

THE SERIOUS ART OF FUNNY BUSINESS:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF COMEDY IN DANCE

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ABSTRACT

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There is an untapped wealth of information in both the theory and praxis of comedy in the embodied realm of dance; it is a subject worthy of serious deliberation. This dissertation discusses the evolution of comedy and comedic theories as they relate to modern dance and narrative ballet. Comedic works were examined providing insight into the theory, praxis, and craft of choreographed comedy and to inform the construction of a framework to aid in the analysis of comedic forms in dance. The works examined include: Paul Taylor's *Three Epitaphs* (1956), David Parsons' *The Envelope* (1986), Mark Morris' the Merlitone dance from the *Hard Nut* (1991), with a developed analysis of the seminal comedic ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*. Choreographed originally by Jean Dauberval (1789), the iconographic ballet is solidified in ballet history by British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton (1960). A theory model, generated from the gathered data, is a lens to view and question the phenomenon of comedy in choreography. I pursued a structural deconstructive approach informed by a transdisciplinary methodology, which enabled the creation of an effective model for analyzing and gauging

comedic rhetorical devices. *La Fille Mal Gardée*, was studied as a precedent for the role of comedy as a choreographic structure in dance.

The research methodology and procedures drew from a broad disciplinary foundation in comedy, philosophy, theatre, dance, history, and my own background as a comedic performer. Slowly a picture formed of a series of complex structures, worlds in which comedy in dance exists, each with its own logic, codes, and canons. Comedy within each dance work is a capsule of information informing the larger picture of that work which becomes a framework for studying the contingent particularities of the comedy existing within it (Roche, 1998). Each work has a unique enclosed system of actions that clarify a new reality. The similarities and differences within these systems provide insight into comedic dance as an epistemological enterprise.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.” (Peter Ustinov in Fitzhenry, 1993, p. 222)

Comedy, since its documented roots in Ancient Greece, has been an integral part of the art world. Humor and laughter are universal human responses; thus there is evidence of comedy in every major period of recorded history from Ancient Greek theatre to the comedy clubs of today. Philosophers and historians have tried to explain the phenomenon of comedy, practitioners have discussed how they use comedy as a tool, and researchers have defined the physiological components and benefits of laughter, yet comedy and its artistic influence in dance have yet to be explored in depth.

Comedy transcends the body through its ability to reflect aesthetic, cultural, social, and political ideals. This idea is not new. The journey of comedy through history is alive with political turmoil, comic innovation, and huge shifts in audience-performer perceptions. In 1924, literary theorist Bonamy Dobrée defined comedy in its relationship to socio-economic eras.

In the great comic periods, those of Menander, of the Restoration writers, and at the end of Louis XIV’s reign and during the Regency we find that values are changing with alarming speed. The times are those of rapid social readjustment and general instability, when policy is insecure, religion doubted and being revised, and morality in a state of chaos. (In Felheim, 1962, p. 202)

In contrast, tragedy, for Dobrée, resided in times of “great national expansion and power, during which values were fixed and positive” (Felheim, 1962, p. 202).

Comedy provides a valuable social function that “makes us more critical but leaves us more tolerant” (Kronenberger in Felheim, 1962, p. 196). Scott Cutler Shershow states that comedy “conveys an ideological vision: an invocation of the ruling assumptions of a particular historical moment.” Comedy is in fact “people’s unofficial truth” (1983, p. 2), a litmus test of social mores and values systems that appear to be a constant in any given era.

Comedy’s popular appeal seems to be its academic downfall. Historically the moral lessons were thought to be taught through tragedies that embodied the moral plight of humanity. Comedies were and are illustrations of the mundane and ridiculous. Comic characters display human foibles and less than desirable personality traits. Yet there is a level of profundity and optimism in these characters that reaffirms our own potential for greatness.

Comedy gives us courage to face life without any standpoint; we need not view it critically nor feel heroically. We need only to feel humanly, for comedy shows us life not at such a distance that we cannot but regard it coldly, but only so far as we may bring to it a ready sympathy freed from terror or too overwhelming a measure of pity. (Dobrée in Felheim, 1962, p. 205)

In fact, in American society, comedians have become our hosts to the world, offering insight into national and world events and an acute perception into ourselves: Jack Benny, Red Skelton, Bob Hope, Madeline Kahn, Lucille Ball, Eddie Murphy, Carol Burnett, Imogene Coca, Ellen Degeneres, and Jerry Seinfeld are not only well-loved comic performers, but they were and are the social barometers of current trends and political convictions. Like the character of the court fool, comedians have the power to state the truth without repercussion. “Humor simultaneously wounds and heals, indicts

and pardons, diminishes and enlarges” Kronenberger states. “It constitutes inner growth at the expense of outer gain, and those who possess honesty practice it and make themselves more through a willingness to makes themselves less” (Kronenberger in Ehrlich and De Bruhl, 1996, p. 307).

Growing up with these iconic figures and having opportunities to perform in adaptations of beloved comedic ballets such as Leonide Massine’s *Gaîté Parisienne* (1938), David Lichine’s *Graduation Ball* (1940), and numerous comedic roles in Marius Petipa’s *The Nutcracker* (1892), as well as working as a cocktail waitress in various comedy clubs imbued my life with comedy. It was only when I began my academic research on the phenomenon of comedy in dance that I realized an inherent hegemony toward drama. Aristotle said, “Comedy in its early stages passed unnoticed, because it was not yet taken up in a serious way” (In Felheim, 1962, p. 194). It is time to take up the study of comedy in dance in a serious way.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to provide a means to analyze comedy in dance in a way that reveals elements of craft and structure. In order to do that I have examined comedy from different theatrical vantage points and identified key details relevant to dance. A discussion of the relationship between how comedy is used in narrative ballet and in modern dance frames the creation of a theoretical model that is then used to examine the popular and long-lived ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

Problem Questions

In order to examine the phenomenon of comedy in dance the following questions presented themselves:

1. How do key comedic theories inform and influence comic practices in dance?
2. What are the component parts and craft elements of comedy in dance?
3. How does the construction and function of comedy differ between narrative ballet and modern dance works?
4. What is the relationship between praxis and artistry of the comic performer?
5. What are the key elements of comedy in the ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée* and how do they inform the whole ballet?
6. How are the various and disparate theories, craft elements, and historical precedence woven together to create a transdisciplinary theory model to aid in the examination of comedy in dance?

Delimitations

Comedy is a complex phenomenon that is culturally specific to its time and place. It was beyond the scope of this research to examine the geographical, personal, and temporal commonalities and differences of the comedy in the works examined, or to address the nationality, race, socio-economic considerations, gender, and age of the various choreographers and performers and the influences these features might have had on their work.

Many different choreographers have adapted, restaged, and re-choreographed *La Fille Mal Gardée*, including Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov in 1885, and Bronislava

Nijinska in 1940. I focused on Sir Frederick Ashton's 1960 version because of its enduring quality and continual success in ballet companies across the world.

The dances that I chose to examine are pieces that are entirely comic, not works where comedy is just a facet, and they are works with which I am personally familiar. Consequently there are many choreographers who may come to the mind of the reader who have not been addressed in this study. The biggest limitation of this selection process was knowingly excluding works of female choreographers and choreographers of differing nationalities and cultures. This study is a just starting point, and these delimitations and limitations highlight the absolute necessity of further inquiry in use of comedy as a choreographic form.

Significance of the Study

Historically, comedy is the stepchild of the arts. There is ample evidence of hierarchical prejudice against comedy which can be traced to Ancient Greece. Both Plato and Aristotle asserted that comedy was an imitative form highlighting the worst traits in humankind, whereas tragedy made noble and moral the plight of the human condition (In Felheim, 1962). Comedy was often equated with the ridiculous, the grotesque, the absurd, the immoral, the topical, and the ugly. A glance through any dance history text or anthology of dance criticism and critical theory and shows a wealth of discourse on the "serious" ballets: those works based on Shakespearean themes, psychological dramas, modernist abstract expressions, and virtuosic pas de deuxes. Choreographers whose body of works are associated with comedy, such as Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins, Paul Taylor, Charles Weidman, Michel Fokine, and Leonide Massine, are remembered for

their more serious ballets. Their comedic works are often written off as slight, minor, or trivial.

Unique or avant garde dances that push the cultural and aesthetic boundaries of what we consider dance or are considered a point of change are lauded, such as Massine's *Parade* (1917) with costumes and sets designed by Pablo Picasso and music by Erik Satie. This work is considered "a perfect marriage of painting, dance, scenario, and music" and Picasso's designs "are the most important example of Cubist art ever seen in theatre" (Craine and Mackrell, 2000, p. 360). Michel Fokine's *Dying Swan* (1907) to the music of Camille Sainte Saëns, utilized emotional expression and metaphor and encapsulating his reformist credo for ballet. "Its poignant fluttering movements not only convey the struggles of the dying bird, but also evoke the art of the ballerina, performer of an ephemeral art which 'dies' after every show" (Craine and Mackrell, 2000, p. 157). Both of these ballets are discussed at length in Chapter III. But what about the dances that make us laugh? Those it seems are relegated to brief synopses and one-line descriptions, if they are mentioned at all. The comedies in dance also challenge artistic boundaries adding rhetoric and techniques pushing aesthetic, social, and political conventions, and shedding insight into the human condition. They critique injustices, gender imbalances, and deal with topical, timely concerns and in and among the social themes, political satire, and gripping human insight. Also of value, they delight audiences and bring levity into a difficult world.

Considerable scholarship has been devoted to the history of comedy in theatre, the philosophy of humor, and the personal praxis of comedy writers and stand-up comedy

performers. Absent is a critical analysis of comedic dance works and their structure and choreographic devices. This opens up a fascinating field of study. The obvious question is where to start? And with which works to begin?

The following works serve as an example: *Three Epitaphs* (1956) choreographed by Paul Taylor, *The Envelope* (1986) by David Parsons, the “Merlitone” dance from the *Hard Nut* (1991) by Mark Morris, and the premier comedic ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée* choreographed originally by Jean Dauberval (1789), and re-choreographed by Sir Frederick Ashton (1960). Each represents a very different approach to choreographed comedy, yet they share the common bond of humor and elicit laughter from an audience.

Methodology and Procedures

Good researchers ignore all narrow-minded debates over whether one mode of inquiry is better than another. Instead they employ the best of all knowledge available to them to investigate the laws and principles governing a field of study. (Rainbow and Froehlich, 1987, p. 23)

Examining the use of comedy in dance is like wrestling with a tub of eels. Each time you seem to have a handle on it, it squirts off in a different direction. Resources in history, philosophy, theatre, popular culture, and my own experiences as a comedic performer provided a bulk of the information; and I quickly realized that utilizing just one method of inquiry would paint only a partial picture of this amazing and complex phenomenon.

I engaged in a naturalistic approach that acknowledges the value system of the researcher and the relationship between researcher and subject. It allows for individuality and unpredictability in the research, and multiple and differing viewpoints. It also accepts

the interrelationship between disciplines (Erlandson, et. al. 1993). It “proposes a reality that is of ‘whole cloth.’ That is all aspects of reality are interrelated. To isolate one aspect from its context destroys much of its meaning” (Erlandson, et al. 1993, p. 11). The naturalistic paradigm encouraged flexibility in my research design that enabled me to respond and be informed by what revelations occurred weaving the information into the fabric of my study (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Through this paradigm I used a selective blend of new historiographical, philosophical, and phenomenological inquiry. The new historiographical research provided a background and a context revealing “the complexities, paradoxes, parallels and lessons” (LaPointe-Crump, 2004) in the use of comedy in dance. The philosophical method was used as an organizational framework and a theory-generating tool with phenomenology augmenting the data. All three methodologies will now be explained in the context of how they were employed.

I started philosophically strategizing an inductive structure collecting very specific data about comedic moments in popular culture, ballet, and modern dance and then generated a broader based theory about the use of comedy in dance. I used informal logic that recognized the subjectivity of truth, and accepted multiple realities and dialectical argumentation that relied on a thesis/antithesis premise yet also accepted the presence of differing truths (Rainbow and Froelich, 1987). Incorporating methods of observation and speculation, I critiqued and analyzed various comedic moments and dance works acknowledging that each one reflected a subjective truth specific for that set of particular circumstances and to that choreographic style. Each thread of information began weaving

a pattern of commonalities and differences highlighting the inherent interrelationship between the various dance works. Purposeful and critical analysis of comedy and humor theories began to correspond to the craft and structural elements intrinsic in the works. Continued and critical engagement with these four dance works and the discovery and synthesis of relevant data led to the construction of a broad based theory to aid in a more in depth analysis of comedy in dance.

There were times when I, as the researcher, separated myself from the materials being viewed and analyzed as in documents, articles, programs, and video performances. Yet there were times when I was inseparable from the perception and experience of the materials. I was drawing upon my felt experiences, and this phenomenological approach generated data that triangulated with aesthetic and factual materials.

Phenomenology was an integral part of the research process. Because I am a dancer and an experienced comedic performer who studied the phenomenon of comedy in dance, I came to the research process with certain insider information. Dance theorist and Maxine Sheets states,

Whatever knowledge we may have of dance, in general or in particular, is extraneous to the lived experience of any dance. Such knowledge may only affect our aesthetic expectations and judgments of that experience. Hence the kinds of dances we have seen before, the extent of our own participation in dance – all prior experiences with dance influence the manner in which, and the level at which we approach and evaluate it. (1966, p. 4)

She goes on to say,

It is the lived experience which is of paramount significance. Through the lived experience we arrive not only at the sense of any particular dance, but also at the essence of dance. What is dance? How does it appear? What are the structures inherent in that appearance? Whatever we know of dance and whatever we may seek

to know, it is the immediate encounter which constitutes the foundation of our knowledge” (Sheets, 1966, p. 5).

Recognizing and associating the personal was a way for me to get at the essence of the phenomenon of comedy in dance from an authentic experiential perspective that allowed me to describe the obvious, assumed, or hidden within my perceptions (Fraleigh, 1987). Utilizing this personal information did not in itself constitute a phenomenological approach. Interrogating my own background as a comedic performer and my responses to various forms of data and material and then using this knowledge to unravel the phenomena of comedy in dance while searching for its essence, is when the methodology embraced phenomenology.

In examining *La Fille Mal Gardée*, I followed the tenets of new historiography. Dance scholar and historian Shelly Berg says this approach reflects the trend of historical research to be culturally sensitized to the time period studied. It acknowledges the artist’s relationship to the culture in which the art was created, thus culturally contexting it and grounding it into *a* reality, rather than *the* reality. It must also be noted that the historian is contexting it through her reality as well (In Fraleigh and Hanstein, 1999).

In this study I provide historical information about the provenance of *La Fille Mal Gardée* and how Ashton worked creatively with the existing material. The research requires a past, present, and future point of view and naturally fits into the methodology of new historicism. Dance historian and scholar Janice LaPointe-Crump defines this as,

A method for analyzing fact-based materials in ways that contextualizes and absorbs cultural themes and archetypes associated with aesthetics, lived experience of the artist, race, gender, class, social change, belief systems, and related arts and artists.

Presence of the reflective, personal voice of the historian is an expected part of this method. (2004)

While examining the race, class, and gender of the artist was beyond the scope of this study, I did examine the lived experiences of Ashton and how they shaped his comedic style. I also examined the cultural themes and archetypes in *La Fille Mal Gardée* and their comedic function within the ballet. I traced the ballet's historical evolution from 1789 to current day, pinpointing a cultural context in which the work premiered and its continual popularity and success.

This method of historical examination follows the naturalistic sensibility of looking at the culture surrounding the creation of this ballet and incorporating new and related theories into the analysis of the work. "In the heady poststructuralist climate, as writers in other disciplines become intrigued by the body, dance writers borrow frameworks from these disciplines to examine dancing" (Jowitt, 2000, p. 133). Author and critic Deborah Jowitt, supports the re-analysis of dance works "in light of French literary theory, Marxist theory, feminist theory, queer theory, disease as metaphor, and so on" (Jowitt, 2000, p. 133). This would certainly be justification to examine comedic works within the framework of comedy and humor theory. More than a revisionist, Jowitt is a qualitative narrativist. She promotes the anthropologic notion of art as a cultural artifact pioneered by Clifford Geertz and is an advocate of the qualitative research tool of thick, detailed description in dance writing (Jowitt, 2000; Erlandson, et. al, 1993). "Descriptive writing—a certain kind of it—is the best way I know to assert the interdependence of content and

form, of narration and movements ‘secret truths’” (Jowitt in Dils and Cooper Albright, 2001, p. 9). She goes on to state,

Description at its best is not simply about surface. It hints at what lurks within a work. It links images through imaginative wordplay. The patterns of language can echo the rhythms and the impetus of dancing as well as the response of the spectator. (Jowitt, in Dils and Cooper Albright, 2001, p. 9)

I used thick description not only as a research tool in the analysis of the various comedic works but in the body of this paper as a writing style to show rather than tell the reader the phenomenon being studied. Jowitt gives an example of explaining water flowing down the drain.

We can explain the phenomenon in terms of impetus, gravity, and the shape of the basin, but the whirlpool itself is a created thing and vanishes when the faucet is turned off. We can attempt to dissect the mutual wizardry that form and content in art exercise upon each other, but the impact of the whole may slip away in the process. It is that created illusion that I yearn to evoke through words. (Jowitt, in Dils and Cooper Albright, 2001, p. 7)

This describes my process of dissecting the phenomenon of comedy in dance – the individual components lose the magic of the whole, but through the use of description and imagery the dismembered parts can begin to be put together again with a greater understanding of the phenomenon. “Written history is not a representation of the past but an abstract work whereby the historian’s selections and interpretations create meaning and significance” (Hamblen, 1985, p. 1). Hamblen explains that a dialectic exists among the historian, the event, and the present, and it is the historian, through selection and interpretation, who creates meaning.

What these three methodologies offer is a collective foundation through which the data are interpreted and synthesized. Alone each would have only given a partial view of

the complex phenomenon of comedy in dance. Together they draw a much more comprehensive picture and allow “the complex relationship among aesthetic, artistic, socio-political, personal life issues, gestures and themes embedded within the art” to be explored (LaPointe-Crump, 2004).

The Transdisciplinary Model and Triangulation

Unlike other subjects which might be hampered by a long tradition, it is possible to be flexible in methodology and adaptable in technique in dance history practice. To be free from entrenched positions about what dance history should do and how it should do it can be an advantage in developing a discipline that is responsive to the activity being studied. (Adshead-Lansdale, 1995, p. xii)

Blending new historiographical, philosophical, and phenomenological inquiry into a cohesive research design encompassed by a naturalistic perspective allowed multiple points of entry into the research and triangulation became a way to check for validity between sources, ideas, and theories. In one example after coding my notes of the videotaped performances of Ashton’s *La Fille Mal Gardée*, David Parson’s *The Envelope*, and Paul Taylor’s *Three Epitaphs* the theme of inanimate objects or non-human beings being the focus of the comedy came to light. This corresponded with Henri Bergson’s theory that inanimate objects and animals are funny because of their anthropomorphic qualities (1911), and was also tangentially supported by dance theorist Ann Blom’s assertion that props and costumes are an integral part to comedy in dance (1986). In the middle of all these sources was a comedic truth. The theme of chickens was also tied into this theory. While no sources pointed to the use of chickens in the original Dauberval production of *La Fille Mal Gardée* it is known that the setting of this ballet was a rustic farm with the actors and dancers engaging in domestic farm chores.

The 1989 Ivo Cramer reconstruction had wooden chickens that could be pulled on and off stage as evidenced by photographs in the playbill, and the 1960 Ashton version had life-sized dancing chickens that opened the show. Bergson theory holds true in these examples and looking historically at the original *La Fille Mal Gardée*, it is not a far stretch to think there might have been some representation of farm animals in the original ballet. Whether or not they got the laugh, we will never know.

The transdisciplinary approach was not the creation of a new research paradigm. It was the systematic use of the methods and procedures of historical, philosophical, and phenomenological modes of inquiry to gather a wider body of knowledge. The danger was being unclear about how each mode of inquiry functioned within the strategy while letting the data drive the research and not the structure. Credibility and reliability were promoted through my prolonged engagement in the field (I have been studying comedy in dance for well over ten years), and the use of triangulation and corroboration of each comic moment and theory to synthesize an interpretation and evaluation of the use of comedy in dance. The delicate balance of organization and chaos paid off with the wide array of focused information that continued to reflect the naturalistic enterprise respecting the various disciplinary codes of history, philosophy, theatre, and dance. It allowed me, the researcher, to interpret a series of comedic moments or visual events, free of the hierarchical dualism that divides elitist art from popular culture. This transdisciplinary model also acknowledged the constituent and structural parts of comedy present in the moments studied to be accounted for without the concern that some of the parts may not be considered dance. It facilitated a more democratic critical process for this research.

Various collections housed at the University of Surrey (UK), Theatre Museum (London), the Royal Ballet Archives (London), the New York Public Library (New York), and the Texas Woman's University Library (Denton), provided primary and secondary sources for this research. While primary sources of the Dauberval version were scarce, playbills of early reconstructions of *La Fille Mal Gardée* and a notated Benesh score of Bronislava Nijinska's version crediting Dauberval, that had wonderful staging notes and comic scenes written in the margins, provided necessary information on the evolution of the ballet. Newspaper articles and reviews of a 1989 production heralded as reconstruction of the original Dauberval ballet by Ivo Cramer for Ballet de Nantes also shed insight into what the Dauberval comedy may have included. There was a wealth of information on Ashton's version including articles, interviews, reviews, playbills, biographies of Ashton, a working Benesh score, and several videotaped performances. These helped me piece together a picture Ashton's choreographic process and more importantly his approach to comedy. And a conference proceeding of an Ashton retrospective found on the shelves of the University of Arizona library dance collection provided key insight into the conundrum of notating comedy in Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée* and helped explained why the comic scenes were written longhand in the margins of the both Benesh scores studied. Popular American television situation comedies and comedy dance ensembles such as the Ballet Trockadero de Monte Carlo, Momix, and some of the Pilobolus repertoire are a direct influence on my understanding and interpretation of comedy.

An Overview

The research was done in several stages. First there was observation and analysis of the modern dance works utilizing Laban Movement Analysis, phenomenological, and reflexive inquiry. The findings were then coded and the themes that emerged were compared against existing theories of comedy and humor then generated into a theory model. This model proved to be incomplete when used to examine classical narrative ballet, thus I assessed the commonalities and differences between comedy in modern dance and comedy in classical narrative ballet, including an evaluation of the history of narrative classical ballet and an in-depth analysis of the ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*. These findings were then added to the theory model for a more comprehensive look choreographed comedy.

The research presented in the next six chapters is a fusion of a transdisciplinary approach necessary to paint a rich and exhilarating picture of the phenomenon of comedy in dance. The canvas is by no means finished this is merely a starting point, launching further explorations into this wonderful and complex area of study.

CHAPTER II

CONTEXT, CHARACTER, AND STRUCTURE

“Comedy is tragedy - plus time” (Carol Burnett in Fitzhenry, 1993, p. 222).

Comedy in its natural environment delights, amuses, challenges, provokes, evokes, and tickles. But when comedy enters the world of analytical thought and discussion, it leaves the milieu of its success and becomes rooted in words, not action. The immediacy of experiencing comedy is replaced with thoughtful reflection of the encounter. “The fun . . . usually exists in the experience, not in the reflection or analysis of it” (Mills, 1998, p. 40). This is the dichotomy of studying comedy, especially comedy existing in the bodily-kinesthetic domain of dance, where verbal and written language is minimal contribution to the actual experience. Yet the starting point of this study is rooted in words and theories tracing the evolution of humor and salient comedic theories of philosophers, comedy writers, improvisational comedy practitioners, and veteran comedy performers. These theories are then be used to help structure a lens through which to look at phenomenon of comedy in dance. Let me begin with an overview of the various theories regarding the evolution of humor.

An Evolution of Humor

The physical origins and evolution of humor as the quality of being funny have varied theories. We start with laughter because it predates language as a means of communication and is seen as a relic of struggling, biting and physical attack (Leacock, 1938). Gradually smiling and laughter became a substitute for actual assault. The similarity of the bodily stance (exposed teeth, contorted face, sprawling movements of the limbs, etc.) in both fighting and laughing is pointed to as evidence. Laughter has even been called a

spiritualized snarl. Laughter now signals good news, expresses unity in group opinion and indicates that the group can relax with a sense of safety or relief (Goldstein and McGhee, 1972). Stephan Leacock takes a Darwinistic view of laughter.

Aristotle was scarcely correct when he said that man is the only laughing animal . . . this is a physiological trick carried down from our monkey days... There is good ground for saying that the primates all laugh--the word here being used to include not only archbishops and bishops, but orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees. (Leacock, 1938, p. 12)

It is thought that as civilization became more verbal, so did humor. From injury and destruction, heightened self-awareness changed humor to include incongruity and led to the advent of wit. This higher form of humor took the incongruities of life and language and pointed them out for all to see (Leacock, 1938).

In its Latin beginnings, humour meant simply wetness or humidity. It also described the liquid currents flowing through the body. Thus, if a man was not healthy, he was said to be in an "ill-humour," or "out of humour." The four humours of blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, translated into four physical types - sanguinic, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic (Norwood, 1942; Casson 1967).¹ But these humours weren't merely indications of human temperament, they were human temperament. During the Middle Ages, when humour lost its medical properties and evolved into a general meaning of disposition there was a conceptual leap from the "objective physical" to the "subjective mental" qualities of a person (Wickenburg, 1998, p. 17). This change from *humour* as a physical state to *humor* as a mental state, from physically being *humour* to having a *sense of humor*, was a perceptual shift from quantity to quality.

The battle between humor as a quantitative substance, as a physical state, and humor as the quality of being funny is seen in William Congreve's essay entitled, *Concerning Humour in Comedy*, written in 1696. For him comedy is a habit with the four humours in

excess while wit is the same four humours in exactness (In Felheim, 1962). Humor, Congreve states, "Shews us as we are while habit, shews us as we appear" (In Felheim, 1962, p. 199). Here is an important distinction between humor and comedy. Congreve posits that humor is part of the biological make up of humankind and that comedy is a byproduct of that humor. This is an interesting distancing of comedy away from the biology of man and more as a study of behavior; which takes us into the realm of comedy.

The terms comedy and humor are widely used as synonymous yet represent very different points of entry into the same issue. Charles Gruner (1978) breaks down humor into ten categories: exaggeration - making use of an obvious over or under statement; incongruity - the lack of rational relation of objects, people or ideas; surprise - exploiting the unexpected; slapstick - broad, physical activity and horseplay; absurdity - the lack of reason, also includes whimsy, nonsense, and the preposterous; human predicament - situational comedy based on the sympathetic acceptance of the situation; ridicule - mockery of oneself or others; defiance - the release of hostility through rebellion, or the expression of unacceptable ideas; violence - the release of hostility and aggression in a sudden outburst; and verbal humor - the manipulation of language (p. 5-7). Kim Grover-Haskins (1986) includes juxtaposition, ludicrousness, absurdity, and incongruity in her definition of humor. Never even addressing the idea of comedy, her premise is that humor takes place in action, situation, or ideals that appeal to the ludicrous or absurd. Morton Gurewitch (1975) outlines the four major components of comedy as humor, farce, irony, and satire, clearly treading on Gruner's categorization of humor.

This is where the distinction between humor and comedy becomes essential. For the purpose of this study, comedy is defined as the deliberate or intentional use of humor to elicit laughter. These many ideas of language and history form a necessary foundation for a

theoretical scaffolding to observe and dissect the delightful and thoughtful role of comedy in dance.

Comedy and Tragedy

Comedy finds its structure in the elements of drama. It is no wonder that like the masks, comedy and tragedy are often seen together. Like two sides of the coin comedy and tragedy are seemingly polarized yet human relevance resides at the center of both. The balance of comedy and tragedy becomes a symbiotic relationship of degrees. Full tragedy would implode with its own weight, and pure comedy would fly into the ether with nothing to anchor it to reality. Grant McKernie and Jack Watson (1993) state that comedy relies on the structure of tragedy. At the core of every tragedy is “a person attempting to understand the nature of the human individual in a specific situation” (p. 17). At the core of comedy is also the quest for human understanding. More than soul searching for truth, comedy highlights the incongruities of human behavior (Leacock, 1938). Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) outlined the tenets of drama: Tragedy takes place in dramatic action; fear and pity are the two necessary emotions; there must be a beginning, middle, and end; there must be verisimilitude - the sense it could really happen; it must have perfdy, the “aha” moment when the plot comes together for the hero; and there must be spectacle including singing and dancing. These elements outlined by Aristotle are what ground comedy as a part of the human experience.

Aristotle and the Prat Fall

The basic prat fall illustrates beautifully the tenets of Aristotle. The scene is set with a person walking down the street, in the middle of the road is a banana peel, the person, not seeing the peel, steps on it, goes airborne for a second and then falls to the ground (dramatic action and spectacle). As a traditional narrative set up, the scene is complete with foreshadowing in that it relies on the reader’s recall of similar set ups (beginning, middle,

and end). The late Susanne Langer (1953) identifies a comedic rhythm she believes is present in all life (p. 327). There is an internal rhythm the spectator has while watching the events unfold. Langer also identifies comedy as moments of heightened self-realization, the moment the spectator realizes what is going to happen, the kinesthetic awareness of the slip, and the exaggeration of the fall; these moments are an integral part of the comedic experience (verisimilitude, perfidy, fear, and pity).

What Langer understands is that comedy is grounded in human life. If we had never seen or experienced a fall, would the banana peel shtick be funny? Comedy is made up of moments - short episodes where the right elements come together at the right time, elements that are grounded in human life and human experience. That human experience is at the core of the humor experience is certainly not a new idea. Philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) states, "The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human" (In Morreall, 1987, p. 117). His theory centers on the objective distance between performer and audience. The disinterested spectator is able to turn drama into comedy and, in his definition, indifference is comedy's natural environment. You see, once an audience is concerned about the well being of the comic, the bit ceases to be funny. Following that train of thought, Bergson continues that ugliness and deformity are only funny to the degree that a "normally built person" can imitate it (1911, p. 23). Bergson outlines his idea of imitation as an objective look at ourselves and others.

We begin, then, to be imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives to rise to laughter. (Bergson, 1911, p. 33)

In this objectification of life, intellect contrasts intuition. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream” (Bergson, 1911, p. 134). Langer states that drama is the process of abstracting reality from our consciousness by taking away our awareness of our surroundings. Comedy, however, heightens our awareness of ourselves and those around us. Langer describes the essence of comedy as a fundamental life-feeling that springs from a basic rhythm of balancing the objective and subjective worlds. “Real comedy sets up in the audience a sense of general exhilaration, because it presents the very image of ‘livingness’ and the perception of it is exciting” (Langer, 1954, p. 387).

Even with their ostensibly disparate views, both Bergson, approaching comedy as a process of distancing, and Langer, describing comedy as an internal state, effectively strengthen a case for a type of comedy that is grounded in human experience and in the human body. If, as Bergson states, comedy exists in the realm of human life, and as Langer asserts, life-feeling is the essence of comedy, then it naturally follows that the body in motion is a natural medium for humor.

Play, Context, and Relativism

Comedians have a unique life and death vocabulary associated with their profession. If a comedian fails to make the audience laugh she/he “dies” or “bombs.” On the other hand, if the audience is “dying” they are laughing really hard, and if a comedian “kills” it means the routine was very successful. Yet this same language also reflects a sense of play. Certain jokes “play” well to certain crowds, stand up comedians “play” a room, and “play” to the audience. This sense of play is integral to the comedy experience. One overriding concept of play is its limited quality. “It is played out within certain constraints of time and space. The theatrical stage, arena, card table, tennis court, temple, sacred circle, all are

playgrounds, and all are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of act apart” (Mills, 1998, p. 45). Comedy and dance both share a sense of limitedness in time and both take place within a delineated or dedicated space.

Play is a complex phenomenon that can be broken down into three component parts: order, ethical value, and community building (Mills, 1998. p. 45). Play has an inherent order and brings “a temporary, limited perfection, to a confused world” (Mills, 1998. p. 45). Rules are an important part of play; and when the rules are violated, the system collapses and the game is over. Comedy works much the same way. There is an inherent logic to comedy, a set of rules or boundaries that must be played within for the comedy to work. Actor and comedian John Cleese states, “You may have a room full of people dressed as carrots and sitting in dust bins but if someone walks into the room not dressed as a carrot or not sitting in a dust bin, it must be explained why not” (Bravo, 1999). Susanne Langer (1953) underscores the function of a comic structure to emphasize the action, while Henri Bergson (1911) emphasizes that “the vice capable of making us comic is . . . like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility” (p. 15). Structure is an important part of comedy; and while there are many scenarios for comic structure, the two dominant constructs, stripped down to their simplest form, are the straight character playing in a chaotic or crazy situation and the comic character or comic characters playing within a straight situation (Vorhaus, 1994).

Ethical value, according to Mills (1998), is the technical prowess of the individual to perform while adhering to the rules of the game. “Play tends to have an element of ‘tension and solution,’ as in skill games” (p. 46). Again, drawing the parallel of play to comedy, the skill of the comedic performer is marked by her/his ability to navigate the boundaries of comedy. A prime example of comedic prowess is the Monty Python’s Flying Circus

sketch, *The Ministry of Silly Walks*. Set in the structure of a comic character playing within a straight situation, John Cleese portrays an officious bureaucrat sitting in his drab government office deciding which silly walks he will fund. Actor Michael Palin comes in seeking a government grant. After showing his almost normal walk, Cleese stands up and earnestly explains to Palin how important The Ministry of Silly Walks must be taken and why the decisions he makes are crucial to contingent funding. During the speech Cleese, a master of physical comedy, contorts his body into ridiculous shapes while propelling himself around the room, thus demonstrating the kind of silly walks he is willing to fund. Cleese adheres to the rules of this comic sketch. He takes himself and his governmental office very seriously, and he himself is a model example of a silly walk.

Community building in play is done through the creation of a temporary world that rejects the normal rules of ordinary life in favor of the “laws and customs within the game world. It even retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game” (Mills, 1998, p. 47). The comic scene, whether in written comedy or in dance, is an enclosed value system. Only the performers within the scene are bound to the prescribed codes of conduct. While the audience can share in the experience, the performers are the only ones fully aware of the intricacies of the rules of play. “They not only participate visually in this play world, but also physically. The dancer is fully immersed in the rules of play, and when leaving these rules behind shares an immense amount of common experience with his or her fellow dancers. This can be a powerful bonding experience” (Mills, 1998, p. 48).

There is an old theatre adage when seating an audience for a drama, seat them apart from one another so they can have room to experience the sadness and tragedy. When seating an audience for a comedy, pack them in tight because laughter is infectious. Comedy is a natural community building experience. As stated at the beginning of this

chapter, laughter expresses unity in group opinion. The performance experience by its very nature creates a momentary community and a created world shared between both the performers and audience members.

Play and comedy share a sense of limitedness, a need for clear rules and structure, a respect for technical prowess, and a feeling of community among the players (performers) and the fans (audience). But unlike play (structured College Football Big Ten play) there is no red flag thrown when a comedic performer violates the comic structure or breaches comedy etiquette.² No points are awarded, and there are no referees to declare victory or defeat. The audience's response is the sole barometer of success. Comedy is unique as an art that has an immediate measure of its own effectiveness. Part of that effectiveness is the creation of context within the performance itself. In play, the fans are aware of the rules before the game starts. In comedy, the audience members come to know the parameters and structure during the performance. Theorist Mark Roche (1998) describes comedy as "the contrast between contingent particularity and a more substantial world" (p. 135). He suggests that various kinds of contrasts generate different types of comedy for it is the relationship of the characters to their particular situations that form the context of the comedy. This contextual relationship between character and situation, in turn, sets the vocabulary and syntax in which the comedy is effective. Without the proper vocabulary and syntax, the comedy would be lost. Context in this scenario is more closely linked with contexture, the interwoven structure, or the union and arrangement of the constituent parts to the whole, rather than meaning the facts and set of circumstances surrounding an event or situation (Webster, 1996, p. 439).

Comedy is a relativist endeavor. Philosopher Nelson Goodman's book entitled *The Ways of World Making* (1978) explains a system where instead of "a world fixed and

found” he advocates “a diversity of right and even conflicting versions of worlds in the making” (p. x). This world making speaks to the creation of a comic structure where people can be dressed as carrots and can sitting in dust bins. It allows for “dramatically contrasting versions of the world” where, as Goodman states “each is right under a given system – for a given science, a given artist, or a given perceiver and situation” (1978, p. 3). Goodman brings up an interesting point of truth within the created worlds. “More venerable than either utility or credibility as a definitive of truth is coherence, interpreted in various ways but always requiring consistency” (1978, p.124). Comedy relies on the idea of coherence and consistency. Good comics know the boundaries and internal logic relevant to their set and can play within them.

Mills (1998) speaks of play as a temporary world within an ordinary world. Goodman states “we are not speaking in terms of multiple possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds (1978, p.2). In comedy these contrasting ideas intersect – because comedy is a temporary world inside the world as we know it; however, it also creates its own separate world, its own reality. This seemingly logical loop brings in the idea of performer and audience perception which is beyond the scope of this research. But these views encapsulate the conundrum of researching comedy.

A wonderful example of this relativist combination of play and contexture is the *Ministry of Silly Walks* sketch which weaves together an internal logic based on two recognizable characters, the nincompoop-bureaucrat and the straight man (more on this later in this chapter), and their relationship to each other and the situation. The title *The Ministry of Silly Walks* helps set up the structure so that the bureaucratic character complaining about the lack of funding for this fictitious ministry becomes the context. The physicality and silliness of the walks become the vocabulary, and who performs which

walk and when becomes the syntax. The structure is set up for Cleese to be the authority on silly walks and Palin to be the novice. If Palin had an amazingly silly walk or Cleese a normal walk, the sketch would not follow the internal logic and would not be as funny. By playing the scene with a straight face, Cleese allows the audience to guffaw at the incongruity of the situation, juxtaposing the ever-serious government with broad physical comedy. It is the seriousness of his silliness that makes this work. It exemplifies an overriding comic structure that allows the characters to find their own dynamics within the context, but it is the character that brings to life the structure. The momentary world created by Cleese and Palin is effective in its limitedness; and its specificity in time, place, and space, establishes an internal logic for the world created. Cleese also brilliantly demonstrates the creation of a comic character.

Character

Show me a comic character without a comic perspective and I'll show you a straight man. (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 31)

The comic character can be broken down into four elements: comic perspective, exaggeration, human vulnerability, and flaws (Vorhaus, 1994). The comic perspective is the creation of a specific reality in which the comic character must play. More than just the internal logic of the whole sketch or scene, the comic perspective is the comic character's particular view of the world. Most often that view is skewed in some manner. Part of the skewed reality within the comic perspective involves exaggeration and physical comedy is an important part of the comic character in dance -- specific physical actions uniquely suited to the comic character contexted within a given situation; the more specific the action, the funnier the moment. Lucille Ball in the chocolate factory is a prime example. Her skewed perspective is that she would rather try and hide her ineptness than ask that the conveyer belt be turned off so she could catch up. Her exaggerated physical gestures are

incredibly specific, first eating the chocolates and then putting them in her pockets, or anywhere else they fit; her gestures follow the logic created by the skewed reality. Her conviction and seriousness are why this scene works. It is in the sense of exaggeration that comic characters allow us glimpses into ourselves. We must fundamentally care about the characters, otherwise their flaws would be repugnant. The characters must depict vulnerability so their foibles are embraced as human and not monstrous. The comic character must be able to see the truth in the distorted reality. By playing the truth of the created situation the humor feels honest. The phenotype of a comic character as Bergson (1911) states encompasses a “rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability” (p. 147) but must be ultimately recognizable as human or human-like. This lack of self-awareness is what Vorhaus (1994) calls the denial of self-doubt, the mastery of which creates the comic perspective and successful physical comedy. Returning once again to John Cleese’s character in *The Ministry of Silly Walks* sketch, he has a very clear comic perspective; he is very serious about his silly walks. His walk is an absolute exaggeration of that idea and highlights the innate humor of his flaws, which are his utter lack of humor and his blustering bureaucratic snobbishness. His human vulnerability is seen in his commitment and obvious love of his position within the Ministry. Cleese’s character has specific actions that play within this very tight comedic structure. The idea and the execution of the idea are clear.

Comedy writer, Ian Bernard (2003), differentiates the humorous main character and the incidental character. While Bernard echoes the idea of the creation of the comic reality, he feels that it is the interaction with the incidental character that can define a scene. More than just the comic lead and the straight man, incidental characters set the stage. We see evidence of this in the aforementioned sketch. Palin’s character has a benign walk that

Cleese dismissively describes, “well it’s only an aerial hitch every alternate step” (Bravo, 1999). He sits as a passive alternative giving Cleese the reason for his rousing speech and subsequent physical comedy.

This sketch from the former British comedy series, illustrates the comic structure, the comic character, and several devices or craft elements that allow a comic idea to be realized. These elements are not uniquely specific to sketch comedy. In fact, they translate well into the dance arena.

The Modern Dance Models

Three modern dance works serve as examples of the use of comedy in dance: David Parsons’ *The Envelope* (1986) with music of Giacomo Rossini; Paul Taylor’s *Three Epitaphs* (1956) to Dixieland folk music; and Mark Morris’ *The Hard Nut* “Merlitone” dance in Act II (1991) to the music of Peter I. Tchaikovsky. I analyzed these three works using Laban Movement Analysis. This system bases its analytical approach on four categories: time, weight, space, and flow. I found time and space to be key elements. Time exists on a continuum from slow or sustained time to quick time and will be addressed at length later in this chapter. The attention to space is either *direct*, pinpointed space, or *indirect*, all encompassing space. There are also other spatial considerations of proximity and staging. For me, though, space as focus seems to be an important factor.

The issue of focus also brings to light the amazing flexibility of the performer to be able to negotiate what was happening on stage and still be funny. Funny is not necessarily tied to a musical cue or a count; it is something inherent in what is happening on stage. There must be an element of awareness and an improvisational sense or intuition to know how and when the comedy can be played to its fullest. Like balancing a broom upside down on its narrow end there are moments when the comedy balances perfectly for a

second; then it's gone and needs to be adjusted again. Comedy writer Jon Macks uses the terms proactive and reactive comedic senses to exemplify the performer's intuitive knowledge of how and when comedy will work within the given situation (2003). The performers of the comedy in the above mentioned modern dance works are actively involved in the processes of listening and reacting, using both flexible and direct focus. Through direct focus characters guide the audience to what must be noticed. Through indirect focus the dancers retain a flexibility and awareness of the whole stage which allows their proactive and reactive comic senses to play within the sustainable boundaries.

Cleese and Palin in *The Ministry of Silly Walks* are masters of proactive and reactive comic senses. Cleese's reaction to Palin's pallid walk is a model of disdain, and when Cleese spouts his monologue in favor of more funding for his Ministry and contorts his body in the most absurd walking patterns, Palin sits meekly in awe of the master. Their reactions are equally as important as their actions. Comedy is not just based on the broad comic moments but the subtle adjusting within the moment or the scene.

Comedy and Racquetball

Comedy is an enclosed system operating within strict boundaries and logic (See Appendix A). The tension of existing within those boundaries creates its own success. The performers constantly negotiate the contingent particularities that present themselves during a comic moment and the flexibility of the performers and the arrangement of the variables inherent in the scene help define the very moment being played (See Appendix B). In racquetball³, the game is played on a wooden court enclosed with four Plexiglas walls and a Plexiglas ceiling. There is continual shifting and jockeying for position within the court so that the players to return the ball in a way that the opponent cannot retrieve. Without the confines of the Plexiglas walls, or the dexterity of the players, the dynamics, intensity, and

purpose of the game are lost. Without the agreed upon physical boundaries it becomes a different game. Both comedy and racquetball share a sense of order, ethical value, and community, adhering to the rules of play.

In this racquetball analogy the different types of comedy, farce, irony, satire, slapstick, et cetera, help define the shape of the court and become the rules and order within which the comedy is played. While the structure is important in defining the parameters of the game, how the players negotiate within the defined space illustrate the possibilities inherent in the structure. One informs the other in a continual give and take. Space in this instance is both a physical reality and a created world. The ball is comedy, and there are various ways to hit the ball to achieve the desired results. There is a fundamental logic to the pattern of the ball against the structure. There are easy places and consistent places where the ball hits, but the most gifted players are able to find the nooks and crannies, the corners of the comedy, that make wit and cleverness of surprising and odd angles. These angles include surprise, juxtaposition, repetition, and other elements of craft and delivery that help to illuminate the rules of the game (See Appendix C).

Each modern dance work I analyzed brought to the stage a definable comic structure and characters that played within the structure. In David Parsons' *The Envelope*, the dancers are engaged in a covert, secret mission. Their black costumes, black hoods, and exaggerated postures all center around the vague notion of mystery and espionage, a contrast against the banality of a plain white envelope. Quirky movement of the elbows folded in to the body at an uncomfortable angle and the dancers mincing steps on half-point establish the initial comedy. References and homages to classical ballet permeate this work and keep the viewer alert to inside jokes. Four of the characters hold hands Cygnet style in

a brief parody of Marius Petipa's *Swan Lake* (1895) and dancers stack up on one another in homage to Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Noces* (1924).

The "Merlitone" dance from Morris' *The Hard Nut* is a witty, albeit sarcastic, commentary on the American perspective of French culture. Four dancers, armed with a baguette, a Vogue Magazine, a riding crop, and a hat box, parade around the stage in haughty fashion, snubbing their noses at each other. That all four dancers, two females and two males are on pointe does not really enter in to the comedic effect, other than a brief nod for the novelty of it. The use of the American stereotypes of the French upper-crust culture is the identifying feature of the dance.

In Paul Taylor's *Three Epitaphs*, the scenario is set by the juxtaposition of the unearthly costumes of Robert Rauschenberg in contrast to Dixieland funeral music. The dancers are dressed in black leotards and tights. Their hoods and gloves are bejeweled in random designs with shards of mirrors which cast the stage lights into eerie patterns on the back drop. The minute the curtain comes up these alien-like creatures begin their slouchy walk punctuated by erratic arm swings. The structure of the comedy is set as an alternate universe and each character has human-like traits and expresses her/his individuality despite similar costumes. No real plot drives this dance; it is a series of quirky movements, slouchy walks with awkward arm swings, funny bits -- the small alien not watching where she is going crashing into the big alien, the vain alien looking in his mirrored palm to see if he looks okay while trying to find his own pool of light in which to stand. Exaggeration and repetition are found in the nervous alien swinging her arms in complex motions beyond a reasonable duration of time. We laugh not at the effort, but at the repetition of the action.

Repetition is just one of the many aspects of time intrinsic in my analysis of these three modern dance works. My notes were filled with time oriented statements like: Threes, slow, repeated many times, fast, unexpected, shock, stillness, same movement but faster, rhythmic, phrasing, restless, takes time to get outrageous, again and again, abrupt, repetitious, hold, rush, stop, start, relate/respond, three jumps, stillness against movement, backwards, slow exaggerated gestures, taking her time, on the music, and winding down. These were the practical and tangible elements of time. But what about the elusive “timing” of comedy?

Theorists agree that timing is everything. Like the old joke: Ask me, what is the most important thing about comedy? And in the middle of your question I state “timing.” In a very broad sense, timing seems to incorporate the numerical, directional, and linear elements as well as the pause or beat necessary for comedy to work. Timing also includes musicality, rhythm, and aspects of the choreographic manipulations of movement. Within comedy, timing is both an essential component and an abstract concept. Practitioners, theorists, and writers hesitate to define it. It is clear when timing works and it is clear when it doesn’t. There are even practical formulas describing how to use timing, but no one can decide what timing is. It seems to fall in the category of “you either have it or you don’t.” Timing is intensely personal for performers because flows from their natural rhythm and pacing. Comedian Steve Wright has a slow, methodical, droll way of delivering his lines, and much of the humor exists in the pauses between his thoughts. By contrast, veteran comedy performer Robin Williams is a high-octane comic. The material he is performing is funny and more so due to the alarming speed with which he delivers it.

In an attempt to understand the use of comedic timing in dance, the following section is framed as a discussion of how several comedians, choreographers, and dance theorists view the concept of time and timing.

When comedian Jack Benny was asked to define timing, he responded,

It's tough to define . . . my pauses fortunately went over even in radio . . . The audience felt the pauses. . . But how do you define timing? It's a necessity. Its timing means nothing and a bad joke without good timing means nothing -- except you can help a bad joke with timing where you can't help a good joke with bad timing . . . I don't know how to define it. (Wilde, 1968, p. 49)

He went on to explain that one night playing a club in Las Vegas, his timing was thrown off and he couldn't regain the rhythm of his set.

Comedian Phyllis Diller refers to a *sense* of timing as, "a sense of when to speak and when not to speak" (Wilde, 1968, p. 210), and funny man Milton Berle approaches it practically: "we had to make pauses, we had to stop in direction, waiting for beats" (Wilde, 1968, p. 61).

Comedy writer Sol Saks puts it another way, "We are aware of the importance of timing in humor, but sometimes unaware that it is only part of the overall use of rhythm" (Saks, 1985, p. 31). Saks alludes to an unexplainable comedy rhythm that must be felt instinctively and mastered through experience.

In the *Ministry of Silly Walks* sketch, Palin's character has just demonstrated his ineffectual walk and Cleese pauses wonderfully while he thoughtfully contemplates the walk he has just seen and his own response. The pause, although quantifiable in seconds, is better described as just long enough to work. He lets the moment hang long enough for the audience to derive meaning from the silence, long enough to switch the focus from Palin back to himself, and long enough for the audience to realize and register what they have just seen. Only then does Cleese slowly push himself up from his desk for his

commentary and subsequent silly walk response around the desk. The length of the pause was instinctual and demonstrates not only the use of time in comedy but also the flexibility within the confines of the moment – a reactive comedy moment. The pause was part of an internal rhythm of the sketch and worked within the overall context of the scene. This same reactive sense can be seen with Lucille Ball and the chocolates, there are the seconds of panic as the chocolates back up on the conveyer belt before she tries to fix the problem. We see her thought process in the pause. And we laugh both at the delay and at the ludicrous choice she makes.

The element of timing in dance is linked to rhythm also. Doris Humphrey, in her book The Art of Making Dances (1959), identifies a motor rhythm consisting of a steady beat, a breath rhythm of inhalation, suspension and exhalation, and the emotional rhythm that fluctuates between the motor and breath rhythms (p. 107-108). Philosopher Francis Sparshott (1995) also places his discussion of timing under the heading of rhythm by linking rhythm to a perceptive human trait.

If rhythm is going to be an invariable aspect of the practices of dance . . . must be relatable to human life. That in itself is not a restriction, of course, because ‘life’ includes everything, including what is intrinsic to dance. But it suggests that we should look at the identifiable kinds and sources of rhythmic movement and the basic ways in which they relate to human activities. (p. 165)

When Sparshott suggests that we should look at how rhythmic movement relates to human activities, he accepts a very broad look at the notion that rhythm is based on “the human sense of order, our ways of arranging information and experience” (1995, p. 166), much like making sense of play through the organization and rules.

“Comic rhythm,” Langer (1953) believes, is present in all life. She states, “the pure sense of life springs from that basic rhythm” (p. 330), and she feels that comedy “expresses the elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature” (p. 331).

Athene Seyler and Stephen Haggard (1990) discuss the comic rhythm in their book *Craft of Comedy*. Haggard tells of an actor losing his comic rhythm during a show and “floundering helplessly” until he found it again. He brings up issues of phrasing, stating that comedy requires a brisk rhythm and punch. “Good comedy dialogue needs the right word and the right rhythm” (1990, p. 48).

These observations of comedic timing seem to travel freely between the abstract and concrete. In the abstract, the relationship between comedic timing and dance seems to find a link in the concept of rhythm. Irmgard Bartinieff describes time working on a continuum from sustained to sudden. “How does the mover exert him/herself in time?” she asks, “driven by it or lingering in it” (1980, p. 56). This classification recognizes the subjective nature of time and comedic timing. The question isn’t how long does it take? But “What is his/her [the mover’s] attitude toward exertions in time?” (Bartinieff, 1980, p. 56). In the concrete, timing is knowing how much time it will take to execute the comic bit or moment. In the abstract, timing is the innate knowledge of how and when something will be perceived as funny.

The Holy Triple

One of the most effective organizational devices in comedy is the set up, anticipation, and punch line. It is interesting to note that this tripartite device parallels Humphrey’s (1959) concept of breath rhythm which she describes as inhalation, suspension and exhalation (p. 108), and Langer’s idea of comedy representing the “elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature” (1953, p. 331). Comedy writer, Melvin Helitzer calls this formula, “the holy trilogy” or the triple (1986, p. 114). Linked to this is the rule of threes; it is like the triple but does not necessarily have the build into the punchline, if it’s funny once, it’s funny three times, depending on the context (Vorhaus, 1994; Robinson, 1999).

This “triple” is also a universal device in folklore and television situation comedy:

Goldilocks the Three Bears, Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Three Little Pigs, The Three Stooges, My Three Sons, just to name a few.

In “The holy trilogy” the set up is the most important part of the formula because it establishes the situation. Incongruity is a major device used in helping to establish the comedic set up. Theorists Jeffery Goldstein and Paul McGhee define the incongruity theory as “humor arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations or presentations of ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs” (1972, p. 7). Incongruity is “the lack of a rational relation of objects, people, or ideas to each other or to the environment” (Gruner, 1978, p. 5). The three modern dance works discussed previously all have two disparate ideas or situations thrown together as a major part of their comedy: Alien creatures and Dixieland music; spies and a innocuous white envelope; and the gender-bending, haughty French characters playing against the traditional ballet music. Immediately incongruity is introduced in these works as the set up for the rest of the dance.

The anticipation of the triple is the build up, straining against the expectations: the scary music in a horror film; the slow run to the finish line; and Christmas eve if you open your gifts Christmas morning. The anticipation is filler between set up and punchline. In comedy in dance, there is a natural rhythm that starts with a comedic set up, and then flows into a technical dance sequences and ends in a conclusion or punchline. The technical dance sequences become the anticipation.

The punchline in the triple is the payoff that finishes the moment or joke. Looking again at Cleese and Palin in *Ministry of Silly Walks*, I described the set up, Palin coming in and requesting a government grant; and the anticipation, Palin’s pathetic attempt at silliness and Cleese’s masterful walk around the desk. The punchline for this sketch isn’t

Cleese's silly walk, it is actually the secretary, Mrs. Twolumps, who brings in coffee at the end of the sketch. Her walk is so awkward that she ends up spilling all of it before it can be served. That is the payoff.

David Parsons uses the triplet not only as his set up in *The Envelope*, he uses it as an overall structure and in his choreographic design. The curtain opens and a lone figure wearing black, with a black hood standing in a pool of light, holds a white envelope. After carefully scrutinizing the envelope, the figure throws it off stage (set up). The envelope is thrown back on stage. For the first time the envelope comes back. The figure picks it up and throws it off again (the anticipation), but the envelope falls from the sky landing right in front of the figure. This is the second return of the envelope. The figure picks it up and throws it off again. This time the lights come up to illuminate the rest of the stage space, and another figure enters on the opposite side of the stage carrying the envelope. She dances with it then jumps into the first figure's arms, envelope and all (punchline). This is three times the envelope has come back on stage. The comedic structure is set up by the incongruity of an inanimate piece of stationary becoming a menacing presence moving of its own accord, the scary "Chucky" doll of dance.

Anticipation in Parsons' work involves a series of ideas all involving the dancers' relationship with the envelope. A group of dancers form a line and motion for the dancer with the envelope to come and jump into their arms. As he flies through the air, the dancers move aside so that he crashes to the ground, envelope and all. The dancer rolls over and thrusts the envelope straight armed, into the air. In the next scene, the remaining dancers roll out a long red carpet and line up on either side with their arms curved overhead forming a royal archway as another dancer enters on with a regal air. The humor archway disbands and the dancers pick up the prone figure setting him down so the envelope lands right into

the hand of the dancer on the red carpet. Space is used concretely and cleverly. The dancers exit and the man holding the envelope is drawn closer and closer to the wings, as the red carpet is pulled offstage by unseen dancers. Just as the envelope is about to disappear in the wings another dancer wanders across the stage and unceremoniously plucks it out of the other's grasp. The punchline is a rousing coda where the dancers display their physicality by passing the envelope to one another, under legs, in mouths, over heads, and around other dancers until all of the dancers are connected and convulsing wildly from the power of the envelope. Suddenly, the dancer in front throws the envelope off stage, and the music ends. The final image of this dance is the envelope arching on from the opposite side of the stage as the last dancer in line pans slowly to gaze at it, unopened and menacing in its own pool of light.

The envelope is the focal point of the dance. As with most dances involving props, the prop is a central character. Within the racquetball analogy, the envelope becomes the ball cleverly maneuvered by the dancers. The black costumes and mysterious hoods the dancers are wearing match the shrouded skepticism and wonder with which they regard the envelope. That skepticism and wonder become the overriding structure of the court in which the dancers are playing. The game is who has the envelope, what is the envelope going to do next, and how well the dancers react to and manipulate each other and the envelope to satisfy the structure of the triplet.

David Parsons learned his craft from a comic master. As a student and company member of Paul Taylor's, Parsons was well versed with the use of comedy in dance. In Paul Taylor's *Three Epitaphs* the black, alien-like costumes by visual artist Robert Rauchenberg provides a central focus. The dance begins with a tall alien creature looking down with what can only be described as disdain at a small alien creature crouching down

looking up adoringly. These creatures are juxtaposed to contrast against the New Orleans folk music, as well as the ludicrous nature of the seemingly human opening pose provide the set up. The big alien scurries off as the little alien slumps forward following close on his heels. Three other alien creatures come on with a slumping step in a count of four, three steps and the arms fling sideways parallel to floor on count four. One derivation of that step is two hops with the arm swing on the count of three, repeated many times. Intricate arm gestures and awkward jumps where the legs criss-cross in the air fill the middle section of the work. The punchline is a return to the big alien slumped over scurrying around the stage and the small alien on his heels, not really looking where she is going. When the big alien stops, and the small alien runs smack into his backside. The small alien crouches to look adoringly up as the offended alien stares disdainfully down. This is a traditional sonata or ABA format, which is just one of the many examples of the triplet. It is also an example of how focus can be used to create comedy.

The *Hard Nut*, “Merlitone” section, is also arranged in an ABA musical format. This dance begins with the four dancers prancing on stage and each posing with their respective prop. As stated earlier this dance relies heavily on the American stereotype of the haughty French culture, but Morris adds another touch of juxtaposition, a comment on gender stereotyping. To emphasize the role reversal, all four dancers, two men and two women, wear pointe shoes and the women are dressed in blue while the men are dressed in pink. The woman reading *Vogue* magazine starts the initial series of tableau poses. The dancing starts with a common ballet sequence of three repetitions of a phrase and then a derivation of it. During the anticipation there are many groupings of three against one and three repetitions and a derivation. The punchline comes when the dance ends in the original pose after which the quartet haughtily marches off.

The triple, just one comedic device of many employed by these choreographers, related to the “holy trilogy” whose origins are in dramatic theatre, translates well into the choreographic realm. The triple is a practical application of the concept of time.

Complementary Theories

Dancers Ann Blom and Kim Grover-Haskins also have looked at the specific phenomenon of comedy in modern dance. Following Charles Gruner’s example (1978), Blom approaches comedy in modern dance as a collection of possible elements. She outlines nine key components of: plain funny movement; illogical cause and effect; use of one’s face to comment on movements; characterization; relationships; music; plot development; costumes; props and sets; and dance satirizing itself. Blom also acknowledges the ephemeral quality of comedy (1986).

Dances are funny by being exquisitely fanciful or more earthy than reality ever is. Analysis is instructive, but there is still magic to creating funny dances that no amount of understanding can automatically produce. Without the magic we are annoyed by the overstated and stupid. With the magic we experience the delight and mystery of the suddenly empty hand of the magician. (Blom, 1986, p. 2)

There is a quality to comedy that defies explanation, but Blom has narrowed the playing field by offering nine possible points of entry into the occurrence of comedy in modern dance.

Grover-Haskins (1986) submerges more deeply into the phenomenon of comedy itself by centering her theorization around Max Eastman’s idea of humor as an inner feeling involving incongruity and contact, the “frustrated expectation” theory -- building expectations and then frustrating the outcome. She also draws heavily on Luigi Pirandello’s theory that the perception of humor works from a spontaneous and impulsive force, the ability to perceive conflicting aspects of every situation simultaneously. She pinpoints juxtaposition, exaggerated action, timing, and dancers, as choreographic devices that enhance the humor in movement. Grover-Haskins illustrates beautifully the presence of

time and space as key forces of comedy in dance as well as alluding to the importance of the performer and improvisational nature of comedy.

When combined these theories form a brilliant cause and effect rationale for comedy in dance. They also collectively support the integration of theory and praxis with concrete examples. Grover-Haskins provides the basis for the nine elements Blom outlined. The outcome of the juxtaposition of the body might be funny or quirky movement, as we saw by the extreme posture of the dancers in both *The Envelope* and *Three Epitaphs*. The frustrated expectation illustrates an illogical cause and effect in Parsons' *The Envelope*. In one scene, the dancers on stage have already defined the envelope as suspect by leaving it lying in the middle of the stage while they stand elbows in, on half point, hunched over, staring at it from a safe distance. One by one the dancers walk slowly to the envelope, peer down at it and then quickly return to their semi-circle (this happens three times). The envelope is picked up, passed around; the group ends up connected and convulsing wildly. When the envelope drops, the convulsing stops. On to the stage comes another dancer who carelessly picks up the envelope and skips away with it. The expectation is that the envelope is dangerous, and the punchline is that the latest dancer does not sense or ignores the menace.

Grover-Haskins contends that the dancers are an integral part in the creation of humor. Her determination makes sense of Blom's directive for using facial expressions to make commentary. In Taylor's *Three Epitaphs* the tall alien saunters to the center of the stage and rubs his mirrored palm on his thigh. He looks at himself in the mirror and the slowly pans front to the audience. Even though the performer is masked we sense a droll expression on his face and is certainly an example of a dancers using their face for self commentary. In the "*Merlitone*" divertissement from The Hard Nut, the dancers' facial

expressions convey haughtiness not only with one of the title characters, Drosslemeyer, but with each other as well. Snide looks, lip curls, and insincere smiles with a nod of the head are the order of the day.

Let us return to the relationship between comedy and racquetball. The shape of the court, determined by the kind of comedy, parody, farce, irony, slapstick, satire, and so on, contributes to the comic structure which includes but is not limited to, the frustrated expectation theory, incongruity, juxtaposition, and exaggeration. The dancer is the player, and the ball becomes the various ways to achieve comedy. In an intuitive and improvisational way the dancer chooses to hit the ball which the choreographer shapes by comic structure and movement choices.

Racquetball is based on angles of trajectory; the more difficult the angle the more dynamic the return of the ball. The use of the triple and Blom's nine elements of plain funny movement, illogical cause and effect, the use of face to comment on movements, characterization, relationships, music, plot development, costumes, props, and sets, and dance making fun of itself, provide possible ways to categorize the various shots. The game itself exists in time and space. Just like the first stroke of color on a blank canvas begins to define the painting, the first shot of the racquetball sets up the tone of the game.

This racquetball analogy is based on a modern dance sensibility to humor and the humor in these examples seem to thrive on the odd angle. Much of the humor stems from the movement choices themselves. Comedy in modern dance flexes the boundaries of human movement. Comic scenarios have a loose hanging narrative rather than a detailed plotline. The movement, costumes, music, and setting define the characters. The characters themselves serve the movement and the idea without really defining or calling attention to themselves. In *The Hard Nut* the four "Merlitone" dancers have vague identifiable traits

centered around our American-centric view of French culture, found similarly in Gene Kelly's *An American in Paris* (MGM, 1951): The *Vogue* magazine, a French baguette, a riding crop (not necessarily French but funny), and a hat box symbolizing haute couture. These props serve the idea while the dancers are merely the vehicles to display them. Other than general haughtiness there were no identifiable comic traits in the dancers' portrayals. In *Three Epitaphs* the costumes make a unified statement. While each character is slightly different we can characterize them with adjectives like the short one, the nervous one, the tall one, the vain one. We are oblivious to their names because they have no sense of individuality. In fact when they bow, they bow with their hoods off so the audience can finally gain a sense of identity of the performer. *The Envelope* employs the same idea. The performers all wear similar costumes and dance with similar movement styles. These dancers service the idea of the envelope and not their own character development. They work as microcosms of the whole structure.

When I researched the range of the craft of contemporary comedy -- stand-up comedy, comedy writing, veteran comedy performers, and tips for how to be funny -- I learned that each writer had something to say about the creation of comic character and this was missing from the modern dance examples. True comic characters with their own comic perspectives, faults, and human spirit that have an integral comic function within the storyline. Then I realized that the *Envelope* and *Three Epitaphs* work from a loosely constructed narrative and not a plot driven story.

Mark Morris' *Hard Nut* operates from a plot driven, narrative and his comic characters are introduced in Act I, considered the "acting" half. Act II is considered the "dancing" half, displaying a series of dances, each themed from a different country. His "Merlitone" dance is his jab at France. The different dances operate much like *The Envelope* and *Three*

Epitaphs in that the comedy is derived from the dancers' service to a central comic theme or prop rather than a broad individual characterizations. They also echo the eighteenth-century convention of Ballet à entrées (discussed in Chapter III).

From my own experience as a comedic performer in dance I remember performing the Young Girl role in Richard France's adaptation of David Lichine's *Graduation Ball* (Lichine, 1940; France, 1982). My first entrance included running full tilt and, in my exuberance, falling and sliding on my belly across the stage, only to spring up, brush myself off, look around furtively, then call the other school girls onto the stage to prepare for the big dance. In France's adaptation of Leonide Massine's *Gaité Parisienne* (Massine, 1938; France, 1981) I played the Head Waitress who, as an awful flirt, cavorted with not only the head waiter but the Baron and, well, any male patron of the cafe. As the Grandmother in Act I of Jean Paul Comelin's *The Nutcracker* (1985), my character was the life of the party gulping glasses of champagne, pinching children's cheeks until they squealed, and delighting in being inappropriate by lifting my voluminous skirts to do lively dances. I didn't represent an abstraction of these roles, but constructed real people.

The theories of Blom (1986), Grover-Haskins (1986), and the three modern dance examples project careening but compatible relationships. Grover-Haskins and Blom illustrate how theory and praxis work as a cause and effect in the creation of comedy in dance. However both theorists operate from a modern dance sensibility of abstraction and the three dance examples also function from this base. This highlights an essential question: Would the racquetball theory be comprehensive enough to cross dance genres? The enclosed system operating with its own internal logic supports a plot driven narrative. Incongruity, juxtaposition, surprise and all of the categories of comedy described by Gruner (1978) and Gurewitch (1975) are craft elements to exact the comedy within the

enclosed system. The “holy triple” and “the rule of threes” are consistent ways to hit the ball in both narrative and abstract dance works. The missing piece of the puzzle is the comic character. Knowing that comic characters are traditional in classic story ballets since Renaissance Comedia dell’arte and knowing also that pantomime is part of this comic tradition, the racquetball theory is not completely useful when turning one’s attention to studying classical story ballets.

The next chapter will look at the contingent particularities inherent of comedy in the story ballet tradition and develop an adaptation of the racquetball model to better function in the context of classical ballet.

ENDNOTES

¹In 1946 George Balanchine choreographed a ballet. *The Four Temperaments*, based on the idea that “each one of us possesses these four humours, but in different degrees, and it is from the dominance of one of them that the four physical and psychological types - melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, and choleric - were derived” (Balanchine and Mason, 1989, p. 181).

²The vast differences between the phenomenon of play and game playing are not be addressed in this study.

³Racquetball is played by two or four players. The game is based on using a strung racquet to serve and return the ball. The objective is to rally the lively small blue ball until your opponent cannot return it before it bounces twice. You must be on the serving side to win a point. The game is won when 15 points are scored. Two out of three wins takes the match. Tie breakers are played to 11 points.

CHAPTER III

NARRATIVE BALLET: GESTURE AND EMOTION

“The universe is made up of stories, not atoms” (Muriel Rukeyser, in Fitzhenry, 1993, p. 268).

This chapter traces the evolution of the narrative form in ballet by looking at three dance writers who advocated dance reform. Ballet pantomime is discussed as it relates to the narrative form. And the works of twentieth-century choreographers Michel Fokine and Leonide Massine are examined as they illustrate the abstraction of the traditional ballet narrative.

To study comedy in ballet is to review the evolution of ballet since Greco-Roman times. There has been narrative based comedy where the plotline is formed by the humor with recognizable characters who carry the plot. Particular to the modernist era, there is also an abstract form of comedy in ballet where works are more theme-based than narrative driven. This change has occurred gradually over the last 350 years. By tracing what is written about ballet composition by three distinguished artist/philosophers who advocate reform, an evolution toward a cohesive plot structure can be seen.

Ballet à entrées and Ballet d'action

Let us review the theories of the three selected dance writers: M. de St. Hubert in 1641; Jean Georges Noverre in 1760; and Michel Fokine in 1905; through their works and ideas the relationship of ballet to the narrative form can be seen, and by extension, a narrative ballet's relationship to comedy. St. Hubert broke his treatise into a taxonomy five categories: subject, airs, dancing, costumes, and machines. Subject, he determined, should be new and well developed. Comic entrées and serious entrées should not be placed back to back, and originality should be valued above all. “If you can find entrées . . . that have not

yet been seen this will enrich your ballet and make your inventiveness more admirable” (In Cohen, 1974, p. 33). Individual entrées [dances] should be organized so the number of dancers appearing in each varies. “Those with three, four, five, six, seven, and eight dancers are the most attractive and make possible the most beautiful figures” (Cohen, 1974, p. 33). Airs or music must be specifically written to fit the ballet.

It would be well for the airs not to be written before the subject is perfectly set and the entrées carefully planned so that they will be appropriate and will follow what the dancers are to do and represent and the musician will be much more successful in this way than by composing many airs which can only with difficulty be adjusted to the entrées and the subject afterwards. (Cohen, 1974, p. 34)

The dancing must be suited to the character, the station, and the plot. St. Hubert continues, “one must fit the dancing and the steps to the airs and the entrées so that a vine-grower or water-carrier will not dance as a knight or a magician” (Cohen, 1974, p. 34). St. Hubert had a list of common sense strategies to be followed. Good dancers should do the best steps while poorer dancers should do character parts. Stage conventions should be upheld. If someone is lame at the beginning of a scene and is not cured during the entrée then he should remain lame at the end of the scene. Scenes should begin and end in the same way unless there is a metamorphosis. Characters should be easily recognizable without their props; dancing should further the plot; uneven numbers of figures (dancing patterns) are better; comical entrées should be kept short, whereas serious entrées should be longer. In his words, “as to the serious entrées, well danced and with handsome costumes, they must be made to last even in longer . . . steps must be varied to avoid boredom” (Cohen, 1974, p. 36). Improvisation must never be permitted, dancers must know their steps.

Originality of costumes and machines, their beauty and relevance to the plot, were the key criteria to composing a successful ballet:

Ballet costumes can never be too handsome provided they are made according to the subject . . . it would be ridiculous to see a vine-grower wearing embroidered clothes

and a nobleman coarse cotton. One should seek not so much lavishness as fitness, since a buckram or a frieze costume, well related to the subject, will be finer and better than an inappropriate silk one. (Cohen, 1974, p. 36)

A century later, Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810) was influenced by St. Hubert's cook book approach, but tackled the choreographic process more philosophically. He felt above all that ballet should be dramatically expressive. He writes, "A well composed ballet is a living picture of the passions, manners, ceremonies and customs of all nations of the globe, consequently, it must be expressive in all its details and speak to the soul through the eyes . . ." (In Beaumont, 1966, p. 16). Plots should be unified and logical with no extraneous dances. "Ballets, being representations, should unite the various parts of the drama. Themes expressed in dancing are, for the most part, devoid of sense, and offer a confused medley of scenes as ill-connected as they are ill-ordered" (Beaumont, 1966, p. 16).

Pantomime should make sense to be understood. In many instances the plot lines and pantomimes of the ballets of the day were so confusing that *livrets*, published librettos detailing the story, were required to help the audience understand what was going on.¹ All elements of the ballet (dances, scenery, music, plot) must work congruently. "It is a capital fault to associate opposite styles and to mix them without distinction; the serious with the comic; the noble with the trivial, the elegant with the burlesque" (Beaumont, 1966, p. 18). Ultimately, Noverre declared that a theatrical representation should touch the heart, move the soul, and inflame the imagination (In Cohen, 1974).

Michel Fokine (1880-1942), schooled in the ballets of the nineteenth-century, created in linear, succession from St. Hubert through Noverre, especially those of Marius Petipa, streamlined the choreographic process even further. He maintained that all the elements of the production should be integrated and relevant to the plot.

The dance need not be a mere *divertissement*, introduced into the pantomime. In the ballet the whole meaning of the story can be expressed by the dance. Above all, dancing should be interpretative. It should not degenerate into mere gymnastics . . . The dance should explain the spirit of the actors in the spectacle. More than that, it should express the whole epoch to which the subject of the ballet belongs. (Beaumont, 1981, p. 23)

Fokine outlined his own five principles of ballet composition. Movement should fit the ballet in period, style and nationality and should not be a set of prescribed, hackneyed steps. Like Noverre, Fokine advocated innovation, the creation of new movement to serve the ballet better. Gesture expresses dramatic action and should not be ornamentation. Fokine posits, “through the rhythms of the body the ballet can find expression for ideas, sentiments, emotions. The dance bears the same relation to gesture that poetry bears to prose” (In Beaumont, 1981, p. 23). Pantomime and conventional gesture should be used only when warranted by the style and meaning of the dramatic action. In all other instances the meaning can be conveyed with dance; “man [sic] can be and should be expressive from head to foot” (Beaumont, 1981, 146). As proposed and practiced by nineteenth-century Danish choreographer, August Bournonville (1805-1879), expressive dramatic action should include everyone, not just the principal dancers. The *mise en scène* groupings and individual events in a scene should be relevant to the plot. Bournonville’s artistic theory incorporated the idea that “art is a question of the spirit, and the theatrical avenue to idealism is through realism” (Terry, 1979, p. 34). Fokine followed this ideal by advocating that the music, scenery, dancing, costumes, are all of equal importance. “In place of the traditional dualism,” Fokine stated, “the ballet must have complete unity of expression, a unity which is made up of a harmonious blending of the three elements – music, painting, and plastic art” (Terry, 1979, p. 23).

All three ballet choreographers and theorists advocated a cohesive plot structure and trimmed the proverbial fat of extraneous dances, but St. Hubert maintained the ideals of

ballet à entrée with its concern for the number of entrées and their organization. For him, a great ballet had at least thirty entrées, a fine ballet included at least twenty, and a small ballet contained between ten and twelve entrées (Cohen, 1974). Noverre, the father of the cohesive *ballet d'action* form, sought to understand the plot, rather than view a series of dances that displayed the technical virtuosity of the dancers and stunning visual patterns. He asserted,

Dancing, according to the accepted definition of the word, is the art of composing steps with grace, precision and facility to the time and bars given in the music, just as music itself is simply the art of combining sounds and modulations so they can afford pleasure to the ear. But the gifted musician does not confine himself to so limited a circle, and the distance he traverses beyond is much greater than the circle itself. He studies the character and accents of the passions and expresses them in his compositions. On the other hand, the *maître de ballet*, striking out beyond the customary limits of his art, seeks in these same passions their characteristic movements and gestures; and bidding with the same chain those steps, gestures and facial expressions to the sentiments he desires to express, he finds, in bringing together all these elements, the means of producing the most astonishing effects. (In Beaumont, 1960, p. 3)

To twentieth-century historian, Lincoln Kirstein, nineteenth-century *ballet d'action* is a dramatic ballet “with admixtures of mimicry and expressive posture that reflected human habit rather than some established carved, cast, or conceptual ideal” (1970, p. 11). Choreographers relied upon pantomime to tell the tale, like recitative in opera, and focused on representing various cultures by staging simplified national dances with the use of a focused plot line in which the main issues were resolved with a happy, rollicking ending -- and ‘they lived happily ever after.’ Fokine sought a stricter adherence to the narrative and cohesive unity among all parts of the production. By advocating psychological integrity within the choreography to convey the narrative, he unloosed storytelling from time honored formulas.

Lincoln Kirstein sees both Noverre and Fokine as ballet reformists that “reassert the necessity for synthesis” (Kirstein, 1969, p. 40). Fokine’s Article, *The New Ballet*,

written in 1916, for the Russian periodical *Argus* heralded expression as the driving force for ballet. Sir Frederick Ashton drew from Fokine's love of natural movement and his sense of the limitless possibilities of the ballet vocabulary and gestures. Fokine's message furthered the creative evolution of the art through the twentieth-century paving the way for an investigation of the comedic potential of dance.

Man has always changed his plastic language. He has expressed in the most varied forms his sorrows, his joys, and all the emotions he experienced, hence his mode of expression cannot be fixed according to any one rule . . . Creators of ballet should always endeavor to seek out that form of dancing which best expresses the particular theme, for this principle leads to great beauty. However varied the rule of ballet might become, life would always more varied still. (Cohen, 1974, 106)

Ballet Pantomime

The role of pantomime in ballet has its roots in seventeenth-century *commedia dell'arte* and eighteenth-century *ballet d'action* in that it plays an integral part in the conveying of narrative. John Weaver (1673-1760), eighteenth-century choreographer and theorist, is considered the father of British pantomime. His ideas of the dramatic expression of dance predate Noverre's by almost fifty years. Weaver's use of pantomimic sequences in his ballets stemmed from "both his exposure to the low-life *commedia dell'arte* figures and his extensive research into Greek and Roman descriptions of the art" (Foster, 1986, p. 128). In *The Love of Mars and Venus* (1717), perhaps his best known work, Weaver fused both dance and mime in this narrative ballet. More than just creating a story ballet, dance and mime furthered the plot. In his description of this ballet, Weaver outlines a series of gestures that the audience should be aware of to understand fully the "passions or affections" of the characters (Cohen, 1974, p. 54). Although strictly coded, his directions are clearly logical and hold up today.

Admiration, Weaver states "is discover'd by the raising up of the right Hand, the Palm turn'd upward, the Fingers clos'd; and in one Motion the Wrist turn'd round and Fingers

spread; the Body reclining, and Eyes fix'd on the Object" (In Cohen, p. 54). Astonishment involves both hands thrown up and the body reeling backwards. Jealousy is the middle finger pointing to the eye, and anger is the left hand striking the right, or striking the breast. This detailed description of gestures and their literal meanings is a corner stone of *ballet d'action* and the basis of traditional ballet pantomime. While Fokine rebelled against such a codified system of pantomime, vestiges of Weaver's influence can still be seen in the classic story ballets produced in the twentieth-century, such as George Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Anthony Tudor's *Lilac Garden*, or Agnes DeMille's *Fall River Legend*.

Joan Lawson, an authority of ballet pantomime, dissects the body into various parts and functions.² Her interest in the body is practical and goal oriented; the sum of the body parts becomes the ability to convey story or narrative in three different categories: emotional expression, occupational gesture, and conventional gesture (Lawson, 1957, p. viii). The categorizations of gestures provide a way organize them according to their function within the storyline.

Emotional expression

Emotional expression is the ability to create the sense of "real life" on stage by enlarging natural movements to read beyond the proscenium arch. "The vital thing to remember when using natural emotional expression," Lawson states, "is that every movement must appear natural in the artificial environment in which it is set" (1957, p. 30). By creating a "presence" on stage, the pantomime is the extension from a clearly delineated character and a proactive and reactive approach to the movement. The performers' attention to direct space gives a distinct directional quality to the movement that helps convey ideas.

Sagittal [forward frontal] movement includes: the greeting, or the audience's first impression; the agreement, or nod of the head; the question, thrusting the head forward from the shoulders and perhaps a clasping or beseeching of the hands; and the surprise, usually preceded by a movement forward before the reaction of what was surprising.

Backward spatial movement includes: saying "no" which might manifest itself in the head or actual steps going backward to ward off a blow or something unpleasant; abhorrence or hate, very similar to the "no" reaction, includes thrusting hands into the air while moving backwards. Moving upward and extending the arms away from the body are happy expressions. Gestures that widen and move upward are prideful manifestations, and narrowing upwards tends to be a show of anger. Sad emotions are portrayed through movement that is down and inward, while tiredness or frustration might be a downward movement.

Sideways open movement depicts bravery and honesty while sideways downward motion is furtive and cunning. Turning, or weight shifting side to side, indicates indecisiveness or quick thinking (1957, p. 15-23). While emotional expression, in Lawson's description, relies heavily on directional qualities, occupational gesture uses the whole body to depict tangible, recognizable activities.

Occupational Gesture

One facet of occupational gesture is the detailed depiction of household chores such as sewing, weaving, or milking a cow, performed without props. Classical narrative ballets are filled with rich examples of dances that incorporate this type of gesture: the spindle dance in Marius Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890), where Aurora sees a spindle for the first time; or the harvest dance in Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1960) in which the performers dance with scythes and file in and out of horizontal and vertical rows as if

picking through the field. In many ways occupational gesture in ballet is based in activities stereotyped by class, gender, and culture. The prayer solo in Act III of Arthur Saint Léon's *Coppelia* (1870) is steeped in what many considered stereotypical prayer gesture including traditional praying hands. Madge's fortune telling sequence in August Bournonville's *La Sylphide* (1836) incorporates palm reading – hand actions to indicate mounting fortunes, marriage, and pregnancy. And Leonide Massine's *Gaité Parisienne* (1938) was filled with lively restaurant activity including waiters cleaning tables, waitresses carrying trays of drinks, and vendors selling gloves and cigarettes.

Another kind of occupational gesture is objective mime. Charlie Chaplin's "Performing Fleas," in which Chaplin follows the flea's progress with his eyes, is a prime example. Chaplin becomes an objective viewer witnessing this imaginary spectacle. The famous fly sequence in *La Fille mal Gardée* is another example and will be discussed at length in chapter six.

Conventional Gesture

Following John Weaver's principles of pantomime, conventional gesture is a highly stylized series of peripheral gestures generated to help convey the subtleties of a sometimes convoluted plot. Lawson depicts conventional gesture as a language complete with vocabulary, syntax, and sentence structure. "A conversation usually begins by defining who is speaking," Lawson states, "followed by a gesture defining to whom the speech is addressed, and then by the operative verb. Thus an initial statement is usually something like this -- 'I -- You -- Speak' (see, hear, ask, etc.)" (Lawson, 1957, p. 73). Several rules of classical ballet mime are outlined that reach beyond the directional meanings, again breaking the body down into parts. The arms, in conventional gesture, are the most important feature, carrying the weight of meaning. It is through the gestures of the arms

that mimetic syntax and structure are established, including transitions from one idea to the next. Lawson describes the accepted ballet vocabulary including: crying -- fingers lightly trailing down the cheeks; aging -- stooped over as if using a cane; witnessing death -- both hands in front of face palms in; and inviting people to dance -- the arms twirling overhead in a clockwise motion. Footwork is important for timing and direction. "It can give the speaker the necessary impetus to move upstage before making the gesture, or carry him away from his position so that another can speak. But the mime must never take too many steps, because, as stated above in conventional gesture the interest lies in the arms" (Lawson, 1957, p. 72). So that the scene is visible to all, the performer must also stand at least three-quarters toward the audience when speaking to a partner or to the audience, with the majority of the weight on the back foot.

This mimetic depiction of narrative is a product of its time and reflects an attitude toward a "vocabulary" of dance that can be codified and taught. Today, with ballet expanding its borders to include many different forms of dance representing various national and individual aesthetics, the classics are being remade and the mimetic passages removed, updated, or colloquialized to add interest to local audiences³.

The story-telling function of ballet requires in its performance a good deal of pantomime. Contemporary audiences, at least in the Western Hemisphere, unaccustomed to and inexperienced with the fine art of pantomime, are impatient with it. Moreover, particularly in the United States, there is very little training and consequently equally little knowledge of pantomime on the part of the average dancer. (Deakin, 1956, p. 98)

Emotional Gesture

Emotional expression and conventional and occupational gesture are convenient labels for ballet mime. Yet ballet has evolved beyond mime incorporating the use of the whole body as a means of expression as Fokine advocated. The vast difference between Lawson's idea of pantomime and the twentieth-century sensibility to the body is reflected in

Ann Bogart's (Artistic Director of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute and Professor of Theatre at Columbia University) notion of behavioral and emotional gesture (2002). Behavioral gesture relates to basic human behavior much like occupational gesture but much more realistic and recognizable as pedestrian movement, and emotional gesture deals with the abstraction of that human behavior. The conventional gestures of Weaver and Lawson have been relegated to the classics and are part of a rich heritage of ballet.

Michel Fokine

Michel Fokine (1888-1942) strayed from occupational and conventional gesture in his ballets in favor of a more emotional gesture quality. Modern dance originator, Isadora Duncan, profoundly moved Fokine. "Before Duncan came," Fokine states,

There was a period when the idea of truth in all that concerns ballet had been completely lost. It was Duncan who brought dancing back to its true beginnings . . . The old ballet had fallen into a fatal error due to its routine and artificial practices. There was always too great a gap between the theme and stage action. The latter was explained by means of inexpressive traditional dances, while to make the plot more comprehensible; recourse was had to a form of gesticulation based on the most conventional actions. (Fokine in Beaumont, 1981, p. 149)

In 1907, two years after Fokine wrote his *Essays in Choreography*, he choreographed *Le Cygne* now known as *The Dying Swan*. This three minute solo for Anna Pavlova to the music of Camille Saint Saens illustrates beautifully the unity of expression and Bogart's idea of emotional gesture. When the swan enters she has already been shot and in a series of feral often ungainly gestures she lives the last moments of her life to die in the now famous seated pose: one leg tucked under her while her other leg extends gracefully, her head rests on the outstretched knee as her hand, once crossed at the wrist while the other on her ankle gently falls to the floor. The gestures in this work convey the narrative, some would say metaphor. There is nothing extraneous, and the costume of a mid-thigh tutu adorned with feathers danced against a plain black drape rivets our focus on the dancer.

The *Dying Swan* is a perfect example of emotional gesture. The bird-like movements of the dancer move beyond a strict narrative and convey a deeper meaning more than just a wounded bird. Pavlova toured this dance around the world, and it became her signature piece. There is even a story that she asked to be buried in the swan tutu when she died.

In 1909, Fokine joined forces with Serge Diaghilev in the newly founded Ballets Russes. The company originated at the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg as a touring company to showcase young and eager choreographers, dancers, designers, and composers. In that, the face of ballet forever changed; its impact was felt worldwide.

The Ballets Russes had a twenty year reign (dying abruptly when Diaghilev expired in 1929), launching numerous stellar careers. Among the dancers and choreographers, the most noted are: Alexandra Danilova, Bronislava Nijinska, Leonide Massine, Ida Rubinstein, Serge Lifar, Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinski, George Balanchine, and Anna Pavlova. Under Diaghilev's influence, the narrative hold on ballet was loosened and one act productions became the twentieth-century norm. Dance critic Irving Deakin notes,

The change in values in ballet, literary as in most others, came with Diaghilev and Fokine. The literary element became either much slighter, or, founded on character, became more concentrated and more intensely dramatic, depending upon the theme. . . . More recently, the tendency has been toward less and less "literature," . . . modern ballet is not based on written libretto or scenario or story, in the sense that a "story" dictates the form of the ballet. (Deakin, 1956, p. 95)

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining several ballets that embody a twentieth-century sensibility to focused narrative and expressive pantomime and its relationship to comedy.

Le Carnaval

"The Schumann Carnaval is an unqualified joy from beginning to end" (Beaumont, 1981, p. 153).

Through Fokine's treatise, comedy slowly gained credence in dance. In 1910, he choreographed a parlour ballet entitled *Le Carnaval* where changes in the reliance on narrative and the use of comedy are seen. Choreographed to the music of Robert Schumann, this whimsical ballet is based on the two sides of the composer's personality. Florestan represents his impulsive side, and Eusebius depicts his sensitive, thoughtful nature. This ballet also follows the antics of familiar commedia dell'arte characters, Pierrot, Harlequin, Pantalon, and Columbine as they flit rambunctiously through a Victorian garden party. The cast list reads like a who's who of twentieth-century ballet: Leonid Leontiev, Enrico Cecchetti, Bronislava Nijinska, Vera Fokina, Vsevolod Meyerhold⁴, and Tamara Karsavina.

Following the demise of the Ballet Russes, *Le Carnaval*'s premiered at a charity ball in St. Petersburg, March 5, 1910, the masked dancers appeared anonymously due to contract restrictions (Craine and Mackrel, 2000). It is interesting to note that in the many sources examined for this study, none give a comprehensive overview of the ballet's structure. "Carnaval is a charade played upon a Victorian apron-stage, for, though the full stage is used in the actual dancing of the ballet, the dancers might as well be the animated figures upon some nineteenth-century frieze" (Brahms, 1936, p. 84). Most sources refer to the title characters as representations of Schumann and his friends. "The guests, masked or in crinolined versions of a commedia dell'arte charade, take the stage in a delicate pageant of the dance" (Brahms, 1936, p. 84). Having performed in a reconstruction of this ballet under the direction of dance historian Richard Holden (1990), I remember it as a series of character studies strung together by a loose narrative of young love and typical, rambunctious *commedia* mischief. Harlequin goes about the party batting at people while

trying to woo Columbine, while Pierrot spends the ballet trying unsuccessfully to catch a butterfly in his oversized hat.

The character Chiarina was based on a portrayal of Clara Wieck at the age of fifteen, later to become Madame Schumann. Chopin and Paganinni were also said to be delicately sketched, although that is not elaborated on in any of my sources (Beaumont, 1981; Deakin, 1956; Brahms, 1936). Thin relationships between the commedia characters are drawn. Columbine is engaged to Harlequin much to the chagrin of Pantalón and Pierrot, “her luckless suitors” (Brahms, 1936, p. 85).

No longer relegated to shorter acts and interspersed with serious entrées, the comedy was not separated from the narrative as in the Baroque era *ballet à entrée*. In fact the ballet exacts a series of tableau moments where the relationship of the commedia characters to one another and the party patrons develop amid the frivolity in a stop-action format echoing mostly to *ballet d'action*. There is delineation, however, between comic characters and serious characters; the commedia characters in traditional slapstick form carry the majority of the comedy.

Le Carnaval was a popular staple for the Ballets Russes and later for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. The audiences loved it. “*Carnaval* is a festival of joy, an evocation of pretty sentiment, light intrigue, and high spirits seen in a Victorian mirror” (Beaumont, 1981, p. 59). Fokine’s unique way of blending occupational and emotional gesture and the loose narrative, one-act structure, as well as the accessible, easy charm of recognizable characters embodied his principles of expression and began to pave a way for a revamped use of comedy in ballet.

When the Ballets Russes collapsed in 1929, Col. de Basil took much of the repertoire and many of the dancers to form the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1932. This company

prevailed until the late 1960's. Young dancer and choreographer, Leonide Massine followed closely on Fokine's heels in his use of comedy and provided a bulk of the repertoire for this new company, much of it comic in nature. "Later, after a period of utilizing Russian legends ([Fokine and Stravinsky's] *The Firebird*), came Leonide Massine, concentrating for a time on the grotesque (comic)" (Deakin, 1956, p. 96). The liberation that Fokine pioneered from the three act format and the loosening of the plot structure brought out a freedom of comic works -- not works with comic moments, asides within a series of dramatic stories, but works that were intended for humor.

Leonide Massine

Leonide Massine (1895-1979) was a tour de force in the ballet world. Throughout his sixty-six year dance career, he created a performance and choreographic legacy that was the life force behind the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. His background in theatre, his relationship with impresario, Serge Diaghilev, his collaboration with many important twentieth-century artists and musicians, and his dedication to his artistic vision led Massine to create over seventy ballets in styles that were accessible to the general audience.

Much of Massine's work has gone unnoticed by dance scholars because of its common themes and sometimes humorous nature. "Massine is content to observe life and mock it deftly. His is the type of vision that turns round and laughs at itself" (Brahms, 1936, p. 74). His ability to blend ballet vocabulary with every day, familiar gesture resulted in some of the most endearing ballets and characters of twentieth-century ballet.

Fokine's treatise on dance reform (1905) reconfirmed the necessity of a unity of action. A Fokine protégé, Massine, incorporated this idea in his own ballets. His versatility as a choreographer included utilizing native culture, comedy, and drama; and his ability to combine acting techniques and broad pantomimic gestures with realistic subtlety, made his works accessible. Massine effectively legitimized the use of comedy ballet that went

beyond traditional, declamatory ballet mime. Dance critic Sarah Kaufman calls him “the great comic master” (1997, p. 13), because he opened a door for dance to begin exploring the wonderful subtleties of humor through movement that related to his contemporary world. His quirky style can be in his role as the maniacal cobbler in the major motion picture *The Red Shoes* (1947). From the beginning of his choreographic career, Massine showed a natural affinity for blatant theatricality in ballet.

Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur

In my opinion *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur* . . . was the most perfect and complete ballet of its type ever invented. It was like a whole series of paintings imposed one upon the other: you could stop the ballet at any given moment and find you were looking at an entrancing composition. So ingeniously had Massine worked it all out that I do not think there was a single insignificant movement. (Sokolova, 1961, p. 98)

This ballet was one of Massine’s first choreographic successes, in no small part because of its detailed characteristics. First seen in Rome in the 1917 season, this work became a staple of the Ballet Russe repertoire and saw many revivals including those by Les Ballets de Champs Élysées, in Paris, 1944, and the Royal Ballet, in London, in 1962. Massine’s ability to bring out the nuance in a character or time period was evident in his first one-act comedic work, *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur* (1917). Dance historian A. H. Franks comments that Massine was able to move beyond abstractions of human behavior and give his characters individual personalities. “Massine exploits the classical technique, enriching his expressive vocabulary by liberal use of stylized folk material and naturalistic gesture” (Franks, 1954, p. 27).

Based on Goldoni’s comedy, “Le Donne di Duon’ Umore,” the plot, as Massine describes it, was a typical Goldoni imbroglio “with a lavish use of masks, flirtations, deceptions, and disguises” (Massine, 1968, p. 97). Set as an eighteenth-century Venetian comedy of manners, the young Costanza and her elderly aunt and the Marquise Silvestra

decide to test the fidelity of Costanza's fiancé, Count Rinaldo. They send him a note from a secret admirer confessing a desire to meet him, telling Count Rinaldo he will recognize her by the rose in her hair. When Rinaldo shows up there are four women with roses in their hair. Confusions and merriment abound to untangle the situation. One critic noted,

The merry adventures are unfolded with a rapidity of action that only perfect precision can sustain . . . the result is not only a very brilliant work of art, but a most exhilarating entertainment. Wordless wit is not an easy accomplishment but Massine's choreography has attained to it." (MacDonald, 1975, p. 216)

Part of Massine's brilliance was the thought and research that went into creating the ballet. Massine studied the gestures of women in eighteenth-century paintings, and was moved by the "ineffable sadness of their backward glances" (Massine, 1968, p. 96). The comedic action was played out on both sides of the stage, while the lyric sections came together in the middle; this idea of simultaneous action would be used again in Massine's *Le Beau Danube*, sixteen years later, in 1933 (Márquez, 1990). One of Massine's movement themes for *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur* was the marked contrast between the upper and lower half of the body. He designed "broken, angular movements for the upper part of the body while the lower limbs continued to move in the usual harmonic academic style. Such opposition of styles is, in my opinion, possible, and creates an interesting contrast" (Massine, 1968, p. 95). It is obvious that Vaslav Nijinski's choreography made an impact on Massine's choreographic choices, although Massine states,

I created entirely new body movements in my imagination, profiting largely by the effect of rhythmic forces, and varying according to the nature of the movement its rhythmic value as well as its tempo in order to attain in the composition of choreographic phrases, the strongest possible effect. (1968, p. 96)

Italian composer Vincenzo Tommasini orchestrated a compilation of about twenty of Scarlatti's sonatas for *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur*. Garofola (1989) cites André Levinson's description of this work as

A perpetuum mobile, a movement falling on each note, a gesture on each semiquavar, a continual fidget to which we owe a breathless and spirited animation . . . bound to the imperative of polyrhythmic musical movement or tyrannical syncopation that a Stravinsky imposes on the orchestra. (p. 87)

Included in the cast of characters were Enricho Cecchetti and his wife, Giuseppina De Maria, playing the old Marchese and Marchesa, very regal and slightly uptight. Leon Woidzikowski, a leading character dancer for the Ballet Russe and a Cecchetti protégé, played the Marchese's servant. Massine choreographed loose jointed, marionette type gestures that made the servant an "endearing, credible personality" (Massine, 1968, p. 98). It is interesting that Massine uses the word "credible." He also refers to the servant as a stock character. So in this instance, Massine had taken the typical pantomimic servant character and infused it with credible or realistic rather than stylized symbolic movement. Even with the marionette images there must have been an element of reality so the comedy would be effective. Franks (1954) notes that Massine often created minor characters with such detailed idiosyncrasy that in the hands of an accomplished dancer; the role was more prized than the lead. Walker states, "the intricacy . . . [of] *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur* is remarkable - the combination of every kind of physical movement to depict character and the development of situation" (1982, p. 220). Critic Richard Buckle, having seen the 1962 revival states, "it is still an enchanting work, it was perfectly staged and danced, and triumphantly received" (1980, p. 196).

Let us continue exploring Massine's effectiveness in both expression and comedy with a discussion of *Parade*.

Parade

It is difficult to convey the excitement of working with two such artists as Picasso and Cocteau. At every meeting in the Piazza Venezia our exchange of ideas would set sparks flying around the room. Every innovation - the sound effects, the cubist costume, the megaphones- would set off a fresh train of ideas for the choreography. (Massine, 1968, p. 106)

Perhaps the most famous and futurist collaboration of the Ballet Russe was that between Massine and artist Pablo Picasso. While they worked together on the ballets *Parade*, *Le Tricorne*, and *Pulcinella*, it was the 1917 cubist extravaganza of *Parade* that was a starting point for Massine's life long dedication to artistic collaboration. Joined by artist, Jean Cocteau, and composer, Erik Satie, *Parade* physicalized Picasso's idea of cubism. Twentieth-century dance historian Boris Kochno cites "the Cubist painter Pablo Picasso and that most audacious of choreographers, Leonide Massine, have created it, consummating for the first time an alliance of painting and dance, of the plastic and the mimic, that obviously signals the arrival of a more nearly complete art" (1960, p. 122). Garofola (1989) argues that *Parade* is classified in the Cubist *ism*, is misrepresented. She categorizes it squarely as Futurism. "Futurism posited new relationships between the performer and a larger stage environment, visualized new ways of filling that space and making it expressive, and urged the vanguardist to comb the modern world, including its popular entertainments, for raw material" (p. 77).

True to Garofola's definition of Futurism, Cocteau devised a scenario filled with circus and music hall images and common every day sounds; the form he innovated is termed *musique concrete*. Cocteau suggested that someone with a megaphone issue directives and make funny noises throughout the ballet. Diaghilev felt that would be going too far for ballet. Cocteau, not to have his idea completely shut down, talked Satie into incorporating typewriter, ship sirens, and airplane engine sound effects into the score

(Massine, 1968, p. 103). Kaufman explains, “It’s a simple story: Three managers are trying to lure customers into a tent to see their show. One by one they bring out the performers -- a Chinese conjurer, an American girl and a pair of acrobats -- to tease the passers-by into wanting more” (1997, p. 13). Woidzikowsky opened the show, banging his walking stick on the ground with the air of a slightly bizarre carnival barker.

It was also Cocteau’s idea that Massine, in his solo, should swallow an imaginary egg. This bit of pantomime took over three minutes and the ingested egg eventually emerged out of Massine’s left boot toe. He then proceeded to march around the stage and took a turn at breathing fire. Massine admits that his character was not as “credible” as “The American girl” solo that followed. Maria Chabelska danced it to Satie’s appropriated ragtime rhythm. The choreography incorporated Charlie Chaplin walks, jumping on a moving train, fighting with a gun pointed at her, swimming across a river, and sinking on the Titanic. The big finish for Chabelska was playing in the sand like a child. There were women on horseback (two men in a horse suit), acrobats, tightrope walkers, ending with a big finale.

Massine called *Parade* an attempt to transform popular art into a completely new form of art and critic, Guillaume Apollinaire, in his review of the Paris premiere, praised him for giving “equal prominence to the innovations in music, décor, and choreography” (1968, p. 112). Other mixed reviews allow that while this ballet was “in close sympathy with post - 1914 - 1918 war artistic thought” it was merely an unsuccessful work marred by ridiculous cubist designs (Franks, 1954, p. 29). Regardless of the tepid critical response, *Parade* embodied Fokine’s ideals and made a huge impact in stretching ballet toward abstract comedy. The pairing of disjointed elements, the juxtaposition of the cubist art and classical dancers, innovative musique concrete, Satie score’s, absurdist pantomime, and comic

characters began a transformation of comedy in ballet from strict narrative to abstract conceptualism. Today we see these precepts practiced in Cirque du Soleil. The idea is the driving force more than the story or the cohesiveness of the characters. And, in that manner, comedy in ballet can be looked at much the same way as comedy in modern dance. With two exceptions, the inclusion of occupational pantomime and emotional gesture as it supports the concept, and the use of comic character.

These three twentieth-century ballets demonstrate an evolution of comedy in dance that rejects Weaver's and subsequently Lawson's ideas of the necessity of codified language of pantomime. Embracing instead Fokine's ideology of unity in expression, based originally on Noverre's principles, the comedy in these works is based on realism or "credibility" as Massine calls it. Each of these works relies on highly stylized characters: the commedia characters in *Le Carnaval*, the high brow characters of *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur*, and the abstract cubist representations in *Parade*. Yet there is a tangible, knowable reality in these characters and their created worlds. These works have evolved beyond the classical ballet tradition, but what is that tradition?

The Classical Tradition

Just as Henri Bergson (1911) says that humor cannot exist outside the realm of what it is strictly human, comedy in ballet must be recognizable as ballet. The use of space in ballet is primarily what the Laban choreautics calls the dimensional cross, a sense of up, down, and side, based on oppositional forces. There is a sense of the pull of gravity only as it relates to a projecting upwards. There is also a lateral sensibility in the back and forthness across the stage -- a function of the stage space itself.

In a classical ballet tradition characters fulfill the dancing and characters fulfill the comedy. Because comedy in classical ballet is much more narrative driven and because the

expectations are so high technically, rarely do comic characters display technical virtuosity (except in absolute parody of ballet, as in Imogene Coca's classic satire of *Swan Lake* pas de deux for the 1950's television series Your Show of Shows, or the work of the Trockedaros an all male, comedy ballet troupe). All principal characters, comic or not, bear the responsibility for furthering the narrative. The principal dancing characters move with an upward mobility on a vertical plane while the comic characters move in ways that instill a sense of gravity and downward motion with most gestures occurring in the horizontal plane. Comedy in classical ballet takes the laws of ballet and opposes them almost diametrically. Where grace, *balon*, and beauty are valued, the comic character in ballet relies on the earthbound, awkward, and caricature. Comic characters also tend to be supporting characters, again the dichotomy of dancers versus comics. We sense the individual in the leading roles, and we sense the character in the comic roles. The leading characters are not devoid of humor; they have comic moments, but when they begin their technically virtuosic dancing, the comic characters either fade to the background or are off stage all together.

Abstracting the narrative opens the door for the comic and the dance to come together as we have seen in the modern dance examples in chapter two, Fokine's *Le Carnaval* and the works of Massine. The racquetball model with its boundaries and rules of play radiantly reveals the process for the more abstract dances and comedic situations but does not make allowances for comic characters. Incorporating Lawson's category of occupational pantomime and Bogart's idea of emotional gesture into the model makes for a more comprehensive look at the comedy that can include works in the classical tradition.

Updating the racquetball model for narrative driven works includes placing the characters at center. Each character has her/his own perspective, comic or not. The shape of

the court is determined by the story and the comic modes used. The dynamics of the game are contingent on the characters bouncing off of each other and their created realities as well as bouncing within the confines of the narrative. The internal logic allows the comedy to read and emotional and occupational gesture are tools used to help create clarity and form within the context of the court. The taxonomic breakdown of gesture and pantomime aid in the character analysis and identification of her/his function within the story.

The next chapter will look at what is considered the first comic ballet in a realistic narrative form, *La Fille Mal Gardée*. I will give a brief history of the ballet and focus on Sir Frederick Ashton's version devised for England's Royal Ballet in 1960.

¹*Livrets* are an invaluable source for the study and reconstruction of period ballets.

The *livret* of ballet and pantomime is defined as an important historical document which clearly presents printed, critical information such as the choreographer, the composer, the set and costume designer, the publisher, the censor, the date and theatre of presentation, the cast of characters as well as an explanation of the narrative story to be danced or mimed. The *livret* was used as an early form of copyright, and a tool for the revision or revival of ballet or pantomime. Its major value lay in helping the audience to understand the action of the performance as *livrets* could be purchased at the time of the spectacle. (Bennehum, 1981, p. vi)

²John Weaver and Joan Lawson are only two of many theorists to design modes of expression for the body. Françoise Delsarte (1811-1871) constructed an elaborate philosophy and methodology designed to teach performers the expressiveness of the body. In the Delsartian system, three categories of movement are learned: eccentric, concentric, and normal. They combine with three areas of the body, head, torso and limbs, to help the individual gain a mastery of physical control and expressive qualities. Modern dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn (1891-1972) was a Delsartian expert who also developed his choreography around the idea of the expressive qualities of the body. His book, *Every Little Movement* (1968) provides a curriculum for enhancing dance expression.

³Choreographer Mathew Bourne turned *Swan Lake* (1995) into an all male, gender-bending production, and his *Cinderella* (1997) is set in a war torn London during WWII. *Cinderella* has also been adapted by Rudolf Nureyev (1986) with in the style of old Hollywood, and by Maguy Marin (1985) with her production taking place in a doll house. Choreographer Mats Ek has also retooled the classics. His *Giselle* (1982) places the title character in an insane asylum and his heroine in *Sleeping Beauty* (1996) is a drug addict. The Ballet Trockadero de Monte Carlo is perhaps the most famous of all comedy ballet

ensembles. Their all male company pays homage to the ballet classics, respecting the original choreography but adding campy, slapstick, and vaudevillian moments.

⁴Famed director, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), joined the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1908, where he and Fokine met. He went on to develop Bio-Mechanics, a form of dramatic training involving a great deal of attention to physical training and the body's physical capacity for mimetic expression. His portrayal of Pierrot in Fokine's *Le Carnaval* is thought to have profoundly influenced Fokine's 1911 production of *Petrushka*.

CHAPTER IV

A BRIEF HISTORY OF *LA FILLE MAL GARDEE* AND ASHTON

“Comedy is an escape, not from the truth but from despair; a narrow escape into faith” (Christopher Fry in Fitzhenry, 1993, p. 223).

Perhaps the most widely known version of *La Fille Mal Gardée* is Sir Frederick Ashton’s, choreographed for the Royal Ballet in 1960. Ashton turned this charming French ballet into the quintessential English ballet. This chapter traces the original work of Jean Dauberval, the many reconstructions, and discusses the development of an English idiom of ballet, that led to Ashton’s version *La Fille Mal Gardée* (here after referred to as *La Fille*).

The Original Ballet

When Jean Dauberval (1742-1806) choreographed *La Fille* in 1789, he created a ballet legacy in subject, content, style, and character. Premiered at the Grand-Théâtre in Bordeaux, France, on the eve of the French Revolution, this comic ballet depicted the life and tribulations of wealthy peasants. The ballet, a story of clandestine lovers triumphing over meddlesome parents, is one of the longest lived ballets still being performed today. Breaking with established ballet traditions of its time, it embodied Noverre’s revolutionary ideas about dance (introduced in Chapter III). Dauberval’s pastoral comedy was based in working class realism without the expected pageantry or appearances of the nobility. This was a marked departure from the Rococo sensibility featuring the fashionable frivolity of Marie Antoinette captured in the paintings of François Boucher and Antoine Watteau. *La Fille* integrated character, subject, expressiveness, and truth in gesture that gave way to a new genre of dance, ballet d’action. Dauberval’s sensitivity to the political turmoil brewing

and his light handed comedic touch made theatre great David Garrick call him, “the Shakespeare of dance” (Sorell, 1967, p. 129).

Dauberval based this ballet on the painting *Une jeune fille qu'erre par sa mère* by Pierre-Antoine Baudouin, 1764, in which a young maiden is in tears, being scolded by her mother as the shadowy figure of her lover escapes up the stairs. Ivor Guest, noted dance historian, recites the colorful anecdote about Dauberval first viewing this painting in a shop window as he relieved himself on the wall just below it. Despite the dubious beginnings of the creative process, Dauberval's ballet was the voice of a disquieted nation. The title *Ballet de la Paille Il n'est qu'un pas du mal au bien* (The Straw Ballet or It Is Only One Step From Evil To Good) had subtle political overtones, and yet, “Dauberval's rollicking ballet statement of a socially classless atmosphere” managed to sidestep the political trap by avoiding satire, and irony (Lee, 1999, p. 113). The subject represented hope in the lives of ordinary people, rather than the pageantry of nobility and the gods. “His [Dauberval's] characters and plot were acceptable to the spirit of the time, which was consciously replacing Roman heroes with French ones and putting nature and sentiment high on the list of virtues” (Percival, 1992, p. 11). During its premiere leading dancer Eugene Hus, who played Colas, stepped to the edge of the stage and raised a glass of champagne toasting the joyous news of the clergy and aristocracy's decision to join the Third Estate, the working class, to work toward much needed social reforms. Guest states, “*La Fille* was an idealized version of that Third Estate on which so many hopes were pinned - in fact, the very backbone of a nation that on the whole still optimistically Dauberval was able to catch the spirit of the people with what Peter Brinson called a “rural realism” (1989, p. 13). The pastoral setting of the farm not only catered to the idea of the working class but was an homage to Marie Antoinette's fascination with dairy farms. There

is speculation that her fascination was directly related to the deadly small pox epidemic of the time. When it was discovered that the maidens working with dairy cows never got small pox, but a less virulent strain of the disease called Cow Pox, the nobility had the infected maidens rub the backs of their hands to exact an early form of inoculation. This is just one small example of how the nobility relied on the working class. When peasant class demanded recognition and power, Dauberval walked a delicate line of political ambiguity with his use of a whimsical narrative. This was a turning point in ballet history. “Indeed, this was the very first time a ballet’s plot was ‘modern.’ It tells of characters and events belonging to the world of the bourgeoisie and peasant life. It is a step towards liberating ballet from the artificial style so typical of the eighteenth century which lapped up mythological gods and heroes” (Brinson, 1989, p. 13). Dauberval broke from the traditional structure of the ballet à entrées and followed his teacher, Jean Georges Noverre’s ideas of ballet d’action.

Dauberval’s use of realistic and almost recognizable characters, his use of identifiable farm chores as themes for dances, his use of country dances, and a score that incorporated popular French folk songs created Noverre’s idea of a “living picture” of rural French life. *La Fille* “had an appeal that transcended time and frontiers because its characters might almost have stepped out of everyday life” (Guest, 1960, p. 241). Mary Skeaping, who researched the original Dauberval production for Ivo Cramer’s proclaimed authentic revival with the Ballet du Nantes in 1989, described the comedy as delicately sketched with action that moved quickly from mime to dance. This makes sense given that the original cast was a mix of dancers and actors from the Grand-Théâtre. Dauberval’s wife, Madame Theodore, played Lise, and Eugene Hus played Colas. Actors played the rest of the characters. The role of The Widow Simone, a travesti role designed by Dauberval to be played by a man,

was performed by popular comic actor Brochard, and Thomas and Alain were played by small time actors Dourdet and Dupui respectively. Both dancers and actors incorporated Noverre's idea of action and gesture stemming from emotion rather than the unintelligible complex pantomime found in the *ballet à entrées*. "Pre-Romantic Revolution ballets, with the exception of a very few -- *La Fille Mal Gardée*, *Giselle*, and *Coppélia*, in particular -- were a series of divertissements, rarely ever (and then ever so feebly) linked with action. In developing eloquence and embracing mime that had in it a choreographic quality, we have the result of the modern master of ballet" (Deakin, 1936, p. 220).

La Fille Mal Gardée's action was "so clearly constructed that no explanation beyond the dancers' mime was needed, and no artificial theatrical effects marred its naturalness" (Lee, 1999, p. 113). Using a simple storyline, archetypal comic characters, and a healthy dose of whimsy, Dauberval created a ballet that inspired generation after generation of reconstructions.

The Later Reconstructions

La Fille has been reconstructed and restaged countless times in the last 215 years. The endearing storyline is relevant and accessible to audiences from all socio-economic backgrounds and makes this ballet adaptable to any era. The most noted restagings include Dauberval's student Jean Aumer's 1828 revival for the Paris Opera, which Fanny Elssler made famous for her portrayal of Lise in 1837. This was also the version that introduced the now famous Fanny Elssler pas de deux in Act I, Scene II, with the corps de ballet making patterns with ribbons around Lise and Colas. Paul Taglioni (brother of Marie) restaged a version in Berlin in 1864; Lev Ivanov's adaptation titled *Vain Precautions* premiered in Russia in 1885; and Anna Pavlova's shortened version, credited to Dauberval premiered in London, in 1912. Nijinska restaged it for American Ballet Theatre in 1940,

under the name of *Naughty Lisette* and *The Wayward Daughter*. Twenty years later, Sir Frederick Ashton choreographed his now renowned version, in 1960, for the Royal Ballet, in London. And finally Ivo Cramer created what he called an “authentic reconstruction” of the Dauberval original for Ballet de Nantes, in 1989.

While Anna Pavlova heralded her production as the first time *La Fille* had been seen in England, it is known that Dauberval’s staged the ballet in London in 1791. The most unusual performance of *La Fille Mal Gardée* occurred in Surrey in 1825, when a troupe of child prodigies, under the direction of Monsieur Hullin, toured from Paris. The performance not only included a six year old leading lady and members of the corps de ballet as young as five years old, but, at the conclusion, Mademoiselle Sylvia Zaphora, “An infant Eight Years old,” repeated “her Interesting and Astonishing Exhibition on THE TIGHT ROPE” (Playbill, 1825).

La Fille also enjoyed an amazing run in the United States prior to the Ballet Theatre version in 1940. Only five years after its premiere in Bordeaux, France, The New Theatre in Philadelphia presented a “New Comic Pastoral Ballet, composed by Mr. Francis called *L’Amour Trouve les Moyens*, or THE FRUITLESS PRECAUTION” (Moore, 1976, p. 62) in 1794. William Francis, a successful director of the Pantomime in London, is thought to have seen the Dauberval ballet in London in 1792, and capitalized on its success by bringing his own version across the Atlantic. Mme. Anna Gardie was featured in the title role. There is still speculation whether it was a true adaptation of *La Fille*. so the American debut credit goes to Arnaud Léon for his version of *The Lovers* or *La Fille mal Gardée* performed in New York in 1828. Ten years later, P.H. Hazard premiered his *La Fille* in Philadelphia in 1838. Fanny Elssler danced Jean Aumer’s choreography in America just once in New York on July 1, 1842, and Pavlova later toured a *La Fille* to

America many times between 1914 and 1925. Mikhail Mordkin, Pavlova's now famous partner, premiered his *La Fille* in Flint, MI in 1937, featuring Lucia Chase in the tile role (Moore, 1976). Dance critic Walter Terry praised Mordkin's portrayal as The Widow Simone but panned Chase's performance stating that she "danced badly and mimed worse. She would do well to work with the corps de ballet until she achieved a technique that a ballerina should have" (1978, p. 23). The Mordkin version of *La Fille* had moderate success, but critics agree that it was the Nijinska version in 1940 that rejuvenated the popularity of the ballet to the west (Macauley, 1987; Kavanagh, 1996; Vaughan, 1977).

Although the ballet enjoyed many incarnations, not all versions of *La Fille* met with success. Terry's acerbic view of the Mordkin version speaks to the heart of this dissertation. Comedy is not easy or frivolous; comedy is serious business. Of all the adaptations of this seriously comic ballet the most widely known and popular is the Sir Frederick Ashton's choreographed for Royal Ballet in 1960. His charming ballet with its dancing chickens, lively clog dancing, the batty Alain, the frantic, cross-gendered mother, and other endearing characters is the embodiment of the English national style (Macaulay, 1998). By tracing Ashton's career we can see the development and journey of his choreographic wit that led to the creation of this comedic masterpiece.

Amusing Ashton

When at age thirteen, Frederick Ashton saw Anna Pavlova perform the role of Fairy Queen, in 1917, at the Teatro Municipal in Lima, Peru, he was hooked. "Seeing her on that stage was the end of me. She injected me with her poison and from the end of that evening I wanted to dance" (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 3). Later Ashton studied ballet with Leonide Massine and said, "I was only influenced by Massine, not so much choreographically but as a dancer. We were in the same kind of rut because he wasn't properly a classical dancer,

nor was I. I started too late. So we were both a bit bizarre in the way we danced, a bit burlesque” (Wohlfahrt, 1996, p. 26). This burlesque quality became an integral part of Ashton’s choreographic style. His first piece, *A Tragedy of Fashion*, in 1926, told the story of a young fashion designer so confident in his own work that when his design was laughed at he killed himself with his own scissors, only to be mourned by dancing mannequins. As dark as the story, sounds his depiction of the world of high fashion was filled with “macabre, farcical humour and irony” (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 75). Even in Ashton’s first ballet there is a predilection for quirky, broad, satirical comedy that pervades his later works.

Ashton danced in Bronislava Nijinska’s company for just one year but her works made lasting impressions on him as evidenced in his choreography. Ashton recalls:

I had, very early on in my career, the great luck to work with one of the greatest choreographers, I think, who has existed -- Bronislava Nijinska. And I learnt everything through watching her and through working under her . . . You see, when I was with Nijinska, although I was in the ballet, I was the whole time watching her, watching her process, watching what she was doing, how she dealt with the crowds, and how she made the whole thing clear. It was really through her that I learnt my craft. (Crisp, 1964, p. 14)

Ashton was a popular dancer in the company and was a wicked mimic of Nijinska. When he left her company, he came under the tutelage of Marie Rambert, joining in a partnership that changed the face of British ballet. With *Capriol Suite* (1930), a work set on Rambert’s students, “Ashton took a step forward and began to assert his own individuality and his essential Englishness” (Vaughan, 1977, p. 35). Based on Thoinot Arbeau’s 1581 dance manual, *Orchésographie*, Ashton used several drawings from the text combined with elements of English Folk dance. “These were amusingly modernized in Frederick Ashton’s choreography . . . this was a new quality in his work, which previously had tended to be ‘amusing’ in the rather precious way that the word usually indicated at the

time” (Vaughan, 1977, p. 36). The performance was a success, more than a student demonstration, it was heralded as the first performance “of a company directed by Madame Rambert and Mr. Frederick Ashton” (Vaughan, 1977 p. 35).

While Ashton’s dancing and choreography were becoming known in the London dance circle with the Camargo Society, an organization started in 1930 and dedicated to the production of new works featuring dancers from Marie Rambert’s company and Ninette de Valois’s Vic Wells Ballet, there was still not enough money to pay bills. The Regal Theatre began to combine films with “spectacular shows in the style of the Roxy in New York” (Vaughan, 1977, p. 52) and commissioned Ashton to do a ballet that ran three times a day for three weeks. Billy Chappell, a dancer in that show, recalled, “we did anything to make money” (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 122). The kind of music-hall theatricality necessary to make ballet work in this venue infused Ashton’s later work. His very next project was a ballet to Edith Sitwell poems set to William Walton’s music called *Façade* (1931). Ashton states,

Looking back on it all I’m very fond of some of my early works. I’m very fond of *Façade*, because I think it seems to me to be a complete entity in itself. It’s successful in what I set out to do which was a parody of dances of that time. And also I think that one thing one must always guard against is that if one has to do a comic ballet, one can never say ‘Well now, I’m going to do a comic ballet and I’m going to be funny’. That must never be so. The structure of the dance must be very solid and then you super-impose the humour if it comes naturally. And I think that in *Façade* the humour seems to come quite naturally out of the actual dances. But it must be a good dance first, and then the humour comes out of that. (Crisp, 1964, p. 13)

This ballet was very popular with the audiences because the comedy ranged from sophisticated and endearing groupings and visual puns such as milking the cow with the hands of several men making the udders, to Alicia Markova’s stepping out of her skirt and performing the polka in her bloomers. Critic Cyril Beaumont accused of the last section in which a gigolo tries to seduce a debutante of bordering on low comedy (Vaughan, 1977). “Although there are jokes galore throughout *Façade*, much of its humour derives naturally

from the movements themselves, such as Markova's 'fall-over' step, which all the comedians used" (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 125). Ashton demonstrated his ability to choreograph comedy that stemmed naturally from the action.

Cinderella

These comedic moments led up to his full evening length ballet, *Cinderella*, in 1948. Here was a milestone for Ashton in terms of style and comedic craft. There was an essential Englishness to this production to which audiences responded. Kavanagh calls it a "homey familiarity" and likens it to the English Christmas pantomimes that Ashton grew up with and that were "deemed as much a holiday institution as plum pudding and Father Christmas" (Byrd, 1999, p. 1). With a combination of classical ballet, boisterous characterizations, and traditional English theatricality, this ballet was revived regularly at Christmas for years to come.

The title character was originally played by Moira Shearer and revived by Margot Fonteyn a year later. But the role of Cinderella, regardless of the casting, played second fiddle to the brilliant comic vulgarity and selfishness of the nasty step sisters played by Robert Helpmann and Ashton himself. "We worked very well together," Ashton said about Helpmann, "we were very different, and possibly that's why. And he was a very amusing person to be with, very good company, so we laughed a lot together. Aesthetically we were poles apart of course, but that didn't matter" (Wohlfahrt, 1996, p. 27). Ashton left his own role until the last minute and made his character confused and forgetful playing the subtle comic foil to Helpmann's broad portrayal of the vain, first stepsister. Ashton stole the show. Critic Edwin Denby commented that his portrayal was executed "with perfect timing, the apparently tentative gesture, the absorption and the sweetness of nature of a great clown" (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 345). This Chaplinesque pathos was evident again in *La*

Fille Mal Gardée's character, Alain. Kavanagh attributes Ashton's brilliance to the "revelation of self-caricature. It is all there: Ashton's love of dressing up in Edwardian finery, his early dreams of dancing like Pavlova, his self-deprecation and constant insecurity; against which Helpmann's thrusting, preening egotism -- equally true to life-- provides the perfect foil" (1996, p. 346). His signature Fred step (*posé en arabesque, coupé dessous, small dévelope à la seconde, passe de bourrée dessous, pas de chat*) and the gesture of balling up his hands on the sides of his face in frustration were included in his portrayal (Kavanagh, 1996; Vaughan, 1977; Crisp, 1964). Ashton's original idea was to have the step sisters played by women, but when Moyra Fraser was unavailable he remembered the male comic dances and pantomime sequences of the Fokine version he had seen in 1939 and cast Helpmann and himself. "When the sisters were played by women in later years . . . it did not work - as with the female impersonators in the Kabuki Theater, the kind of observation of the female character that lay beneath these comedy performances could be achieved only by men" (Vaughan, 1977, p. 234).

With each subsequent comedy choreographed by Ashton, the words classical and English began dotting the reviews. In his growth as a choreographer he was exploring his own background in his use of comedy. Audiences were able to recognize themselves and their surroundings in his works. In an interview given to historian Clement Crisp in 1964 Ashton states,

You must have a personal idiom. Your work should be recognized. People should be able to come and say 'this is a Balanchine ballet. This is an Ashton ballet. Or this is a ballet by Kenneth MacMillan. If you can say that then you know that the choreographer is good, and has something personal to offer and a language in which he expresses himself" (p. 14).

Ashton's personal idiom is evidenced by themes of cross gender casting of the broad comedic characters, animal masquerades, clandestine lovers, of subtle characters played

opposite to the comic characters, and an amazing ability to convey a Chaplinesque pathos. *Cinderella* was a landmark for Ashton; it was his first full length ballet and many of the comic conventions established in this ballet led the way for his *La Fille Mal Gardée* in 1960. In many ways *La Fille* is a culmination of Ashton's comedic work, arguably his most famous. Through his choreographic genius he turned something so uniquely French into the quintessential English Ballet, doing for the English Ballet what Marius Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) did for the Russian ballet.

Ashton and the English Idiom

I would say about Fred that he did one thing that even Fokine and Massine didn't do. In *La Fille Mal Gardée* he created a pure classic, a real classical ballet which created what has become the English style of dancing. (Marie Rambert in Dominic and Gilbert, 1973, p. 138)

In ballet lineage students tend to follow their masters. The original *La Fille* followed the principles of Noverre's ballet d'action, since Dauberval was a student of Noverre. Ashton had worked with Fokine, dancing in his *Firebird* when it was revived for Sadder Well's Ballet in 1954. In many ways Ashton followed Michel Fokine's ideology of a cohesive plot structure and movement born out of the story and emotion rather than through long sequences of pantomime independent of the dancing.

Part of Ashton's approach to choreography was his dedication to an expansive view of ballet classicism. He felt classical ballet was so rich that it could "take in anything, and absorb all the outside influences into itself" (Cohen, 1974 p. 171). His trust in what Robert Greskovic calls academic dancing coupled with his originality is what makes his work classical. Classical not being "pejorative, that is old-fashioned, conservative" but "living and progressive" (Greskovic, 1984, p. 10). His inclusion of English folk dances and bits of English country charm are the reasons he is said to have created the first ballet in the

English idiom (Darlington, 2002; Macauley 1996; de Valois, 1960). Ninette de Valois states, “in the choreographic development . . . we see, once again, a national tradition at work that is as important in its own way as the tradition that once inspired Fokine in his native Russia” (1960, p. 400), and Bournonville in his native Denmark and Morris in the U.S. She wryly comments that her students never understood why they had to take folk dance as part of their curriculum until they saw what Ashton could do with it.

Ashton has been compared with Jane Austen in his essential Englishness. His great lyricism and the creation of “an adorable form of Tory Fantasy, coloured by a nostalgia for a rural existence sweeter and neater than ever existed” (Macauley, 1996, p. 23) still appeals to audiences today. More than anything, Ashton’s ability to define a nation of dance with *La Fille Mal Gardée* stems from his charming conservatism: His trust and reliance on the classical ballet vocabulary, his love of narrative and simplicity, and his unflagging dedication to the inherent humor in the common man.

Sir Frederick Ashton’s *La Fille Mal Gardée*

The idea of doing *La Fille Mal Gardée* was first put to Ashton by renowned ballerina for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, Tamara Karsavina, who had seen noted ballerina Virginia Zucchi’s performance of the Ivanov version. Alexandre Benois describes *La Fille* as “a naive story in the style of a *bergerie* of the eighteenth century, but, thanks to Zucchi and in spite of the faded décors . . . and the very modest music of Hertel, the performance seemed actually to exude the fresh fragrance of fields and meadows and to created the illusion of the charm of country life” (Playbill, 1960). Initially Ashton was hesitant to do the ballet because he didn’t like the Hertel music; but after Karsavina then entreated him to do the ballet with different music Ashton replied, “there is a wonderful idea” (Wohlfahrt, 1996, p. 30). Karsavina acted out passages of pantomime that she had learned and also

shared with Ashton a book, published in 1937 in Leningrad, called *Vain Precautions* that outlined the Ivanov version of *La Fille*. Ashton is said to have based several moments of his ballet from the illustrations, including the maypole dance in Act I, Scene Two, and Lise's trying to steal her mother's keys in Act II. After preliminary research he approached John Lanchbery to help piece together a workable score out of the 1928 Herold version.

The lineage of the music for *La Fille* is as varied as the many versions of the choreography. Historian Ivor Guest conducted extensive research and credits Franz Beck or the violinist L'Empereur, both musicians with the Grand-Théâtre Bordeaux at the time of the premier, with the original Bordeaux score. Jean Aumer commissioned Ferdinand Herold to rework the original score for his 1828 production. Herold added a pastiche of passages liberally borrowed from Gioacchino Rossini, incorporating the opening music of his popular *The Barber of Seville*. The only music credit given for the 1825 version in Surrey was Monsieur Hullin's conducting what the program notes states was "The Band" (1825, Playbill). Peter Ludwig Hertel created a new score for the Paul Taglioni version in 1864, and Gerthel is the name of record for Anna Pavlova's version in 1912. However, Guest believes she danced to the same Hertel score that the Russian adaptation used. Nijinska, Ivanov, and Mordkin all used Hertel's music. Ashton and composer/arranger John Lanchbery went back to Herold's score as inspiration with Lanchbery, adding some of his own music, for the Royal Ballet's 1960 version. And Ivo Cramer's 1989 version reverted to the original Bordeaux score.

Ashton often called *La Fille* his "poor man's Pastoral Symphony" owing to repeated listenings of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony in his country home in Suffolk. "There exists in my imagination a life in the county of eternal late spring, a leafy pastorate of perpetual sunshine and the humming of bees" (Ritter, 1995, p. 36). Ashton and scenic designer

Osbert Lancaster drew on nineteenth-century rural English and French prints with such names as “The Cottager’s Daughter” or “The Farmer’s Son” to tease out a sense of the serenity of the English countryside. Lancaster used bold, almost cartoon-like, vibrant colors to encapsulate an exaggerated vitality. Vaughan states that there is “a kind of jokey condescension in the decor that comments on the ballet and its period in a way that neither Ashton nor Lanchbery ever do -- the cows and dogs drawn on the backcloth, the pictures on the walls these things hit precisely the wrong note” (1977, p. 313). Many critics felt the scenic element was the weakest part of the production.

Although swiftly choreographed in less than four weeks, the music and the scenic elements were already in place before the choreography even began. Ashton stated,

I always work out the structure of a ballet before I start -- who’s doing what and for how long. I don’t do any steps until I’m with the dancers. The structure for *Fille* I worked out with Lanchbery, marking the music. I have a great instinct for the right length of things. And I set that very tightly it’s a kind of minutage. And after I set that, in the case of *Fille* at least, it went very easily. Everything just flowed. (McDonagh, 1970, p. 17)

Ashton’s method of sparking ideas from his dancers prompted Ninette de Valois to call his approach “assimilative” (Darlington, 2002, p. 193). Ashton’s methods always included his favorite phrase “show me something” (Macauley, 1998; Vaughan, 1977; Kavanagh, 1996). But it was this approach that allowed him to utilize his dancers’ individual strengths. David Blair’s (Colas) virtuosity is evident in the harvest dances, Nadia Nerina’s (Lise) uncanny balance and jumping ability are integral to the character’s youthful exuberance and naiveté, and Stanley Holden’s experience as a vaudevillian hooper led to some of Widow Simone’s most endearing comedic moments in *La Fille*.

Ashton is credited with brilliantly capturing “a perennial and internationally acknowledged idea of England as idyll” (Macauley 1998, p. 28), partially through his use of English folk dances. The most notable folk dance in *La Fille* is the show stopping clog

dance by The Widow Simone performed during the harvest scene. The idea came to Ashton at a folk dance festival at Royal Albert Hall in 1959. Attending with John Lanchbery, at the end of the Lancashire clog dance he turned to Lanchbery and said, “write me something like that” (Darlington, 2002, p. 193). Stanley Holden, the original Widow Simone, was an outstanding vaudevillian hooper long before he was a ballet dancer and is said to have contributed quite a bit of his own interpretation to the clog dance. Owing to Holden’s background the clog dance was derived more out of the tap tradition than actual folk steps. “On the whole I think the original dance is a rather effective parody of a clog dance, incorporating many elements a clog dancer would readily recognize. Of course, it is dressed up for ballet performance and is leavened by large swaths of moving around the stage with a simple step/hop/catch out movement, but attractive nonetheless” (Darlington, 2002, p. 202). Pat Tracey, the performer of the Lancashire clog dance that Ashton originally witnessed, agreed, calling Widow Simone’s solo “a mixture of ballet, ‘stage’ and popular dance, county, tap, and clog, used at will to produce a jaunty, jolly dance” (Tracey in Darlington, 2002, p. 198).

Other folk elements include the maypole dance with Lise at the center en pointe in *arabesque* while her friends promenade her with the ribbons, and the dance of the laborers featuring row upon row of dancers whirling sickles over their heads in an exaggerated statement of harvest toil. A closer look at the structure and elements of comedy in *La Fille* appears in chapters V and VI.

Summary

When talking about the success of his *La Fille*, Ashton commented, “I am terribly concerned about the clarity of the story, that it should be understood by Aunt Edna, not so complicated that you don’t know what is going on” (Wohlfahrt, 1996, p. 28). The

simplicity and elegance in which he depicted the young lovers' struggle helped shape what is now considered the quintessentially English style of ballet. Macaulay defines the essence of Ashton's work as "ballet remarkably comfortable to live with . . . There are few losers or villains in his world. His leading characters are generally marked by neither heroism nor cleverness . . . They live, love, have fun, make fools of themselves, have eccentricities, enjoy friendship and society: as do we. Hence their appeal" (Macaulay, 1987, p. 20).

Dauberval used rural realism to depict French life in 1789; Ashton used English nationalism to encapsulate an English flavor. Dauberval used French folk tunes in his score and country dances. His use of barnyard animals and rich pastoral beauty created a ballet filled with hope of a better tomorrow. Ashton created a ballet of a charming past by using English folk dances, and characters who as Macaulay said, "must feel as familiar to English observers as if they had known them all their lives" (Macaulay, 1996, p. 22). Dauberval and Ashton each created a *La Fille* that encapsulated a nation. This endearing story that captured the hearts of audiences and brought to life a world of imagination and became a beloved classic and a landmark in the use of comedy in ballet, a model that inspired contemporary modern dance and ballet choreographers such as David Parsons and Ben Stevenson. "The richness of the dancing, its variety, its purity and its earthiness, its lyrical and expressive qualities, its poetry and its comedy, its humanity and its humour -- and the fact that they coexist in harmony. For Ashton, there was no clash between classicism and character; they were part of one great whole" (Crisp, 1996, p. 35).

Chapter V more closely examines the use of comedy in Ashton's version of *La Fille*, addressing broad themes of story and character in relationship with comedic theory.

CHAPTER V

ASHTON'S *LA FILLE*: STORY AND CHARACTERS

“What is most remarkable is that it [La Fille] is very funny. For any ballet to be funny is rare: for a long one to be funny is quite extraordinary.”(Percival, 1996, p. 34)

This chapter consists of a detailed analysis of the plot and of the characters in *La Fille* for their comic functions with support from related comedic theories to inform our understanding of how structure cements the laugh. I also examine what is written about *La Fille* and what comedic moments bubble up to the surface as key markers of the ballet's success.

The Story

As Percival states above, *La Fille* is rare in that it is a full length ballet that sustains a comic quality. Like a Monty Python movie or a Neil Simon play, the undercurrent of comedy drives the narrative and the narrative drives the comedy. *La Fille* is not an hour and a half sight gag; it is a series of interrelated themes, scenes, and characters that all play within the simple story line. In fact, much of *La Fille's* success and longevity stems from that simple plot. “The story lends itself admirably to ballet treatment; there is not a dance in it that does not flow directly out of a natural situation” (Greskovic, 1998, p. 422). It is an “accurate portrait of peasants or farm people as well as the well-designed intrigue which kept the action flowing smoothly” (Bennahum, 1981, p. 124).

The ballet is set in a two-act, three scene format: Act I, Scene One; the farmyard, Act I, Scene Two, the fields; and Act III, the farmhouse. This format observes Aristotle's idea of a beginning, middle, and ending as a fundamental tenet of drama; and these three sections also follow the natural comedic device of the holy trilogy (Helitzer, 1986). Arranged by set-up, anticipation, and punchline, the ballet has an inherent comedic rhythm and context within which the five main characters play. Applying the racquetball theory of comedy in ballet, this game takes place on the farm with five key players: The Widow Simone, the mother and well-to-do farm owner; Lise her daughter; Colas, a poor farmer, and the young lover; Thomas the wealthy vineyard owner; and Alain, Thomas' son and the village simpleton.

Act I, Scene One: The Set Up

Act I takes place in the farmyard and is filled with pantomime. "Food baskets are carried here and there, butter-churners do their vital work, pots of cream are put in their rightful places, workers haul farm tools in vast fields and spinning-wheels and distaffs occupy the space in the home" (Bennehum, 1981, p. 125). This attention to occupational and behavioral gesture in the set-up contextualizes the ballet as a knowable rustic reality (Lawson, 1957; Bogart, 1999). Also fulfilling the function of the set-up, the five characters are introduced, their relationships are revealed, and the conflict is presented. There is an initial fleeting moment between Colas and Lise that establishes their love for each other. The Widow Simone's continual attempts to thwart the lovers' meetings establishes the conflict; The Widow Simone wishes her daughter to marry a more suitable match, worthy of her station as the daughter of a well-to-do farm owner.

The young protagonists, Lise and Colas, move jauntily through their amusing situations in order to meet one another, while the mother, Ragotte [The Widow Simone] (which means a thick set horse), does her best to arrange a marriage with Alain, the wine-grower Thomas' son. No doubt the fairs brought characters and situations of such quality to the public, and moments which remind us of a Chardin painting show Ragotte [The Widow Simone] throwing her skull cap at Colas' nose when she catches him trying to see her daughter - raising her fist at Colas, snarling at Lise and scolding them both. (Bennehum, 1981, p. 124)

The Widow Simone's blustery entrance in which she throws a variety of items at Colas' head - vegetables, a flower pot, and even her own night cap - cements the friction between Colas' and Lise's budding romance and the matriarch's plans. When the young lovers find themselves alone together in the farmyard they dance entwining themselves in and around a length of ribbon in what is traditionally called "The Ribbon Pas de Deux." The ribbon motif is woven throughout the whole ballet, symbolizing the lover's connection to each other which purportedly can be traced back to the original Dauberval ballet (Bennehum, 1981; Greskovic, 1998; Guest, 1960; Macaulay, 1987). Ashton's clever choreography with the ribbon creates one of the moments of perfidy for the audience, the "Aha" moment when the familiar and comfortable cat's cradle is formed as a result of the intricate choreography.

When Thomas and Alain enter, clearly established is Alain's identity as a comedic character and Thomas as his unwitting straight man. Thomas pushes Alain toward Lise hoping for a successful first meeting; but Alain's gangly, awkward walk and unending antics with his red umbrella fail to win her heart. His antics do, however, provide much of the comedy in this first scene. The Widow Simone is a bit wary of Alain, but the big bag of gold waved in front of her nose is too tempting, so she forgets her reservations. The scene ends with the union agreed upon by Thomas and The Widow Simone, much to the chagrin of the young lovers and to the oblivion of Alain.

Act I, Scene Two: The Anticipation

Scene two takes place outdoors among the fields. In this is the anticipation phase of the triplet; Colas and Lise sneak moments together as the harvesting dances go on around them. A budding connection between The Widow Simone and Thomas is hinted at, and Alain entertains himself not noticing the lovers dancing behind his back. The villagers are in on the deception, and it becomes a game as they try to divert Alain's attention away from Colas and Lise. The Widow Simone becomes more charming when she impulsively kicks up her heels in a lively clog dance. Alain becomes a bit of a wild man stealing the flute player's instrument and playing it very badly, then cavorting with the ladies as they try to dance with their partners. When a storm breaks out, everyone runs for cover.

This scene is vital to the comic pacing of the ballet. It allows us to care more about the characters and gain insight into the complexities of their situation. The relationship between Colas and Lise is solidified in their duping of poor Alain. But Alain is so off-kilter and inattentive we lose patience and pity for him.

The Widow Simone's impish quality supersedes her blustery and concerned matriarchal persona and her character, despite her faults, becomes more lovable. Thomas never really has a chance in this ballet to develop much more than being a concerned yet detached parent. His vaguely romantic interest in The Widow Simone is interesting but goes nowhere. Despite his role as detached patriarch, Thomas grounds the ballet in the historical realism of formally contracted arranged marriages. His "normalness" is a necessary contrast that allows the comic characters to be larger than life, and opens the way for the lovers to act freely without guilt. The contextual set-up in Act I, Scene One, gains momentum and depth in this scene. The storm at the end of the Act gives Alain amazing comic fodder. Scared, he tries to hide underneath the ladies' skirts; and he and his red

umbrella are picked up by the storm and flown off stage. The storm also acts as a foreshadowing device and metaphor for the emotional storm brewing in the final act.

Act II: The Punch Line

Act Two takes place inside The Widow Simone's farmhouse and is the culmination of both the set-up and anticipation. Whereas, the lovers want to be together, therefore The Widow Simone tries desperately to keep them apart. She locks Lise in the farmhouse and begins working at her spinning wheel. In a wonderful broad, burlesque moment she falls asleep and begins to snore, and the lovers meet and kiss through the window. When the harvesters arrive bringing in the sheaves, Colas sneaks in hidden in one of the baskets of grain. The Widow Simone follows the workers out the door to pay them, unwittingly locking Colas in with an unknowing Lise. Lise begins to daydream about her future with Colas, and out he jumps from his hiding place. When The Widow Simone is heard returning, Lise sends Colas up to her bedroom to hide. Unknowingly The Widow Simone brings the lovers together when she pushes Lise upstairs to her room to change into her wedding dress. We delight in knowing what is happening, in the perfidy of the moment while The Widow Simone, Thomas, and Alain are left unaware.

Thomas and Alain show up to finalize the marriage documents so The Widow Simone sends Alain up to Lise's room to fetch her. At this point the viewer knows what is about to happen. This scene is the culmination of the anticipation phase. The lovers are caught and come tumbling down the stairs to a fainting Widow Simone and a shocked Thomas. The lovers beg The Widow Simone to allow them to marry. At this point, in the original Dauberval version, the moral of the story was sung by the cast to end the ballet, "never let anything make you sick at heart; the bad and the good are but one step apart" (Percival, 1992, p. 11), which is actually the subtitle of the ballet *Il n'est qu'un pas du mal au bien*.

In the verse vague political overtones referred to the peasants' awful plight during the French Revolution. The Widow Simone finally agrees to the marriage despite losing the wedding dowry bag of gold that Thomas gave her in Act I, Scene I. Thomas grabs it amid all of the confusion and marches a befuddled Alain out the door. General merriment then ensues, and the ballet ends in a balletic celebration (Guest, 1996). All's well that ends well.

The punch line in this case is the happy ending. The ballet is set up so the audience roots for the lovers to be successful. Because the love theme is central to this ballet, the comedy stems from the obstacles the lovers must overcome to be together. Their relationship is established in the set-up, concretized in the anticipation, and consummated in the final act. "I think of Colas's loving kiss in Act II of *La Fille* on Lise's hand, forearm, upper arm, and the curve of her neck which she arches ecstatically, trembling in the bourrées the while, at the thrill of his lips on her skin" (Macaulay, 1987, p. 36). Critic Alastair Macaulay suggests that when they are locked in the bedroom together before being discovered by Alain that they have already consummated their love for one another. While this is just one interpretation, there is a genuine lusty quality to their relationship that plays right into the context established early on in the ballet.

Each character achieves some sort of resolution in the final act. The Widow Simone finally blesses the couple and accepts the financially less advantageous union, embracing Lise's happiness in love instead of a secure future for herself and her daughter. The lovers get to be together, and Thomas takes his bag of gold back as he pushes Alain out the door. The one loose end is Alain. When he comes down the stairs after discovering the Lise and Colas together, he seems genuinely hurt as a child whose favorite toy is broken. It is unfair that he is manipulated and used by all four of the other characters. He is the universal scapegoat, a sad sack about whom no one cares. The late philosopher and theatre director

Susan Sontag states, "Comedy is not any less comic because it is punitive. As in tragedy, every comedy needs a scapegoat, someone who will be punished and expelled from the social order represented mimetically in the spectacle" (1961, p. 274). We experience pangs of recognition, regret, and guilt because we find humor in his exclusion, and because he is not the focus of our concern. His comic function as the fool within the story is as important as the central love theme.

The end of the ballet is a resolution of the narrative and each character's function within the narrative. The sense of hopefulness and closure stems from the feeling of knowing and caring about the characters. In this way, the characters drive the narrative. Thus an in-depth analysis of each character and their comic function within the story is in order. This analysis is based on Sir Frederick Ashton's 1960 version starring Nadia Nerina as Lise, David Blair as Colas, Stanley Holden as The Widow Simone, Alexander Grant as Alain, and Leslie Edwards as Thomas.

The Enduring Characters

Ashton has an affinity for creating comic characters. In his *Cinderella* (1948) the attention to detail in his dance and pantomime for the stepsisters were so detailed and specific that Ashton himself and Robert Helpmann dancing the roles *en travesti* stole the show. Moira Shearer cast in the title role, famous from her role in the movie *The Red Shoes* (1947), was completely upstaged. While the broad comic aspects of the characters are what draw us into the comedy - the prat falls, the trips, and bumps, the clumsiness, and sheepish awkwardness - it is the attention to detail that makes the characters distinctive and endearing. It is Ashton's "wit and observation of human behavior that takes the character far beyond that of any pantomime" (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 421).

In *La Fille* Ashton delicately crafts each character to provide her/his own comic function in the story. There are the broad burlesque characters of The Widow Simone and Alain and the darling, daring title characters of Lise and Colas. Thomas is a lesser character, but Ashton uses him as the comic foil, to temper the morality of the story and to ground the comedy into the reality created. What the writers and critics of *La Fille* attest to is that the young lovers are known for their technical virtuosity. Kavanagh talks about David Blair as being “technically flamboyant and academically polished” with his “neat beats, terre-à-terre footwork and fast crab-like pas de bourrée runs” (1996, p. 422). Nadia Nerina competes with Blair’s virtuosity; “she reverses a grand fouetté sauté sequence, jumping in different directions her leg saucily flinging up her skirt in swinging battements en clôche.” (p. 422). Overwhelmed by the dances, Vaughan says the “ballet’s choreographic felicities are seemingly inexhaustible” (1977, p. 309). He proceeds to spend the next two pages heralding the technique of Blair and Nerina. Stanley Holden and Alexander Grant are applauded for their characterizations of Widow Simone and Alain, respectively, and not their technique, while Leslie Edwards as Thomas is given very little ink.

These five main characters all function differently to impact the story. The Widow Simone and Alain are imbued with the four characteristics of comic character that Vorhaus (1994) outlines: comic perspective, exaggeration, flaws, and humanity. Colas and Lise are the leading couple and the principal dancing characters. Not to minimize their contribution to the story, their comic moments are secure, but their impetus for furthering the plot is centered in their technical dancing, not their humorous bits. Thomas, while treated as a comic character, is truly the moral center of the ballet, as he is the only one concerned about Alain’s well being and fulfilling the contractual rights and obligations of the marriage plot.

Typical of the nineteenth-century ballet canon, comedy and technique rarely share the stage in *La Fille*. Ashton and composer/arranger John Lanchbery even strategized a scenario in Act I, Scene Two that cleared Alain off stage before the famed Fanny Elssler pas de deux (added in 1837 to show off the famous ballerina). Lanchbery added poorly played flute sounds so when Alain snatched the flute from the dancer on stage and attempted to play it his mime was accompanied by dreadful orchestral sounds. So caustic were his off key sounds that the villagers chase him off stage. There is an ancient Greek Theatre adage that states after the actors “quit the stage, the fool speaks” (Broadbent, 1964, p. 88). In this case the reverse occurs. After the fool leaves the stage, the dancing starts. Yet Ashton honors Greek theatrical tradition by using Alain for many of the transitions in his ballet.

When comedy and technical dancing share the stage in this ballet, parody results. Alain’s solo in Act I, Scene One follows a flawlessly danced male solo by Colas. It is a hilarious unharmonious and off beat as his flute playing, stiff legged and full of thrashing peripheral movement, Alain’s solo is very difficult to execute but done with facial expressions that convey the comedy. Following Ann Blom’s (1986) criteria of facial and embodied expression integral in the use of comedy in dance.

The clog dance by The Widow Simone in Act I, Scene Two incorporates wonderful self-referential moments where she mugs to the audience, raising an eyebrow or winking broadly. It also contains elements of very technical clog and tap dancing. Although it is by no means devoid of technique, the dance is done with a whimsical air and includes antics such as The Widow Simone is losing her balance, falling down, wobbling on her ankles, and other stock vaudevillian lazzi or tricks. So in these solos, while the dancing is quite technical, the emphasis is on achieving a comic effect.

Key elements in the attention to posture, weight¹, and space² mark the difference between the comic and technical characters, and the division is established quickly in *La Fille*. Light weight and direct space permeate the entrance of both Lise and Colas. Lise's entrance begins with her immediately searching for Colas by climbing up into the hayloft, elevating her physically. When she does not see him, she descends shaking her head sadly. It is the same for Colas; he comes on in a group of rough and tumble farm workers, but his attention is toward the house seeking Lise. Their postures are upright and searching. Within the first ten minutes of the ballet, Colas has a variation that displays his technical virtuosity, then a sweet solo by Lise also establishing her technical brilliance. Blom states, "The performer's focus has the power to direct the audience's attention and to activated the space" (1986, p. 6). Whenever Lise and Colas are on stage together or separately, the air is charged with their relationship and their focus is towards each other.

The minute The Widow Simone enters we can tell she is the comic matriarch with her wide stance and heavy gait. She proceeds to chuck flowerpots and her own bonnet at Colas' head and scolds him vehemently for not being in the field. Her attention to space while intent on Colas is scattered as evidenced by the many times she throws items at him and misses. Alain is also targeted as a comic character in his entrance. Thomas pushes him on stage with high-kneed half pointe, tiptoe steps. His body weight is back on his heels in Thomas' hands, and his face suggests an extreme dislike of the situation he finds himself in. Alain's posture when standing is pigeon-toed (much like the chickens – discussed in Chapter VI) and stooped forward. His attention to space is meandering and indirect which makes moments when he uses direct space, such as his brusque thrusting a bouquet of flowers at The Widow Simone, startling and funny in its surprise. Both Lise and Colas create a sense of upward and forward motion while The Widow Simone and Alain are

weighted, earthbound, and slightly back behind the hips (the Laban Movement Analysis system refers to weight as existing on a continuum from strong to light. I choose to use the word heavy in this analysis because the performers' attention to passive weight in these examples gives the weight a heavy feel). Thomas is the stable, unmovable character, his weight is rooted into the ground, and only when he postures with his hands on his hips does his weight travel back behind his hips.

There is historical precedent for the division of technical and comic characters.

Seventeenth century theorist St. Hubert (1641) states,

Comical entrées with grotesque costumes ought to be short, for sometimes what seems excellent at first because it is ridiculous becomes boring before long, like good tales that make us the wise laugh only once. Serious entrées, well danced with handsome costumes, they must be made to last even longer." (St. Hubert in Cohen, 1974, p. 36)

Dauberval himself introduced the division of comic and serious dancing in his use of familiar folk elements in his ballets. His subject matter called for it; so did his politics. His separation of ballet and folk dance spoke boldly of the divisive political climate present in eighteenth-century France. Dance historian Carol Lee states,

His emphasis on bucolic and comic elements in the ballet's action contributed to the development of character dancing. Taking various steps from traditional folk dances, he exaggerated the movements for stage purposes. Because folk dance is a visual contrast to the highly refined look of the *danse d'école*, employing both styles in the choreography enriched the total effect of the ballet. (Lee, 1999, p. 113)

More than Dauberval's introduction of the peasant class and peasant folk movement into ballet it was his conscious choice to omit royal or noble characters that changed the face of ballet history. There is a host of characters from everyday life that grace the ballets of the Romantic Era (1800 – 1850's approximately). *Giselle*, choreographed in 1841 by Jules Perrot and Jean Coralli, is the story of peasant maiden duped by a prince. James and Effy in *La Sylphide*³, choreographed in 1832 by Filippo Taglioni (father of famed romantic ballerina Marie and choreographer Paul who reconstructed *La Fille Mal Gardée* in 1864),

are not poor but nothing indicates noble birth, even the ballerinas of *Pas de Quatre* (1845) are depicted as ballet royalty only.

The use of weight and space to delineate between technical dancing and character parts is also a part of this tradition. In *La Sylphide* there is a struggle between reality and dream in that James is engaged to Effy but wishes to pursue the mythical Sylph. James consults Madge, the witch, to find out how to catch her. The use of weight and space is fascinating in this ballet. The Sylph is the embodiment of lightweight and indirect space, compared to James' plodding attempts to catch her. Yet James accesses light weight in his virtuosic solos. Madge, as a traditional ballet character part, uses heavy/strong weight and direct space. She is an anchor to the plot. Effy's attention to weight and space is relative; next to James, she is light and indirect, but compared with the Sylph, and weighted and direct in her focus. While she does not utilize heavy weight her character embodies a reality, a substance that the Sylph lacks. The same is true for *Giselle*. Giselle is a frail, sickly peasant and her light weight and indirect focus (which reads as shy and naïve) are in direct contrast to Albrecht's forceful dancing and his use of direct space. In Act Two, Giselle retains her frail, light quality and is contrasted to Myrta, Queen of the Wilies. Myrta is a rare blend of a dancing character part. Her dancing is grounded, forceful, direct, and very, very technical.

The convention of character parts being weighted and dancing roles defying gravity remained a key element in classical ballet traditions later in the nineteenth-century. In Marius Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890), Princess Aurora is light weight and a bit indirect. The fairies are all light weight, and all but Lilac Fairy seem to have an indirect quality. By contrast, the perturbed Carabosse is strong, direct; and her gestural choreography is

forceful. Sometimes played *en travesti*, Carabosse is the character that grounds the narrative, literally and figuratively.

Ashton's *La Fille* follows this rich nineteenth-century tradition in its canonical use of comic characters and technical dancing characters. Beyond the use of weight and space each character has a unique function within the plot and within the social order. These characters represent different facets of life in the time in which it was originally choreographed. The political turmoil of revolutionary France is not lost in the Ashton version; these characters retain their rich connection to history and must be viewed within the plot and within the society of those days. Here now is an analytical profile of these delightful characters.

Lise

Lise is the ingénue, the young maiden in love with the poor farmer, Colas. She is mischievous and good spirited constantly trying to outsmart her mother in order to be with him. She does not fit Vorhaus' (1994) criteria for a comic character. She plays within her own reality, but it is not a comic or distorted reality. There is little exaggeration in her portrayal or her antics. She is a straight character with comic moments that stem from her predicament of withstanding a quintessentially domineering mother. This is the context in which her humor is played. Her comic bits include hiding from The Widow Simone, trying to steal her keys, and attempting to mix in with the crowd to avoid her constant scrutiny. If this were just an attempt by Lise to escape, the comedy would be flat and lifeless, but the various escapades chronicle teenage rebellion followed by moments of genuine tenderness and humanity between Lise and her mother. In Act I, The Widow Simone stubs her toe, and Lise follows behind trying to blow on it to take the pain away -- a comic moment that establishes their superior/subordinate relationship. And in Act II there is a touching scene in

which the field workers bring in the sheaves of wheat and perform a country folk dance. While they dance Lise stands with her arms over her mother's shoulders with The Widow Simone holding her hands as they both sway to the music, not comedic but as the scene plays out Lise is picked up and almost carried out by the field workers. She looks sheepish as The Widow Simone catches her right before she charges out the door and unceremoniously drags her back into the house, locking the door behind the exiting workers. There are several more touching moments between Lise and The Widow Simone; without them the conclusion of the ballet would not make sense. If The Widow Simone did not care for Lise or was only after her own security and not Lise's happiness, she would never acquiesce finally to an unsuitable marriage. In many ways the humanity is established in the familiar little touches added by the characters themselves and not born out of the huge sweeping choreographic prose.

Because Ashton drew inspiration from his dancers, Nadia Nerina's Lise had a lightness and *balon* in her choreography. Her ability to jump was well known in the company, and Ashton capitalized on it. "In the many jumps which fill her role, jumps small and large, Lise seems always to draw power and brio from the floor" (Macaulay, 1998, p. 29). When Lise and Colas are together there is a sense of upwardness in their dancing. "These characters are far from floor bound," writes Macaulay (1998, p. 6). There is a light and direct quality in their dancing. Their focus is toward each other and their movements seemingly defy gravity.

Colas holds Lise above his head in their first duet: a preparation for the exultant Bolshoy [sic]-influenced 'bum lift' at the end of their grand pas de deux in the next scene. In the wedding pas de deux in the final scene, at the apex of two successive grand jeté lifts, he literally throws her into the air (at once to catch her again). Yet at the very end of that duet, after holding her on his shoulders (from where she has gazed tenderly down at him), he lowers her gently to the floor, where she blissfully kneels, gazing up at him. (Macaulay, 1998, p. 29)

Many of Lise's pantomime scenes and comic bits incorporated by Ashton are directly linked to the Petipa/Ivanov version (1885) and the Nijinska version (1940). Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo Ballerina, Tamara Karsavina, having danced these versions, shared many of the hilarious details including:

Alain playing hobby-horse with his umbrella, to Colas finding the ribbon left for him by Lise, kissing it, tying it on a stick and parading with it on his shoulder. Karsavina even provided Ashton with one of *La Fille*'s jokes: Lise pretending to trap a fly as her mother wakes and catches her trying to steal her keys. (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 420)

In Act II, after The Widow Simone has gone out to pay her workers, Lise begins to daydream. This is one of the many passages that Karsavina taught to Ashton. Her direction states:

She starts to think about when she is married. I will wear a lovely dress, carry a bouquet and walk like a great lady. Then perhaps have children 1, 2, and 3 (counts them out in sizes.) 'Have you learned your lessons?' she asks an imaginary child. 'No' then slaps it. A baby falls down. Picks him up and rocks him in her arms and sings to herself. Colas appears and she is ashamed to be caught in such day dreaming. Colas takes her by the hand and both sit on the straw and look different ways and then at each other. He takes a kerchief and rolls it, then each puts a kerchief on the other's neck and they kiss. (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 420)

This passage of pantomime defines the love relationship between Lise and Colas. Lise's vision of the tender domesticity of their future and Colas' reaction to her solidifies their bond.

Lise's comic moments effectively end there. The rest of the ballet is the process of getting caught with Colas and pleading The Widow Simone to allow her to marry her love. She becomes the quintessential ingénue in her wedding gown gazing at the man she loves. Much like an opera star's persona is maintained during both aria and recitative, Lise's identity as "ballerina" established in the first ten minutes of the ballet carries her through the ballet in both her technical and comic moments. Our last glimpse of Lise after a glorious

mini pas de deux that reasserts her as “ballerina,” is Colas’ carrying her out as “wife” and thereby fulfilling the happy ending.

Colas

Played originally by the dashing David Blair, the young lover has many touching, light-hearted moments but very few broad comedy scenes. Because his mime and dancing do not fit the criteria for a comic character, the viewer knows that Colas does not operate from a comic reality. There is little or no sense of exaggeration in his movement and few flaws. He, in fact, is a fairly one-dimensional character. From the moment he enters the stage looking for Lise to the finale of the ballet, when he dances triumphantly through the door with Lise in his arms in their wedding celebration, his desire to be with Lise drives his character. Neither hero nor villain, he is the technically proficient lovesick suitor that plays the straight man to The Widow Simone and provides the necessary stark contrast for Alain’s character.

Colas has very few moments of physical humor, and the few he does have are found in his attempts to escape The Widow Simone. In Act II, the lovers are about to be caught in the house together. Lise opens dresser drawer for him to hide in, he gets one foot in before he recognizes he will not fit. “Lisette [Lise] tries to hide Colin [Colas] - under the little table, in a small chest. In desperation, she pushes him into the hayloft and slams the door shut just as her mother enters” (Mason and Balanchine, 1989, p. 165). Another clever moment, though not particularly funny, is Colas’ pas de deux with Lise through the transom window. He leans into the locked room, and there is an obvious innocent affection as they embrace with her suspended above the floor and gently rocking back and forth. His humanity is evident when he spies Lise is pantomiming about marriage, being pregnant, and having three children. He comes out of his hiding place and places three kisses, one on

her hand, her elbow, and her shoulder, each kiss albeit increasingly intimate, symbolizing one of the three children. The love story between Colas and Lise is an anchor as the sea of comedy eddies around them.

The Widow Simone

Historically, The Widow Simone is a role played *en travesti*; and Ashton, already comfortable with that theatrical device as evidenced in his own portrayal as a stepsister in *Cinderella*, cast veteran comic dancer Stanley Holden as the stern but caring matriarch. The Widow Simone exhibits all of the standard characteristics of a comic character. She boldly plays within the reality of a rigid and distorted social world where Alain is the better match for Lise despite the obvious love between her and Colas. Historically, The Widow Simone represents and is a caricature of the ruling class, or the benevolent dictator. She holds the key to any social reform that may happen during the context of this ballet (more on that later in this section). This power is played out through a pronounced exaggeration in her movement. Her gestures are broad and skim the periphery of her kinesphere. One example is that when she spans Lise for trying to be with Colas she picks her up off the floor in one arm and paddles her with full range of motion slaps that extend beyond the shoulder line. There is an inherent masculinity in that her portrayal incorporates flaws of violence, rigidity, and curmudgeonly, unsocial behavior, yet her unsociability is contextual, aimed toward Colas and her daughter's relationship.

The Widow Simone's humanity is equally evident. There are moments of genuine fun in her dealings with Thomas in Act I, Scene One and her reluctant yet giddy willingness to do the clog dance in Scene II. Her shy, proud demeanor is endearing. Her rigidity stems from her concern of her daughter's affection for the poor farmer Colas and the wish that

Lise marry Alain because his father, Thomas, is wealthy. All of *The Widow Simone*'s comic bits stem from this realistic and understandable scenario.

The Widow Simone adamantly discourages Colas' pursuit of Lise. In Act I, Scene I, she throws flowerpots and bonnets at him, which he readily dodges. She also throws up a screen of mother guilt in her continual display of stern disapproval and exaggerated physical pain when she spies them together. Her world and plans are being turned upside down, and this reversal is physically manifested in her many varieties of prat falls, trips, and awkward off balance moments; the slapstick quality of her comedy reflects the violence of the struggle against her own convictions both in her own mind and in response to Lise's and Colas' behavior. Yet again it is her genuine affection for Lise that makes *The Widow Simone* a comprehensive comic character. "The falls, the bumps, the tumbles in a bit of slapstick are all an expression of the characters' relationships to each other and to the situation" (Dennis, 1995, p. 195). The three-dimensionality of her character make these comic moments work.

Originally Robert Helpmann was cast in the role of *The Widow Simone*; but after several rehearsals he asked to be released because as he said, "all I do is scold my daughter" (Kavanagh, 1996, p. 423). Ashton was actually glad because he knew of Helpmann's tendency to "camp" up character roles. He knew Stanley Holden would give *The Widow Simone* a much more truthful portrayal. Holden's comedy "depended not so much on gags as on close and loving observation" (Vaughan, 1960, p. 5). Ashton drew on Holden's vaudevillian background. In fact, *The Widow Simone* was constructed in homage of *travesti* performer, Dan Leno, legendary dame of English pantomime.

The clog dance discussed in Chapter III is just one example of Holden's influence and charm in the characterization of *The Widow Simone*. One improvised moment by Holden

in Act II, when The Widow Simone looks in the mirror fixes her hat and then on her way out sneaks another look in the mirror with a self-satisfied smile, has been heralded as one of the defining comedic moments for the character (Kavanagh, 1996; Macaulay, 1986; Vaughan, 1977). This simple, specific gesture brings clarity and insight into the character while playing within the comic structure. It is the classic comic double take that reveals a wonderful impish vanity in the stern matriarch. Humor is human; and when The Widow Simone lets the audience witness her warm qualities, her rigidity softens, and we love her capacity to grow and change.

The Widow Simone is an archetypal character and one wholly recognizable to English audiences. Marcia Siegel wrote of a performance by Royal Ballet in New York at the Metropolitan Opera House on June 21, 1970,

The grandma of all classic ballets, *La Fille Mal Gardée*, looking every bit her 184 years, returned after a few years' absence from this country, with Stanley Holden, who now makes his home in Los Angeles, doing two guest appearances in the role of Widow Simone. Ashton's greatest gift lies, I think, in the creation of comic and period ballets. (1972, p. 51)

She also states, "Ashton knows how to stage this kind of madness, making his point about character through distinctive dance movement . . . the wacky individuality is thoroughly English" (Siegel, 1972, p. 51). The tradition for grand dame *travesti* roles goes back centuries to comedia dell'arte characters and is especially popular in English pantomime even today in the annual Christmas pantomimes. As Haggis is to Scottish nationality, *La Fille*'s homey familiarity is recognizably English. The ballet is centered on the character of Widow Simone, her point of view, her being thwarted by the children, and her ability to make the best out of a bad situation.

Simone isn't just a grouse, and Ashton's invention is at its most touching in demonstrating this: we're surprised that she does a clog dance at all, and when she does we're made aware of all her vitality, her sense of fun and comradeship. I love too her eventual blessing of Lise's union with Colas - impulsive and big-hearted her cheek upon their joined hands: a beautiful bit of mime. (Macaulay, 1987, p. 19)

The Widow Simone is the only character that undergoes any sort of change in the ballet. She accepts a new social order, albeit begrudgingly. From a historical perspective it is The Widow Simone who embodies the hope that an established superior social structure can be changed by the sheer will of subservient class. In this ballet the blustery air of The Widow Simone becomes the wind of change.

Alain

The other main comic character is Alain. “Alain, the half-witted suitor, was danced by Alexander Grant in another lovely characterization, as touching as it was comical” (Vaughan, 1960, p. 5). Within the story line, Alain is the loser. He is teased, tormented, and despite his best efforts, does not get the girl. This is the context and reality in which Alain must play. His comic reality is detached from societal norms, and his perseverance with his umbrella is part of his comic persona (Robinson, 1999) and which focuses the comedy. While the Widow Simone’s comic focus is thwarting the lovers, Alain has his brolly. His movements and persona are greatly exaggerated, rigid, straight-legged, and extend from his periphery. His gestures extend beyond a natural kinesphere giving him an awkward and ungainly quality. He is fundamentally flawed, but his absolute denial of self-doubt makes the physical comedy possible much like John Cleese’s character in the *Ministry of Silly Walks*, Alain plods, trips, tramples, meanders, and falls down with absolute confidence.

While Alain is the fool or idiot, he is a kind of rogue idiot. He follows Henri Bergson’s guidelines that deformity is funny only to the degree that a “normal” man can imitate it. Political correctness and comedy rarely acquaintances. His humanity is evident only several times through-out the ballet and this is the detachment that allows the audience to overlook his misfortune and forget to feel sorry for him in his predicament. Alain is

“determined to be playful and completely oblivious to his surroundings” (Balanchine and Mason, 1989, p. 162). He is mentally disabled according to societal standards, and Ashton, not wanting the critical or social edge of true ostracism, sets up moments where society supports Alain. When he gets lost on his way to the picnic at the beginning of Act I, Scene Two, he is about to turn back toward home when a group of villagers come along and sweep him up into the fray. He rides astride his red umbrella while the peasant women form a group around him and twirl their ribbons in a circular motion like the wheels of a carriage. Once at the picnic Lise and Colas run off together, and Alain performs Pan-like moments trying to steal the flute and disrupting the hand holding couples. He runs between the couples’ arms and leans up against the women trying to make eye contact. This is a huge breach of etiquette, not only is his physical proximity to the women uncomfortably close, the eye contact is invasive and aggressive. Alain’s disability is socially excusable within societal standards, but we certainly do not want our heroine to marry him. This detachment of the normal social order of things defines his comic character and echoes Bergson’s theory that “any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings” (1911, p. 134).

Ashton brilliantly uses Alain for transitions between scenes and acts of *La Fille*. This device has a long-standing tradition.

The practice of putting the fools and clowns in requisition between the acts and scenes and after the play was finished, to amuse the spectators with their tricks, may be traced to the Greek and Roman theatres; and their usages being preserved in the middle ages, wherever the Roman influence had spread, it would not of course, be peculiar to England. (Broadbent, 1964, p. 88)

Between Act I, Scenes One and Two, the villagers sweep Alain into their procession to the picnic, putting him in the center as they twirl their ribbons around him. At the end of

Act I, after the lovers exit the stage in the storm, Alain returns riding his red umbrella. A gust of wind picks him up and flies him off stage left. At the end of Act II, after the lovers and guests have revelled themselves out the door, Alain, who was pushed out of the house by Thomas after The Widow Simone reneged on the marriage deal, sneaks back inside; “the little guy points with satisfaction to what he’s seeking. It’s his red umbrella, which he retrieves from the table and, as his music turns to more elated ‘traveling music,’ scuttles out, almost as if pedaling on air as he hugs his beloved broly (Greskovic, 1998, p. 447). The 1969 Benesh score margin notes read, “umbrella so happy.” With Alain’s joy intact, our lingering sorrow is alleviated while we still sympathize with him. “Not to find Alain sympathetic is to ignore a part of ourselves: his permanent childishness is so lovable -- his joy in the storm, his self-conscious formality as a would be suitor (rigid right through his whole posture), his excited jumps up on the staircase- it brings our own childhood to mind” (Macaulay, 1987, p. 19). When contrasted with Colas there are a wonderment and endearing awkwardness to Alain that are both sad and appealing. He is the underdog in an unwinnable situation. But with his umbrella, he is somehow complete.

Thomas

Leslie Edwards played Thomas, the rich landowner, and Alain’s father. Not much is said about this character. In fact, he is an afterthought in many articles about the production. Coupled with the broad comic character of Alain, Thomas plays the straight man. He does not have a comic perspective and his gestures although exaggerated do not exude the comic flair so present in The Widow Simone and Alain. He is an ordinary man operating without any perceptible faults. As a father striving toward a traditional manly role for the dimwitted son, his humanity is completely geared toward his son’s success. He does not meet the criteria of a comic character, nor does he have any virtuosic dancing in

the ballet. And yet he is not an incidental character; after all it is Thomas' bag of gold that starts the marriage negotiations of Lise and Alain. The gold represented a tangible future for both Thomas and The Widow Simone. Thomas gets a suitable match for his son and the potential grandchild or grandchildren to carry on the family name, and The Widow Simone secures a future for herself and for her daughter. Within the narrative, the gold also sets up the consequences if the marriage contract is breached. And the gold demonstrates the popular adage that love cannot be bought.

Thomas provides the class-based morality for the ballet in many ways, and he uses almost solely reactive humor to Alain's proactive antics. His reality is trying to keep Alain in line while not tarnishing his pride or position too much. The bag of gold acknowledges the antics of his son as less than desirable to The Widow Simone and Lise. He gets upset when Alain acts foolishly around Lise or when he thrusts the flowers in The Widow Simone's face at their first meeting only to retract them and thrust them at Lise. And it is Thomas who comforts Alain when Lise and Colas are discovered in the bedroom together on the eve of their marriage. There are awkward hugs and pats on the head as Alain cries on his shoulder and then Thomas stomps to the table, grabs the bag of gold and shoos Alain out the door ahead of him. While The Widow Simone is upset for a brief amount of time, presumably from the lack of gold and the prosperous match, it is Thomas' last moment of anger that is the appropriate response for Alain. We know that Thomas will take care of Alain and that lifts the burden from the audience allowing us to experience the ending of the ballet as a happy one. Without Thomas there would be no safe haven for Alain and his antics would be pitiful, not comic. While The Widow Simone represents social reform, Thomas represents social conscience.

The analysis of the story and the characters in *La Fille* highlight the holy triple of set-up, anticipation, and punchline (Helitzer, 1986) as Ashton's overriding structural device, driving the narrative forward and allowing the characters to play within the comic opportunities created. The triple forms the backbone of *La Fille* in the organization of the whole ballet and the individual comic scenes (See Chapter VI).

Following a long historical tradition, the characters fall into two categories, technical and comic. Given the time and political climate in which *La Fille Mal Gardée* was originally choreographed, the charming narrative and unique characterizations work on a broader societal scale. The technical characters of Lise and Colas are not true noble characters; they are demi-character types, peasants who display a sense of upward mobility and lightness in their movement and a sense of space that is direct towards each other. While they have comic moments their characters center the story to a knowable and recognizable reality. Their love becomes the focus of the story and deepens the plot around which the comic characters revolve around. These two characters also represent a proletarian class striving for change. Alain and The Widow Simone are archetypal comic characters. Their solo dances (Chapter VI) have a heavy, downward quality, an attention toward indirect space, and their interactions with Lise and Colas provide the bulk of the comedy. The Widow Simone as the stern matriarch who softens her view of the marriage between Lise and Colas symbolizes the hope and possibility for societal change. Alain as the fool depicts the need for societal responsibility and Thomas anchors the morality and expected human responses to the abuses heaped on Alain. He is the social conscience of the ballet. We are allowed to laugh at the story because Thomas loves and takes care of Alain.

The next chapter investigates key comedic moments and how related comic theorization plays a part in the function and structure of these moments. The improvisational nature of comedy in *La Fille* is addressed also.

ENDNOTES

¹ Weight exists on a continuum of strong or forceful weight to light weight (Dell, 1979). I use the word *heavy* deliberately in this study because of the attention to passive weight utilized by the performers.

² Space (sometimes thought of as focus) exists on a continuum of direct or pinpointed space to indirect space. Indirect space is not a lack of attention to space, it is an attention to all space, but in the case of some comic characterizations its outcome can look like a meandering focus (Dell, 1979).

³*La Sylphide* was originally choreographed by Filippo Taglioni in 1832, but the version that survives today and influenced my sense of the ballet was choreographed by August Bournonville in 1836.

CHAPTER VI

ASHTON'S *LA FILLE*: COMIC MOMENTS

"All tragedies are finished by a death, all comedies are ended by a marriage."
(Lord Byron's *Don Juan* in Ehrlich and De Bruhl, 1996, p. 98)

This chapter looks at key comedic moments in Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée* and their comic function within the ballet as a whole. Each moment is examined as it relates to comic purpose, comic components, and related comedic theories that reveal how Ashton's process works. Weight and space are emphasized to distinguish where these elements become a significant quality of the comedy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the improvisational nature of comedy in this ballet.

The Dance of the Cock and Hens

As the curtain rises in the darkened theatre, the bosky pre-dawn scene reveals peasants breaking in the new day. Along the right side of the stage, shadowy forms can be seen but not distinguished, and even as the lights brighten, these massive whitish blobs are indiscernible. Only as the figures begin to move and hop down one by one, stretching, scratching, and pecking does the audience laugh, realizing the undistinguished forms are four life-sized chickens and one lively rooster.

A cock-a-doodle-doo cry rises from the lulling music as the rooster jumps down from his roost. Waking-up movements, feather plumpings, and frissons, and strutting soon animates the four white hens and the iridescent rooster. A rousing musical surge leads to the "Dance of the Cock and Hens." A male dancer plays the rooster; four female dancers, the hens . . . Little prancings in place, fly-away side-to-side *sissonne* jumps, and wonderfully deft *renversé* pulsings in place all have the delightfully odd look of being at once like chickens and related to the daily formed by Enrico Cecchetti. . . A mini-chorus line enlivened by pecking heads, *échappé* steps, *sauté-passé* moves and arm/wing flapping pulsations in place cap the chicken's wake-up dance. (Greskovic, 1998, p. 423)

Dancing chickens are comic on several different levels. One is the creation of a context where humor can happen, setting the comic boundaries and defining the court of play. Ashton effectively creates a world in which the villagers find nothing peculiar about five and six foot fowl prancing about the stage. This, combined with the attention to occupational and behavioral gesture, enhances the broad comic characters playing within a fairly straight storyline and defines the boundaries clearly setting the comic premise (Lawson, 1957; Bogart, 1983). If Elvis Presley or Marie Antoinette should show up at the farm, it would be not be funny, only confusing because the incongruity plays outside the created and established boundaries.

Another comedic point is the ability to see human characteristics in nonhuman beings. The chickens do fit two of the criteria for comic characters as outlined by Vorhaus (1994). They have their own comic perspective; they are chickens after all, and they play within a sense of spatial and temporal exaggeration. There is no sense of fault or humanity in their portrayal because of their non-human character, and yet their postural characteristics highlight and identity with the chicken's anthropomorphic qualities (Gruner, 1997; Bergson, 1911).

You may laugh at an animal but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men [sic] have given it -- the human caprice whose mold it has assumed. (Bergson, 1911, p. 3)

Taking this one step further, educated dance audiences recognize more than just human caprice; they are privy to the insider humor. Combining the precise head movements of Ashton's early Cecchetti ballet training and his music hall performing background, Ashton pays homage to the granddaddy of all bird ballets with his chicken dance (Greskovic, 1998). The quick half pan¹ and repeated *échappé* step together with the chickens all in a row clearly doffs its hat to the four cygnets divertissement in Act II *Swan Lake*². While the

dancers cannot hold hands because of their feathered wings the reference reads loud and clear; there is also a wink toward Odette's famous solo in Act II of *Swan Lake* with the *échappé passé* step.

Head gestures are a vital part of the comedy in this dance; the quick tempo of the half pans, forward head thrusts, and little wobbling head motions, as well as the occasional the full pan³ clearly mimic the pecking motion of chickens. There is a sense of exaggeration in the use of vertical space and sudden time with the extremes in levels from the low hunched-over, squatting posture with turned in toes to the full height of the *sissonne* jumps and the combinations of tiny, quick, mincing steps punctuated with staccato *developpés* with the legs parallel and the elongated wing flaps.

These flightless fowl have a grounded quality, a boomerang effect to the floor. In this way they follow the historical precedence; that of balletic comic characters in ballet being earthbound. They serve the most basic comic function, the old vaudevillian trick of warming up the crowd before the show. They also provide a comic through line and break the rule of threes by appearing four times throughout the ballet. They help set the context of the ballet at the beginning. They appear during the transition into Act I, Scene Two just before Alain comes on stage. They have a cross-over from stage left to stage right with the parallel *développé* extend step, while Colas shoos them off to make room for the horse and cart carrying Thomas, The Widow Simone, and Lise to the picnic with Alain riding his broom behind the carriage. The rooster and the hens double back on themselves and cross upstage again, this time from stage right to stage left. Their final appearance is at the end of Act I. The rooster and hens come on stage during the fray of the storm, and there is a comic moment when the rooster chases Alain and he hides behind his umbrella until it leaves, leaving The Widow Simone without cover from the storm.

Chapter V established Alain as a comic character. He is also a burlesqued character, never experiencing self-doubt while performing slapstick moments. "In a slapstick story or a slapstick moment the comic premise is the gap between the slapstick character's self-assurance and his manifest incompetence" (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 70).

Alain is a physical comic, weighted and indirect. His awkwardness stems from his gangly, off-rhythmed walk and his startling moments of direct pie-eyed focus. From the moment he enters the stage in Act I, Scene One, pushed on by his father, his reluctance and incompetence are clear. On his way in he abruptly thrusts the flowers he is carrying at the Widow Simone, who is delighted by the gift, albeit a bit startled by the presentation. There is a quick half pan by Alain as he realizes he has given the flowers to the wrong woman; he withdraws them unceremoniously and shoves them right under Lise's nose. This is the set-up of the triplet. His solo is the anticipation.

The march like music shows a pompously stiff father and a backwards son who appears to have learned to strut for this would-be formal occasion. Alain, the young man, peeps out from behind his father, half-shy and half-proud. Simone sends Lise to change as Thomas warily tries to show off his son, who moves in the strangest ways. At a key point, Alain pops out of sight, hiding behind his red umbrella, which has opened suddenly like some giant, leaning mushroom. (Greskovic, 1998, p. 429)

When Alain's umbrella opens, he dives behind it and crawls along the ground producing the fascinating illusion that the umbrella is moving across the stage of its own accord. The umbrella stops suddenly and Alain reappears standing and peeking like a child over Thomas' shoulder. The comedy in this moment stems from the anthropomorphic transformation of the ordinary umbrella and the surprise of Alain's materializing suddenly behind his father.

Alain slides in and out of traditional ballet vocabulary, incorporating tap steps and English folk movements all with an exaggerated stiffness. He jumps into splayed, off-

balanced, *arabesque* lines, shuffles-off-to-Buffalo, and hitch-kicks while throwing his body so far forward his nose almost touches his knee. Each hitch-kick lands with a self-satisfied smile and a “taadaa” pose with his arms thrown behind him in a disheveled second position. Alain then bunny hops backwards on alternating legs and executes a sequence of *petite jetés* moving forward so awkwardly they look like tap shuffles all ending in a classic fifth position pose. The traditional male virtuosic solo ballet performance is adhered to in this solo with a series of *pirouettes* both *en-dehors* and *en-dedans* and three very difficult *tour en l’airs* with flexed feet changing his focus from down stage to up stage. The up-shot to this virtuosity is that Alain executes a full pan every time he lands, demonstrating his disorientation from each one and a half revolutions that throw him so off balance that he lands flat on his belly after the last one. Alain brushes himself off, makes a series of “I’m so cute poses” with the arms rotating in and then out with a side tilt of the head and an arched eyebrow, and ends with a rollicking handstand flopping onto The Widow Simone and Thomas’ laps. This could be considered the punchline, but it does not end there; Alain grabs his umbrella and rides it out the fence as if riding a bronco thus ending the scene. What a punchline! Through out the whole solo Lise shoots her mother wide-eyed knowing looks, and Thomas is alternately proud and concerned by his son’s dancing.

This solo is about character and follows the comedic principals of facial expression, exaggeration, juxtaposition, slapstick, and dance making fun of itself (Blom, 1986; Grover-Haskins, 1986; Vorhaus, 1994). Alain’s half-proud, half-shy facial expressions telegraph to the audience that this is not a serious solo, and Ashton wisely lets Alain take center stage with no other action taking place to compete with the satirical tour de force. No

character stands a chance against Alain. His broad comic portrayal steals focus, which the reason one never sees him on stage during the serious duets between Lise and Colas.

Exaggeration and juxtaposition go hand in hand. The technical difficulty of the solo is juxtaposed against the exaggerated clumsy execution and creates a tension between technique and character. Alain's goofy movement furthers his character, but the technical proficiency begs a grudging respect. The audience knows the subterfuge of technique that allows the comical bastardization of the classical ballet vocabulary to make the character seem completely inept. This same phenomenon also makes this dance border on slapstick. "To create slapstick comedy start by creating comic characters with delusions of grandeur. Then put these characters in situations designed to torment those delusions" (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 70). In this definition Alain is a kinder, gentler slapstick character. The only torment involved is the tortured ballet vocabulary, which falls into the category of dance making fun of itself (Blom, 1986). "With slapstick, you don't have to worry about inner conflict or emotional core issues. . . All you have to do is make it funny in a very superficial way. It is as easy as slipping on a banana peel" (Vorhaus, 1994, p.70). Alain has no idea that his rousing solo has not won Lise's heart. He is unaware of his own bumbling antics, and this lack of self-awareness removes any sense of abuse or malice in his motives; this lack of self-doubt and awareness leads to the next comedy moment in *La Fille*.

The Picnic *Pas de Trois*

In Act I, Scene Two at the picnic Lise, Alain, and Colas dance a *pas de trois*. The comic premise is that Alain thinks he is dancing a duet with Lise; he is completely unaware of Lise's attentions toward Colas and the village maiden's ploys to distract him while Colas sneaks intimate moments with Lise. The dance starts with Thomas and The Widow Simone

urging the reluctant couple to dance. Lise looks miserably at her mother while Alain is thrilled. Alain proudly *promenades* Lise with a stiff-legged gait and in to an *arabesque penché* thrusting his head under her arm smiling directly at the audience with an oafish grin. At the same time Colas grasps Lise's hand and kneels at her feet while she looks adoringly down at him.

Ashton's dance is hardly extraneous. Its comic timing, with continually shifting emphasis so Colas can be Lise's partner in a dance where Alain thinks he's the partner, tells a good deal about the characters involved. Lise is almost innocently complicitous in dividing her responses to Alain's and Colas's attentions. Colas is a deft thinker, taking immediate and sweet advantage of Alain's distracted moments. While Alain is blissfully unaware of the ongoing moves that allow Colas to steal intimacies with Lise behind his back. (Greskovic, 1998, p. 432)

In another comic moment the village maidens swarm around Alain tickling him and distracting him from Colas' lifting Lise on to his shoulders while she waves to the crowd. This echoes the transition into Act I, Scene Two where the maidens gather the lost Alain into their group and guide him to the picnic. Because they have already helped him, their antics in the *pas de trois* do not seem malicious, just mischievous. In another moment, repeated twice, Lise thrusts her leg into *arabesque penché* almost extending toward the ceiling (colloquially termed a "six o'clock" arabesque). Alain is so impressed with this he points and looks up matching the direction of her back leg causing the villagers to look up wondering what he is pointing at. Each time this happens Colas tiptoes in to kiss Lise's hand.

This moment actually caused consternation for Michele Braban, the choreologist assigned to update the notation of *La Fille mal Gardée* for the Royal Ballet in 1995. The moment of comedy within the section has shifted focus over time, literally. Within a variety of sources there seemed to a discrepancy in the intended humor of each version. In the 1960 video, starring the original cast, the humor stemmed from the awkward arm position

of Alain when partnering Lise's *arabesque penché*. In the 1981 commercial video the humor seemed to be lost as Alain's arm stayed in line with the *arabesque* leg (a standard symmetrical partnering procedure). In the 1992 rehearsal video, the humor stemmed from the entire corps de ballet panning up toward where Alain's arm was pointing (Jordan, 2000). This is also true in the Australian Ballet's 1994 video production of Ashton's ballet. In this version Alain's gaze follows Lise's leg as it swings upward, pointing up in response, the comedy comes when the villagers all look up. This highlights the murky problem of notating comedy and yet recognizing the inherent flexibility in interpretation and execution of the differing cast members as well as the natural evolution of the comedy.

The rule of threes (the repetition of a step or phrase three times for the maximum comedic effect) plays heavily into the comedy of this dance. Three times Alain and Lise run toward each other seemingly to set up for a promenade or a turn, but Lise ducks out making Alain's momentum carry him too far while Colas slips in for a series of supported *pirouettes* with Lise. Three times Alain and Lise grasp hands and fold their arms under to take them around in a circle, but Alain is facing backwards which allows Colas to sneak cheek to cheek with Lise after each turn. And three times Lise and Alain a *sauté grand jeté* passed each other running back into the center for an awkward embrace setting up the final moment of the bait and switch. On the third pass Colas sweeps Lise offstage and not looking, Alain runs into the center embracing his love only to discover one of the village men standing in her place. Dejected Alain then runs to a group of maidens asking where Lise went. The corps shake their heads "no" in exaggerated back and forth motions. He then runs to another group of maidens who execute the same movements. The triple continues as a third group repeats gesture. The music repeats a fourth time, but Alain just stumbles forward toward the audience looking discouraged. One by one the village

maidens come forward lavishing him with attention making him forget his troubles with Lise. This is the third time in the ballet that the maidens have rushed to Alain. His radiant delight takes away our concern for his well being, and he is able to keep self-doubt at bay.

In this dance weight reinforces the idea that Alain is grounded and earthbound. All of his partnering work with Lise is heavy, low, and discomfited. One promenade has Lise slumped in Alain's arms while he galumphs about in a circle. Colas and Lise, on the other hand, have movements that move upward, *pirouettes* with the arms extended above the head, a shoulder sit, and the ending *jeté* lift into the wings in which Colas lifts her above his head. Within the Laban definition of space as direct and indirect, Colas and Lise are direct with each other while Alain is beyond indirect space, almost out of space or spaced out, in his unawareness.

Sudden time and direct space are again used by Alain to surprise the audience. For example Alain's pointing up in the *penché* section, or the quick mincing steps Alain takes when turning Lise. Alain is the only one given sudden movement in the *pas de trois* and is notably contrasted by the sustained quality of Lise and Colas. This highlights Alain's awkwardness and his underdog status, again solidifying Alain's place as a slapstick character.

The Clog Dance

Another character that could arguably have slapstick qualities is The Widow Simone. She has her own solo in Act I, Scene Two. The Widow Simone enters and discovers Lise and Colas kissing; and, in a very slapstick way she separates the two lovers by kicking Colas in the behind three times to move him away from her daughter. The daughter grabs the clogging shoes and in an attempt to divert The Widow Simone's anger, entices her to dance. Again the technical subterfuge gives way to a slapstick parody of a familiar folk

dance form. The Widow Simone is actually quite adroit at clogging, but her delusions of grandeur in this scene keep it within the realm of slapstick (Vorhaus, 1994). This dance is a peek into Widow Simone's perky personality. She ceases to be the stern matriarch during this dance, and that gives her a wonderful bit of self-awareness, not enough to completely negate her comic or slapstick nature. Her broad comic antics are interspersed with very difficult clogging, and the quick way she accepts the offer to dance and slips her shoes on with aid of a shoe horn provided by her daughter belies her reluctance. The sheer joy in her smile projects levity in the dance to come.

With a stomping of her clog-shot foot and a swish of her skirt, she's off and clogging. After some heel-toe scuffing and bell-clapper kicking, Simone is in the thick of her dance . . . soon she is joined by four of Lise's girlfriends, who manage to rise and pick around on the "pointes" of their clogs. Simone's attempt to match this is crude to say the least. Open-close, heel-toe fanning and gliding steps add further variety. Simone's sliding variant turns into a braked skidding move. . . Madame launches into a "hoofing" segment that soon finds her on weak ankles and fatigued feet. . . Their finale finds Madame duly supported by two friends on each side as she hoists herself off the ground to perch at the center of their grouping. (Greskovic, 1998, p. 438)

There is a marked contrast with the way The Widow Simone perches precariously on her points and the ease in which Lise's friends accomplish the same move. In Alain's solo the contrast between him and Colas showed Alain's incompetence; in this solo it becomes an endearing personality trait. Although arthritic perhaps and ungainly, her joy in dancing for pleasure helps us laugh with her and not at her. She sees the maidens do the moves on their pointes and tries it herself, clearly over doing her physical limits. We love her for trying and laugh not that she failed but that she was willing to go out on a limb. The comic device of dance making fun of itself applies in this moment (Blom, 1986). Much as Alain's solo parodies Colas' bravura technique, The Widow Simone's solo parodies the pointe work of Lise's friends. This is another moment that notator Michele Braban had difficulty deciphering. Within the three different videotapes there seemed to be questions about whether the corps women were on pointe or flat and where their heads were positioned.

“The humor intended here seems to have been lost in the newer versions both the archive video and original score show the heads tilting from side to side with each step upstage” (Braban in Jordan, 2000, p. 84). The 1994 Australian Ballet video shows the women on pointe with traditional ballet heads and no sense of exaggeration, the humor stemming not from the corps de ballet but from The Widow Simone’s attempts at pointe work.

The age difference comes into play again when after a particularly vigorous stomping section, that startles a nearby villager, The Widow Simone stops, hunches over and grabs her painful back. She walks the pain off by strutting around the stage and then runs to join the ladies dancing and trips over her own feet trying to get back into line. Three comic moments happen back to back: The Widow Simone, presumably too tired to walk correctly, rolls on first the inside and then outside of her ankles looking pained, then, while all the girls are turning left in a one count canon, she, in the middle, goes last and turns right, and then ends being lifted by the two middle dancers. Not finished yet the friends call her in for a solo bow and she trips in falls in the middle of it.

In the chicken dance the half pan, full pan, and thrusting forward of the head provided a bulk of the comedy. This solo is driven by joy displayed in The Widow Simone’s shoulders and the jaunty angle of her head. They bring an appealing human quality to the dowager.

The rule of threes and the frustrated expectation theory apply here. There are three times when The Widow Simone jumps to second position and then clicks her heels together by sliding them in to first position. The first time she shrugs her shoulders as if to say, “look what I did.” The second time she grasps her hands in front of her and shrugs her shoulders as if to say “wasn’t that grand.” The third time she doesn’t shrug her shoulders at all; she grabs her back in pain and shuffles stage right. There are also many times during

the solo that The Widow Simone gives a saucy over the shoulder look to the audience, breaking the forth wall with a wink directly to the viewers.

Stanley Holden, the original Widow Simone, profoundly influenced Ashton and “derived the steps of the Clog Dance under Ashton’s supervision and, obviously, with his approval” (Darlington, 2000, p. 195). This is not an authentic Lancashire clog dance; it can’t be. “Lincoln Kirstein said that ‘National dances characteristic of various people and places cannot be transposed to theatre without compromise of authenticity. Folk dancing is more fun to do than to watch’” (Darlington, 2000, p. 197). The additions of tap and ballet vocabulary make this dance accessible to the ballet audience and make it fit within the context of the ballet. The clog dance “may be said to succeed through its very lack of authenticity, inasmuch as a perfunctory display of ‘genuine’ dancing would, at the least be much less comic” (Darlington, 2000, p. 197). The purpose of this solo is not to laud the historical wonders of the Lancashire Clog dance; it develops The Widow Simone’s character by revealing a crack in her blustery veneer. The small personal touches of shoulder shrugs and over the shoulder glances are what make us care for The Widow Simone and are what cannot be notated by counts, only by performer instinct.

The Tambourine Dance

The comedy in Act II stems much more from situational humor that blends both occupational and behavioral pantomime rather than actual dancing (Bogart, 1983; Lawson 1957). The Widow Simone, having fallen asleep at her spinning wheel, wakes and finds Lise with a closed fist right in front of her nose. Lise, who was actually trying to steal her keys, uses her other hand to depict a buzzing fly, indicating that is what she holds in her hand. She opens her fist, claps her hands together and follows the path of the dead imaginary fly to the ground, then stomps on it. The Widow Simone gingerly steps over and peers down at the place where the fly purportedly landed; she shrugs her shoulders and

skitters off to get the tambourine. This is a beautiful example of both behavioral and occupational gesture. On a side note, the similarity between this and Charlie Chaplin's "Performing Fleas" is almost too close to be coincidence.

This is yet another section of comedy that troubled notator Michele Braban. She did the majority of her work by studying three videotapes, one done in 1960, the commercial video in 1981, and a 1992 dress rehearsal video. She also consulted the original notated score done by Elphine Allen in 1963. She breaks down the counts of this scene (see table 1). I have included an analysis of the same scene from the 1994 Australian Ballet video.

Table 1

Variable Counts of Fly Sequence in *La Fille*

Counts	1960 Score	1963 Score	1981 Video	1992 Video	1994 Video
1					turn palm
2	let go				let go
2&	head	let go			
3	clap	clap	let go	turn palm	clap
3&			head		
4	watch	watch	clap	let go	watch
5	squash		watch	clap	stomp
6		squash		watch	twist foot
7	point	point	squash	squash	point and look
8	look		look	stamp	hold pointing

The clap on count three in the 1963 score and the 1994 video correspond with a musical cue. However if the performer needs more time to establish the set up, the clap on count five will be equally effective. Every version that I examined had something happening on count three even if it was just turning the palm or executing a half-pan. The musical cue is acknowledged in all of the versions, just not always with the original clap. There is also the element of music to consider; much of the comedy in *La Fille* was enhanced with the wonderful and clever adaptations of the Herold score (1828) made by composer John Lanchbery. While examining the music's influence of the comedy on this dance is far beyond the scope of this study, the connection is an important one. The music directly affects how the performers attend to the dancing and the comic bits.

During the ensuing tambourine The Widow Simone carries the comedy. She is sitting next to her spinning wheel stage right, playing the tambourine. Keeping her in one place allows the comedy to be localized as the audience pans back and forth watching the beautiful solo by Lise and wondering what The Widow Simone will do next. She hits the tambourine with her hand, elbow, and shoulder and in one inspired moment, her bum while her face gives constant commentary on Lise's performance. Lise surprised her mother by dancing close enough to bang the tambourine. The Widow Simone then holds the tambourine out for Lise to hit and pulls it back at the last minute, pointing at her with a self-satisfied grin as Lise misses. The hits on the tambourine become less and less as we realize The Widow Simone is falling asleep again. The audience is able to devote more attention to Lise's dancing and effectively fades the comic character out as another duet between Lise and Colas begins.

La Fille is a whimsical story of requited love whose characters are simple and recognizable. The comic structure is set up with the lovers Lise and Colas at center while the characters of Widow Simone, Alain, and Thomas revolve around them. Each dancer “has clear moments to establish and develop their characters, and to move the story on” (Ritter, 1995, p. 36). The performers are center stage driving the narrative, negotiating the contingent particularities of each moment.

When evolution stops, extinction begins. This becomes a very important point when looking at the 215 year history of this ballet. *La Fille*, one of the oldest ballets extant, would never have survived this long without the adaptability to evolve and grow within recognizable cultural and social conventions. It would have been relegated to the dusty annals of dance history like so many of the dances of revolutionary France. Leslie Colier who starred as Lise in the 1981 Royal ballet video of *La Fille Mal Gardée*, comments,

They are wonderful roles to dance. Alain, Lise’s unwelcome suitor, is a model figure of pathos, and Widow Simone, Lise’s mother, can be a very complex and wonderful character. Different dancers in those roles could change the ballet and make me aware of things I had not previously realized about my own character. Performances with Stanley Holden and David Vintley as my mother were highlights of my career. I loved having different partners and different mothers so many of them inspired me. Some nights one would go on stage and find something new that happened between the characters. I would put these things in the bank as it were, so that on a less inspired night I could go to the bank and take out and draw on it. This is something you can’t really teach dancers – either it comes naturally or it doesn’t. (In Ritter, 1995, p. 36)

Colier’s flexibility to draw from her different experiences and varied comic moments each time she performed *La Fille* demonstrates that while certain moments are choreographed there are vital individual touches in performance that play realistically out of the narrative and the dancer’s life. These connections make the comedy ring true with theatrical authenticity.

Performer freedom within the structure is at the heart of the racquetball theory of comedy in ballet. The performer's creative and intuitive flexibility to negotiate the contingent particularities of a given moment provide the spontaneity that keeps comedy alive. To play the comedy within the created structure the characters must be allowed to negotiate and discover the boundaries, and in the discovery process comedy can evolve and grow with each cast member. "Ad lib" moments are the life-blood of comedy. If you always knew where the ball was coming from, racquetball would be predictable and boring. When I examined both the Monica Parker score of the Petipa/Ivanov version (1963) and the Elphine Allen score of Ashton's version (1967) the margins were peppered with the phrase "ad lib." Noted dance critic Katherine Sorely Walker cautions,

Comedy, of course, is all too easily damaged by dancers who have no inborn feeling for it . . . the golden rule is to concentrate on performing the choreography as perfectly as possible. All the fun is contained in the steps and gestures - it does not have to be emphasized by ad-libbing or underlining, and novel notions by hopeful new casts have a deplorable effect (1994, p. 50).

Physical comedy specialist Davis Rider Robinson supports this idea about the nature of comedy,

Comedy is a living thing. What works for one actor might bomb with another. The most carefully choreographed bit of comic cutesiness will be futile if the performer is unskilled, if he or she is uncomfortable with the role, or if the situation is forced" (Robinson, 1999, p. xii).

The simple details become important to the continuity of the ballet, and it is in the execution of these details that the freedom occurs. That freedom however can sometimes be abused. Jane Elliot, former dancer with the Royal Ballet who restaged *La Fille Mal Gardée* for Stuttgart Ballet in 2000 illustrates this crucial issue.

Our first cast cockerel . . . is the shortest in the company and a brilliant, slightly quirky dancer with a penchant to add his own tidbits. I have never seen such a cockerel. He flew and flapped and squawked (not literally) quite brilliantly. He decided in a stage call to join a romantic couple a-top the haystack during the 'Fanny Elssler' pas de deux. We saw him at his naughty antics and it was over the microphone "No Eric, No! Get down!" (Elliot, 2000, p. 1075)

With the interpretive freedom built into the very nature of comedy, it is no wonder that documenting comedy becomes a difficult job. When queried by Michele Braban about constant “ad lib” changes to Ashton’s *La Fille*, choreologist Elphine Allen replied, “I do hope the Royal Ballet have not changed too many things in their recent productions as Ashton always wanted *Fille* to be taught in the original version even though he agreed to many variations for many different people” (In Jordan, 2000, p. 87). The dilemma for Braban became a delicate balance of maintaining the integrity of the original score and intention of Ashton while taking on the responsibility to notate the changes accurately with reference to the circumstances in which they were made. This brings up several questions. Do the changes become standard for the next cast that learns them? And is this part of the natural evolutionary process of comedy in ballet? These are questions that really cannot be answered, for only time will tell.

In Braban’s article outlining the challenges of updating the notation of Ashton’s *La Fille*, three of the four examples were questions about Ashton’s intended humor. The fourth example dealt with the number of turns before the cat’s cradle appeared in the Ribbon pas de deux and on what count the kiss happened. While I do not read Benesh Notation, when I looked at both the 1969 score by choreologist Monica Parker and the 1963 Elphine Allen score for the Royal Ballet, most of the pedestrian movements and comic bits were not notated but written out in longhand. The comedy was easier and quicker to understand being so written. Being certified in Labanotation (another form of dance notation) I remember with wonder how long it took to read a notated example of a cartwheel. The process of identifying the body parts and the placement was so detailed and exact that it was a full five minutes of tongue-biting, brow-knitted concentration before the light bulb in my brain went on and I exclaimed in delight “Ooooooh, it’s a cartwheel.” Had

the word “cartwheel” been in the margins the recognition would have been instantaneous. I believe that is the reason that the comic bits were written long hand; it is much simpler and clearer. Exact timing of specific elements may be clearly notated, but in order for the person reconstructing the ballet to understand the moments there must be a sense of context of the comic scene for the parts to make sense.

Summary

Braban’s frustration over the changes in timing and execution of the comic bits was in keeping with all of the theories that frame this dissertation. There is a magic, as Ann Blom (1986) calls it, to comedy that happens between performer, material (including musicality), and audience, some element of “ad lib” that makes the comedy ring true for that particular performer, that particular performance, in that particular moment in time. The comic scenarios remain constant such as “Lise tries to steal keys, catches fly” (Allen, 1969) but the contingent particulars are what facilitate the comedy. The narrative set up is clear, but the anticipation and punch line have to be personal. If it were automated and the same every single performance, the spontaneity and thus the majority of the humor would be lost.

The racquetball theory of classic narrative ballet must include an “ad lib” quality for it to be effective. In racquetball one does not always know where the ball is going or coming from because there is an element of surprise and discovery in the process of playing. Comedy is an evolutionary process and with *La Fille*, over the 215 years of this charming ballet’s existence, each adaptation and reconstruction allows for broader range of comedic discoveries and possibilities. Humor is human and it is human action in all of its unpredictability that is the life blood of comedy.

Chapter VII recaps this adventure.

ENDNOTES

¹The half-pan starts with the head center and scans to one direction and returns to center.

²*Swan Lake* choreographed by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa premiered at the Maryinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg in 1895. This romantic story ballet is the story of a young woman cursed to live her life as a swan queen by the evil Von Rothbart. The only cure of the curse is to find true and faithful love. In Act II the Swan Queen, Odette, meets and falls in love with Prince Siegfried and while he pledges his faithful love to her, by act three, Von Rothbart has tricked him into betraying her. Odile a swan looking identical to Odette but dressed in black deceives Prince Siegfried into declaring his love to her thus relegating Odette to life as a swan.

³The full pan starts with the head center and scans from one side all the way to the other side.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

“You can pretend to be serious, but you can’t pretend to be witty” (Sacha Guitry in Fitzhenry, 1993. p.224).

I first began this research when I realized a dualistic hierarchy that prioritizes serious, enigmatic, and abstract expressive structures over wit, satire, and farce. Tragedy receives critical attention while comedy is laughed at and enjoyed but barely tolerated as worthy of artistic critique and historical memory. This hegemony toward the serious is misplaced. Comedy and tragedy are two sides of a coin, two masks representing the duality of theatre, the happy and the sad. Throughout the recorded history of theatre, comedy remains a powerful force unifying people, both performers and audiences, through laughter by pointing out human foibles, social imbalances, gender inequities, and other timely, topical concerns (Leacock, 1938). The primary question was how was comedy able to perform this function? And even more specifically, how was that possible in dance? And the investigative journey began.

From my own perspective, my background as a dancer and career as a comedic performer turned educator and choreographer was a fundamental and an invaluable resource into the understanding of comedic timing, and the creation of comedic structure. I set out to uncover and explore the phenomenon of comedy in dance by examining four seminal comedic dance works: *Three Epitaphs* (1956) choreographed by Paul Taylor; *The Envelope* (1986) by David Parsons; the “Merlitone” dance from the *Hard Nut* (1991) by Mark Morris; the ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée* choreographed originally by Jean Dauberval (1789), and re-choreographed by Sir Frederick Ashton (1960) among others.

These works represented comedy in dance from both the classical narrative ballet and the modern dance traditions, and each represented unique comic challenges to unravel.

The Research Questions Reviewed

I posed six questions which targeted a breadth and depth of comedy in dance and gathered data utilizing a blend of philosophical, phenomenological, and new historiographical modes of inquiry. Embedded in these questions was an understanding that meaning could be derived from the structural deconstruction of comedy in dance. The data collected was then woven into theory model to aid in the analysis of the use comedy in dance. I answer the first four questions separately and then answer the last two by demonstrating the effectiveness of the theory model as applied to Ashton's ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

How do key comedic theories inform and influence comic practices in dance?

One of Aristotle's principal tenets of tragedy outlines the necessity of a beginning, middle, and ending. This corresponds with the dominant comedic organizational device termed the *Holy Triple* (Helitzer, 1986). The triptych arrangement that connects the three basic events found in a joke, comic situation, or comic dance are, the set up, anticipation, and punchline. These events proved to be foremost not just in the overall structure of the dances but instrumental in individual comic moments as well. Modern dance choreographer Doris Humphrey is known for her fall and recovery dance theory of movement. Much of dance analysis is predicated on the idea of a triad relationship such as the body, mind, and spirit, or on modes of behavior. Humphrey utilized a natural breath rhythm of inhale, suspension, and exhale. In Paul Taylor's *Three Epitaphs* there is a delightful moment of breath rhythm or triple where the vain, space alien-like creature wanders center stage in the already established hunched over, shuffling walk. He settles into an asymmetrical posture

with his weight on his back leg and his other leg jutting out to the side, resting bent, with his foot on the ground. He inhales and brings his mirrored palm up to his face; he suspends his breath while he wipes the mirror on his outstretched leg and then brings it back up to eye level. His exhale happens after, happy with what he has seen, he releases his posture and shuffles offstage. The Widow Simone in Ashton's *La Fille* offers another moment of the triple that exploits a mirror. In Scene II when she leaves the house to pay the workers she adjusts her bonnet in the mirror and then sneaks another self-satisfied look just before she bounds out the door. This classic double take reveals a charming, impish quality in The Widow Simone's character. This brief moment of vanity speaks to the heart of how comedic theory informs comic practice. Her simple double take supports Henri Bergson's (1911) theory that comedy cannot exist outside of what is fundamentally human and yet it is also the objectification of human life. Susanne Langer (1953) offers a sense of "livingness" which is evident in this charming characterization. Even Aristotle's tenets assert that drama must have action, perfidy, and verisimilitude. The Widow Simone's vanity is the crack in her blustery veneer giving the audience a sense of veracity and insight by finding her human qualities amidst the broad comedy. These theorists agree that comedy rooted in human life, human action, and human awareness of that action reveals so much more than just a reflected image.

What are the component parts of comedy in dance that aid in its success?

The most dominant component parts corresponded with the Laban Movement Analysis principals of time, weight, space, and flow. Time was the most evident in all of the dances studied, but space and weight were instrumental in identifying the differences in the function and application of comedy between modern dance and narrative ballet. Flow was an interesting side bar but not as evident as the other three qualities. The performer's

attitude toward time existing on a continuum from quick to slow or sustained was only a part of the equation; duration, repetition, and the elusive concept of “timing” all played heavily into the success of the comedy. The performer’s attitude toward space operating on a continuum from direct to indirect was at the heart of comedic timing. The performer’s ability to negotiate the contingent particularities of a scene while directing the audience to what needed to be noticed was exacted by a delicate ebb and flow between direct and indirect space.

The triadic organizing principle of comedy in dance does not end with the “Holy Triple” of set up, anticipation, and punchline (Helitzer, 1986). The *Rule of Threes* was employed extensively throughout each work studied whether it was a movement, concept, prop, or character. The device was introduced and then repeated twice more, either as it was originally performed or with slight variations. Every comedy writer studied had some variation of the *Rule of Threes*. In David Parsons’ *The Envelope*, the *Rule of Threes* sets up the relationship of the performers with the envelope. The curtain opens to reveal a man in a hooded costume and sunglasses holding an envelope. He spins and throws it off stage right. It gets immediately thrown back onstage from whence it came. He picks it up and again he spins tossing it off stage right again. The envelope drops from the ceiling and lands with a loud “plop” at his feet. The third time he spins and tosses it off stage right, a woman, in a similar hooded outfit, comes running on from stage left holding the envelope and jumps into his arms. The magic of the *Rule of Threes* is its predictability. By the time the envelope drops from the ceiling there is an expectation that the envelope will magically reappear and the anticipation is not *if* the envelope will come back but *how* and *when*.

This *Rule of Threes* pattern is sometimes augmented following Max Eastman’s (1948) frustrated outcome theory of comedy. After setting up the expectation of threes, *not*

following that format causes surprise and laughter. In Ashton's *La Fille* the chickens break the *Rule of Threes* by appearing four times throughout the ballet. The first three entrances consist of orderly, choreographed movement. In their final entrance during the storm at the end of Act I, Scene II, it is mayhem, including charming comic moment when Alain, chased about the stage by the Rooster, finally dives under his red umbrella until the Rooster exits the stage, all the while, leaving the Widow Simone without cover from the storm. The surprise of having the chickens reappear during the storm frustrates the audience's anticipation of predictability and laughter erupts.

Space and weight are the qualities that contrast the difference between the comic and technical characters in Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille*. In the Picnic Pas de Trois in Act I, Scene Two between Colas, Lise, and Alain, Alain's attention to heavy weight and indirect space is instrumental in constructing his character as awkward, ungainly, and idiotic. Lise's and Colas's attention to light weight with their continual upward movements emphasize their dance status; and their use of direct focus towards each other through out the dance re-confirms the love plot. Choreographed weight and space are illustrated in the modern dance examples below. This takes us to question two.

How does the construction and function of comedy differ between narrative story ballet and modern dance genres?

The major differences between the construction and function of comedy in narrative ballet and modern dance are the use of narrative, character, and pantomimed gesture.

The comedy in the modern dance examples of Paul Taylor's *Three Epitaphs*, David Parsons' *The Envelope*, and Mark Morris' "Merlitone" dance from *The Hard Nut* is derived from the movement itself and is an abstraction of a central comic idea. The angular elbows, forward, hunched over posture, and tip-toe steps in *The Envelope* illuminate the

spy and espionage theme that makes the plain white envelope so mysterious. This odd, light weight step motif contrasts to the heavy slapping of the envelope on the floor. The performers intense use direct space focuses the majority of the comedic material in this dance toward the envelope. Taylor's use of weighted, ungainly, slumping, shuffling walk in *Three Epitaphs* highlights the human qualities of the space alien-like creatures and is juxtaposed against moments of surprising light weighted movement. And the haughty, nose-up, lightly weighted prancing movements contrasted with the performers' dour faces in Morris' "Merlitone" dance, emphasize the American born stereotype of the snobbish French, not just a single person from France but the entire French population. In these three dances the characters are not distinguished as recognizable individuals; they collectively represent their comic ideas. The use of a narrative thread is also minimized to emphasize the central theme. While these three works have a discernible beginning, middle, and ending and are rooted in human action, one would be hard put to tell the story of *The Envelope* beyond stating the basic premise of a mysterious white envelope reeking havoc within a group of suspiciously dressed folks.

Narrative classical ballet, however, is completely story based involving individual characters that fall into three categories: true comic characters, technically virtuostic dancers with comic moments, and straight characters with few comic moments. While not all ballets are plot driven, I was specifically interested in how comedy plays within such a structured narrative and found that the use of these three types of characters were key factors in the generation of comedy.

There is a decided difference in the use of pantomime between modern dance and by extension a loosely themed ballet like George Balanchine's *Western Symphony* (1954) or Twyla Tharp's *The Little Ballet* (1984), and narrative classical ballet. The dominant

modes of pantomime present in ballet are occupational gestures, depicting job related chores, and conventional cultural and gender gestures. There is a highly specific, structured pantomime language in a narrative ballet conveying abstract concepts and emotions (Lawson, 1957). A prime example of this is the pantomime sequence in Act II where Lise imagines her life with Colas and enacts a scene where she foresees having children. This is depicted in part by her hand marking anticipated height of each child. We follow her daydream because of the specificity of her gestures.

Modern dance, post modern dance, and contemporary ballet typically do not apply traditional or conventional pantomime. Through the reforms in the twentieth-century urged by choreographer Michel Fokine, conventional gesture fell out of favor, replaced by action more closely described as behavioral gesture -- recognizable pedestrian movements and emotional gesture -- an abstraction of behavioral gesture (Bogart, 2002). I found both behavioral and emotional gestures present in the modern dance works examined for this study. The two examples involving of use the mirror stated earlier exemplify the difference in the use of pantomime between ballet and modern genres. In *La Fille* there was an actual mirror on the wall and The Widow Simone executed a traditional double take depicting her impish vanity. In *Three Epitaphs* the mirror was built into the costume designed by Robert Rauschenberg, and the alien-like creature's gesture of looking into his palm became an abstraction of human vanity.

While the analysis of comedy between the two dance genres offers insight into fascinating comic conventions, there is an interrelationship between the performer and comic structure that begins to give shape to comedy in dance.

What is the relationship between praxis and artistry of the comic performer?

In the examination of the three modern dance works and *La Fille* I discovered a series of worlds that existed with their own logic, codes, and canons. Each moment of comedy within the dance work was a capsule of data informing the larger picture of that work, and that larger picture became a framework for studying the contingent particularities of the comedy existing within it (Roche, 1998). Each work studied established its own unique enclosed system. The similarities and differences within these systems provide insight into comedy in dance as an epistemological enterprise.

The Enclosed System

There is a sense of play with a unique internal logic governing a created comic world with a dedicated space, rules of engagement, a respect for technical prowess, and a building of a community between participants and audience (Mills, 1998). Each system is a paradigm of associated signifiers with a definable comic structure that varies with each work. In simplest form they range from a comic character operating in a straight situation, a straight character existing within a chaotic or comic situation, or the dancers representing an abstraction of a comic idea.

Play, character, time, weight, space, pantomime, the *Holy Triple*, and the *Rule of Threes*, are represented in the many facets of comedy in these works and make up the internal workings of the enclosed comedic system. But the various types of comedy are what frame the system: wit, satire, slapstick, parody, farce, irony . . . a different sensibility and corresponding set of rules form the overall comedic make up of a work. In narrative driven work, the story line contributes to the construction of the comedic framework. In more abstract dance works a central idea or theme helps define the boundaries of the comedy. In *The Envelope* relationship between the performers and the envelope form the

basis for the comedy, and the dancers play within the narrow parameters created by the enigmatic envelope. In *La Fille*, the meddling parents getting in the way of true love form framework of the comedy, and the characters operate within this premise.

How can the various and disparate theories, craft elements, and historical precedence be woven together to create a transdisciplinary theory model to aid in the examination of comedy in dance?

The inherent comedic structure in the dance works ultimately defined the look and the framework of the comedy, but the internal workings of the characters and how they interact with each other and their created realities set the tone. Eastman's (1948) frustrated expectation theory, Bergson's (1911) theory of automation and distancing, Langer's (1953) assertion of humor stemming from a life force, and Aristotle's elements of drama are among theories rooting comedy in dance to the human experience. The human experience is what allows a dialectical relationship between the structure and dancers to create a synergy that feeds off of itself and thrives on spontaneity and improvisation – within the created context.

Racquetball and Comedy in Dance

The sense of play, organization, inherent logic, and the contained environment led me to consider racquetball as a fitting analogy. Each game of racquetball is different, but there are commonalities and a quality of “racquetballness” that identify it. Comedy works similarly. The mechanics of the game playing form a structure whereby comic moments inform the structure and ambiance of the whole work. The elements of craft, the *Holy Triple*, the *Rule of Threes*, repetition, exaggeration, juxtaposition, incongruity, defiance, fear and violence are the various ways to hit the ball. The structure of comedy is formed by its various constituent elements and supported the choreographic and performance craft. In racquetball there is the service shot, the volley, and the kill; each shot has a different

function within the game. Each element of craft has its own angle and trajectory that initially dictates where the ball will go and that ultimately informs what is necessary to encounter the ball again.

Racquetball and comedy are processes rooted in action, requiring skill to keep the game going, knowledge of the rules, and a felt awareness of reasoning underlying the orderliness of the game. Each comic moment informs the next and plays within the given context, to play outside of the established boundaries is like playing racquetball with a baseball bat or having Marie Antoinette show up in a Tennessee Williams play. The incongruity would be confusing rather than funny.

The Model in Operation

In addition to studying contemporary comedic works I made an exhaustive historical examination of one of the greatest known comedic ballets, *La Fille Mal Gardée* and then chose Sir Frederick Ashton's 1960 version for the Royal Ballet on which to assess the effectiveness of the racquetball model. I first evaluated the story and found a clear holy triple format. Act I, Scene One was the set up; Act I, Scene Two was the anticipation; and Act III was the punchline. This organizational format gave definition to the comic structure. Ashton's version of *La Fille* was done in a classical narrative ballet style with a modern sensibility. His use of emotional and behavioral gestures, as well vestiges of conventional pantomime, gave this ballet an old world feeling but also followed Fokine's treatise of ballet reform. This sensibility to both classic and modern conventions not only furthered the narrative it also helped shape the comic structure. I then investigated each character and her/his relationship to the plot and the comic structure. The function of the character, delineated by weight and space, informed what type of comedy she/he used. The comic characters of Alain and the Widow Simone were choreographed with an attention to heavy

weight and indirect focus and utilized slapstick and burlesque as their principal comic modes. The technically virtuosic characters our romantic leads, Lise and Colas, were choreographed with light weight and direct focus towards each other; and their dominant form of comedy was wit. And Thomas, the straight character, exaggerated his appearance and posture but had no discernable comedic moments. By understanding how the storyline defined the structure and how each character existed within that structure, I effectively learned the rules of the game and the shape of the court. But the game is not just the sum of its component parts; it must be a cohesive whole comprised of plays, moments, and most of all, action.

A play by play analysis of comedic action provided a more comprehensive view of the whole game. Each comic moment fit within the comic structure and informed the comic whole. These moments defined characters, furthered the plot, highlighted conflict, and ultimately resolved the conflict. Slapstick, wit, and exaggeration dominated the court and the characters provided the dynamics of the game. The performers' ability to negotiate the contingent particularities of each comic moment, each scene, and each act illuminated the cohesive comic structure and allowed the audience to enter into their particular perspective and to care about them as individuals. The comedy was believable within the character's various realities creating a cohesive world in which we entered, were engaged, and satisfied.

Each character played within the structure until the game was finished and the happy ending achieved. There was even a sense of victory at the end of the ballet when Colas and Lise were successful in their wish to be together. And Alain's defeat and loss of his betrothed was temporary. His reunion with his beloved broly secured the happy ending without remorse as he rode off into the proverbial sunset unscathed. Thus the ballet has endured to the surprise of the late choreographer, as a classic in the genre of comic ballet.

The racquetball model is by no means the only way to view comedy in dance, but it proves an effective lens through which to look at the phenomenon and is a helpful tool in organizing the myriad of information garnered in any evaluation and discussion of comedy. When the racquetball model, with or without the gaming language, is applied as a functional organization tool, one more easily is able to examine individual moments within a scene or whole works of comedy.

In this study, because there were only a few examples in the literature or available on video for the sustained analysis dealing with the specific use of comedy in dance, I found the blend of philosophical, phenomenological, and historiographical modes of inquiry particularly helpful in generating data. I also had viewed these works in live performance. By triangulating the theory, history, and observed data, an image of comedic structure and practice of comedy in dance emerged where none had existed before.

The examination and analysis of comedic dance works are an important part of dance research. This dissertation offers a number of interesting findings including: The theoretical connection to the practice of comedy in dance; the differences in how comedy is used in narrative and abstract dance forms; more specifically, the differences in the use of comedy in narrative ballet and modern dance; the relationship of the Laban Movement Analysis principles to the examination of comedy in dance; and the generation of a theory model to help in further investigations of comedy in dance. But most importantly this study has given value to an often overlooked area of study.

Recommendations for Further Study

A number of research possibilities presented themselves as a result of this study. Since the hierarchy against comedy in dance still exists, this avenue of study deserves further consideration in dance analysis, aesthetics, and history. Cultural differences and variations in the execution of standard comic repertoire would be fascinating. Choreologist Michele

Braban (2000) examined several versions of Ashton's *La Fille* over time and found the comic moments the most difficult to notate from production to production because each performer had slightly different timing. It would be fascinating to follow the evolution of the comedy in *La Fille* through time. Another fascinating study might be to analyze the comedy in *La Fille* for cultural differences for example, American Ballet Theatre's staging approach versus Royal Ballet's, or the Australian National Ballet's.

A dissection of comedic works with Laban Movement Analysis would also shed insight into the phenomenon of comedy in dance by examining specific movements and combinations of movements and their qualities and their ability to get the laugh. A deeper exploration of the connection of play and comedy is an area for further inquiry. But the area that leaps to mind, as the most critically significant is the power of comedy in dance as an agent for revealing cultural relationships and social change and as an indicator for its ultimate power to further a more open ended and democratic art form. To quote Horace, "a jest often decides matters of importance more effectually and happily than seriousness" (In Ehrlich and Bruhl, 1996 p. 307). Although this study focused on the comedic structure applied to twentieth-century choreography, I am fascinated with the connection between comedy in dance and social change. This dissertation is a threshold to a much larger field of study. The fact that comedy delights, amuses, provokes, evokes, and tickles is a subject worth serious deliberation.

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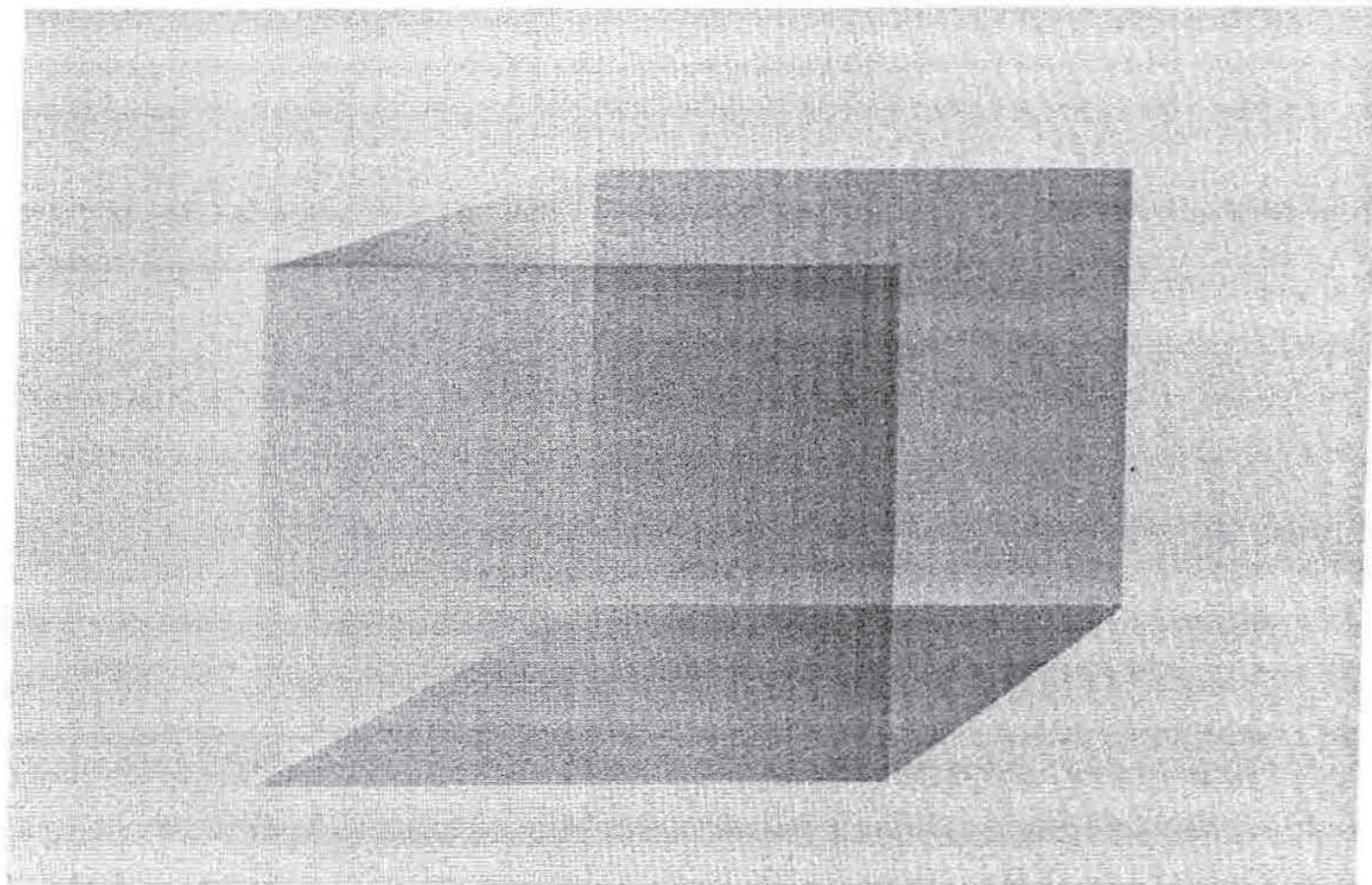
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APPENDIX A

The Racquetball Model: An Enclosed System



APPENDIX B

The Elements of Craft Inform the Comedic Structure

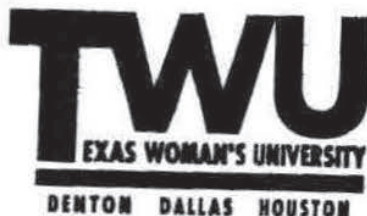
APPENDIX C

The Racquetball Model of Comedy



APPENDIX D

The Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378 Fax 940-898-3416
e-mail: IRB@twu.edu

August 6, 2004

Ms. Margaret Faulkner

Social Security #

Dear Ms. Faulkner:

Re: *The Serious Art of Funny Business: Comedy in Ballet*

The request for the above referenced study to be reactivated has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and appears to meet our requirements in regard to protection of individuals' rights.

A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp and a copy of the annual/final report form are enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. The signed consent forms and final report must be filed with the Institutional Review Board at the completion of the study.

This approval is valid one year from the date of this letter. According to regulations from the Department of Health and Human Services, another review by the IRB is required if your project changes in any way, and the IRB must be notified immediately regarding any adverse events. If you have any questions, feel free to call the TWU Institutional Board at the number listed above.

Sincerely,

Dr. David Nichols, Chair
Institutional Review Board - Denton

enc.

- cc. Dr. Penny Hanstein, Department of Performing Arts - Dance
Dr. Janice LaPointe-Crump, Department of Performing Arts - Dance
Graduate School

Simply the **BEST**