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A New Year's Gift
for Dance Lovers

or

A View of the Dance

as

Fine Art and Pleasant Pastime

by

August Bournonville

© Royal Academy of Dancing

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Translated by
Inge Biller Kelly

First Published Copenhagen 1829

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RESPECTFULLY AND GRATEFULLY DEDICATED
TO THE DANISH AUDIENCE BY THE AUTHOR.

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London 1977

Nytaarsgabe

for

Danse = Bndere,

eller

Ansæelse af Dansen

som

skøn Kunst og behagelig Lidsfordriv

af

August Bournonville.

Kjøbenhavn.

Paa C. A. Reizels Forlag,
Trykt hos Sabritius de Tengnagel.

1829.

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Foreword

Several treatises on the dance have already been published in the French language, and yet there is hardly any aspect of this art that has been sufficiently explained. Noverre, Baron, Blasis, Anatole and others have all expressed profound opinions, but although these may seem completely adequate in both elementary and in critical respects, and are interesting for dancers and connoisseurs, they were scarcely intended for the greater part of the audience, who often enjoy themselves with sincere feeling, and in vain enquire the reason why. I dare, then, to present to my fellow countrymen the fruit of what I have learnt after several years' stay in the home of dance, and my personal conclusions on an art, which for many may not be considered a possible subject for investigation. My intention is not to raise the taste for fine art, but as the enjoyment is intensified by the ability to judge, it has become a necessity in our meditative age to know the reasons for everything, even behind our lightest pleasures.

The question is whether one really enjoys more intensely by placing the artist on the map? I venture to insist that this is so. Being completely able to explain to ourselves why something does not please us, is after all a kind of satisfaction for those who have a natural sense for

beauty. And as the critical faculty of the audience best aids the progress of the art, it must be interesting to see the artist, in whom one detected a lot of faults and yet perceived particular good qualities, gradually correcting this and that, because of the comments imparted by the judicious spectator.

I will thus seek to describe the beautiful ideal of dance, the qualities the art demands, and why it demands them. I do not doubt that in case I should achieve the happiness of dancing on my native country's stage, the same will happen to me, as to most others who have set forth rules and doctrines, namely that I will not fulfil my own demands. Perfection is a chimera and I would consider myself happy if I approached it even by a mile. I gladly share my personal thoughts as a sacrifice for the art, which I chose because I found it beautiful and because it has already given me a few happy moments.

Paris: 12th July 1828

The Dance, considered as fine art

IS THE dance a fine art? This question has often been asked and not infrequently been negatively answered. It seems absurd, though, that antiquity's most cultured nations, whose supremacy in taste and art we acknowledge unanimously, should have awarded the dance a muse, without having considered it a branch of humanity's ennoblement: an "Art".

We understand by this word the activities which, through the noblest senses, cause in civilized people feelings that are completely alike in so far that the enjoyment and even the memory of them leaves an impression, which cannot be called admiration, nor delight, but a sincere consciousness of the true, the beautiful.

It is not my intention to renew the ridiculous quarrel, which Molière so splendidly described in his *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: namely the supremacy of one art over another. Very obviously, I love best the one to which nature called me and which made me a

worthy citizen. Still, this pardonable partiality does not prevent me from regarding the arts as a beautiful unity, and a feeling for this is a necessity for attaining a degree of perfection in any of the branches of the arts. I would consider distaste or indifference for any of them a basic fault in a human being, which would be a constant hindrance to the progress of the student of art.

The fine arts may be divided into two kinds: the positive (or those that imitate what already exists) and the ideal (or those that create objects and images). The former is guided by nature and the goal is reached in the most faithful and exquisitely chosen depiction of it. The only boundary for the latter is the power of imagination. Poetry, music and dance belong to this category; to the former: painting, sculpture, tragedy, comedy and mime.

Where the poet is silenced by the limitations of language, there the magic of music begins, and the imagination reaches far beyond reality.

So do not condemn harmony, which seems meaningless, or rather impossible to put into words. How many a thought there is ready in your soul, which you in vain strive to express in words. Truly, music is the most beautiful medium of the imagination.

Likewise the dance belongs to the kingdom of the imagination and finds its images in it. When our eye, with the fire of youth, follows a lovely female creature

in wanton flight, does not the imagination depict for us something more poetic than ordinary running? When in martial spirit we watch the sons of war bravely stepping out, in our enthusiasm do we just see changing positions of the feet? Does not the swallow, brushing the grass at our feet, often give rise to our volatile wishes? Ah, could we but imitate such lightness. Often we have dreamt with bated breath of hovering through the sea of mist, and unwillingly we tore ourselves away from this dream. Yes, even when thinking of the supreme, of eternity, imagination uses dancing to depict, 'midst heaven's clusters, the everlasting delight of those glorified beings. That art whose purpose it is to realize such noble thoughts and to touch such melodious strings in thoughtful minds, must be noble. Dancing cannot be denied this name, since when performed mechanically it is not fulfilled.

Those who have no opportunity of seeing dancing that approaches the ideal, might object and consider the dancing they saw as not being true art. This simply proves how difficult it is to become an artist. But even if beautiful dancers ceased to exist, nor true actors any more set foot on the stage, the art would never lose its essential value; only, our enjoyment would be impaired.

Many people say that the dance is a mechanical art, because only constant practice effects the desired results; but any art has its mechanical difficulties to

overcome. The poet without prosody, music without harmony and intonation, the actor without a pure language and a good memory, would at any moment, just like an untrained dancer, be an obvious offence to art.

The dancers' preparations may seem as ridiculous as the musicians' scales are boring, yet the result is that, without revealing the work involved, he can create those paintings in movement which a pure imagination can produce.

It is then technical accomplishment that in all arts aids the soul. This impression is the chief aim of art; whosoever achieves it, is an artist.

The Way To Judge Dancing

One of France's most famous generals, the Marquis de Lauriston, was a few years ago appointed as *Ministre de la maison du roi*, and was in this capacity made director of the Royal Theatres. Although gifted with taste and versatile knowledge, he sought furthermore the association with experienced men in order to acquire competence in matters of art, which would assist him in his administration. Thus one day he inquired of the ballet-master Gardel what was really the mark of a good dancer. "It is very easy to recognize", was the reply. "Imagine that you could stop a

dancer in mid-movement and in any, even a casual, pose. Imagine a drawing that left nothing to be desired in taste and grace; you will then see the beautiful ideal of dance. How closely the dancer succeeds is the measure of his talent".

I believe that it is scarcely possible to give a more accurate description of beautiful dancing, and therefore I literally repeat this remark, often told to me by M. Gardel.

Hence the dancer must strive to delight before he thinks of arousing admiration. Any bodily accomplishment which reveals hints of violent effort or causes the face and arms the slightest strain is not what one would accept under the name of dance. Head, torso, arms and legs ought to be considered as a perfect whole, and any deviation must offend the discriminating eye, in the same degree as a jarring discord hurts the ear of someone who has not even studied harmony.

Expression in the dance should be adjusted to its different characters and to the nuances of the music. As the dance yields few positive ideas, one has now accepted the principal rule that whatever is beautiful is good, but even this rule allows much flexibility in the individual, because how often does it not happen that whatever is immensely pleasing in one, may in another seem less beautiful, even ridiculous. It is this essential that the artist must carefully study, and make consultations concerning his natural good points and

shortcomings and carefully adjust all his work accordingly.

Explanation of a few French Technical Terms

* <i>Dehors</i>	<i>Constructions.</i>	<i>Pointe</i>
<i>Aplomb</i>	<i>Vigueur.</i>	<i>Élévation.</i>
<i>Ballon</i>	<i>Brillant.</i>	<i>Vivacité</i>
<i>Epaulement.</i>	<i>Opposition.</i>	<i>Genre.</i>
<i>Style.</i>	<i>Caractère.</i>	<i>Couleur.</i>
<i>Tact.</i>	<i>Élégance.</i>	<i>Grace.</i>

As the dance is a language, which is spoken and understood everywhere, it has been agreed to use French terminology, partly because the French language is the most extensively spoken and partly because the French are masters of the art.

To be *en dehors* or to have turnout.

This main demand of dancers, is the ability to turn the innermost part of the leg (from hip to foot) forward in the same direction as the breast and shoulders; this position in dancing, from which there is no deviation, is maintained by a certain feeling in the hip and the big toe.

* *These terms are exactly as given by Bournonville*

The generally accepted reasons for this rule are:

- 1) The leg and the foot are shown in their most beautiful aspect.
- 2) It is the only position in which one can freely lift the leg in all directions and
- 3) it makes feasible the free play of the foot, and safeguards it from damage when returned on the floor.

Constructions: (arqué; jarreté).

Even in well-shaped people there exists a slight difference in knees, which are either concave or convex. The first when it is extreme is knock-kneed—the language of dance says *jarreté*; the other condition is called bowlegged and is named *arqué*. Very few are born with perfectly straight knees. Someone who is *jarreté* must bend slightly, while the one who is *arqué* must remedy this defect with a stronger stretch. Undeniably, the former almost constantly acquire a greater degree of suppleness, whilst the latter possess more strength. So it is a fallacy to think that either condition prevents *Dehors*, as this placing is in the hips and not in the knees.

Pointe: Cou-de-pied.

Whenever the foot is raised from the floor, it should be pointed in a stretched position which is procured by forcing the instep downwards and by

closing the toes in a point as the heel is forced forward. This stretching and contact with the floor furnishes the dance with an indescribable brilliance and softness, and presents advantages in both lightness and assurance.

Aplomb.

By this is understood the constant maintaining of a centre point, even in positions that deviate from straight lines. There must be *Aplomb* in all dance; one must see it in attitudes; when the heel is raised from the floor, and in jumps. Although the dancer may deviate from the centre point, this is only because he is travelling in whichever direction he has chosen and he can return to the line of balance at will. The triumph of *Aplomb* is probably pirouettes, which completely depend on the centre point.

Vigueur, Elévation, Ballon, Brillant, Vivacité

The first embraces attack. *Elévation* or the ability to raise oneself to a considerable height (from two to three feet) stems either from the instep—and is quicker, more dry; or from the calf (bending of the knee) and is lighter, slower and softer. When this kind of *élévation* presupposes a quick upward movement and slower descent, it is called *Ballon*. Brilliance depends entirely on the foot's firm *pointe*, the flexibility of the knees and the precise closing of the feet in the final position.

Epaulement: Opposition

The straight lines or those that show the whole body quite *en-face* are probably most useful in study, but they have for good reason been modified for the stage in the newer school. The second position is for example maintained by the stretching and lifting of the leg (I assume the left one). It becomes more beautiful by a slight turn or *Epaulement* to the left side, this is called *effacé*. In the fourth position the leg is placed straight forward; with a slight turn of the shoulder to the right, it is called *croisé*.

It is known that arms and shoulders function in opposite movements to the legs: one could only walk with difficulty if one placed the same foot, arm and shoulder forward simultaneously when stepping out. This rule of nature is a dogma in the dance, in that whichever *croisé* position the left foot is placed when forward, the head must turn to that side, the left shoulder and arm must be lowered and keep more forward than the right, which when raised, so to speak, frame the upper half of the body. However, in *effacé* positions the head must turn towards the raised arm. Any position which broke with this rule was condemned by the older masters and called a false opposition, but Vestris, the creator of the new school, discovered partly by studying antiquity, partly by his own inspiration, that one could swerve from the strict rules, remaining graceful, yet not foreshortening the

older, beautiful oppositions. He thus enriched the dance with innumerable others, and proved thereby that head and shoulders in different positions allow the arms fortuitous curves, which although not in opposition to the legs, far from hampering these movements, increased their grace.

A general reproach against the new school is that it mixes the various genres: *sérieux*, *demi-caractère* and *comique*. Presumably there are more examples that uphold this complaint and even famous dancers, who in any costume perform the same style of dance, but these are misconceptions of the school. Indeed formerly each genre had its quota of *pas* which it dared not exceed, but one noticed often that the so-called "danseur comique" was serious and cold, whilst many a "danseur sérieux" in face and gestures was extremely ridiculous. It now became obvious that genre and style are not established only in steps, but in different ways of expression. Accordingly the kingdom of dance became considerably enlarged and the able dancer was obliged by his facial expression and his high dignity to encompass *pas* previously considered outside his sphere, just as the "danseur comique" gave odd turns to the poses he had borrowed from above.

It would be highly unreasonable to demand that those wearing similar costumes should have identical characters in dance, because this unity does not exist and furthermore would be of killing monotony on

stage. In a ballet with a court ball, one could for instance very well present three different genres of dance in a nobleman's costume: *Sérieux*, when the prince or some of the main characters perform; *Demi-caractère*, lighter for the romantic Troubadour; and the rogueries of a young page might easily suggest delicate comedy. The same applies on a lower level to a Spanish *Bailes* party. The most courtly guests dance *Bailes*, the young girls *Guaracha* and the jolly *Pas Fandango*. The difficulty in any dance is to give true *couleur locale* or national character. It would be impossible to transfer national dances to the stage quite unrefined, yet one's entire manner must characterise both the national style as well as the situation, which a mime role demands and which must penetrate every movement.

Tact—Rhythm.

The sworn brother of dance is music. When the dance composer has given his original idea to the musician, new situations will arise for the dancer. That every step bears the stamp of the music and closely follows all its nuances, is what gives the dance its quality and thus persuades the spectator that it is not the music that is prompting the dancer, but the dancer who, simply by lightly touching the ground, is bringing forth the melting notes.

Elégance. Grace.

A person who combines a suitable physique with the greater part of the qualities mentioned in this little French dictionary, can be said to possess *Elégance* and to be gifted. This word is definable, whereas grace, this inborn gift, which is not subject to rules and gives an inexplicable radiance to the whole art, I cannot describe, partly because I have seen "grace" in one seem mannered in another, and I may have found a dancer cold and heavy, whom others, even knowledgeable men, have considered a model of bodily grace.

Grace is only definable by the French phrase—*le "je ne sais quoi"*.

As Regards the Purpose of Exercises

Few arts demand such constant practice as the dance, not just for acquiring skill, but also in order to maintain it. As the dance consists of quite opposite qualities, namely aplomb and suppleness on the one side, and strength and lightness on the other, exclusive attention to either of these would cause the loss of the opposite elements, so that somebody who constantly practised suppleness would undoubtedly

attain great skill in this, but at the cost of losing strength and lightness, just as somebody, who did not pay attention to anything but *Vigueur* would become incompetent in quiet, soft and graceful movement.

This mixture of conflicting qualities that provides the dancer with a degree of perfection, motivates the perpetual exercises to which the artist is submitted. These demand great steadfastness and love of the art in order to vanquish their obvious monotony (which however, differs more or less with regard to the dancers' build and disposition). As it barely concerns the audience which means are employed, as long as the outcome is beautiful, I could easily leave the secrets of the art veiled. But as not uncommonly happens, when the uninitiated witness the dancers' laborious daily work, and see the unfamiliar exercises, they elicit a smile on their lips, and when questioning what this and that means, the reply from those who just follow the routine mechanically is: this is called *Battements*, *Ronds-de-jambe* etc., so perhaps a short explanation of their usefulness and purpose would not seem entirely superfluous.

Pliés or kneebends in all positions aid the hip in attaining the requisite turnout and provide the knees with considerable suppleness.

Battements. The large ones are a lifting of the leg in all directions.

Battements tendus. Mean to point the foot and turn it out in the lower positions, and in the quicker

battements sur le cou de pied to attain vivacity, brilliance.

Ronds-de-jambe. Those on the floor add suppleness to the hip and flexibility to the foot, those off the floor serve mostly in giving speed and suppleness to the knee.

Demi-coupés, ballottés and *fouettés* have, besides the acquisition of aplomb, the usefulness that they stretch the Achilles tendon with length and elasticity, which is so indispensable for *vigueur* and *élévation*.

Temps de pirouettes: the practice of pirouettes "en face" is unavoidably necessary in order to teach the dancer to turn well.

The quintessence of all exercises is: *Développés* (the unfolding of the leg to the height of the hip), various poses for the harmony of the body and *temps de ballon*, which exercise the knee and instep and give strength and softness.

Social Dancing

It is generally accepted that only a few excellent resources exist for the training of the body except moderate practice in dancing, and that this, at least in social respects, has this advantage over gymnastics: that it unites propriety with strength and thus aims to please rather than to impress. It is then incontestable

that a well-mannered person achieves an added social dignity when appearing with graceful carriage, being able to walk freely and easily, knowing how to sit in a decorous pose, and finally having nothing in manners offensive to noble feelings. This principle must guide the master as well as the pupil. A teacher's artistic feelings cannot be more outraged than when a clumsy, stunted person demands a few lessons in French and English "Tours" in order to join in ballroom dancing. This misinterpretation of the purpose of dance is partly the cause of the negligence with which social dancing is treated at the moment almost everywhere and especially by the gentlemen partners.

It is probable that dancing was always more favoured by the ladies, and one can almost consider the Ball as instituted for them. Consequently I address myself not to the gentlemen who forsake the ballroom for the card table, but to those who devote their attention to the ladies. A partner who turns his head towards the floor instead of following the movements of the lady, whose kicks to the side do not allow his neighbour a quiet moment, whose way of presenting his hand seems more like a threat than an invitation, and finally whose clumsy turns and contorted feet expose both him and the fellow dancers to the most unpleasant accidents, must not believe that he is paying due homage to the fair sex when he requests a dance.

Being able to dance well is probably not the true yardstick of courtesy, but the ladies who are acknowledged as having the finest sense of judgment generally favour the man who can for a few moments forsake his more serious occupations, in order, with charming solicitude and without the least affectation, to give support and participate in the pleasures which by his presence are increased a thousandfold. As it is unlikely that any gentleman wants to be inferior in courtesy, no effort should be neglected on his part in order to please the sex, who so clearly have a claim on our attention and so great an influence on our character and behaviour.

There is no better way to present social dance than by comparing it to social singing. Those who practice the art as a pleasant pastime for themselves and others, cannot quite imitate the artists, who either are heard or seen at a distance, or who distinguish themselves with extreme accomplishment, and whose great talent, big movements, *entrechats* and *roulades*, would appear ridiculous and pretentious in polite society.

But as there is no pleasure in singing out of tune or without rhythm, so it cannot amuse one to dance clumsily and without grace. Just as a simple ditty requires a degree of intonation, rhythm, and execution, I also believe that any kind of dancing requires a certain deportment, ease and flexibility in the foot and the whole body. Anyone who in order to avoid

getting tired or warm only promenades *en contredanse*, must in the way he turns his foot out and places his head and shoulders, show that lightness depends only upon him. Finally I dare to say to those who, on my request that they should dance beautifully, might answer that they only dance for their own pleasure: in the phrase "social dancing", is also understood some social obligations.

I will add a few words on the frequent use of the German Waltz. One might overlook its violence, which causes the blood to race, and the disarray it causes in dress, yet I believe that as more cultured society, both in language, custom and dress as in all pleasures, differs from the lower classes, it ought also make its dance a little less accessible to those whose mind and manners are lacking the requisite grace, because I consider that it is impossible to discern a degree of propriety in waltzes. I will probably find many opponents amongst passionate waltzers—I do not pretend to be an oracle—only I do believe that it would not hurt to have a little less waltzing at Balls.

The Progress of the Dance

The complaint of theatrical artists in all periods of time is that those with the greatest talent leave no other trace than a transient memory. It is like a beautiful day, a dazzling firework; in some people such impressions grow faint, in others they increase with time, but they die with the last eye-witness.

Admittedly it is not given to all artists to penetrate a great many minds, although the works of the painter and the sculptor, though long ago departed, can be evaluated by posterity. Yet the living need not suffer under the weight of a former celebrity's accumulated fame.

Much has already been written on the progress of the different fine arts. Many books have put forward appraisals and still there is only general agreement on the advancement in the sciences. On the other hand, as regards the arts, opinions are divided. The reason why, probably rests with differences in changing taste, and it is with this as with religion: each professes to believe in the right one. Every century has produced its great talents, men who were unique; and these men have brought the art one step forward and have left examples for imitation. The art survives, although these men cease to live, and as long as life goes on extraordinary geniuses will appear.

As I descend to my own sphere of a dancer, I consider, with veneration for former times, how

reliable traditions are. Certainly with the years one often changes in outlook, and contemplating too much of past excellence blunts our feeling for present good.

Thus we have heard elderly people quite seriously speak of their youth: how the climate was much more gentle, the fruit was sweeter and much more pleasant, yes even that the women were more beautiful! Let us not quite trust judgments which depend so much on the first indelible impressions, because as we age, the pictures of our youth and the memory of them will always remain dearest to us.

The old rarely or never admit to the possibility of an apprentice being able to surpass his master. Using this yardstick, the famous Auguste Vestris would have been inferior to his father and this latter would have been below Le Grand Dupré, who presumably was nowhere near his (to me unknown) master. Like music, the dance has undergone upheavals and to some extent been subjected to fashion and modern taste. I have therefore in defence of the present day come to the conclusion that if former actors and dancers, in spite of the classical statues and literature, had such erroneous conception of the stage that they presented Romeo wearing high heeled shoes and wig, and showed archaic shepherds wearing powder, ostrich feathers and stiffened skirts, they might at times also be mistaken in their views of dramatic truth and natural grace. However I am not

averse to believing in the greater development of the different qualities of the dance, as each in his own genre practiced fewer conflicting movements and therefore could attain a higher degree of *Vigueur* or more *Dehors*. But I doubt whether anyone formerly possessed the combination of qualities which are demanded at present. I do not include all kinds of new dance, because at all times more bad than good has existed, but I refer to the school that Auguste Vestris founded, when he deviated from the straight lines and the constant dancing *en face*, and gave the dance flexibility in its lines and removed the pedantry that was ridiculous in such a transient art, which even when most difficult should be pleasurable.

Whatever is beautiful is good. Vestris has followed and expanded this principle, but although we at present do not possess two dancers in Vestris' class or as accomplished as Duport, one can still consider the dance as in continuous progression in diversity, elaboration and satisfaction: the true aim of art.