

Mikyšková, Anna; Goff, Moira

"With Several Entertainments of Dancing" : interview with dance historian Moira Goff about dancing on the London restoration and eighteenth-century stage

Theory and Practice in English Studies. 2021, vol. 10, iss. 1, pp. 109-121

ISSN 1805-0859

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143989>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

INTERVIEWS,
REVIEWS,
CONFERENCE REPORTS

**“WITH SEVERAL ENTERTAINMENTS OF DANCING”:
INTERVIEW WITH DANCE HISTORIAN
MOIRA GOFF ABOUT DANCING ON THE LONDON
RESTORATION AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
STAGE**

Anna Mikyšková

MOIRA Goff is a dance historian specialising in ballroom and theatre dance between 1660 and 1760, with a particular interest in dancing on the London stage. Her research in these areas occasionally extends as far as 1830. In 2001, Moira received a PhD from the University of Kent at Canterbury for her thesis “Art and Nature Join’d: Hester Santlow and the Development of Dancing on the London Stage, 1700–1737.” Her book *The Incomparable Hester Santlow: A Dancer-Actress on the Georgian Stage* appeared in 2007.¹ Moira is also a rare books and special collections librarian. She was previously curator of British Printed Collections 1501–1800 at the British Library and her exhibition *Georgians Revealed* was held there 2013–2014. She has published many articles on dance history, and she writes a blog entitled [Dance in History](#). Moira also researches, reconstructs and occasionally performs the notated dances of the early eighteenth century.

AM: When we look into the *London Stage* catalogue of London theatre programmes, there are regular references to dancing, some general, some very specific.² Yet theatre historians tend to focus on plays and operas. In comparison to acting and singing, how much of the theatrical evening was devoted to dancing? How had it changed throughout the period between 1660 and 1750?

¹ Moira Goff, *The Incomparable Hester Santlow: A Dancer-Actress on the Georgian Stage* (Routledge, 2019).

² *The London Stage, 1660–1800*, edited by William van Lennep, Emmet L. Avery, Arthur H. Scouten, George Winchester Stone, Jr., and Charles Beecher Hogan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960–1968).

“With Several Entertainments of Dancing”: Interview with Moira Goff

MG: In London’s theatres, relatively little time was given to dancing during each performance, but it often ran through the whole evening – notably in the entr’actes, but also within plays (tragedies as well as comedies). From the 1670s it was included in dramatic operas, a few of which survived in the repertoire well into the eighteenth century, and from the late 1710s dancing was an integral part of pantomime after-pieces. The lack of evidence about performances during the late seventeenth century makes it difficult to chart changes and developments before the early 1700s, but there was certainly more dancing in London’s theatres following the opening of the Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre in 1714. The surviving newspaper advertisements and playbills show that dancing remained an important feature of theatre performances into the nineteenth century.



Figure 1: French dancer Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo, a ballet star of the Paris Opéra, painted by Nicolas Lancret in a stylized scene in a pastoral opera (c. 1730) (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

What kind of dancing was actually taking place in the theatres? The French *baroque dance* or *belle dance*, which was a dancing style evolving at the court of Louis XIV, was becoming popular in England after 1700s. Should we imagine

an older form of modern ballet? Was there a difference between court and stage dancing in technique and type of dances?

“French” dancing, the style and technique developed in the *ballets de cour*, *comédies-ballets* and Lully’s *tragédies en musique*, was probably first seen in London soon after the Restoration. In the 1670s there were several entertainments by French musicians and dancers at court and in the theatres, establishing “French” dancing on the London stage. By the early eighteenth century, it seems to have been the norm, but “English,” “Scotch” and “Irish” dances were also given and these apparently used different styles and techniques, although we know little about them. Modern ballet is the descendant of “baroque” dance, and the two certainly share steps as well as a distinctive deportment, but the style and technique of baroque dance was very different – scholars/practitioners are currently developing a variety of new theories about how it was performed. In his 1712 *An Essay Towards an History of Dancing* (see pp. 162–63), John Weaver was very clear about the difference between ballroom and stage dancing. He referred to the “peculiar Softness” of the former if put on stage and the “rough and ridiculous Air” of serious dancing if seen in a ballroom, as well as the greater use of jumping steps in theatrical dancing.³

What was the symbolic value of dancing in London theatres in the Restoration and later eighteenth-century period? Could we say that theatres gradually made the elite style of dancing, formerly associated with the court, available to broader audiences? How much did dancing contribute to or ensure the commercial success of the theatrical evening at that time?

Without more evidence for the Restoration period, it is difficult to be sure how dancing was developing at court and in the theatres. During the reign of Charles II, theatre audiences included many people who were close to the court, but this changed as time went on. I’m not sure whether we should characterise “French” dancing as a specifically elite style. I think that by the 1690s it must have been taught quite widely to those who could afford it (who were not necessarily from the highest ranks of society). London’s theatres presented quite a range of dance styles – not only the “English,” “Scotch” and “Irish” I have already referred to, but also dancing rooted in the *commedia dell’arte* which came to London in the 1670s through visits by Italian performers based in Paris. John Weaver, who was probably working as a professional dancer in London in the 1690s, reflects some of the range of dance styles to be seen there in his attempt to characterise the different genres of dancing

³ John Weaver, *An Essay Towards an History of Dancing* (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1712).

in his 1712 *Essay towards an History of Dancing*. The extensive use of dancing in dramatic operas from the 1670s provides early evidence for its contribution to theatre profits. When John Rich opened the Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre in 1714, he gave particular emphasis to dancing because he could not compete with the drama offered by his rivals at Drury Lane and quickly found that dancing drew audiences. From the mid-1720s, the popularity of pantomime afterpieces took this further still.

Would you agree that the growing popularity of the eighteenth-century afterpieces was, to a large extent, dependent on the popularity of dancing on stage? Can we say that the vogue in dancing paved the way for the emergence of English pantomimes?

Danced afterpieces were a natural development from the extended divertissements in dramatic operas, some of which held the stage throughout the eighteenth century, and the more elaborate entr’acte dances that began to emerge from the late 1710s. However, I think that the main driver for the emergence of the English pantomime was the *commedia dell’arte* entertainments given in the entr’actes. These “Italian Night Scenes” brought together comic dancing with mimed action, including the familiar lazzi, and added a thread of narrative. It is interesting that, while *commedia dell’arte* was at the core of the comic plots in most if not all pantomimes, at Lincoln’s Inn Fields the serious plot was performed by singers and at Drury Lane by dancers. The Drury Lane reliance on dancers was partly because the managers of that theatre gave primacy to serious drama and had little interest in music and singing.

That’s fascinating. Was there any particular reason why John Rich at Lincoln’s Inn Fields employed singers instead of dancers in the serious plots of his pantomimes? As you said, it was dancing that drew audiences after all.

John Rich was obviously looking to entertainments beyond drama, the tragedies and comedies that were the main attractions in London’s theatres, as he tried to rival Drury Lane. He also had an ambition to fulfil, for he wanted to establish an English form of opera, which could compete successfully against the Italian operas which were so popular with London’s elite. He set out his ideas in the dedication to the published libretto for *The Rape of Proserpine*, Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre’s popular new pantomime for the 1726–1727 season. Rich wrote of “Machinery, Painting, Dances, as well as Poetry” as additions that had been seen as necessary to the success of music in England. He must have been thinking of the elaborate dramatic operas of the late seventeenth century, which brought together drama with divertissements of music and dancing. Paradoxically, Rich turned to French opera for inspiration. *The Rape of Proserpine* drew on the libretto of Lully’s

1680 opera *Proserpine*, not least because like all French operas it made so much use of dancing. The influence of French opera can be traced in several of the pantomimes produced by Rich at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre.

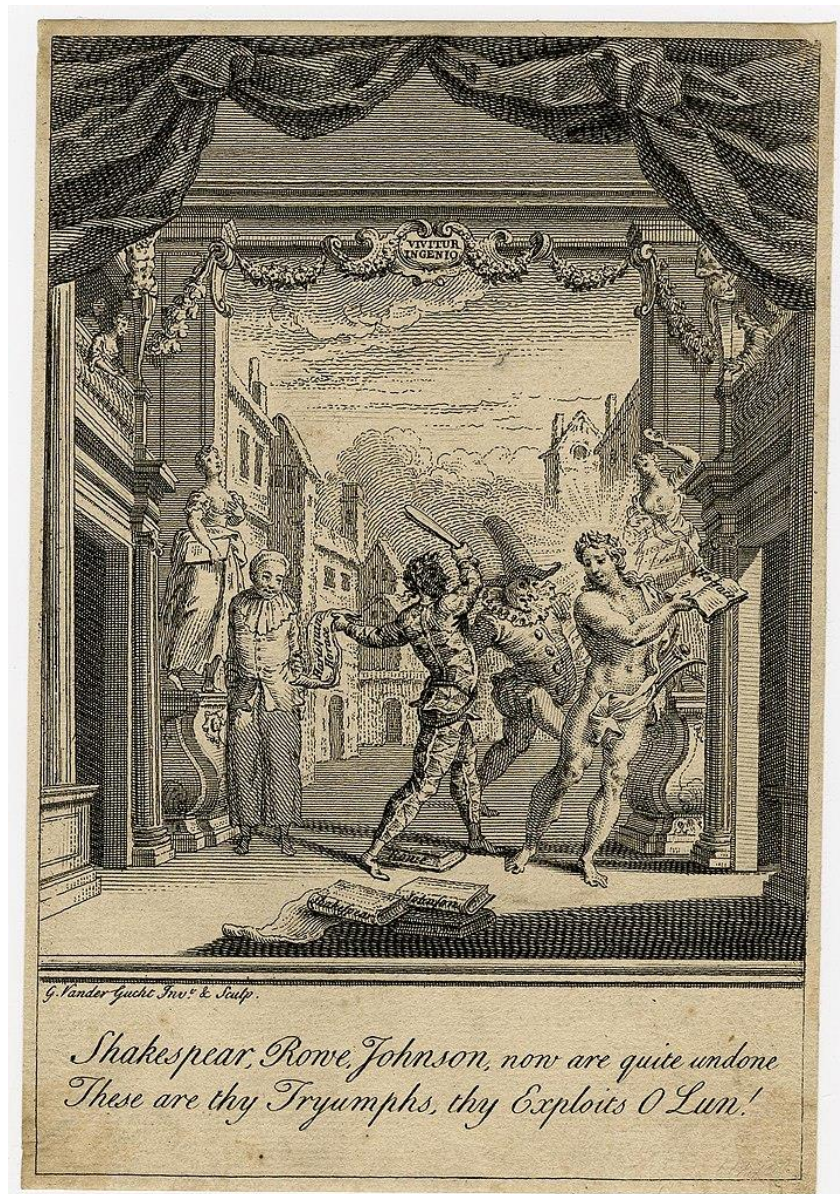


Figure 2: A satirical print (c. 1735–1745) mocking the popularity of British pantomime which competed with the traditional dramatic genres of the English stage. While Pierrot silently watches on the left, the figure of Punch is driving away Apollo, who is holding a book by Horace, with the assistance of Harlequin, who is waving his typical slapstick and holding a script “Harlequin Horace,” which refers to the verse satire *Harlequin Horace or the Art of Modern Poetry* (1731). (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

As mentioned above, dancing played a crucial role in the late 1710s and 1720s pantomime. The serious plots based on Greek or Roman mythology are more textual and thus often preserved, but the comic, more improvisational subplots are usually not extant. Do we know what and how much dancing was taking place in pantomimes?

The surviving sources for pantomimes are generally very incomplete. Libretti and scenarios (written descriptions of the non-verbal action) were not always published and often little or no music is known to survive. We have no record of any of the choreographies. The two pantomimes of 1723, *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (Drury Lane) and *The Necromancer* (Lincoln’s Inn Fields), are almost unique in having detailed scenarios which allow close analysis of the action and show what dances were performed within them. In later seasons, John Rich’s practice at Lincoln’s Inn Fields was to publish libretti which give the words for the sung serious plots there but say little or nothing about the comic dancing. When Drury Lane turned to sung serious plots, it did the same. Some of the comic dancing in pantomimes may have been related to “French” dancing, as shown by the surviving choreographies for Harlequin (which include one published in London, performed by a dancer who was also a virtuoso performer in the French style).

Pantomime was also often promoted as “a new dramattick entertainment of dancing in grotesque characters.” What was it exactly?

This description was first used for John Weaver’s afterpiece *The Shipwreck; or, Perseus and Andromeda* given at Drury Lane in 1717. I suspect that the wording on the bill was Weaver’s own and was intended to contrast the afterpiece with his *The Loves of Mars and Venus* given at Drury Lane the same year and described by him as “a New Dramattick Entertainment of Dancing after the Manner of the Antient Pantomimes.” The “Dramattick Entertainment” refers to telling a complete story with individual characters, rather than a simple sequence of actions and dances by general types like Peasants or Sailors without a narrative. The “Grotesque Characters” are the *commedia dell’arte* roles, in the case of *The Shipwreck* Harlequin and Colombine, but also the other comic characters in the afterpiece. Weaver discusses these characters as part of his description of grotesque dancing in his *Essay*. He returns to them, but with a different interpretation, in 1728 in his *The History of the Mimes and Pantomimes* (see p. 56).⁴

⁴ John Weaver, *The History of the Mimes and Pantomimes* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1728).



Figures 3 & 4: Prints from Gregorio Lambranzi's famous book of illustrations *Nuova e curiosa scuola de' balli theatrali* (*New and Curious School of Theatre Dancing*) printed in 1716 in Nuremberg. Two dancers on the left dance a sarabande, on the right two dancers perform a grotesque dance. (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

In the early years of the eighteenth century, the Italian opera was frequently criticized in London because some critics saw it as a foreign import sung in effeminate language which corrupted the English taste, English music, and theatre tradition (a case in point is John Dennis's *An Essay on the Opera's, After the Italian Manner, which are to be Established on the English Stage: with some Reflections on the Damage which they may bring to the Publick from 1706*).⁵ Were there instances of objections based on the artform's national origin in connection to the French dancing style or French dancers? Was French dancing ever viewed by the English as foreign in a negative way?

French dancers came to London soon after the Restoration in 1660 and in the 1670s were brought over from Paris to dance in entertainments at court as well as in the theatres. Evidence for their reception is lacking, but there seems to have been little serious hostility despite the political tensions between England and France.

⁵ John Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's, After the Italian Manner, which are to be Established on the English Stage: with some Reflections on the Damage which they may bring to the Publick* (London: Printed for J. Nutt, 1706).

When the French star dancer Claude Ballon came to London in 1699, the main criticism was of the exorbitant fees he commanded. He got a mention in the anonymous satire of 1702 *A Comparison between the Two Stages*, as did his Paris dancing partner Marie-Thérèse de Subligny who followed him to London early in 1702. The first real violence directed against French dancers seems to have been the riot at Drury Lane in 1755, when audiences objected to Jean-Georges Noverre and his production of *The Chinese Festival* performed at the request of the actor-manager David Garrick (this was shortly before the beginning of the Seven Years War, when political tensions may have been running high). My guess is that by the early 1700s “French” dancing had been fully adopted both on stage and in the ballroom and the English did not really consider it (or even its French and European exponents) as foreign.

You wrote a book about a popular English actress and dancer named Hester Santlow. To what extent was her career unique? Do we know how many dancer-actors and -actresses were active in London between 1700 and 1750? What do we know about the training of dancers performing in London theatres? Was the social status of a popular dancer similar to that of a popular actor?

Mrs Santlow was not unique in being both a dancer and an actress for she had several predecessors, going back to the 1660s, as well as a number of contemporaries. She was unusual, however, as both a leading actress and the company’s leading dancer with extensive repertoires in both genres which went far beyond those of other dancer-actresses. There were no true dancer-actors – although there were actors who regularly performed individual speciality dances, there were no actors who took both



Figure 5: John Ellys’s painting of the actress-dancer Hester Booth (née Santlow) as a Harlequin Woman, c. 1722–1725. (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

significant acting and important dancing roles. So far as I can tell, dancer-actresses were generally a phenomenon of the period 1700 to around 1735. From the mid-1710s, with the better information provided by theatre advertisements in the daily newspapers, it is possible to discern groups of specialist dancers within the theatre companies. They would appear regularly in the entr'actes as well as taking leading dance roles in pantomime afterpieces. There is much work to do before we can be sure who these dancers were and how many of them were active during the first half of the eighteenth century. Most professional dancers were trained for the stage by leading dancers in the theatre companies, although they may not have been formally apprenticed. We know very little about how they were taught the skills (and the repertoire) they would need, although the dance manuals and surviving notated dances provide some clues. The leading dancers in London's theatres were undoubtedly stars – visiting dancers like Claude Ballon in the 1690s and La Barberina in the 1740s could command fees well beyond those of the local leading actors. The evidence for their social status is contradictory and needs more research and analysis.

A considerable number of dances are extant due to the Beauchamp–Feuillet notation, which was the first comprehensible system of writing down dancing, and the English dancing masters became familiar with it after the turn of the eighteenth century and imitated the French style. Dances soon started to be published in that notation in England. What was the key significance of the notation for the history of dancing? Who were the consumers of the printed dances? Did only the dancing masters know how to read the notation, which would have advanced their expertise, or was the knowledge more widespread?

When Beauchamp-Feuillet notation was first developed, there was certainly a desire to preserve dances for the future. This benefits dance historians of the period today – without the notations we would have little or no information about choreographic practice in the early eighteenth century. At the time, notations gave dancing masters the ability to share dances more widely throughout Europe, advertising their work at the same time. Most of those purchasing notations were undoubtedly dancing masters – although the subscription lists in some of the manuals and collections show amateur (and some professional) dancers alongside the dancing masters. Dancing masters may well also have learned to write the notation, but it seems unlikely that many dancers would have bothered.

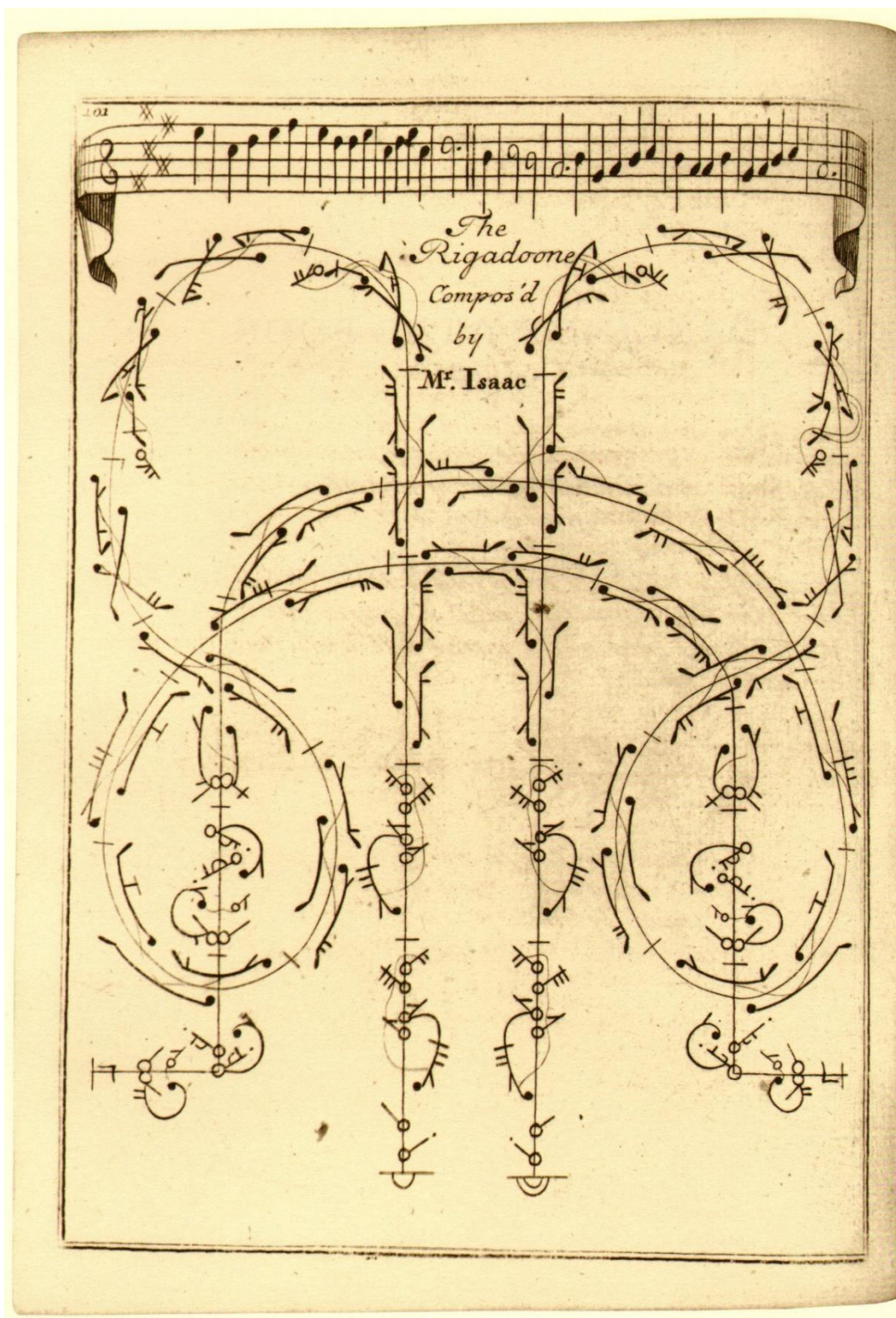


Figure 6: *The Rigadoon Composed by Mr. Isaac*, an English ballroom duet dance in the French style in the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation, c. 1721. (Source: commons.wikimedia.org)

You are not only a dance historian, but also a baroque dance specialist and practitioner, and in your career you have danced multiple dances that had been popular on the London stages in that period. Can the dances written in the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation be completely reconstructed, or are there things that you must add? How do you compensate for the lack of extant music?

The Beauchamp-Feuillet notations provide us with a great deal of information and it is important to pay close attention to every detail when reconstructing dances. That said, they do omit much essential information – for example, how high legs might be raised in *ouvertures de jambe*, how high (or how dynamic) *pas sautés* might be. Notated dances routinely omit arm movements, and body movements, for example *épaulement*, have often to be inferred. Ballroom duets may reasonably be danced with appropriate decorum, but there are few clues to the performance style of stage duets and solos. Thus, there is much the modern performer needs to add using other original sources as appropriate as well as imagination. In my work I want to portray the meaning of the choreography, I try to understand the original context for the dance (although this is not so easy for the “English” stage choreographies) as well as the skills and experience of the original performer. I also try to visualise how the choreography might have fitted into the stage space and how the dancer might have interacted with both the onstage and offstage audience. All but a few of the surviving notated dances have a top line of music on each page. In many cases there is a concordance which will provide at least a bass line as the basis for a musical arrangement. If not (most of the English ballroom dances have no such concordances), dancers are reliant on skilled musicians to write one. One of the frustrations of working with this repertoire is the lack of good recordings of the music which can allow us to explore a range of the surviving choreographies.

In your articles and on your website *Dance in History*, you frequently mention that dancing in the Restoration and eighteenth-century London theatres has been often neglected by theatre historians and even dance historians. What are the main pitfalls of such an oversight when we want to understand the theatre culture of that period?

As I said earlier, dancing was an integral part of the performances in London’s theatres throughout the period 1660 to 1800 and well beyond. Most evenings offered a mix of drama, dance and music – genres that nowadays are usually given in separate venues – theatregoing in the eighteenth century was a very different experience from now. This influenced the audience’s expectations both before

and during the evening as well as their perceptions of the comedies and tragedies they saw. On stage, there was a shared culture of deportment and even gesture between the dancers and the actors – for the first, see Francis Nivelon’s *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* (1737), while the gestures described by Weaver for *The Loves of Mars and Venus* are derived from rhetorical practice and thus closely linked to acting. There is also the question of money – dancing was key to the profitability of London’s theatres. These are all points that are worth exploring but that have escaped most theatre historians.

Do you have a favourite dance that was performed on the London stage in that period? How did the experience of dancing baroque dances inform your research?

My favourite dance among the notated choreographies is L’Abbé’s solo *Passagalia of Venüs & Adonis* for Hester Santlow, followed by his solo *Menuet* for her which is great fun to dance. Sadly, we don’t know exactly when and where she performed these – although the *Passagalia* may well date to around 1717 and the *Menuet* is likely to be earlier, perhaps around 1708. Reconstructing and performing them gave me a deeper understanding of her as a dancer, not only her technical skills (which were considerable) but also her performance style and the way in which she may have used the stage space available to her. Performing the *Passagalia*, which I did many times, brought me close to her in a way that academic research alone never could.

You were involved in the production of John Weaver’s narrative ballet piece *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, which was produced by *The Weaver Dance Company* at the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond in 2017. Are there similar projects that reconstruct dances associated with the London theatres of the eighteenth century?

The Weaver Dance Company was unable to attract the funding needed to fully recreate *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, which would have needed three professional dancers for the leading roles with at least twelve supporting dancers who could dance to a professional level. All would have needed to be trained in baroque dance style and technique. A small band of musicians would also have been required. The score (which does not survive) was recreated using existing music of the time, brought together and edited as appropriate. That work was done some years earlier than the Weaver Dance Company performances, as a private and unfunded venture. With a small amount of private funding, it was possible to engage three

dancers and three musicians to present scenes from the ballet within a short play which explored Weaver's ambitions to produce his first "Dramatick Entertainment of Dancing" – as a way of celebrating the 300th anniversary of what I call "the first modern ballet." I now have little involvement with the UK early dance world, so I don't know if there have been any further such projects here. So far as I can tell, interest in these English stage works is growing elsewhere, but funding is always an issue when it comes to recreating dance works for which we have so little choreographic evidence and little or no music and which therefore remain more or less unknown to the wider public.

What is your current project? Is there something dance-connected that you are particularly looking forward to?

I have been working for some years on a history of dancing on the London stage covering the period 1660 to 1760. My blog *Dance in History* quite often deals with topics that are part of my research for that project and perhaps provides an idea of what I am trying to do. I am hoping to be able to complete my work on the period 1600 to 1714 by the end of this year and I will then consider whether to try and publish that as the first part of the longer study. I am also looking forward to returning to dancing in a studio and with others soon. My academic work has always been closely intertwined with reconstructing, recreating and performing the dances of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and I look forward to being able to continue with that as soon as possible.

Dr Goff, thank you very much for this interview and I wish you all the best in your future research as well as dancing projects.

This article was supported by the Czech Science Foundation project GA19-07494S, "English Theatre Culture 1660–1737."



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

