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## Site under construction:

### Taking 'Reading Performance' literally.

*Astrid Bernkopf*

The review printed in magazines and newspapers contains information on the performance it discusses. Therefore, the review can be considered as stepping in for the performance after the latter has vanished. Conventions regulating journalistic writing and the review in particular guide the reader through the text and ensure that some main points are addressed. Although reviews are used by reconstructors and historians, they do not appear to have gained a significant status as sources that capture and record dance performances.<sup>1</sup> In this presentation, I am going to explore the notion of *Reading Performance*, which I have already started to define in my PhD thesis by using only ballet scenarios as source materials.<sup>2</sup> Here, however, the centre of attention is the critic's review and how it may be read as representing the performance. For this investigation, I intend to take you on a journey investigating how factual the facts contained in reviews are. This will happen through a combination of elements of Critical Theory and historiography, which hopefully will illustrate my point.

Italian lecturer of semiotics Keir Elam points out that 'the written text ... is determined by its very need for stage contextualisation, and indicates throughout its allegiance to the physical conditions of performance'.<sup>3</sup> This implies that the fact that a text is written to be performed influences the text's shape and appearance. Furthermore, the stage text is not equal to the literary one and has its own distinct features. The words of a play, an opera or the scenario of a ballet are, therefore, not entirely literary texts, but written performances displaying the most important features of the live performance. The critic's review, however, does not precede the performance, but directly follows and is borne out of it. Although partly a journalistic text, the review may be considered as exhibiting the features of the art form from which it originated; the performance.

The composition of the review can be understood as following a conventional pattern

of textual narration. Firstly, a general statement concerning the performance, choreographer and theatre is given. At this point, the reader is informed which performance is dealt with and where it has taken place. This is usually followed by a more detailed account of the evening or production, which may focus on choreographic features, narrative, spatial patterns and interpretational skills of performers. Other features regularly mentioned in articles are costumes, stage design, the use of machinery and music. By referring to these elements the critic sets up an account of the performance that seeks to capture the main elements so that the reader can receive an impression of the performance.

Given these considerations, it seems possible to extract the elements of the performance from the subjectively written review. These facts will constitute the performance as it has been captured by the critic. However, the problem is what facts are. Historiographer Edward Carr sees facts simply as events.<sup>4</sup> A fact would be that we all are here in this room. That some of us have arrived by car, whereas another fact is that others took the tube. The fact, according to Carr, receives relevance through its treatment. Hence, some facts are more important than others. For the review, this means that the critic does not present the entire performance, but selects from all events the facts that are most important to him. This selective process discards many elements and focuses only on a few. By doing so an emphasis on particular events is achieved. It can be observed that some reviews draw all attention to the soloists of one performance, whereas others prefer to go into lengthy accounts over the *corps de ballet* and hardly, if so, mention the soloists. Hence, the review does not depict the entire performance, but seeks to give an impression of it without accounting for all details.

At this point, the critic himself as the one to select comes into play. The critic perceives the performance and may be considered as responsible for the point of view that his text

assumes. He filters the events through his mind and is influenced by his socio-cultural, educational, political and religious background and origins. Terence Hawkes states in *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1992) that ‘in fact, every perceiver’s *method* of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree’.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, everyone perceives according to his/her own method, which is influenced by bias. This bias causes a person to perceive a situation in a particular way as opposed to another person’s perception. Thus, by viewing the performance, the critic creates his own version of it. Such understanding goes hand in hand with the view expounded by French literary critic Roland Barthes in his seminal essay *Death of the Author* (in *Image Music Text*, 1977, p. 142 – 148). Here, Barthes claims that ‘the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent’.<sup>6</sup> The reader creates the text according to Barthes, whereas the author vanishes immediately after having composed it. Such creation of the text happens in the reader’s mind according to the words and clues he finds on the paper. In relation to theatre, it can be said that the performance is consumed by the audience, whereby every member of the audience becomes, as reader, the author of the performance.

The next step in the critic’s work would be to write the review and transmit all information about it. However, since a review is a subjective text meant to evaluate, the words and sentences are arranged to influence the reader. Not only that the critic chooses which facts to pass on and which ones to leave out, he also manipulates his own audience through his choice of words and the use of language. Edward Carr, again, has summarised this notion of presenting facts according to a particular view as such: ‘every journalist knows today that the most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts’.<sup>7</sup> With this additional problem, it appears necessary to consider not only one single review, but several. In many articles from a number of authors more facts about the performance may be found. Furthermore, it might be possible to filter out the critic’s personal comment as opposed to the facts.

In order to distinguish between the influence a particular time and culture had on an individual and facts, a profound knowledge of the critics’ influences and time is necessary. This would lead on to research into a particular era and its

socio-cultural climate. Additionally, political influences such as censorship would have to be considered, as these may have a significant impact on what is published.

According to recent theory, this notion of being able to understand what people in distant cultures or times thought and how they lived has been critiqued. Keith Jenkins, philosopher of history, focuses on the actual work of the historian in his book *Rethinking History* (2003). He claims that ‘[historians] take with them certain identifiable things. First they take themselves personally: their values, positions, their ideological perspectives’.<sup>8</sup> The historian reads, according to Jenkins his sources, and presents his own view of how matters could have been. This understanding is due to the recognition of the interpretational work on behalf of the historian. Furthermore, the text is presented by the historian diluted by his own influences in form of his socio-cultural, educational and religious background and views. Hence, it is not that we, as dance historians, read all about the Romantic ballet in Paris, but what we read is, according to Jenkins, what Ivor Guest presents us as Romantic ballet in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the selective process is also here applicable and, therefore, only the most important events are dealt with by Guest.

Edward Carr has, in this sense, another explanation for this phenomenon: ‘All history is ‘contemporary history’, declared Croce, meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems’.<sup>10</sup> Carr insists that we cannot rid ourselves of our own influences and, thus, will always be hampered by our own upbringing and views. For people having grown up in the late twentieth century, it is hard to imagine a time when it was not common use to brush ones teeth in the morning. Therefore, all our conclusions are tainted by our understanding and perception of the world, which does not correspond with the era we research anymore.

Hence, going back to Roland Barthes and *Death of the Author*, it can be said that the researcher or historian himself creates a text when reading it. Thus, whatever the critic put into his review may be lost in interpretation by researchers. Just in as much as every spectator creates the performance when watching it, the reader of the review produces it when reading. This would result in one single article multiplying through such interpretative process on behalf of the reader.

The site of performance construction is therefore not the blank page, but the mind of the reader or scholar. Herbert Grabes terms such process theatre of the mind and states that the reader of a play synthesises the information by adding stage directions and implicit textual clues.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the stereotypical presentation of characters, movements and narrative situations in ballet tradition, for example, provide a stock repertoire for the reader to draw upon. The poses of the shy girl are in as much codified in ballet tradition as the seductress. Consequently, the text of the review triggers particular pre-existing notions and concepts of performance tradition that help to construct the performance from the review. Having said that, the performance remains an individual construct as opposed to that of another researcher. Through continuous reading and researching, the constructed performance changes as new information and insights are gathered. Thus, not even the constructed performance remains static.

To this end, the performance can be considered as lost, but through its various artefacts it encourages a process of constant construction. The theatre takes place in the mind of the researcher, who views the performance according to his personal mode of perception. In relation to history, Keith Jenkins states that 'history is produced by a group of labourers called historians when they go to work; it is their job'.<sup>12</sup> I do hope that in the course of this presentation it has become clear that the theatre of the mind creates the performance. Consequently, performance is produced by scholars – critics – when they go to work; it is our job.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter in Janet's book on reviews and that it gives a comparison that does not consider changes in choreography, countries and different journalistic conventions in different eras and countries.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernkopf, Astrid. Narrative Variants and Theatrical Constants: Towards a

Dramaturgy of Romantic Ballet. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Surrey, 2005.

An extended version of this paper will be published in the forthcoming book publication *Reading a Dance or Two* by the European Association of Dance Historians.

<sup>3</sup> Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 191

<sup>4</sup> Carr, Edward. *What is History?* Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001, p. 5 – 6

<sup>5</sup> Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism & Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 1977, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, p. 145

<sup>7</sup> Carr, 2001, p. 5

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, Keith. *Re-thinking History*. London/New York: Routledge, 2003, p.25

<sup>9</sup> Original by Jenkins: 'Let us imagine that you have used one major text-book: Elton's *England under the Tudors*. ... When the exam came along you wrote in the shadow of Elton. And when you passed, you gained an A level in English history ... But really it would be more accurate to say you have an A level in Geoffrey Elton: for what, actually, at this stage is your "reading" of the English past if not basically his reading of it?' (Jenkins, 2003, p. 9)

<sup>10</sup> Carr, 2001, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> Grabes, Herbert. Staging plays in the theatre of the mind. in Scolnicov, Hanna and Holland, Peter (eds.). *Reading Plays: interpretation and reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 94 - 109.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, 2003, p. 25

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