
The Relationship of Physical Activity to the Success of the London Stage in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century

by
D. MARGARET TOOHEY
California State University

The London stage in the seventeenth century presented audiences with comedies, tragedies and unusual entertainment. A five act play with prologue and epilogue was characteristic of the bill of fare. With the beginning of the eighteenth century, there developed a greater diversity and variety in the entertainments offered. These entertainments were frequently presented between acts (entr'acts) and at the conclusion of a play. By 1720 a typical program usually included an afterpiece, as well as giving a greater concentration of song, music, dance and specialty acts, such as vaulting and acrobatics between the acts. This study examines the relationship between the specialty entertainments and the commercial success of the London stage in the first half of the eighteenth century. Special emphasis is given to the works of John Weaver, probably the earliest producer of ballet pantomimes in this era, as well as a dancing master, dance theorist and kinesiologist.

The close relationship between the fairs and the theaters early in the eighteenth century fostered specialty entertainments such as gymnastic and dancing activities in the playhouses. What was presented to the audiences at the booths in the summer was brought into the theaters in the winter. In the first decade a fairly long parade of acrobats, rope dancers and posturers could be seen. They performed on the sloping rope and the "marag'd horse" vaulted over bars and poles and demonstrated their strength and flexibility performing free exercise routines termed "grotesque postures!" Of all the forms of entr'act entertainment, however, none exceeded in popularity the dance - solo, duet or ensemble. From the opening years of the century the theatres advertised "with Entertainments of Dancing" as part of the bill with the phrasing often including "serious", "comic" or "grotesque." As the bills grew longer the managers named the dancers and the gymnasts and specified in what interval they would appear.

The most phenomenal development of dance routines came, however, in ballet pantomime. By the 1720's many Londoners felt that theatrical talent resided in the heels, rather than the head. Every theater, the patent houses, the opera, the amateur groups, the foreign comedians catered to the unquenchable thirst for the dance. These ballet pantomimes emphasized formalized ballet style which was very different from the duets show which had been seen previously in the fairs. John Rich, an actor, dancer at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and John Weaver at Drury Lane, dancing master and dance kinesiologist, were the leading producers of the ballet pantomimes. The early efforts of John Weaver in such pieces as *The Loves of Mars and Venice* and *Orpheus and Eurydice* were the first to receive the appellation of pantomime. Weaver clearly indicated in his *History of Mimes and Pantomimes* an intent to create the interpretive dancing of the classic Romans. Weaver's classical ballets employed no commedia figures, were without comic portions and were less dependent upon spectacle and novelty. The emphasis was not upon bustling dumb show activity, not a spectacle, not a comic business, but upon story telling possibilities of the dance itself. Weaver's theories and rules did not go undisputed in the arts and the pressures of vigorous rivalry from John Rich caused Weaver to invent many ballets not based entirely on classical myth. Rich, a brilliant performer, achieved phenomenal popularity by his dancing as Harlequin. He took Weaver's entertainments, burlesqued them, and brought out his own comic versions within a few weeks of the original's opening night. That the promoters could rely on tire drawing power of pantomimes and other specialty acts was evidenced in the 1731-32 season when Drury Lane set their charges at 5S, 3S, 2S, 1S, for plays followed by pantomimes and/or specialty acts, but lowered them to "common prices" on other evenings.

Dancers and actors were also demanding and getting more money for performing in the pantomimes and other specialties in the theaters. The specialty acts continued to be popular and even seemed to threaten the exalted position that tragedy and comedy held on the London stage. The theater was centered midway between the two extremes. It had lost the privileged position that it had held in the seventeenth century in the court theaters, but had become fashionably popular with the middle classes. Out of the writings and choreography of John Weaver had developed a ballet d'action, a form which was to be followed for the next two hundred years. From the commedia dell'arte characters and with the enterprise of John Rich, there developed a trend for light entertainment based on the antics of Harlequin, Scaramouche and Columbine which was to last into the beginnings of the nineteenth century.