballroom in Prince Orlofsky's palace and the district prison (Moisescu, Păun, 1969). All parts of the production abound in scenic movement moments and planned dance phrases and the party from Prince Orlofsky's palace makes no exception. Along with the singers and the ballet dancers who perform waltz, czardas and polka, a group of circus performers engage the viewer in the world of juggling and spectacular acrobatic actions. We will further address a part of the Act II of the performance, namely Prince Orlofsky capturing the guests' attention. Although this character is generally embodied by a travesti (a mezzo-soprano performing dressed as a man), this time the character is played by a tenor, Victor Bucur, the then collaborator of *Ion Dacian* Operetta Theatre in Bucharest.

2.1. The research methods cover the analysis of the scenic behaviour of the performer by watching the video recordings. We aim at examining the performer's interaction with his fellows, the way in which he relates with the scenery and with the audience. Therefore we try to:
identify the expressions and movements by analysing the screen captures.

- estimate the relationship between the director's perspective, the choreographer's vision and the performer's capacity to act out the story.
- establish the correspondence between expression and the way to approach / elaborate the sequences of movements.

2.2. Research questions: if the performer proves a natural ability to execute the required movements, then a correct training will lead to a successful performance.

2.3. Research objectives:

- identifying the correlation between the mental elaboration of the movement phrases and the performer's expressive behaviour on stage / the movements executed / the actual dance sequences,
- the performer attaining the necessary comprehension and expressiveness degree towards successfully embodying his character,
- addressing the case in which the sequences of movements match the text and the music or not.

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2.4. The photographs below depict the action from the ball organised by Prince Orlofsky from *Die Fledermaus (The Bat)* operetta by Johann Strauss – The Son, a part of Act II, staged by Matteo Mazzoni and acted out by Victor Bucur, actor and singer of *Ion Dacian* Operetta Theatre in Bucharest, who brings a novel approach of his character.

Libretto: The young Prince Orlofsky, an extremely wealthy man, tired of so many extravagant parties, agrees to play a joke on someone, at the suggestion of Doctor Falke, known as Doctor Bat. This is the moment when the prince invites marquis Renard (embodied by Gabriel Eisenstein) to have a drink and to party together with his guests. The prince's line which marks the start of the choreographic moment is *Enjoy life to the fullest, Marquis!*, followed by the *'Cause that's the way I like it* aria.

a – captures attention: from the upright standing position (heel side by side with a 45° angle between medial edges of feet which widens the base of support, thus increasing postural stability, indicating confidence and domination) (Nenciu, 2009), both upper limbs are in total extension and in abduction to nearly 110°; the indexes and middle fingers are extended and spread apart and the hand is in pronation, simulating the posture of a conductor starting their performance.

b – the dance begins with a forward cross step, while the knees are bent to 45°; the upper limbs coordinate with the lower ones and are moved simultaneously as follows: the right one is elbow bent to 90° in the sagittal plane, while the left one is extended and in abduction to 90° in the frontal plane in relation to the midline of the body, the head is pointed in the direction of movement (Ghițescu, 2010).

c – switching from forward to backward cross step by a movement of slight instability achieved by shifting the centre of gravity backwards to reach the collapsing effect which enhances the movement (the movement is directed downwards and its completion depends on the music accent).

d – the performer executes a backward cross step, keeping his lower limbs bent; the upper limbs coordinate with the lower ones; a staccato rhythm is reached.

e – the end of a musical phrase is marked by clapping, the lower limbs execute a Hungarian specific dance step, probably in anticipation of the entrance of the *Hungarian countess* (embodied by Rozalinda, Gabriel Eisenstein's wife) – heel tapping from closed position I to open position I causes the performer to stop and change the body's direction (Lopoukov, Shirayev, Bocharov, 1986).

f – the completion of the dance phrase is marked by a musical phrase in which the singer hits high notes. This stance involves static muscle contraction resulting in a reduced motor behaviour, only the upper limbs execute slight, moderate gestures.

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g – the performer moves parallel to the footlights, turning to the side to hide the temporary absence of breathing following complete exhalation but also to act hypocrisy by miming surprise and benevolence in relation to the guests. It is in fact contempt mixed with disgust, showed by lifting the corner of the mouth and through mimics denoting falsity (Ghițescu, 2011).



a

b

c



d

e

f

g

Photographies – Prince Orlofsky capturing the guests' attention, *Die Fledermaus (The Bat)* by Johann Strauss – The Son, Act II, Performer: actor Victor Bucur

3. Discussions

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The wide range of sequences of dance steps in an operetta performance is due to the story of such performances – mostly developing at balls, cabaret shows, rural parties or other type of events – which allow and sometimes even impose the existence of choreographic moments, on the one hand, and to the rhythmic, danceable music often inspired from various dances specific to the geographical area where the action takes place, on the other hand (Urseanu, Ianegic, Ionescu, 1967).

In an operetta production, the performers must prove high accuracy in executing the technical elements of the dance steps. In order to understand this process, we need to conduct a thorough analysis of the elaboration of movements by referring to biomechanics aspects. Explaining the movements on a documented basis is relevant not only from an anatomic and artistic standpoint, but it helps achieve a consistent expressive motor behaviour. The bodily expression of the performer under physical effort conditions is basically the result of the muscle contractions, whether they are voluntary or involuntary. Achieving that bodily behaviour involves a wide range of physiological processes of circularory, respiratory or endocrine nature. When performing, not only the muscle groups participating in the actual execution of the motor action are involved, for the nerve impulse is also transmitted to other muscle groups not directly concerned in the respective activity (Voiculescu, Petricu, 1964). Such dissemination of information depends on the intensity of the movements (Ghițescu, 2011). Practicing the movements (and, implicitly, developing the required motor skills to smoothly and effortlessly conduct the sequences of steps) leads to various movements concentrated in one action, without engaging any additional muscle groups. This results in higher efficiency and, at the same time, less energy expenditure (Calais-Germain, 2018). During the performance / training session the movements must be executed in a preestablished order which will improve the conditioned reflex, thus leading to movement accuracy and inhibition of parasitic and / or disruptive movements (Calais-Germain, Lamotte, 2018).

The performers' bodily expression becomes essential in understanding the operetta production's theme, on the one hand, and the intentions of both the choreographer and the director, on the other. This allows us to determine the seemingly chaotic diversity of the existing forms of movement and to distinguish the choreographers' speculative constructions from those organically assimilated by the performer; this means coordinating the mentally elaborated movements with the rest of the performer's stage activity. This way we can go beyond the mere description of the movement anatomic and physiological mechanisms and rather focus on studying the bodily expression.

This research addresses two issues which become two directions to be analysed, as follows: determining and reaching the most appropriate technical

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and creative direction in staging a choreographic moment in an operetta production; and training the performer such as to become able to accurately execute the required sequences of dance steps while having in view the various constraints in terms of staging an operetta performance.

The performer relies on self-reflection when executing a movement phrase, yet it takes learning and the part of the other participants in staging an operetta production (director, choreographer, other performers) to act out a telling and appealing story. A successful performance requires:

- the capacity to observe, resulting in the reproduction by the performer, as faithfully as possible, of the given dance phrase, thus expressing the movement language most accurately (recognisable movement technique);
- precision in gestures and movements;
- focus on technical execution and artistry in interpretation;
- spatial and temporal orientation on stage;
- permanent desire for self-improvement resulting in visible progress recorded from one performance to the other.

Learning new choreography involves adapting the movements to one's capacity, so they give them a personal interpretation towards achieving a flawless artistic behaviour on stage. The initial dance phrase given by the choreographer to the performer undergoes multiple alterations until reaching an optimum phrase for the performer which will suit them from a motor level without affecting their singing.

4. Conclusions

Based on data analysis we have tried to highlight the importance of scenic movement and of choreography in an operetta performance following the more or less fruitful searches of the choreographer and the performers towards achieving a flawless creative behaviour on stage, always starting from the director's perspective. This search is definitely organised and constantly improved.

Obviously the method used in creating the choreographic moment under research is imitation-based learning. Imitation is the best-known and frequently used dance composition means and consists in the reproduction by the performer, as faithfully as possible, of a dance phrase given by the choreographer. It helps build dance-specific motor behaviour and implicitly develop the performer's motor skills. Motor learning also covers the choreographer becoming able to create dances to match the director's vision. Accuracy in execution of every movement is of utmost importance.

The choreographer's role in staging an operetta performance can have various sources of inspiration, namely: their dancing experience, a specific music genre or a short section of a musical composition making a strong

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impression, thus stimulating their creativity, a play in which the emphasis is placed on movement, studying literature topics, legends and myths, history, rituals, religion, folklore, social concerns or other indefinable states.

In an operetta production, the performer is more than a skillful singer and / or dancer. In acting out a story, the performer gives every movement a particular meaning towards attaining the ideal harmonious blend of sound and gesture, sound and movement, movement and colour, thus building the closest version of a character to the director's perspective and the performer's personal options. In embodying their character, the performer does not truly rely on the external models they refer to, but on a great amount of spontaneity and creativity, contributing to a complete, livelier and more vivacious stage experience.

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