Abstract

This study is a theoretical-argumentative descriptive research aimed to define the main features of the technique and the possible links of the “extreme” use of the pointe shoe by Maria Taglioni taking into account her biographical aspects and the historical context. The life of Taglioni and her art were characterized by a constant research of the limit, using the pointe shoe to lift and evolve the movement, the posture, the behavior and the steps. The results of this study show how in the Nineteenth Century the classic ballet was continuously looking for the perfection, since it could not count on the engineering devices and on the current complex light games, which make you doubt about the real concreteness and existence of what is played on the stage, but only on the perfect movements and on the coordination.

Key words: pointe technique, body limits, classical ballet

A remark on the evolution of the ballet which points up the topic of the “sense of limit” needs an heuristic effort to study its romantic connotation during the nineteenth Century and the possible exasperation of the research of the technical and biomechanics limits came out with the pointe technique of the ballet. A research which has a specific hermeneutical approach cannot ignore Maria Taglioni (Stockholm 1804 – Marseilles 1884), who was a dancer of the romantic ballet and who exalted and improved the pointe technique, celebrating its expressive potential. The main aim of this research is to study the evolution of the ballet through the pointe technique, which helped to make a first great change of the dance from a technical and expressive point of view, so sealing the unity between the subject and the technique of the dance.

This research provides a theoretical-argumentative descriptive part to define the historical context, the biographical aspects of Mrs. Taglioni, the main features of her technique and the possible links of the “extreme” use of the pointe shoe. Particularly, the historical analysis allowed to contextualize the life of Taglioni and her art, biographically highlighting the formative experiences of the “Goddess” and the possible link with her artistic expressiveness, with her constant research of the limit, using the pointe shoe to lift and evolve the movement, the posture, the behavior and the steps.

The part of the research aimed to the interpretation of the main feature of the survey is based on a chronological rebuilding of the sources, allowing to acknowledge the information about the origins, the evolution and the feature of the ballet through the pointe technique. This study, with regard its comparative aspects, fixes a methodology that discovers, analyzes and explains the likeness and the differences in their relationships with the social and cultural context, allowing to examine the phenomenon from a comparative point of view.

The results of this study highlighted how in the Nineteenth Century the classic ballet was continuously looking for the perfection, since it could not count on the engineering devices and on the current complex light games, which make you doubt about the real concreteness and existence of what is played on the stage, but only on the perfect movements and on the coordination.

Unfortunately, they were fleeting moments of lack of gravity, destined to be “extraordinary” success because of her premature death.

But in that same time a new little wonder girl, who would have become the “phoenix” too, took lessons of dance and fifteen years after she would have lift on her pointe just as Gossèlin did, hiding her efforts to the audience, which was so amazed to think she had a trick.
Indeed, it was written in an article of that time, after Taglioni’s appearance:

M.me Tartaglioni lifts on her pointe with a remarkable balance. No other nymph from Tersicore could keep this a position for such a long time since the time of M lle Gossèlin (Sorell, 1994, p.269).

She loved the dance and she chose it among all the arts because she was aware of having two different scenes: the success or the anonymity and the oblivion. Only the talent could make the difference, making her excel and dance on the most important stages.

She was born into the profession and she pushed ahead the choral dancer tradition of her father, who had a great influence in the artistic ambition. The training for her first debut in Vienna on 10 June 1822 was very hard and full of hardships and asceticism. She overcame her biological and physiological limits of her body, avoiding to drink even during her training, even if the weather required a greater hydration, drinking only when she ate. Actually she worked 6 hours per day, equally split in three different moments: two hours in the morning, two hours before dinner and two hours before going to sleep. After each training she was so sweat to wet the floor and she needed to change her clothes. So, the dance appeared a cruel activity which demanded a perfect balance among technique, sensitivity, expressiveness and motor control, achieved by the artist only after a very hard training.

The biography of Mrs. Taglioni points out the “extreme” style, which featured the behavior and the artistic expressions, also involving the sensitivity of the cleaning staff of the theatre, which used to hide in the restroom close to the studio, a great glass of cold water, which was the sole refreshment for the young extraordinary artist.

Léandre Vaillat, to explain the kind of training imposed by Filippo Taglioni to her daughter, beyond every limit, exactly report La leçon de Maria Taglioni (Vaillat, 1942, pp.74-75), which so wrote:

I dedicated more than two hours to aplombs or adagio: staying on one foot, I made positions that I should then develop very slowly. When the position was particularly difficult, I count till 100 before changing it ... These positions were en pointe, that’s to lift the heel so that it doesn’t touch the floor ... Then you need to turn the body with grace, with aplomb and confidence. I reached a great perfection doing this kind of exercises ... I used to do those positions when I needed to rest, while they generally were very difficult for the other dancers ...

... I spent two hours jumping ... Before really doing it, it was necessary to stretch the feet and the tendons ... I slowly and deeply bowed, so to touch the floor with my hands, without bending my back, just bending my knees and aligning. Then I slowly rose en pointe without bumps and efforts: Then the real jumps started. The jump starts only from the heel, without any movement of the body. The knees have hardly to bow ... I stayed aligned without being stiff. You could not hear me falling because the pointe of my foot arrived always before and my heel laid down slowly. I loved those jumps when I almost did not feel the ground under my feet: I really vibrated in the air. One of my father’s greatest reproach was I was not enough aligned. I felt a strong pain in my chest and when I bowed forward I suffered a lot and he obliged me to stay aligned. My father was aware of my pain and he was so happy of this position that everyday, in the night and in the morning, I prayed God to save this pain of mine. Finally it ended but I went on staying aligned ... All this work, aimed to improve the style and the technique, made me beat fast and often nervous and I wanted to cry so he told me: “Cry, it will help you”. He was right, that helped me a lot. My mother, who was near the dance hall, cried saying that my father had no mercy and he wanted to kill me.

After five months of hard work Filippo Taglioni made his daughter debut at the theatre of Vienna with a little ballet he himself created: La recéption di une jeune nymphe au temple de Terphsicore.

During this debut the audience reserved her a warm and fully deserved welcome because of her charming body, the grace of her movements and the technical perfection, all things that made her a complete dancer and allowed her to improve.

During her first Paris season, interrupted by fleeting appearances in Stuttgart, she often
danced with her brother Paul, till the consecration, in the role of premier sujet, with the masterly interpretations of Naiad in Belle au Bois Dormant by Herold and Niuka in Manon Lescaut by Aumer.

In 1830 Maria Taglioni had already demonstrated to have a bright future. Her debut in Paris was one of the most extraordinary events of the theatrical life of that decade as her style, in sharp contrast to what was seen on the stages in that period, was an original development of ballet technique. Indeed, the emergent feature was not so much the possess of superior technical skills and abilities, but in using a unique style that could harmonize poetry, grace and gentleness and resulting in the production of soft curves and flowing lines that transcended the biomechanics limits of the body, through a highly controlled movements and body segments. Her secret was to fit her skillful technique on an unparalleled artistic reflection which allowed to capture a unique executive lightness.

In 1832 La Sylphide anointed Marie Taglioni, outlining a picture of an ethereal, disembodied and unreal woman who, thanks to the use of pointe shoes (with which, gradually, the work of the foot in half-tip, carried to the extreme, leads naturally to the tips), ceased to be tied to the laws of anatomy and became a limit-creature in an continuous tension between the body, meant as a "divine" being that minimizes the contact with the ground, and the sinful humus.

La Sylphide decreeds the triumph of Romanticism by placing in the public mind a new image of the dancer that is configured in a heavenly vision, set in a dimension to which ordinary mortals cannot aspire.

Indeed, the evolution of dance in this period is linked to the changing times and to the new conception of woman, the sylph-woman who recalls the ewigweibliche by Goethe (the eternal feminine), which dominated the literature of that period (Testa, 2005, p.69).

With the ballet dance of Taglioni, we assist to the perfect combination of the over-body and oversoul due to her extraordinary ability to rise from the ground, but at the same time to dance with all her soul, giving the impression of freedom from the laws of gravity.

Not by chance, it speaks about aérien style, that is sublimated by the device of tips looking for the absolute Elevation, improved by the introduction of the tutu.

Designed by Eugène Lami for the first night of the Sylphide, it helped, along with the tip-shoes, to give rise to the image of the ethereal and angelic ballet dancer.

In the biography by Levinson (1929) we can read:

Mrs Taglioni is a Christian dancer, if you can use this expression for an art that is proscribed by Catholicism. She floats like a spirit in the midst of a white muslin clear fog which she likes to surround herself of, she looks like a happy spirit just bending the petals of blue flowers with the tip of pink feet.

A reviewer of that period described the moon style of Taglioni as danse ballonnée because of the impression that the dancer gave of being suspended in the air, for her lightness, for the aerial lift of her jumps and for the aplombs which gave relief to the virtuosity of the suspension.

Today the nineteenth century romantic spirit of La Sylphide is still intact in the resumed and adapted preparations of the play, which are performed by major dance companies. Throughout the ballet, La Sylphide is moving, vibrating in the air, the light arms bend favoring hand movements in a game of port de bras, made even stronger by the elevations on the pointe of one foot. The arabesques, made longer by many penchées and pliè, draw endless lines into the air and, finally, the suspended, beaten and small leaps seem flutters of wings.

Actually, Mr. D'Aurevilly writes, in an article of the magazine Paris-Le Pays "Avec la Taglioni on vit danser une âme" (1850) just to highlight the superhuman and virginal feature of this ballet dancer. The author of the Petits Memoires de l'Opéra states:

That a thirty years old dancer could have made the dance a revolution that still continues today is something definitely surprising. But it is absolutely a miracle the fact that this great revolutionary dancer was a ugly crooked woman, without any of those outward appearance advantages and striking which control the success (Levinson, 1929, p.122).
In her lean body, with paradoxical proportions, everything was function, everything was consistent with a secret of successes. M. Ehrhard, the excellent biography of his eternal rival Fanny Essler, maintains, that the claims of illness of Sylphide were stigmata of the genius. Levinson (1929) makes a comparison stating that there are musical instruments, such as the Stradivarius violins, which are shelters of the soul and have the form and the reactions of a living being. On the contrary, by a miracle, we have the impression that not even a divine lute-maker could build alone the extreme artistic skills and abilities of Maria Taglioni.

In fact, she embodies the character of the Sylphide, with the high forehead, slightly rounded till the long and thin nose, tight-lipped with little hazel eyes. The facial expression is calm but tinged with sadness and with a great air of intelligence, her figure is that of a painful and suffering girl resigned to take the flight.

Her little head is resting on a swan neck, the delicate and tapered arms are too long, the wrists are very delicate, the fingers are sharp. The legs are long in relation to the bust and a portrait of one of her legs shows a very clean profile, except for a slight deformation due to the muscular EFFORT.

So, the conclusions to be drawn from this comparative study of documents show a peculiar person, whose physical anatomy, away from preconceived notions of beauty, seems sometimes fake for some people, fashioned from the extreme power of his artistic talent and his hard will. The dual figure of Maria Taglioni, in her diversified essence, transcends all borders, in an unchanging harmony of volumes and planes. Her dance tracks intersections of lines that become big curves, in the space of the ideal figures that tend toward the geometric purity, allowing to admire a body in its stable equilibrium. The vertical cut at an angle that is determined by two parallels, which is given by the use of an arabesque on the tip, shows the balance in which she excels, and her tip continues the great vertical ability of the aplomb. The widely outstretched arms draw a line toward infinity. The same short trunk and the significant development of the legs destine the dancer to a disproportionate elevation. The stride is wide, the length of the steps makes the jumps an amazing dish.

Levinson, to describe the incomparable characteristics of Mrs. Taglioni, used an original example drawn from the world of the animals, highlighting their evolutionary aspects "the grasshopper or maybe the kangaroo are not designed that way? As Nature created the insects, so She made Mrs. Taglioni a ballet dancer" (Levinson, 1929, pp. 126-127).

We are therefore facing a human creature that challenges the human possibility, through gruelling exercises which goes beyond the bounds of possibility. Speaking about that, it is remarkable what Vaillat (1942, pp.544-545) writes as regards as his lifeless body after death:

*Les objets ne vivent que par celui qui les anime. L’humain compte plus que le décor de sa vie. Lui disparu, il ne reste qu’une matière inerte, plus ou moins bien œuvré. Deux castagnettes d’ébène ne font pas une cachucha. J’ai beau regarder les deux chaussons de satin noir qu’elle portait la dernière fois qu’elle parut en public. J’ai beau me dire qu’elle les signa l’un et l’autre, dans sa loge, qu’elle inscrivit à l’intérieur la date décisive, avant de les coucher à jamais au fond d’un coffret d’amarante. J’ai beau m’extasier sur l’invraisemblable étroitesse de ces chaussons, telle qu’aucun pied de femme ne semble avoir pu les chaussé. Ils sont là inertes, poses à plat, comme pour marcher, non pour danser. Impossible d’imaginer qu’ils vont relèver sur la pointe. Ils ne sont meme pas douse de ce mouvement de pendule que le vent imprimait à cet autre chausson de la Taglioni, que je voyais autrefois se balancer à l’extrémité d’une ficelle, au-dessus d’un éventaire.*

The data emerged from the historical and theoretical reconstruction, related to the analysis of the biography of Marie Taglioni and literature on the basic theme of “Romantic Ballet”, showed the sublime artifice that helped to shape an ethereal image of the dancer, capable to rise from the earth, beyond gravity, beyond the physical limitations (pain, fatigue), returned harmonious and elegant technical virtuosity which qualifies the name of “Divine” and to define “new boundaries” of the art of dance.

This work shed a new light on the possible boundary among talent, innate gifts, skills and personal determination, meant as the ability of a person to impose new boundaries, new targets...
and in some cases new forms. This autoevolutionary perspective, leading to the research of methods and didactics in the field of the bodily dimension, to pose new questions about the real boundaries of human limitations, by inquiring on people ability to challenge themselves in a competition that may lead to the discovery of most fascinating human dimension.

References