

Choreography In Operetta Performances – Case Study: The Cabaret Show In *Die Csárdásfürstin* (*Sylva Or The Csárdás Princess*), Act I, Production By Emmerich Kalman

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Abstract: The choreographic parts in operetta performances must be adapted to the performer's artistic capacity and needs. In the case of singers, the dance steps and sequences come to complement the singing towards achieving an engaging expressive behaviour; the choreographic moments allow them to expand their performance beyond just vocal delivery, turning them into a more dynamic presence on stage – one that embodies both the music and the drama through movement. I have chosen to address the beginning of Emmerich Kalman's *Sylva*, which depicts the character's entrance for her final performance as a cabaret singer. It is a moment covered by Act I of the production staged at Brasov Opera House, in 2012, by director Anda Tăbăcaru Hoge, choreographed by Dorin Coșeriu and acted out by soprano Andreea Blidariu. The research method we use analyses the scenic behaviour of the performer embodying Emmerich Kalman's *Sylva*, followed by a biomechanical and aesthetic analysis of her interpretation. In order to create an effective choreographic moment in an operetta, the performer must possess advanced motor skills that allow them to accurately execute complex dance-specific movements. Choreography may be viewed as the fruit of the creative journey shared by the choreographer and the performers. Guided by the director's vision and shaped by their own personal expressions, they work together to develop movements and structures that align with the specific demands of the production towards achieving a flawless creative behaviour.

Key words: operetta, performer, dance technique, choreography, scenic movement.

Theoretical foundation:

Due to the complexity of its scores, the satirical themes addressed in the librettos, the specific musical structure and the large number of artists involved, operetta is a musical genre that brings together broad audiences in the theatre halls. The importance of operetta is also highlighted by Claudia Măru-Hanghiuc: *If we shift focus from Greek tragedy to the history of*

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*universal music, we discover three major compositional and interpretive genres: opera, operetta and musical.*¹

In operetta performances, the dance phrases or the scenic movements are individual, distinct moments, being an important part of the narrative, while over time, many of such moments become significant elements that help develop the themes of the performance, thus enriching the scenic status of the lyrical singer. It is worth mentioning that operetta is considered a predecessor to musical, both genres sharing structural similarities. We can therefore state that *the operatic genre paves the way for musical*² (Rotaru, 2017). Nineteenth century French, German, Austrian and English operetta composers (Offenbach, Herve, Strauss – the Son and the like) develop rich repertoires, shaping the future musical theatre by blending drama, music and dance.

In order to create dance phrases in line with the libretto, a choreographer must find the optimum combination of body language elements (mimics, gestures) that help act out a story. The scenic movement and the choreographic constructions must result in a well – balanced artistic discourse, adapted to the theme of the operetta production but also to the geographical area where the action described in the libretto takes place. An aesthetical analysis reveals that all choreographic parts under study convey the proper artistic message which reflects the complex and efficient communication between the director, the choreographer and the performers.

The choreographic parts as well as the scenic movement in operetta performances must be adapted to the performer's artistic capacity and needs. In the case of singers, the dance steps and sequences come to complement the singing towards an engaging expressive behaviour; the choreographic moments allow them to expand their performance beyond just vocal delivery, turning them into a more dynamic presence on stage – one that embodies both the music and the drama through movement.

Operetta brings a particular approach in that the entire performance consists of planned dance sequences or ample parts of scenic movement conducted by both singers and the ballet.

¹Elena Claudia Măru-Hanghiuc, *Tehnica vocală (respiratorie și de emisie) în arta teatrală*, teză de doctorat, biblioteca UNATC, București, 2017, p. 86, cited by Dana Rotaru in *Actorul de Musical sau Tripla amenințare*, Editura UNATC Press, București, 2017, p. 14.

²Dana Rotaru, *Actorul de Musical sau Tripla amenințare*, Editura UNATC Press, București, 2017, p. 19.

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Operetta captures the attention of a wide audience by its complex nature, as well as by its rich and diverse history filled with fascinating events and characters. All throughout its history, operetta has embraced a wide variety of music styles bearing the cultural influences in their countries of origin. The same operetta production can be staged in numerous versions to tailor the audience's preferences.

This research addresses the representative work of one of the genre's most notable figures from early twentieth century, Emmerich Kalman, who brings a novel approach in the field through melodious, elegant, joyful and witty musical compositions. He enjoys public recognition in 1915, when he composes his work called *Die Csárdásfürstin* (*Sylva* or *The Csárdás Princess*). The work is staged the same year to a libretto by Leo Stein and Bela Jenbach, subsequently revised by István Békeffy and Kellér Dezső and premiers at Johann-Strauss-Theater in Vienna (Belina, Scott, 2020). The Romanian audience is introduced to Kalman's production around the same time, specifically in 1919, at the Modern Theatre in Bucharest (Moisescu, Păun, 1969).

The story revolves around the romance between a cabaret singer, Sylva Varescu, and Prince Edwin Ronald of Mittenkofer-Löwenstein. Edwin's family disapproves of their relationship, viewing it as a threat to the family's honour and social standing. The refusal to accept Sylva ignites the primary conflict of the operetta, which ultimately concludes positively for the two lovers.

Research method:

I have chosen to address the choreographic moment at the beginning of Emmerich Kalman's *Sylva*, which depicts, as the libretto reads, the character's entrance for her final performance as a cabaret singer before embarking on a lengthy tour in New York.

We mention that *Die Csárdásfürstin* (*Sylva* or *The Csárdás Princess*) is Emmerich Kalman's most successful composition. Consisting of three acts, the work is structured on a romantic duet between the main characters, Sylva and Edwin, a humorous duet featuring Stazi and Boni and a great number of serious characters (Prince Leopold, Anhille, General von Rohnsdorff) or funny characters (Feri, Mişka, Eugen) (Moisescu, Păun, 1969).

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In analysing the scenic movement parts, we have chosen to tackle a moment that engages the viewer into a romantic picture filled with elements of humour due to the Hungarian csárdás, a lively dance that brings a joyful energy to the scene, allowing the characters to express their emotions through both music and movement. We focus on the performance staged at Brasov Opera House, in 2012, by director Anda Tăbăcaru Hogeia and choreographed by Dorin Coşeriu. Sylva is embodied by Andreea Blidariu, a young talented Romanian soprano, known for her utterly unique voice. The vibrant score of the performance turns it into a genuine masterpiece of the genre, maintaining it as fresh and engaging today as it was over a century back, when first introduced to the audience.

Kalman portrays the character of Sylva Varescu as a folk singer, therefore all the songs she performs carry Hungarian folk music influences. This is deemed a groundbreaking approach in the musical structure of the time. Anda Tăbăcaru Hogeia's production choice stays true to the composer's original vision, capturing the lively atmosphere of Hungarian cabaret as well as the opulence of Viennese palaces. Therefore, the joyful and vibrant spirit of the era known as *La belle époque* is preserved.

We also notice Andreea Blidariu's impressive ability to move naturally between spoken lines and sung passages, thus succeeding to convey a meaningful and seamless message while successfully maintaining her vocal interpretation closely tied to the situational dynamics on stage. Her ability to communicate the emotional nuances of her character's journey allows her to reach the audience on a deeper level, thus becoming a trustworthy character. Blidariu's interpretation of Sylva reflects a certain purity and nobility, embodying the character's humble origins and inherent dignity. At the same time, through her rendition of the csárdás, she brings out Sylva's passionate side, showcasing her as a woman torn between the passion for her career as a cabaret singer and her love for Prince Edwin.

2.1. The research methods used aim at examining the scenic behaviour of the performer by watching video recordings of her performance in order to analyse her chemistry with the dance partner, the relationship with the other stage partners, her response to the environment on stage, such as the scenery, and her engagement with the audience. We refer to bibliographic study, direct observation, interviews and case study.

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2.2. Research questions: In order to create an effective choreographic moment in an operetta, the performer must possess advanced motor skills that allow them to accurately execute complex dance-specific movements. This way the performer / performers will be able to coordinate the variety of information they must manage to build a character. Only through consistent, disciplined practice can the performer achieve the necessary skill level to deliver a compelling and cohesive performance.

2.3. Research objectives:

This research aims at attaining the following **objectives**:

- Determining the specific physical skills needed by the performer / performers to build / embody the character;
- Identifying the types of dance techniques that must be employed in order to faithfully execute the choreographed numbers within the performance;
- Identifying the types of coordination in an operetta performance: music – movement, music – vocal delivery, movement – vocal delivery, performer – stage partner/partners.

○ **Description of the photographs:**

Sylva's aria in *Die Csárdásfürstin (Sylva)*, composed by Emmerich Kalman, Act I, Scene 1, representing her farewell performance at the *Orfeus Cabaret* in Budapest before embarking on a lengthy tour in New York.

This is the moment when, following the insistence of the audience and after receiving a flower bouquet from Boni Cancianu, Sylva offers a final encore.

Since Emmerich Kalman portrays his character as a folk singer, the spectacle within a spectacle moment from the beginning of the operetta delivers a *csárdás*³. In fact, the entire musical and choreographic performance of Sylva is built on Hungarian folk intonations and dance steps.

In this scene, both the music and the choreography embody the spirit of the *csárdás*, a quintessential Hungarian folk dance, characterised by rhythmic alternation and variety. One of the defining features of the dance is the *crescendo*, a gradual increase in tempo and intensity. The dance begins

³Ceardaş (the Hungarian *csárdás*) is a traditional Hungarian folk dance, typically performed by couples; the term roots in the word *csárda*, meaning tavern or inn. Refer to dexonline: <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/cearda%C8%99>

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with a slow section, gradually building in intensity to reach pulsing and syncopated beats.

a – the dance begins with Sylva moving forward with slightly crossed steps, introducing a subtle turn of the hips, moving from *épaulement* to *épaulement*, as the hips are shifting in coordination with the legs' crossed steps. These first movements are executed to a slow musical passage (*adagio* in 4/4 time) as she advances from the back of the stage towards the forestage. The arms are bent at a 45° angle and held in front of the body, crossing the axis of symmetry, with the hands resting on the hips. The upper body remains steady and static, which gives her the freedom to focus on the vocal expression. We notice the forward weight shift as well as a slight vibration of the ankles and knees as the performer moves forward, resulting in a progression in the movement which culminates in the joyful atmosphere on stage.

b – while the lyrics read *What do I care for your longing...*, the dance progresses with emphasised steps, moving laterally to the right and left, in sync with the musical crescendo. This creates a strong contrast between the lyrics and movement, which heightens the tension on stage. Execution of the step to the right: On the first beat, a lateral step is taken with the right foot, with a slight knee flexion of about 20°, while the left leg rotates outward (*en dehors*) by 45° from the hip joint, with the left foot resting on the heel in flexion, and the knee fully extended; On the second beat, the left foot moves to align with the right foot with a beat against the floor, shifting the emphasis to the unaccented musical beat. Simultaneously, the arm on the side of movement lifts diagonally upward in the sagittal plane. The arm is slightly curved, with a slight abduction of the arm (15-20°) and a 15-20° flexion of the elbow, while the wrist remains in a neutral position, and the fingers are relaxed with a slight flexion (5-15°) of the metacarpophalangeal joints. Meanwhile, the other arm remains fixed on the hip. This rounded arm position enhances the fluidity of the movement.

c – as the *allegro* section (2/4) begins, choreography becomes more varied. Sylva executes a "V-shaped" movement consisting of a sequence of three sharp, staggered steps performed along a diagonal, followed by a small, accented jump with a beat to the floor. This movement structure is executed

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in a forward-backward pattern along diagonals 2-6 and 8-4⁴. The movements draw directly from Hungarian folk dance, known for its strong, rhythmically complex structures. (Baciu & al., 1957).

d – In this choreographic sequence, Sylva performs a *Holubetz*⁵ variation with one of the ballet soloists, where both dancers execute a 720° turn together. Starting position: position I (parallel feet): The two dancers stand side by side in a frontal position, facing opposite directions. Sylva faces stage right (Point 1), while her partner faces stage left (Point 5). Sylva rests her hands on her partner's shoulders, while he holds her at the waist with his right hand. His left arm is extended diagonally upwards, in the frontal plane, with a slight elbow bend of about 15-20°, and his palm facing upward (in supination). Both dancers execute a subtle lateral *cambré* (bending of the body), leaning slightly outward with an extension of 20-30°. This extension ensures the proper alignment and balance as they prepare to initiate the turn. On the first beat (Time 1), both dancers step with their right foot. On the second beat (Time 2), they execute a key move (a quick change of position on *demi-pointe*) with the left foot. The key is performed without transferring the body weight to the left foot; rather, the heels are moved from a closed position to an open position with a small beat of the feet. After completing the key move, on the upbeat (aufтакт), the weight is suddenly shifted onto the left foot, accompanied by a *plié* (bending of the knee). This *plié* motion places strong emphasis on the heel as it contacts the floor. During these two musical beats, the dancers begin to rotate, turning 45° relative to an imaginary axis between them. Their bodies remain in slight lateral extension, and the iliac crest area (the part of the body near the hips) lightly brushes against each other, helping maintain balance and synchronization. This sequence of steps is repeated eight times, each time rotating 45°, resulting in a total of 720° of rotation (8 x 45°). This progressive rotation is done towards the right at first, creating a cumulative, dynamic spinning effect. After completing the 720° turn, the direction is reversed, and the movement repeats in the opposite direction, further contributing to the dynamic tension and energy on stage.

⁴According to the division of the performance space into 8 points, as adapted from Agrippina Vaganova, *Basic principles of Classical Ballet – Russian Ballet Technique*, Editura Dover Publications, INC, New York, 2017, p. 4.

⁵Andrei Lopoukov, Alexander Shirayev, Alexander Bocharov, *Character Dance*, Editura Dance Books, Cecil Court, London, 1986, p. 81.

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e – Sylva executes *en dedans* turns with her partner in accented steps matching the quick tempo of the music. Sylva does not break contact with her partner, as he holds her left hand with his right hand throughout the turns. The direction of the turn involves Sylva moving toward her partner, where their hands are entwined, and their movements are tightly coordinated. The stopping point of the turn is when both dancers come together, with their palms meeting, and their bodies align shoulder to shoulder. The movement is performed in both directions, meaning Sylva and her partner alternate between the wrapping (*en dedans*) and unwrapping motions.

f – in the final pose of the dance, the two partners holding hands step forward to the forestage and take a bow to acknowledge the audience.



1.



b.



c.



d.



e.



f.

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Photographies – Sylva's aria in *Die Csárdásfürstin (Sylva)*, composed by Emmerich Kalman, Act I, Scene 1, representing her farewell performance at the *Orfeus* Cabaret in Budapest before embarking on a lengthy tour in New York. Performer: Andreea Blidariu (Source: personal archive)

Discussions:

We witness a harmonious relationship between the director's perspective, the choreographer's vision and the performer's capacity to faithfully embody the character. The singer successfully conveys the artistic message at all three perfectly balanced levels: music, movement and emotional interpretation. There is a noticeable progression in the complexity of movements and in the depth of interpretation, gradually revealing Sylva's emotional state as she bids farewell to her devoted audience.

The expressions and movements captured from video footage align with the intended storytelling in the libretto. The method involves extracting still frames from video to create sequences of images that illustrate the choreography step-by-step. These sequences showcase not only the technical accuracy of the movements but also how each gesture carries meaning and emotional weight. Therefore, this alignment between the character's emotional state, the descriptive names of each dance movement, and the crafting of movement sequences reinforces the authenticity of the performance.

The performer's physical expression is a form of nonverbal communication, where the performer and the character meet at the boundary between the unreal that is created and the real that is mimed, which represents the theatrical act itself. On the one hand, we have the performer taking on the mediator role, while on the other, there is a virtual world that is made tangible and concrete through the mediation of the artist, a world that becomes real through a unique performance. The shift from the performer's physicality to that of the character is essentially a transition from a controlled form of freedom, shaped by rules, to an uninhibited, playful expression. This shift marks the transition from the convention-driven reality of everyday life to the world of theatrical conventions (Măniuțiu, 1985).

Such observations determine us to assert that in an operetta production, the performers must prove high accuracy in executing the technical elements of the dance steps. The performer's movements are driven by the tension between different elements in the production, which can include emotional contradictions, differing personality traits among the cast, and varying levels

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of information and understanding among all involved. They also result from the so-called *accidents* during rehearsals (unplanned and unforeseen moments by either the performer / stage partners or the director, that break from the planned choreography or staging, requiring situational dynamics rethinking), ultimately resulting in a more authentic and effective performance.

We must bear in mind that movement is the primary visual stimulus. When people watch a performance, their attention is first captured by motion and subsequently by details like shape, size, color and the like. This means that the viewer is initially emotionally engaged by the dynamic and fluid aspects of the performance before understanding its representations, grasping its message and appreciating its value. On the other hand, other factors are to be considered, as follows: firstly, familiarity with art and cultural context, secondly, individual subjectivity (meaning personality factors) and thirdly, other factors as age, education, artistic experience and the like. This means that each individual appreciates a work of art differently, an aspect also shared by Umberto Eco, who states that *Perception of the whole is not instant; it is a learned act of organization influenced by a social and cultural context. On this background, the principles of perception are not entirely neutral, but are shaped by particular cultural models.*⁶

Conclusions:

A thorough analysis of the choreographic structures reveals the importance of scenic movement and of choreography in an operetta performance. Choreography may be viewed as the more or less valuable outcome of the creative journey shared by the choreographer and the performers. Guided by the director's vision and shaped by their own personal expressions, they work together to develop movements and structures that align with the specific demands of the production towards achieving a flawless creative behaviour. The construction of choreographic structures is thus an evolving process that demands continuous refinement. Through repeated rehearsals, the performers adjust and improve the movements until they achieve a seamless blend of technique and expression.

⁶ Umberto Eco, *Arta și frumosul în estetica medievală*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1999, p. 89.

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The choreographic approach used in this *csárdás* sequence relies on the character dance technique. The choreographer's method begins by immersing the performers in the specific steps of traditional Hungarian folk dance. The performers are tasked with interpreting these movements in a way that fits within the larger narrative and artistic framework of the operetta.

Learning the choreography involves building the required motor skills to accurately execute every movement. This precision becomes essential, as each movement is carefully synchronized with the partner's, without sacrificing the quality of the vocal delivery. In bringing *Sylva* to life, Andreea Blidariu relies heavily on her own interpretive skills, creative insight and inner strength, rather than on external influences.

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