



CHAPTER V

Shakespeare Ballets

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In the play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare makes his tedious character, Polonius ask Hamlet who is walking about holding a book, this question: “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 193). Hamlet’s abrupt answer is: “Words. Words. Words” (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 194). Shakespeare was quite aware of the power of words but he was also aware of the fact that words alone did not make much sense; especially on a page where the written text lied as lifeless as it could be. Hence in the same play Shakespeare makes Hamlet say firmly: “The play’s the thing” (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 616). When this line is taken out of the play *Hamlet*, it can very well become the transformation formula for all the Shakespearean texts. That is to say, the transformation of the printed text into a performance text or the transportation of the page to the stage.

Shakespeare wrote for the stage. He wanted his plays to be performed. In the literature world, he is known as a poet, as a playwright but in the theatre world he was an actor himself and he wrote for the theatre. It must be remembered that he was a shareholder in “the show-business” of his times. He was a keen businessman watching out for the box-office success. Hence, the performed versions of his plays.

On stage, Shakespeare’s plays can be seen as plays, as operas, and ballets as well. If opera and ballet had been established performance genres in Shakespeare’s days, he would have been an excellent choreographer or even an opera composer. He was quite sensitive to the general interest in music and dancing in the Elizabethan Period. The Queen’s (Queen Elizabeth I) court was a festive court of

courtiers who had to be skilled musicians and dancers, the Queen herself being a keen dancer till her very late years.

Shakespeare's plays are full of allusions to music and dance and indeed in many of his plays, there is the active use of live music and dancing accompanying the plots of the plays as is the case with the Ball Scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Witches Scene in *Macbeth*, the dance scenes in *Much Ado About Nothing* to give a few examples.

The 16th century during which Shakespeare also lived (1564–1616) was the period when the first developments of ballet can be seen. The Renaissance festivities of the Italian courts paved the way for the appearance of ballet as well. Even in İstanbul of the Magnificent Suleiman in the year 1524, Venetians staged a balletic performance. This event is before the famous *Ballet Comique de la Reine* of 1581 which was arranged at the French Court by Catherine de Medici as Metin And states (1989: 14).

In ballet history, *Ballet Comique de la Reine* had always been considered as the first balletic example. During the 16th century, there were court ballets mostly performed in banquet halls rather than the theatres and the spectators were mainly members of the nobility (Koegler 1977: 40).

In 1588, Thoinot Arbeau's famous work *L'Orchésographie (Orchesography)*, a treatise about 16th century dancing, fencing, piping, and drumming appeared in which the period dances such as *basse danse, pavane, gaillarde, volte, courante, allemande, gavotte* (dances that Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I loved and Shakespeare made use of as dances or allusions in his plays) were described with musical notation and the positions of the feet and steps were clearly defined. The 5 positions of the feet were established ballet positions (Koegler 1977: 25).

Sir John Davies in his *Orchestra* also presented the dance interest of his times and described the Elizabethan dances (Davies 1976: 739-776).

During the 17th century, especially at the court of Louis XIV, this new art form was more than welcome. The King himself performed in the *comédie ballets* and he established the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661 to formalize the ballet steps and movements (Koegler 1977: 40).

This is also the period when famous publications on dance and analysis of body movements increase in number. John Bulver's *Chironomia* in 1644 was a treatise full of types of chirograms; in a way a genuine study of semiotics of gesture back in the 17th century (Joseph 1951: 105).

In the 18th century after the court ballets, in ballet history *ballet d'action*, ballets with a story, can be seen in which a story is told by means of dance steps

and mime gestures without any spoken words. The famous *ballet d'action* masters were John Weaver (1673-1760) who was considered “the father of English pantomime;” Franz Anton Christoph Hilverding (1710-1768) who was the son of the popular Viennese Hanswurst, Gottfried Prehauser; Jean-George Noverre (1727-1810) who was considered by Garrick as “the Shakespeare of the dance” and who was famous for his work, *Lettres sur la danse (Letters on Dancing)* (1760); and Gaspero Angiolini (1731-1803) who focused on the concentration of action and gesture, unity of style in the ballets, and who tried to develop a system of movement notation (Koegler 1977: 257, 390-391, 21).

Among these masters, Jean-Georges Noverre (whose birthday is on 29 April to be celebrated as the World Dance Day) staged a *ballet d'action* called *Cleopatra* in 1765. It is not definite that this was Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Probably the work was based on the love affair of Antony and Cleopatra.

Since he was hailed as “the Shakespeare of the dance” he might have referred to Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, too.

In the 18th century, the first attempts of translating Shakespeare’s works into the ballet language can be seen. A ballet by Charles Le Picq (1744-1806) who used the music of Locke on the play *Macbeth* was staged in London in 1785 (Koegler 1977: 338). In the same year, *Romeo and Juliet* was balletized by Eusebio Luzzi in Venice (Koegler 1977: 479). Again in Venice, Francesco Clerico (1755-1833) staged the ballet of *Hamlet* in 1788.

The 19th century is the period for ballet and opera to gain an established status in the history of theatrical arts. This is also the period during which famous choreographers of the period stage Shakespearean ballets. Salvatore Viganò (1769-1821) using the music of Joseph Weigl (1766-1846) choreographed his first Shakespeare ballet, *Coriolanus* in Milan in 1804 his second ballet being *Othello* in 1818 again in Milan. Vincenzo Galeotti (1733-1816) staged *Romeo and Juliet* in 1811 and *Macbeth* in 1816 using the music of Claus Schall in Copenhagen. Jean Coralli (1779-1854) using the music of Jean Schneitzhoeffter staged *The Tempest* in 1834 in Paris. Marius Petipa (1818-1910), balletized *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* using the music of Mendelssohn in St. Petersburg in 1877.

During the early 20th century, Antony Tudor (1908-1987) using the music of Girolamo Frescobaldi staged a ballet called *Cross-Garter’d* in 1931 based on *Twelfth Night*. In 1942, Bourmeister and I.Kurilov using the music of V. Oransky staged *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in Moscow. In the same year, a one-act ballet of *Hamlet*, a mimo-drama by Robert Helpmann was staged in London to the

music of Tchaikovsky. In 1954, Maurice Bejart staged *The Taming of the Shrew* using the music of Scarlatti in Paris. In 1976, V. Boccadoro staged *Much Ado About Nothing* using the music of T. Khrennikov in Moscow.

Among the 20th century balletized versions of Shakespeare's plays, the most frequently staged ones are; *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The most famous *Romeo and Juliet* ballet productions are the 1938 Lavrovsky production in Bruno, the 1955 Ashton and Rodrigues productions, the 1958 Cranko production, the 1965 MacMillan production, the 1971 Neumeier production, also in 1971 the Rodrigues production (in Ankara, Turkey).

Among these productions the monumental *Romeo and Juliet* ballets are as follows: The Lavrovsky-Prokofiev production in Bruno was staged in Kirov in 1940 and it was also revived for the Moscow-Bolshoi Ballet in 1946. This production was prepared after long research sessions on Shakespeare. In this ballet, Galina Ulanova was Juliet and Sergeev was Romeo creating a legendary couple before Kenneth MacMillan's 1965 *Romeo and Juliet* in which another legendary couple, Margo Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev danced for the Royal Ballet in London.

Kenneth MacMillan also was faithful to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* focusing on the developing love between Romeo and Juliet translating this love into the ballet language following the stages of development and presenting it in the choreography. In both Lavrovsky and MacMillan productions the Nurse, Tybalt, Mercutio were portrayed in the dance language vividly and Mercutio's mercurial character came alive with the aid of the ballet steps. The mimed parts of Friar Lawrence and Lady Capulet were also very effective.

Among the famous *Hamlet* ballets along with Robert Helpmann's one-act mimo-drama of 1942 *Hamlet*, there is a 1934 Nijinska production in which a woman dancer Nijinska danced the title role (as Sarah Bernhardt did in the play *Hamlet*) (Koegler 2008: 1).

There are also Konstantin Sergeyev's 1970, Chaboukiani's 1971 *Hamlets* and John Neumeier's *Hamlet: Connotations* in 1976.

Among the famous *Othello* ballets one production is José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* (a one-act ballet of 1949 in which only Othello-Desdemona, Iago-Emilia are portrayed). The 1957 Chaboukiani *Othello*, on the other hand, follows the play closely.

The Taming of the Shrew is also a favorite play of the choreographers who translated the play into the ballet language. The most famous balletized version of

the play is John Cranko's 1969 ballet in 2 Acts. The ballet highlighted the rough comedy of the play and juxtaposed the relationships of Katherina–Petruccio and Bianca–Lucentio.

A Midsummer Night's Dream which is a challenging play to produce, has also interested the choreographers to translate this intriguing play into a ballet. Among the balletized versions Ashton's *The Dream* (1964), Balanchine's (1962), and John Neumeier's 1977 full-length ballets can be seen. Frederick Ashton's *The Dream* is a one-act ballet in which the transformation of Bottom into an Ass, the *pas de deus* of Titania and Oberon are the most effective scenes.

John Neumeier who has his versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as ballet in 1977 for the Hamburg Ballet. The same ballet was staged for the Bavaria State Ballet in 1993 and revived for the same company in Munich in 2013 which was also performed during the Ballet Festival in Munich in 2014.

John Neumeier used Mendelssohn and Ligeti music. For the fairies in the forest Ligeti music was chosen to present the fairy-world. To accompany the Mechanicals Neumeier chose barrel-organ (*drehorgel*) music making use of selected Verdi pieces. Through his choreography the fairies and the mechanicals were very successfully presented in the ballet language.

In the 21st century, there are radical and controversial approaches to the plays as they are balletized.

In 2000, when Stephen Mills using the music of Philip Glass staged *Hamlet* for Ballet Austin, he stated that he wanted to approach the play in a different manner by starting at the end while Hamlet is dying being wounded by a poisoned blade. Mills has made use of the flashback technique as well. He mentioned that he left out Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the gravedigger (Collins 2001: 2).

In 2001, when Mauro Bigonzetti balletized *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he focused on the "glacial relationships" in the play. In 2004, a year after the war in Iraq, David Gordon choreographed *Henry V* with a post-modern approach in an hour-long ballet to present the (im)morality of war with seven dancers and a narrator. In 2007, Sasha Waltz balletized *Romeo and Juliet* setting the play in another universe omitting Benvolio, Paris, Mercutio, Tybalt leaving Romeo and Juliet and the Friar accompanied by a chorus (Mann 2012: 1).

In 2008, Igor Dobrovolskiy's *King Lear* for the Atlantic Ballet of Canada presented the balletized version of the play *King Lear* portraying "pride, folly, and broken dreams". Again in 2008, Dominic Walsh Dance Theater balletized

Titus Andronicus by Dominic Walsh as “an updated tale of hatred and revenge set in an airport security screening room” (Gleave 2008: 1).

2013, Alexei Ratmansky who had also balletized *Romeo and Juliet* in 2011, choreographed *The Tempest* for the National Ballet of Canada as a one-act ballet.

In 2014, the most recent new Shakespeare ballet is *The Winter’s Tale*, a co-production of the Royal Ballet with the National Ballet of Canada which had its opening on 10 April 2014 to run till 8 May 2014. The choreographer, Christopher Wheeldon created a full-length ballet to the music of Joby Talbot keeping the play characters Hermione, Leontes, Perdita, Florizel, Paulina, Polixenes.

Even the Sonnets inspired choreographers. In 1964, MacMillan staged *Images of Love*, and Sonnets 18, 23, 25, 43 were balletized by Maurice Béjart in 2009. Also in 2009, Sonnets 2,11,18,44,116 were balletized by Ballet Roland Petit.

What is happening while the plays are being translated into ballet is that the music and the choreography gain importance to replace the words of the play-text. The dance steps and movements are choreographed in such a way accompanied by music that they tell the story of the plays, portray the characters, present the conflicts and the climax and resolutions of the plays.

Whether the ballet is a one-act or full version of the plays, the ballet language adds another dimension to the plays as John Neumeier whose *Shakespeare Dances* (*Die ganze welt ist Bühne*), a dance program in which a collection of excerpts from his Shakespearean ballets were performed in Hamburg (8, 9, 28, June 2013) states: “[..]. Shakespeare is the greatest source of inspiration for a choreographer. He is the most human of all writers. He captured people in such depth, described his characters and their relationship in such an unbelievably intricate and powerful way that we (the spectators) also understand them on stage without words, however paradoxical that may sound” (“Shakespeare Dances”).

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