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The Articulate Lower Leg: An Exploration Into the Effects of Changes in Jumping Technique in Ballet

Toby Bennett

I remember being very surprised during my own training in the Cecchetti method to discover that many of the jumps that I had been struggling to perform with perfectly stretched legs and feet, such as *changements* and *assemblés*, should in fact have been done with bent legs after all. I had never seen them done this way in class or on stage, nor had I ever been taught to jump like this, but there it was in black and white in the Cecchetti 'manual' – Cecchetti taught people to jump with bent legs.

Bent-legged jumps seem to have all but disappeared in contemporary practice (even in the teaching of the Cecchetti method) and have been replaced with the now almost ubiquitous fully stretched legs. The technique may have been unpopular even with some of Cecchetti's students, Serge Lifar, for example, later referred to the technique as jumping '*à la crapaud*' [like a toad] (Lifar, 1956, 32). Nevertheless, Enrico Cecchetti (1850-1928) ranks as one of the most influential pedagogues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his wide-ranging career as a dancer, teacher, choreographer and mime is impressive, spanning as it does the nineteenth century Italian Ballet, Petipa's Imperial Ballet in St Petersburg and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. I believe, therefore, that his bent-legged jumps deserve further investigation, and the aim of this paper is to explore the technique further in an attempt to understand its position in the changing world of ballet technique rather than to reject it as a stylistic oddity or even bad dancing.

The bent-legged jumping technique was not invented by Cecchetti but was a facet of the Italian school of which Cecchetti was a product, in fact the Italian school also seems to have prescribed that *pointe* work should be done with bent legs. Cecchetti was only one of many Italian dancers and teachers who were influential in late nineteenth century Russian ballet and enriched the Russian dancing by introducing aspects of their more virtuosic technique. However, according to Tamara Karsavina

...the Italian school taught in St. Petersburg was a softened one. By that I mean that Cecchetti, though allowed to put into practice his own methods of teaching had to agree to certain modifications of Italian principles. For instance, slightly bent knees in *pointe* work – a typical

feature of the unmixed Italian school – were entirely ruled out.

Karsavina, 1927, 433

I have come across no indication that Cecchetti taught bent-legged *pointe* work later in his career, however it is clear that his teaching of the bent-legged jumping technique continued and we must suppose that it was not so frowned upon by the St. Petersburg authorities.

Despite Lifar's criticism the bent-legged technique does appear to have had its adherents, some have viewed it much more favourably even regretting its passing, and the following three pupils of Cecchetti all seem to have valued it: Laura Wilson (1901-1999, a pupil of Cecchetti and a long time teacher of the Cecchetti method) lamented its loss which she claimed was 'a big mistake [since] it is such a strength giving thing' (Wilson, 1997). Alicia Markova once said to me that 'it developed wonderful *ballon*, particularly in the men' (Bennett, 1997, 58). And according to Suki Schorer, George Balanchine used to teach the bent-legged technique referring to the jumps as 'Cecchetti jumps', he liked them because 'they give the dancer practice in getting off the floor, instantly establishing a position in the air and holding it for as long as possible' (Schorer, 2000, 78). Like Markova, Schorer also considers that the technique develops *ballon*.

It has been suggested that the reasons for bent-legged jumps include giving an illusion of jumping higher by lifting the legs, and enabling the romantic ballerina to hide her legs under the long tutu (Ryman, 1998, 4). This may be so, but the opinions of Wilson, Markova and Balanchine suggest that the picture is more complex than that and that the technique may have had other benefits. In attempting to understand the technique the following questions will be addressed:

- How was the bent-legged technique performed?
- Are there any biomechanical implications of the technique compared to the contemporary practice of full knee extension?
- What does the technique tell us about the dancer's conceptualisation of the body?
- What are the stylistic and expressive effects of the technique?
- What are the implications of the technique for understanding past performance practices and the issue of historically informed performance?

How Was the Bent-Legged Technique Performed?

In the principal 1946 codification of the Cecchetti allegro steps Craske and Beaumont describe a *grand changement* as follows:

While the body is in the air - Bend both knees (a *plié à quart*) and bring together the flat of the toes of both feet, forcing the instep well outwards.

Craske and Beaumont, 1946, 23

In practice correct execution of the technique involves a push off from the ground during which the knees are not fully stretched but retain a slight, quarter *plié* bend (they do not straighten and then re-bend) neither do the hips extend fully. The ankles and feet do, however, fully stretch in order to bring the pads of the toes together and this effectively produces a bent-legged first position in the air. This is quite different from the straight-legged fifth positions which we would be more likely to see in contemporary practice. According to Schorer, Balanchine required some of his Cecchetti jumps to be performed with this bent-legged first position and some, for example the *soubresaut*, to be performed with the bent legs crossed in fifth position; it is not clear whether Cecchetti ever wanted the crossed fifth position.

It is important to note that the technique involves only a small bend of the knees (indeed in his discussion of *plié* exercises Cecchetti makes a clear distinction between a *demi-plié* [half-*plié*] and a *plié à quart* [quarter-*plié*] Beaumont and Idzikowsky, 1932, 39), thus the technique might be better described as without fully stretched knees rather than with bent knees. In this respect Cecchetti's bent-legged jumps differ from the bent-legged *changements* that I remember encountering whilst dancing in Belgium and which were referred to as '*changements à l'italienne*'. In this version of the *changement* the knees were much more bent and such jumps are occasionally seen in the repertoire, one example is during one of Colas' solos in Frederick Ashton's *Fille Mal Gardée* where he executes a series of them alternating with jumps with the legs split in second position in the air. The appellation 'Italian *changement*' does suggest a common origin in the Italian school for both Cecchetti's bent-legged jumps and this '*changement à l'italienne*' and it may be that in incorporating such jumps into a vocabulary of ballet steps performed with the straight-legged technique, the knee bend has become exaggerated to emphasise its characteristic nature. Perhaps such an exaggeration of the knee bend may also have contributed to the technique's decline, for according to Wilson 'people exaggerated it [and] it looked ridiculous like that' (Wilson, 1997), and perhaps that is why Lifar considered it toad-like.

We must be careful, therefore, not to confuse the Cecchetti bent-legged jumps with jumps where the knee

bend is more emphasised, for both the technique and the visual effect may be quite different. Equally, it is important to remember that the bent-legged technique does look distinctly different from the straight-legged technique and this is likely to have aesthetic and expressive implications some of which will be addressed later.

Cecchetti jumps using the bent-legged technique include *changements*, *assemblés* and *jetés* but an interesting case is his *ballotté* since it adds to the confusion surrounding the difference between very bent, straight, and slightly bent legs. Cecchetti directs that the *ballotté* should be performed with the legs *plié à quart* and a very low extension of the aerial leg upon landing (Craske and Beaumont, 1946, 19), however, most contemporary practice seems to emphasise much more bent knees, in a kind of *retiré* position, and a much higher extension of the leg (contemporary productions of the ballet *Giselle*, for example, normally opt for this *retiré* type *ballotté* in the familiar act one *enchaînement*: *ballotté en avant*, *ballotté en arrière*, *coupé*, *ballonné*, *posé*, *jeté en avant*). I have always assumed that what we were seeing in the Cecchetti *ballotté* was a more genteel, less virtuosic version of the high *retiré*-high extension version, however, the fact that Cecchetti often uses the bent-legged technique when others would use straight legs raises the possibility that Cecchetti is actually describing a straight-legged *ballotté*. And indeed straight-legged *ballottés* are described by various authors including Agrippina Vaganova (1969, 94-95) and Muriel Stuart (Kirstein, 1953, 204-205). An interesting link with the repertoire presents itself here since the *Giselle ballotté* step is also recorded in the Cecchetti work (Craske and Beaumont, 1946, 81). Cecchetti would almost certainly have known the Petipa version of this ballet and it seems likely that he lifted the step directly from there, it is interesting to consider what this can tell us about earlier performance of the *Giselle ballotté enchaînement*.

The bent-legged jumping technique is an interesting phenomenon in its own right but it also needs to be seen within the context of the Cecchetti work as a whole. We have seen that bent legs may have been used, and abandoned, in *pointe* work but what about other manifestations?

A similar technique is also evident in *entrechats*. Craske and Beaumont instruct that during an *entrechat* you should 'interchange the feet – allowing the knees to bend and beat the feet one against the other' (Craske and Beaumont, 1946, 31). In other words the knees bend as a result of the crossing action of the feet and the emphasis appears to be on the slight relaxation of the knee joint to enable the feet to cross. Most contemporary teaching, however, seems to favour holding the knees fully stretched, according to the Royal Academy of Dancing 'all *batterie* requires ... fully stretched legs and feet.' (Royal Academy of Dancing, 1997, 98).

As we have seen Cecchetti also describes simple *jetés*

as being done with bent knees, but in addition to this he indicates that upon landing the non-supporting foot which is held at the *cou-de-pied* should be relaxed with the ankle bent (Craske and Beaumont, 1946, p. 36 and fig. 2). This of course is reminiscent of the baroque technique and suggests a different attitude to the use of the foot and ankle.

Cecchetti even has a bent-legged *pirouette* (Craske and de Moroda, 1979, 86-87), therefore it is clear that there is a cluster of technical elements in the Cecchetti technique which differ in their approach to the use of the legs and feet from most contemporary practice, but what are the implications of this? The following discussion looks first at some biomechanical factors and then goes on to consider the implications for the dancing body, and the expressive quality of the steps.

Biomechanical Implications

Firstly it is important to point out that this discussion focuses on the movement of extending the knee during jumping and is quite separate from the issue of the fully extended knee position where the 'locking' action of the final few degrees of knee extension is considered to be important to protect the knee, particularly from rotational forces.

Despite the fact that both Alicia Markova (as mentioned above) and Suki Schorer (2000) believe that the bent-legged technique developed *ballon*, Rhonda Ryman considers that it 'decreases the thrust that the dancer can generate during the push-off' (Ryman, 1998, 4). The implication appears to be that with the bent-legged technique you can't jump so high as with full-extension. It seems likely that Ryman's reasoning is that since the knees (and the hips) do not reach full extension they cannot work through their full range of motion and the duration of the 'push-off' will be slightly shorter, they cannot therefore, contribute as much 'impulse' to the jump as they would in the full-extension technique. This seems a compelling argument but I think it deserves further investigation. It is also important to remember that the quality of *ballon* and the height of jumping, or elevation, are not the same thing.

An initial biomechanical analysis suggests that the last few degrees of extension gained by fully stretching the knees may not contribute much to the 'push-off', in fact the biomechanics at this stage of knee extension are probably somewhat inefficient. This is because the large joint angle of the nearly straight knee is mechanically less efficient than the more bent knee. In addition when the knee is nearly straight the knee extensor muscles will be reaching the end of their range of motion where most muscles are known to be less efficient. Therefore the main 'push-off' may be coming from the middle portion of the movement where the joint angle and the muscle efficiency are more favourable.

It is also possible that the difference in emphasis between the two techniques may have an effect on how the 'push-off' is produced. Biomechanical studies of dancers performing *pliés* have shown how variable the recruitment of different muscles can be, and how easy it is to change these patterns of recruitment (Clippinger-Robertson et. al., 1984). It is possible, therefore, that the different emphases in the two jumping techniques could have profound effects on the patterning of muscular action during jumping. Craske and Beaumont (1946, 23) give the following instructions for *grand changement*: 'Bend both knees (*plié à quart*) and bring together the flat of the toes of both feet, forcing the insteps well outwards', notice that there is no instruction to straighten the knees but there are two instructions for the feet. Perhaps this emphasis promotes a greater use of the feet and of ankle plantar-flexion (stretching the feet) during the jump than in the full-extension technique which tends to focus more on the knee and the knee extensor muscles. Balanchine also seems to have noticed this changed emphasis since according to Schorer he liked the Cecchetti *soubresaut* because 'it builds awareness of exactly where the feet are' (Schorer, 2000, 78). If this is the case then one of the effects of the bent-legged technique may be to add extra 'push-off' from the feet and lower leg albeit, possibly, at the expense of some lost 'push-off' from knee extension.

In a similar way, a reduced focus on knee extension in the bent-legged technique may also promote the increased use of the muscles involved in hip extension (including the hamstrings, adductors and gluteals) which again might contribute extra 'push-off', this observation is supported by Schorer's comment that during Cecchetti jumps the dancer 'freezes the position in the air by using the inside thigh muscles' (Schorer, 2000, 78). Support for the importance of these muscles in balletic jumps might also come from the observation that adductor and hamstring muscles seem to be used more in correctly performed *pliés* than incorrectly performed ones (Clippinger-Robertson et. al., 1984). In addition, when dancers who normally exhibit greater use of the adductors and hamstrings in their *pliés* are compared to those who favour the knee extensor muscles, they appear to demonstrate a lower incidence of the knee injury Chondromalacia patella (ibid.). Thus, in changing the balance of muscle recruitment the bent-legged technique may have safety benefits as well.

In fact there may be another safety advantage to the bent-legged technique. Sports scientists recognise that the uncontrolled, forceful, full extension of a joint is undesirable. This is because upon reaching full extension the unchecked force is absorbed by non-muscular structures, principally the ligaments and the joint capsule, with the possibility that they may be irreversibly stretched. Since the primary function of these structures is to maintain the joint integrity and alignment, any irreversible stretch-

ing is likely to compromise joint stability and is best avoided. Therefore, sports scientists suggest that optimal technique involves the recruitment of the antagonistic muscles at the end of the movement in order to dissipate the force by muscular means rather than risk ligament and joint capsule injury. In fact such a use of the antagonistic muscle action is an inbuilt involuntary reflex action which acts as a natural protective mechanism. It seems likely that the bent-legged technique is one where such a protective mechanism operates as the antagonistic action of the knee flexor muscles is brought into play in order to retain the slightly bent legs. On the other hand we can see how the full-extension technique might produce the very effect that sports scientists would warn us against as the knees forcefully reach full extension.

Ligament laxity in the knee is often revealed in the ability of dancers to hyper-extend the knee joint, and although hyper-extended knees are generally seen as problematic from a biomechanical point of view (see for example Howse and Hancock, 1992, 181-182) they are still seen as a desirable characteristic for aesthetic reasons and the 'banana legged' ballerina has become a familiar sight. The question therefore arises as to whether the teaching practice of emphasising energetic, full knee extension in jumping might be one factor contributing to the prevalence of hyper-extended knees in ballet. In addition, it is also interesting to consider whether repeated practice of the full-extension jumping technique might have the effect of suppressing the inbuilt protective reflex action thus further exposing dancers to the risk of knee injury. Perhaps then, the bent-legged technique is more anatomically sound than the full-extension technique, and perhaps Balanchine may have been ahead of us by being intuitively aware of the advantages of the bent-legged technique as part of a training programme even though he may not have used Cecchetti jumps in his choreography.

These questions of muscle group recruitment, biomechanical efficiency and knee safety are presented here merely as unproven hypotheses in need of further investigation, I am grateful to my colleague Dr Siobhan Strike of the School of Life and Sport Sciences for discussing these issues with me. I am currently working with colleagues in the Sports Science department at Roehampton University of Surrey to study these questions further; if findings support these ideas then perhaps we would be morally obliged to reassess Cecchetti's bent-legged technique and incorporate its principles into contemporary teaching just as Balanchine himself may have done.

The Dancer's Expressive Body

Biomechanical considerations aside it is also necessary to consider what an investigation of Cecchetti's technique can tell us about the dancing body and the expressive potential of the bent-legged as compared to the full-extension technique.

It would appear that for Cecchetti the fully extended line is not so important, and the softened line of the knee and ankle joint are appreciated above the very different and perhaps harder, colder line of the fully extended leg. We see, therefore, a different emphasis, Cecchetti emphasising the feet and lower legs as they: come together in a bent-legged first position during a variety of jumps; cross in *entrechats* with a deliberate relaxation at the knee; and alternately stretch and relax in both the knees and the ankles during *jetés*. Such an emphasis has been noted by Richard Glasstone in a discussion of the technique of *batterie*, he considers that 'by bringing the knees into play, the emphasis of the [*entrechat*] can be transferred to the lower leg' (Glasstone, 1995). By comparison the full-extension technique appears to emphasise the action in the thigh, and favours a knee action which alternates between full extension and the strongly bent; the result is a tendency to display the leg from the hip as a single, stiff member – Susan Leigh Foster's image of the 'the ballerina's phallic pointe' comes to mind (Foster, 1996).

What this amounts to is, I think, a different conceptualisation of the body by the dancer and the choreographer. In performing the bent-legged technique and related uses of the lower leg and foot, the dancer's focus shifts and he/she becomes more aware of the foot and lower leg as an initiating and controlling factor in movement rather than the knee or hip joint, or the idea of leg acting as a single unit. This change in awareness gives rise to an articulation of the lower leg in the same way that Cecchetti's use of the arms and hands in mime-related ways promotes an articulate use of the upper limb. I use the word 'articulation' deliberately both to suggest a fluid multiple joint articulation and an expressive, almost speaking quality. In this respect a particularly interesting step from the Cecchetti work is the *rond de jambe joué* in which the independently articulate hands and feet could almost be considered to be engaged in a dialogue. The hands circle round each other (in a gesture similar to the familiar ballet mime gesture for 'dance') whilst being held low and addressing the foot which is also circling, this time in a low *rond de jambe* movement in front of the body.

Another effect seen with the bent-legged technique as compared to full extension is exemplified by the *assemble élané* or *assemble porté* (sideways travelling *assemblés* often seen performed on a diagonal pathway moving downstage). In the Cecchetti version the legs are held in a bent-legged first position and the arms in second position whilst in the air. In more familiar contemporary versions the legs are usually held in a tight, straight-legged fifth position and the arms often in a diagonal arabesque type line. The difference is striking and I would like to suggest that in the Cecchetti version the dancer is presented as a human being with two legs and arms to

the side; in contrast the other version presents the dancer's body as a more abstracted, geometrical image with one straight line for the legs which is continued into the line of the torso, this line is crossed at a jaunty angle by the line made by the arms.

Movement Quality and Expression

The following discussion focuses on two *enchaînements* from the recorded Cecchetti work and one example from the repertoire in an attempt to highlight some of the aesthetic and expressive effects of the bent-legged technique. It should be remembered, however, that the effects of this changing attitude to the use of the legs is, perhaps, also apparent in the gradual loss of steps which rely on such a usage. An example would be disappearance of steps such as the *gargouillade* and the *gargouillade volée* where there is clearly a focus on the articulate lower leg.

Jetés en Tournant

The Cecchetti *jetés en tournant* is a step combination, consisting of pairs of small *jetés*, it recurs in several travelling turn *enchaînements* (for example '*Deux jetés, assemblé, temps levé en tournant, fouetté en dehors, fouetté en dedans*' Craske and de Moroda, 1979, 98-99). On the first of these *jetés* the dancer jumps sideways from one leg to the other, without significant elevation but emphasising the travelling. Upon landing the other leg executes a *fouetté à terre* to bring it to the *cou-de-pied devant*. This strong, quick, direct action of the foot coming in gives a rotational impetus taking the dancer into the next turning jump which emphasises the turning and the elevation rather than travelling. The movement *fouetté à terre* is also used in the Cecchetti method during *fouettés à terre en tournant* and is sometimes given as a *barre* exercise in its own right. During the movement the fully stretched foot is brought from a low position at the side to the *cou-de-pied* (with a stretched ankle) strongly brushing the tips of the toes across the floor as it moves. From the dancer's point of view the *fouetté à terre* is initiated by the foot and demonstrates an almost independent action of the lower leg, it is not initiated in the thigh or by a movement of the whole leg as a single unit.

I was able to investigate this step further whilst working with some dancers during a lecture demonstration for the Cecchetti Centre, London (Bennett, 2001), and I was intrigued to notice that when performed with this focus the elevated turning phase of the movement tends to exhibit the *plié à quart* position even though this is not the aim of the movement. The effect of this use of the lower leg was also very striking giving a dynamic clarity to the sequence of alternating travelling and elevated jumps, these jumps being punctuated as the dancer is whipped (*fouetté*) into the elevated turn by the foot initiated *fouetté à terre*. We can compare this step with what

is probably the nearest equivalent in the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD) syllabus where the dancer performs a series of travelling *emboîtés* (jumping from one leg to the other) with a half turn for each. In this step there is little contrast between the two jumps and the independent action of the lower leg is not apparent, compared to the Cecchetti version the two landing positions seem to be highlighted rather than the contrast and excitement of the travelling jump and the whipped, elevated turn. In body terms what we see is the pumping action of the legs as they fully extend and then bend, acting only in the vertical dimension. One of my students to whom I taught the Cecchetti version and who had previously been trained in the RAD system identified the RAD *emboîtés* as the nearest equivalent and made the observation that the RAD *emboîtés* felt 'more compact and even'.

Full Contretemps

The dance scholar and Labanotation specialist Dr Ann Hutchinson Guest and I have, for a while, been collaborating on a project to produce a Labanotation-based record and analysis of the Cecchetti work (Guest and Bennett, in preparation). The Cecchetti version of the 'full *contretemps*', or simply *contretemps* (Craske and Beaumont, 1946, 26) is a step which we have found very frustrating to pin down. It consists of an intricate sequence of small movements which carry the dancer across the floor and into a large jump. What has become apparent is that at the speed that is required it is difficult to fully stretch the feet and articulate the movements with full attention to the positions they are making. A literal interpretation of the word description in the Cecchetti manuals, for example, tends to yield a very stilted effect. However, if we choose to look at this step in a different way we can see that the emphasis is not so much on the positions but on the intricate play of the lower legs and feet as the dancer skims the floor, and the knees and feet are not expected to stretch fully, indeed one older generation Cecchetti teacher described it to me as if you are almost tripping over your feet as the weight shifts sideways and you almost fall into the movement. The fast intricacy of the movement preparatory to the large jump provides an interesting contrast in its own right.

The Cecchetti *enchaînement* in which the full *contretemps* occurs (Craske and de Moroda, 1979, 38-40) is of particular interest in the context of this paper since it also contains the bent-legged *assemble élançé* and the *rond de jambe joué* mentioned above.

Temps de Poisson

Clearly one effect of bent-legged jumps is to alter the line of the body in jumps. This difference is highlighted by comparing two dancers performing the Bluebird in the Bluebird *pas de deux* from Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*. In a 1939 photograph by Gordon Anthony of the Cecchetti

trained dancer Harold Turner we see a gracefully curved line through the body from the crown of the head to the toes with the legs held slightly bent at the knee which serves to continue the curve through its whole length (this photograph is reproduced in Bennett, 1997, 57). If we compare another dancer in the same role in a more recent production (I am referring to a 1994 Royal Ballet recording, Nears, 1994) we can see the straight legs of the full-extension technique clearly in evidence and the alteration of the body shape to produce a much less fluid and more angular line, but perhaps a stronger, more masculine looking effect. The body appears energised in quite a different way. In narrative terms these two Bluebirds tell a very different story about the character of the Bluebird and thus the narrative of this *pas de deux*.

Criticism has been levelled at more recent productions of the Bluebird *pas de deux* for ignoring its narrative meaning, Leo Kersley, for example, is highly critical of interpretations of the female role. He explains that the story concerns a princess and her lover who has been turned into a bird by the princess's father who did not approve of the match, thus during the *pas de deux* the Bluebird is singing his love to the princess who should be listening to his song and not 'grinning like a Bluebell girl all the way through' (Kersley, 1989). We can see, therefore, that not only is the narrative changed by the princess's interpretation, but a changing technique applied to the male role may also have contributed to a change in narrative and expressive focus of the *pas de deux*.

Conclusions

One of the problems with focusing on the technique of one pedagogue, even as influential as Cecchetti, is to extrapolate from these observations to more general ones. In this case the bent-legged technique was clearly not invented by Cecchetti but was a facet of the Italian school, but to what extent did the technique permeate other areas of ballet practice? Some evidence points to a wider use of this approach to the legs, for example: According to Gail Grant the bent-legged technique in *changements* was a feature of the French school as well as the Italian (Grant, 1967, 28) and James Neufeld, in a review of the National Ballet of Canada in a reconstruction of August Bournonville's *Abdallah*, suggests that for Bournonville 'the "engine" of so much of his choreography [was] the dancers foot and lower leg' (Neufeld, 1997, 41). It is not possible to dwell further on this here, but it is interesting to note the appearance of bent-legged jumps in other contexts for example a sort of bent-legged *soubresaut* which is used in some productions of *Giselle* during the second act *pas de deux*.

What has interested me as I have tried to understand Cecchetti's bent-legged technique further, is the suggestion that, when compared to contemporary emphasis in leg work, a different conceptualisation of the body and

movement, and a different presentation of the dancing body is revealed, and the effects of this changing emphasis may also help us to understand changes in the dynamic, expressive and narrative potential of the dance. In addition I am also surprised by the biomechanical and safety related issues that appear to emerge, although these are areas which clearly need further investigation before the case can be stated more strongly.

The rich legacy of the extant Cecchetti work, stemming as it does from his varied career in some of the key periods of ballet history, and preserved through various codifications and a continuous teaching tradition, suggests that studies of his technique may be of particular interest. A picture of the richness and variety of this work, some of which appears to lie hidden beneath the surface of modern performance practices, is beginning to be revealed. Giannandrea Poesio and I have written about the place of mime and mime-related arm movements in the Cecchetti work, and we have suggested that it is not just surface ornamentation but is integral to the movement and its expressive quality over and above its links to the more literal mime vocabulary (Bennett and Poesio, 2000). In another study, the results of which were presented at the recent European Association of Dance Historians conference in London (Bennett, in press), I became fascinated at the variety and richness of the dynamic and body information which appears to be embedded Cecchetti's *enchaînements* and which I suggest is often dependent on his particular use of the arms. The study presented here suggests that Cecchetti's articulate use of the legs is analogous to his use of the arms and may also be crucial to the dynamic and expressive impact of his steps.

The time appears ripe for a critical reassessment of the traditional ballet repertoire, and recent reconstructions such as the Kirov ballet's 1999 production of *Sleeping Beauty* are evidence of this. I believe that studies such as the one presented here can only be enriching to those interested in the field of historically informed performance. If the movement is approached on its own terms, and not with the presuppositions of modern technical fashions, much information about changing conceptualisations of the body and performance of the ballet vocabulary can be found embedded in the Cecchetti work; and this is no doubt true of other historical sources. The movement may appear quaint or old-fashioned at first, but I think that a deeper understanding, and an open-minded approach can reveal rich artistic vistas.

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Hospitality and Translation in Katherine Dunham's *L'Ag'Ya*

Ramsay Burt

This paper investigates the relationship between Katherine Dunham's work as a dancer and choreographer and the dance culture she studied during fieldwork in the Caribbean in 1935-7. Focusing in particular on her experience of dancing during vodun rituals and the enactment of a trance dance in her 1938 ballet *L'Ag'Ya*, it considers the ethics underlying her use of Caribbean dance material in the light of recent debates about hospitality. Miss Dunham briefly considered aspects of dances of possession in her book *Dances of Haiti*. She says this was largely completed in 1937, but it was not until 1941 that an essay from it was printed in the journal *Educational Dance*, and the book in its entirety was only published in the bilingual Mexican journal *Acta Anthropologica* in 1947. Miss Dunham discussed in more intimate detail her own experiences dancing Vodun ceremonies in her 1969 book *Island Possessed* (1994). But trance dances appeared not only in *L'Ag'Ya* (1938), but also in *Rites de Passage* (1942) and *Shango* (1945). It would be an oversimplification to assume that her anthropological research came first and that her choreography and performance subsequently drew on this. Miss Dunham's mature anthropological reflections followed years of performative exploration and experience, and her earlier anthropological conclusions seem to have been written while she was creating choreography with the material about which she was writing. My aim in this paper is to acknowledge both the agency of the people in the Caribbean in welcoming Miss Dunham and sharing their dance culture with her, and the ways in which her obligations towards them are figured in her danced testimonies of their hospitality.

When Miss Dunham undertook her fieldwork in the Caribbean in the mid 1930s, she was a young, highly educated, middle class, light skinned African American. She arrived in the Caribbean a year after the end of a nineteen year long military occupation of Haiti by U.S. marines. While doing field work in Haiti and elsewhere, Miss Dunham nevertheless found that, because she was black, she was often welcomed by the people whose dances she was studying. They saw her as someone with a common African heritage, and felt that the ease with which she picked up their dances confirmed her need get back in touch with African-derived religious practices. What comes across in her 1969 book is that she felt strong obligations to the people in Haiti who had helped her become initiated into the Rada-Dahomey vodun cult. Miss Dunham nevertheless also felt obligations towards her

Professors — Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovits — and towards the Rosenwald Foundation which supported her financially during her field trip. But on her return to Chicago in 1937 she found that she had to maintain her dancing and performing and therefore had to choose between her needs as a performer and the requirements of completing her Ph.D. Miss Dunham wanted to educate both black and white people in the United States about black dance -- a task that Téoline, the mambo who supervised her first initiation, had in effect set her. As Miss Dunham observed, to Téoline: 'It seemed that the welfare of the entire Negro race might be improved if these unfortunates in the north could be acquainted again with the rituals of ancestor worship and vodun' (1983: xxiv). Miss Dunham therefore chose choreography as her primary means of research and favoured performance as a means of publication.

Underlying both her work in the Caribbean and her subsequent choices between anthropology and professional dance practice are questions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Marianna Torgovnick has observed that it is the conceit of ethnographers to assume that 'only someone who has done work in the field (...) is in a position to make fully meaningful statements', while art historians believe that the elevation of primitive objects to the status of art brings Others into the 'mainstream' in a way that ethnographic studies can never do. But, she goes on, postcolonial discourse has alerted us to the extent to which 'western standards control the flow of the "mainstream" and can bestow or withhold the label "art"' (1990: 81-2). Miss Dunham wanted to elevate the dancing of black people in the Americas to the same status as ballet and modern dance, but she also used the term 'primitive dance' to describe the dancing she studied in the Caribbean. Torgovnick, James Clifford (1988), and Susan Hiller (1991), in recent critiques of primitivism, have drawn attention to the extent to which both ethnography and modernist art practice, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, colluded with colonial exploitation. Hiller has summed up the political issues at stake: 'In borrowing or appropriating visual ideas which they found in the class of foreign objects that came to be labelled "primitive art", and by articulating their own fantasies about the meaning of the objects and about the peoples who created them, artists have been party to the erasure of the self-representation of colonised peoples in favour of a western representation of their realities' (1991: 2-3). While it is clear that

this is not what Miss Dunham was doing when she used dance practices from the Caribbean, it is not so clear *why* what she was doing was different. The difference, I suggest, lies not only in the fact that Miss Dunham was black but also in the fact that she was working within the area of performance.

Where Clifford, Hiller, Torgovnick, and others have discussed modernist artists' collusion with colonial ideologies in their uses of 'primitive' art, they have largely focused on the visual arts. When the cubists and surrealists appropriated West African masks, they had probably bought them in the flea market or from art dealers, and had had no direct contact with the maker of the mask or with West African wood carving techniques. However, when Miss Dunham created *L'Ag'Ya*, she was using dances that she had learnt directly from women in the Caribbean. There is a danger that postcolonial discourses can be applied to cultural analysis and interpretation in a reductive way that enforces a limiting notion of political correctness. Sometimes non-Western artists and crafts people only figure within postcolonial discussions as the passive recipients of the negative effects of colonialism. A discussion of Miss Dunham's scholarly and performative investigations of trance offers an opportunity to acknowledge the agency of the Caribbean peoples who shared their dances with her. One way out of the potential dangers of a reductive use of postcolonial perspectives is to consider the ethical responsibilities and obligations involved within the relationship between Western artists and ethnographers and the non-Western people whose cultural practices they study. At stake is an ethics based on private and intimate responsibilities and obligations rather than on an institutionally sanctioned moral code. Recent discussions of hospitality by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida can help elucidate the ethical relationship between Miss Dunham and the people she danced with in Haiti.

At Herskovits's request, Miss Dunham initially used film to record the dances she was studying but abandoned this after an incident in Trinidad where a priest angrily stopped her filming a Shango ceremony. Arriving in Haiti for her major study she decided to become a participant observer, a technique she was familiar with at the University of Chicago, although Herskovits, at Northwestern, repeatedly wrote trying to dissuade her. Since my focus includes the way Miss Dunham's fieldwork was used to create dance pieces for her company, my concerns are not with the objectivity of her research methodologies but with the value of her testimony about the communities who offered her hospitality — evidence of which only survives through her work. Both Miss Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston went through initiation ceremonies in the Caribbean. As Joyce Aschenbrenner (2002) recently suggests, Miss Dunham seems to have gone more deeply into the social and religious aspects of these experiences than

Hurston, and this attests to the depth of the welcome extended to her.

We know the names of the mambos and hounsans (female and male priests) who supervised Miss Dunham's initiations, and the names and something about the lives of those initiated alongside her. They all welcomed her despite, as she put it, the initial stigma of being an American (1983: xxiv), a foreigner. Hospitality, Levinas argues, does not just involve a warm friendliness but an openness to the infinite and potentially overwhelming and threatening otherness of the outsider. Derrida (1999, 2000) points out that, for the stranger, there is a certain violence in having to ask for hospitality in a language that is not one's own, and, for the host, a violation in complying with the dues of hospitality — in saying 'what's mine is your'. There is no simple symmetry within hospitality but the host in effect reduces him or herself to a guest in their own home. The 'home' offered to Miss Dunham was not just a geographical location but a particular way of being in one's body — a set of 'practices of the body' (Mauss) and a 'habitus' (Bourdieu) within which these were meaningful. Allowing her into their 'home' was in effect an intimate sharing of their sense of being at home in their bodies with someone who experienced some aspects of this as alien and, I shall demonstrate, sometimes incomprehensible.

While Miss Dunham felt comfortable dancing in the rituals, she has owned up to her feelings of revulsion at some parts of her initiations. Remembering her first *lavètè* ceremony she described her hair matted with offerings including sacrificial blood. She recalled her fastidiousness about the fetid breath and body odours of the woman with whom she lay 'spoon-fashion' for three days and nights on the mud temple floor (1994: 92). Repelled by the scum of algae and droppings on the surface of the water she had to drink in the altar pool, she wet her lips and reminded herself to take quinine tablets when she got back to her hotel (*ibid.*: 114). She knew that priests and their assistants were observing her and that any hypocritical actions or gestures would be censured. The scientist in Miss Dunham theorised that the function of these highly intimate blurrings of interpersonal boundaries was to induce group solidarity. But she also wrote that during the ceremonies she became confused about her intentions and could not tell where the participant began and the scientist ended (*ibid.*: 106). The intimacy of hospitality folded into the intimacy of shared cult practices amounted to a particularly disorienting and traumatic experience.

According to Miss Dunham, the Haitian ritual dance the *Yanvalou*, which involves a fluid ripple up and down the spine from head to buttocks, had a positive effect on cult solidarity. Decidedly soothing rather than exciting, she observed, it left individuals in a state of complete receptivity, freer to receive suggestions of possible contact with a God or loa (Dunham 1983: 61). This openness

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would also, I suggest, have been a way of enabling hospitality. Haitians say that when a loa possesses someone it is as if a horseman were riding a horse. Vodun ceremonies however do not set out to make people become possessed but to help them when possessed to control their actions more effectively. When an uninitiated person or bossale is possessed by a loa it is believed that the experience is rough and dangerous, a warning that the person should pay proper respect to the ancestral realm and become initiated. In Miss Dunham's accounts of ceremonies, the priests and their assistants resemble choreographers and rehearsal directors: their skill in looking at dance and understanding dancers' experiences is used to coordinate and direct the event as a whole. I have written elsewhere about Miss Dunham's feelings of frustration and fear of rejection when, during her *lavé-tête* and her later canzo ceremony she did not become possessed in the sense of having a seizure and going into a hypnotic trance. She was thus unable to demonstrate through possession that the loa Damballa approved her dedication and accepted her offerings to him. But she did find an extraordinary sense of release in the dancing that concluded each of these ceremonies, and has written that she experienced an extraordinary purity at these moments which she had never previously felt (ibid.: 132). It is her absolute openness here to the alterity of her hosts — and of them to her as they danced with her — which, I argue, she testified to in the trance dances she subsequently choreographed.

Just as Miss Dunham herself never became possessed, neither did she want her dancers to become possessed. Joyce Aschenbrenner writes about an incident when a young man rehearsing the role of the boy in *Shango* showed signs of going into a trance. Miss Dunham subdued his seizure and subsequently did not take him on tour (Aschenbrenner 2002: 78). Her company didn't imitate the dances she had seen but translated them into a theatrical idiom for North American audiences. *Shango* was set in Trinidad, *Rites de Passage* in an imaginary Africa, and *L'Ag'Ya* in Martinique. All drew on her experiences in Haiti but none referred to these directly, partly out of respect for those who had welcomed her into their cult, but also, I suggest, out of her inability to assimilate as a whole her overwhelming experiences with them. *L'Ag'Ya* was the earliest of these pieces, Miss Dunham's first large scale work, and one that her company continued to perform until it disbanded in the 1960s. Set in the eighteenth century in the fishing village of Vauclin, it consisted of three scenes. First, Loulouse and Alcide were introduced as lovers. Julot, a semi-outcast, desired Loulouse but was rejected. In the second scene he stole away to the jungle where he fearfully begged for a love-charm from the King of the Zombies. Returning that evening to the village he interrupted a ball and used the charm to magically induce everyone except Loulouse to freeze. As the orchestra went silent and the drummers

took over, he forced Loulouse to dance for him. But just as he was about to steal a kiss from her, Alcide broke out of the spell and engaged Julot in the Martiniquean fighting dance *Ag'Ya* — which loosely resembles Brazilian Capoeira. Tragically the ballet ended with both men dead and Loulouse mourning her lost lover.

When Julot used the charm, he waved it hypnotically around Loulouse like a vodun priest with a sacrificial offering. Miss Dunham described Téoline controlling the seizure of a boy possessed by Damballa in this way using a sacrificed chicken, Damballa's sacred food. A series of photographs by Roger Wood show Miss Dunham dancing *L'Ag'Ya* in London in 1948. In her theatrical trance she gradually shed, piece by piece, the elaborate eighteenth-century dress and headdress she was wearing to dance barelegged in a flimsy petticoat. Trapped between Julot and the drummers, her solo resembled that of a vodun devotee whose possession was driven by the sacred drums and controlled by the priest. However, rather than representing the way a dancer moved when possessed by a particular loa, Loulouse's solo clearly referred to Miss Dunham's sense of release while dancing at the end of her initiation ceremonies. It was not therefore an appropriation but a testimony.

Shoshana Felman has described what she calls 'precocious testimony' where a speaker feels compelled to communicate important information as quickly as possible. Such testimony, she says, speaks 'ahead of knowledge and awareness, and breaks through the limits of its own conscious understanding' (Felman and Laub:1992: 21). This, I suggest, is how Loulouse's solo referred to experience which I argued Miss Dunham had found traumatic. Felman proposes that it is only in this way that victims of trauma can speak about their unforgettable but incomprehensible experiences. Their testimony is broken and partial because what they have been through is too overwhelming for them or us to consciously assimilate. The encounter with the other — facing up to the absolute and overwhelming difference the other represents — is an ethical encounter. Levinas has written that:

To approach the Other in discourse is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity' (Levinas 1991: 51).

For Levinas the fundamental question about humanity was the nature not of Being but of the existential act of hospitality. Ethics, he said, was first philosophy. And while ethics involves a one-to-one, face-to-face relationship, when a third person becomes involved, Levinas believed that ethics becomes politics. The readers of Miss Dunham's

books and the audiences who watched her dances constituted that third party who in effect politicised her ethical testimony about Haitian hospitality. Her danced solo in L'Ag'Ya did not therefore commit an aesthetic appropriation that colluded with colonial ideologies. It testified through the excruciating immediacy of the live moment of performance to the importance of maintaining a welcoming openness when face to face with the overwhelming idea of infinity.

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Webs of Identity, Webs of Heritage: A Conceptual and Historical Examination of 'the Birth of English Ballet'

Alexandra Carter

Any attempt to revisit history is necessarily coloured by the consciousness of the historian. That consciousness is formed by points of view which, whilst diverse and sometimes contradictory, interact with the dominant theoretical perspectives of the time. This paper arises from three states of self and social consciousness. The first is a post-colonial awareness that any claim for a national identity is based on shifting sands. Although there may be, for example, a national self-consciousness of 'Englishness', the unified nature of the concept and its practical grounds are highly contestable. The claim for the formation of an English ballet which pervades the literature of the 1940s and 1950s can be seen with hindsight to be part of the social and political thrust to stabilise and celebrate a national identity which culminated in the Festival of Britain in 1953. Not any old identity, however, but one which had cultural credibility. For artists and writers of the time, ballet's credibility rested on the aristocratic foundations of a Russian Imperial and an Italian heritage; it did not owe any allegiance to the indigenous music halls and commercial theatres which had been presenting ballet as a part of variety or pantomime during that ascribed 'blank' period in ballet history, the 1880s till the first decade of the twentieth century. I argue here that the notion that English ballet was established primarily with the Vic-Wells in the 1930s negates to the point of oblivion its preceding indigenous history. In doing so, I am aware that this reclaiming of the commercial theatre in our ballet history might seem to contest a second force in contemporary theoretical consciousness, a post-modern one which is suspicious of teleological accounts of history; narratives where one chapter in the past appears to lead neatly on to the next. I have argued elsewhere (Carter, 1995, 1996) that the music hall period, as one of the most vibrant and popular contexts for ballet in the whole of its history, is viable for study in its own right and not just as a stepping stone to the twentieth century. Here, I don't revoke that claim but offer a parallel one: that the influence of this period on the development of ballet in England in the 1920s and '30s was far more significant than has been convenient to acknowledge. The influences of history sketch out not a line but a web, and the complexity of that web has been ignored in the fight for public recognition for ballet as an art form in England in the 1930s. In

making this claim, I am also aware of a third point of contemporary consciousness: that if today we recognise the significance of popular culture and the blurring of boundaries between the activities it embodies and so-called 'high' art, we can also revisit the past without such exclusive notions in place. This paper reinstates popular culture into the web of influences on the development of ballet in England. That web includes contexts for ballet such as pantomime and the smaller music hall venues;¹ 'external' influences such as the Ballets Russes and Massine and, of course, the many other activities which paralleled those of de Valois such as Marie Rambert's school and company and the Camargo Society. For the purpose of this investigation, however, parameters are drawn in order to provide a 'case study'. I intend to explore the links between the ballet of the Alhambra and Empire palaces of varieties and the development of a so-called 'national' institution embodied in the Vic-Wells/Sadlers Wells Theatre companies and school.

That the seeds of an English ballet were sown and quickly blossomed with the establishment of the Vic-Wells ballet by Ninette de Valois in the early 1930s permeates the literature (for example, Haskell, 1934, 1938 & 1950; Howlett, undated; Manchester, 1946; Williamson, 1946; Noble, ca. 1949; Fisher, 1954). Now accepted as 'fact', this claim is replicated in secondary sources. Percival, referring to the significance of Diaghilev's production of *The Sleeping Princess* in 1921, notes that 'no such thing as British ballet existed then' (1994: 5). Similarly, the critical view of the music hall ballet which Haskell exemplifies in his imagining that 'the Empire ballet was choreographically, musically and artistically negligible, just a form of light entertainment' (1934: 188) is perpetuated in Deborah Bull's assertion that 'at the beginning of the century, dance in Britain was in a sorry state, reduced to grabbing performances where it could between the variety acts in music halls'. It was de Valois who 'dragged ballet out of these artistic slums' (1998: 100). It is de Valois who is seen unequivocally as responsible for the establishment of the first English ballet company, though the decade she spent on the commercial circuit, including both large and small music halls, tends to be written out of early biographical accounts (e.g. Williamson, 1946) or noted apologetically (e.g. Fisher, 1954).

Those with actual first-hand experience of the music hall ballets were both less damning of their quality and,

significantly, more alert to their place in an English heritage. Perugini, writing in the mid 1930s, discussed how the recent dance scene was dominated by the Russians. He felt, however, that he was seeing ballet that was 'not English as we had seen it at its best at the Empire and Alhambra in the first quarter of this century' (1935: 272). Bedells, in a gentle dig, wished that 'the critics and balletomanes of today could have seen that production of *Coppelia* at the old Empire. They would know then that ballet in England was flourishing long before Diaghilev was heard of here' (1956: 15). Lawson (1964) suggests that a possible event for the dating of the start of British ballet could have been when Bedells took over from Kyasht at the Empire in 1914.

Despite these views, the 1880s – 1910s tend to be written out of histories and biographies of British ballet. In all the literature, however, whether primary or secondary, none of the writers are explicit about what precisely constitutes 'Englishness' in the context of an English ballet. In this paper, I aim to conflate two aims; first, to unpack this construct of 'English' – or, as referred to in later sources, British, ballet and test its viability.² Second, to contest the ascribed chronological timing of its 'birth'. By doing so, I hope to destabilise its foundations in order to let in the unacknowledged influence of the music hall ballet. If nothing else, I hope to demonstrate, at least, what Simon Schama (1999) calls 'the messiness' of history.

What was this thing called 'English' ballet in the 1930s? What might constitute a national institution and what might be construed as the components of a national heritage? These components might, arguably, be summarised as (i) activity and people who are ethnically indigenous (ii) repertoire (iii) technical and production style (iv) audiences (v) the context of the work and finally but essentially (vi) a self consciousness of a national identity.

Haskell's claim in 1938 that 'there was never a trace of a native English ballet until the present day' (1938: 32) is based on his characterisation of England as 'a consumer rather than a creator' of the ballet form, as opposed to the Russian ballet which 'absorbed foreign influences into the indigenous ballet which was part of the people' (p. 33). Haskell's puzzling claim is more one of convenience than of historical accuracy, for an examination of any country's heritage will show a flux of imports and exports which interact, become assimilated, consolidate and change. And if the creators, in a literal sense, of the music hall ballets such as Katti Lanner and Carlo Coppi were of European descent, paradoxically, the 'mothers' of English ballet were an Irishwoman (Ninette de Valois) and a Pole (Marie Rambert). As the following investigation will demonstrate, the concept of 'indigenous ballet' can be applied as much – or as little – to the music hall ballets as it can to any other period. Arguably, the most indigenous 'English' as-

pect of the so-called new 'English' ballet of the 1930s was the social and educational background or aspirations of the men who wrote about it.³ This might be, perhaps, a significant if sub-conscious element in the ascription of the nomenclature.

On reading these writers' accounts of the formation of English ballet, one not only senses the subdued excitement about this 'new' period but that period is explicitly isolated from what has gone before. There is no sense that influences might have spilled over, to the extent that even when the contribution of artists such as Genée, Bedells and Cecchetti are recorded, their commercial is elided.⁴ But fundamental to my argument is the notion that there cannot be a 'sweeping out' of the old in any historical transitions; if there is a broom it is in the hands of the writers who record the history. The threads of history are woven into different contexts, but these threads can be traced. Many performers and teachers who were influential in the development of ballet in the 1920s and 1930s were deeply rooted in the ballet of the large music halls. These include Adeline Genée, about whom Bedells noted, 'much as the art in this country owes to the Russian ballet . . . I feel we owe still more to the influence of Adeline Genée' (Bedells in Genné, 1995: 439). Bedells herself was hailed as the first English prima ballerina after succeeding Kyasht at the Empire. Edouard Espinoza worked briefly at both the Alhambra and Empire, as performer and creator; Lucia Cormani was choreographer and teacher at the Alhambra. All of these were instrumental in establishing the Association of Operatic Dancing (1920), later the Royal Academy of Dancing (1935) and in the formation of a syllabus of training. Francesca Zanfretta, *premiere danseuse* and mime at the Empire for twelve years, taught de Valois and Ursula Moreton, who took Zanfretta's work in to the Sadlers Wells School. Her mime was written down and 'handed on in its complex and fascinating detail to the Vic-Wells Ballet and its successor companies' (Sorley Walker, 1987: 65). Cavallazzi, who trained at the La Scala school and performed for many years at the Empire, passed on her knowledge of the Italian technique to Bedells. Less influentially, Madame Rosa, an ex-Alhambra dancer partly trained by Palladino, worked with de Valois in pantomime at the Lyceum for five years.

An examination of the professional lives of artists such as Genée, Zanfretta and Cavallazzi reveals how international schools of dance were embodied in these dancers, were central to their music hall performances, and were passed on in to the 1920s, 1930s and beyond.

One of the props for the claim that an English ballet started in the 1930s was that the performers were English. Until Bedells, the music hall principals were mostly foreign, though the residential longevity of some might render them 'native'. However, the great majority of the other performers were English. As 'J.M.B.' (possibly J.M.