

8 Jean-Georges Noverre: dance and reform

JUDITH CHAZIN-BENNAHUM

Noverre's life

Jean-Georges Noverre was born in Paris on 27 April 1727 and died in Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 19 October 1810. He had an abrupt and demanding temperament, made many enemies and stirred up a variety of fierce artistic controversies during his long career. More than any other choreographer before him, he turned ballet into an independent art form and means of expression. Diderot called him “le génie”, the one who would save dance, and Voltaire named him “Prométhée de la danse”.

Noverre's mother, Marie Anne de la Grange, is thought to have been born in Lausanne, although P. J. S. Richardson suggested that she was born in Picardy. His father, Jean Louys, was a Swiss soldier. Like Rousseau, Noverre's Swiss origins created suspicion about his loyalty to France, although he always considered himself a Frenchman. His father expected him to be a soldier, but the boy insisted on dancing and eventually followed his own instincts. Still a child, he went to Paris to study with M. Marcel and then with the famous Louis Dupré. His critical eye quickly led him to question why the arms had such a circumscribed use, and to wonder why masks, high heels, panniers and over-blown wigs were popular in ballets as they constrained all movements of the head, arms, legs and face.

Noverre's first dancing probably occurred at Jean Monnet's Opéra-Comique at the Foire Saint Laurent on 8 June 1743 in Favart's vaudeville *Le Coq du village*. There, in that free environment, he detected other ways of using gesture and movement. He learned much by observing the Italian comedians with their emphasis on physical and improvisational theatre. At the age of fifteen he appeared at the court at Fontainebleau. With his “copains”, Campanini and Lany as well as his teacher Dupré, Noverre was recruited to dance in Berlin before the young Frederick II and his brother Prince Henry of Prussia. It was the first of his many trips outside Paris. Still in his teens, he performed in Dresden, Strasburg and again at the Opéra-Comique. At the age of twenty, Noverre became ballet master in Marseilles and created what became a well-known piece, *Les Fêtes chinoises*. There it is thought that he met his wife, the actress Marie-Louise Sauveur. In 1750 he became Principal Dancer in Lyons and partnered the celebrated Marie Camargo. In addition, he made his first ballet pantomime, *Le Jugement de Paris*. He then

moved from Lyons to Strasburg in 1754 for one year, and then returned to Paris and the Opéra-Comique. There he created ballets which organised the elements of a production into beautifully arranged pictures. From 1755 to 1756 he and his company went to London to work with the famous David Garrick at the Drury Lane Theatre. Like Samuel Johnson, the writer, with whom he had gone to school in Lichfield, “Davy” Garrick was a poor boy making it in the new commercial market for theatre and books in London, then one of the richest and least censored cities in the world. He performed Shakespeare with notable brilliance and gained a reputation for eloquent and expressive gestures in his performances and for the consummate taste of all his theatrical productions. Noverre, who received handsome fees from Garrick, was able to take his new wife and sister with him.

The London period introduced Noverre to different conceptions of the theatrical style. Garrick belonged with Rousseau and others in the middle of the eighteenth century to the school of “natural” theatre. In 1752 the arrival of an Italian opera company in Paris, which performed *opera buffa* by Pergolesi, Alessandro Scarlatti and other composers, triggered a fierce debate between proponents and opponents of that new natural style, which emphasised melody over harmony. Jean-Jacques Rousseau made his name in a famous attack on Jean-Philippe Rameau, the most prominent court composer at the time. This *guerre des buffons* (the war of the *opera buffa*) raised the same issues that had begun to occupy Noverre. Like Rousseau, he rejected artificiality, the use of masks and statuesque formalities and thought that art had to achieve “truth”. In order for theatre to be true, pantomime must be used, which aroused the intelligence of the viewers by engaging them in the emotions of those on stage and thus presenting human dramas to be considered. While working in Drury Lane, Noverre became acquainted with Eva Weigel, Garrick’s Austrian wife. She had studied ballet with the innovative Franz Hilverding in Vienna, who also experimented with what would become known as the *ballet d’action*. As early as 1740 Hilverding produced such dance dramas for the Viennese court as Jean Racine’s *Britannicus*, Crébillon’s *Idoménée* and Voltaire’s *Alzira*. These tragedies had proper plots and portrayed human emotions. Noverre adopted that model. The true ballet was not defined by the steps but the sentiments and nuances that were enacted by the dancer to create the real dramatic effect.

In spite of his progressive views, he ran into political trouble in London. In 1756 a war between Britain and France broke out, which was part of a worldwide conflict on the continent that was known as the Seven Years War but in North America as “The French and Indian War”. The English audience rioted at the performance of Noverre’s *Fêtes chinoises*; they were incensed by the way the French had stirred up Indian tribes to massacre English settlers. Both the French, whose colonial economy rested less on settlement than

trade in forest products, and the Indians, who found English pioneers cutting homesteads from their forests, had a common enemy. Noverre had to leave London in 1757. He wanted to work at the Paris Opéra, but quickly realised that he would be swimming against the prevailing currents of courtly dance. He returned to the provinces and to Lyons where he created new and very different ballets based on his newly found expressive movement. He worked with the seductive and distinguished Mlle Guimard in an anacreontic ballet, *Les Caprices de Galathée*. He garbed the fauns in tiger skins, shoes that looked like tree bark and leg stockings the colour of carnation for the forest inhabitants. The nymphs' material was speckled with flowers and greenery. All of these features associated Noverre with the new naturalist attitude towards costume and put him in the mainstream of the culture of the French Enlightenment. One of his enduring successes centred on his work *La Mort d'Ajax*, a tragic ballet that permitted him to portray strong emotions that touched and moved his audiences.

Noverre always had a knack for sensing which way the artistic wind was blowing. The year 1760 was ideal for publishing his *Lettres sur la danse, et sur les ballets* and he managed to find both a French and a German publisher respectively in Lyons and in Stuttgart. His ideas on dancing and performance fitted the new culture in Germany based on the so-called *Affektenlehre*, the doctrine of emotions or "sensibility". Lyons had been good to him but an invitation to serve at the court of the Duke Carl Eugene of Wurttemberg could not be resisted. Carl Eugene, who ruled his principality for more than forty years, may have been the most extravagant, luxurious and irresponsible of the substantial German princes, a group notorious for conspicuous consumption. He built six huge palaces on the model of Versailles on the taxes of his 600,000 groaning subjects. In Stuttgart, Noverre had a 350-seat theatre for his ballets, the services of the distinguished scene designer Servandoni, the costume designer Louis-René Boquet and composers Nicolò Jommelli, and Jean Joseph Rudolph (Rodolphe) who composed his most famous ballet *Jason et Médée* in 1763. Since the duke never cared how expensive his artists and architects were, Noverre staged ballets on the grandest scale imaginable. He created at least twenty new works and built his reputation. As the author of a serious treatise on choreography and ballet, he had the ideal setting to put his ideas into practice. He attracted remarkable dancers such as Gaëtan Vestris ("the god of dance") who played Jason, Anna Heintz who is credited with having invented the double *pirouette*, Le Picq and the extraordinary Dauberval who went on to create the famous *La Fille mal gardée* (1789) in Bordeaux.

When Noverre launched *Jason et Médée* in Stuttgart, he borrowed ideas explored in Vienna by Hilverding, Christoph Willibald Gluck and the librettist Raniero di Calzibigi. They too were seeking a deeper definition of, and

credibility for, ballet and opera. Noverre knew that where the ideas of the French Enlightenment had spread, important patrons emerged; in such areas his doctrine of natural dance, his work on gesture and expression would find a favourable reception. And patronage was the name of the game in the eighteenth century. For after all, Noverre was like Samuel Johnson and David Garrick, a poor boy without class. Johnson could write in his great dictionary of 1755 that “a patron is a wretch who supports with insolence and is paid in flattery”,¹ but he could get away with it because London had a huge commercial printing and publishing business and his dictionary easily found a market. Johnson never needed a patron. Neither did David Garrick with his commercial Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. But nobody could buy tickets to Duke Carl Eugene’s theatre. Noverre worked on the continent where royalty still controlled the arts. Hence Noverre had to choose his patrons with extreme care. Though he wanted to return to the Drury Lane in London, the British victory in the French and Indian war had not yet calmed anti-French sentiments. He decided to try his luck in Vienna, the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, the most important city of the German-speaking world, and the place where the young Emperor Joseph II, to the irritation of his mother, Maria Theresa, the reigning queen (a woman could not hold the imperial title), made serious attempts to impose the culture of the Enlightenment on the huge, polyglot realm. As always, Noverre had guessed shrewdly. He found royal patronage and managed to stage nearly thirty-eight new ballets. He also revived earlier works and created dances for operas that were great successes, such as Gluck’s *Pâris et Hélène*, *Orphée et Eurydice* and *Alceste*. Noverre knew what historians tend to forget: in the *Ancien Régime* no artist could succeed without very wealthy protectors, and in Vienna he secured the highest possible patroness, the Queen Maria Theresa herself. He became *maître de danse* for the twelve-year-old Marie-Antoinette, the queen’s favourite daughter, and remained her close friend and confidant until she was guillotined during the French Revolution in 1793. He knew he only had to wait until she came of age to do as he liked. With the composer Franz Aspelmayr he created *Iphigénie et Tauride* (1772), *Apelle et Campaspe* (1773) and with Joseph Starzer *Adèle de Ponthieu* (1773). With *Horaces et des Curiaces* (1774) Noverre deployed a frightening and moving scene of ancient Roman history, a combat between brothers and also a grand military parade with extraordinary pomp and splendour. Unfortunately, his use of a theme of the great French playwright Corneille went too far. It must have annoyed the very conservative Maria Theresa, who presumably ceased to protect him. In any case, the production cost him his job. In 1774 he decided to move to the Teatro Regio Ducale in Milan, which was the capital of Austrian Lombardy and by far the richest Italian city, the sort of place that could afford a Noverre. Here

unfortunately his ambition collided with reality. The Milanese did not take kindly to Noverre, and many reviews of his ballets cast aspersions on him, criticising the fact that his works were slow moving, “With long stretches of pure mime, and boring”.² He grew despondent at his lack of success. Italians were used to spectacular and exciting grotesque dancing that included jumps and virtuosic moves and, besides, Italian national sentiment had begun to stir. As in Germany in the 1770s, so in Italy, young, influential intellectuals no longer looked to France for their artistic models. After only two years, he returned to Vienna to manage their Kärntnertor Theatre. Finally, in 1776, after a thirty-three-year journey throughout Western Europe, his long-term investment in royal patronage paid a big dividend. In 1770 his former pupil Marie Antoinette had married the Dauphin Louis, grandson of the King of France, Louis XV and who thus had the prospect of becoming queen of the richest, most powerful and most populous state in Europe. Paris alone had more inhabitants than the entire Duchy of Württemberg. In 1774 King Louis XV died, and Marie-Antoinette became Queen of France. His esteemed friend Marie Antoinette had not forgotten her dancing master. She ordered his return and secured his appointment at the Paris Opéra. His ambition had now been fulfilled. Noverre, poor, provincial, without class or breeding, had managed his patronage so adroitly that now he could rule the world of dance. But the loyalty and support of royalty can shift. Other geniuses had access and the fate of a low-born subject mattered little especially to the frivolous and casual queen. Noverre got into trouble with Mozart, who had composed *Les Petits Riens*, a bagatelle performed at the Paris Opéra in 1778. Noverre constructed a slight and charming theme to Mozart’s music: the famed Vestris pursued with a net L’Amour (Mlle Allard) disguised as a bird. Mlle Guimard captured the bird and, in a happy ending the bird escaped. Dauberval played a character role in the piece. Apparently Mozart was disappointed with the ballet’s production and that was serious since Mozart already enjoyed the reputation of musical genius. Noverre with his usual arrogance must have assumed that with the queen as patron nobody could touch him. But Dauberval and the ambitious Maximilien Gardel enlisted a cabal against Noverre. They called him egotistical, overly serious and, what is more, they did not like his pantomime pieces. Mlle Guimard also rebelled against his authority and poisoned many prominent people against him. He was unseated and, in 1779, wrote a seventeen-page memorandum describing the difficulties of his reign. His felicitous effect on the Paris ballet world was perpetuated by his later staging of his tragic ballet *Jason et Médée* (1780) that created a sensation, as did his ideas on costume and his thoughts on ballet pantomime, which were dutifully carried through by Pierre Gardel, who inherited the throne and the running of the Paris Opéra in 1787.

Noverre returned to his beloved London and the King's Theatre where he had a brilliant season in 1781, and staged many of his successful ballets from Stuttgart and Vienna. He also returned to Lyons from 1782 until 1787 to recreate many of his old works. There was a poetic justice in this happier golden era of his later years. Again from 1787 to 1788 he redid older works in London, many of which did not conform to his loftier, youthful aesthetic pronouncements, but were much appreciated by London audiences.

The French Revolution broke out in the summer of 1789 and Noverre, in spite of his lowly birth, had depended on royal patronage for much of his career and saw earlier than most that France would be an uncomfortable place for royalists. He hid for a while in the remote area of Triel in France, and managed to get to London, where he spent two years from 1791 to 1793. When the "Terror" and the executions of "enemies of the people" finally ended in July 1794 with the fall of Robespierre and the Jacobins, the fanatics of the revolutionary era gave way to the less puritan and less devoutly republican regime of the Directory.

In 1795 Noverre could safely return to his home in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, in front of the Château, near the Hôtel de Noailles where Mozart had been received. Noverre was nearly destitute because of his association with the old regime and had lost his funds from the Opéra. He returned to visit its studios and stages where young talents were nurtured. He attended rehearsals where he gave advice to young dancers, "and deplores that no male dancers are being formed, with the result that the danseuses now exceed the danseurs in numbers".³ He republished in 1803 his *Lettres* in St Petersburg, amended with the benefit of many years of disappointment and experience. His ballets, however, continued to be revived on the major European stages. He died in Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 19 October 1810 at the age of eighty-three.

The intellectual and aesthetic world of the young Noverre

The art of dance paralleled other developments in theatre and performance in the eighteenth century. Its reliance on carefully patterned steps and an extremely stylised approach to movement, gesture and emotion associated with the absolutist style of the seventeenth century came under criticism. "The real meaning of dance movement was lost in the flash of twinkling feet, in the curve of voluptuous arms, in the coquettish empty glance."⁴ A new emphasis on the expressionistic possibilities of plot and movement enlarged the emotional opportunities for dancers, especially if a ballet had its own beginning, middle and end, and was not merely a *divertissement* in an opera. Several aestheticians in the early eighteenth century had already

expressed interest in a modern form of dance. P. J. Burette (1719) and Abbé du Bos (1719) cited Plato and Aristotle as well as the contemporary Italian actors as advocates of gesture with meaning. Pantomime became an important topic since pantomimes in antiquity were of high repute. In addition, the idea of a ballet with a plot or the *ballet d'action* also took root. In 1741 Rémond de Saint Mard objected to the uniformity and passionless quality of the contemporary ballet. Five years later, Charles Batteux saw the possibility of dance as an independent art form and wrote copiously about its lack of variety and interest. Louis de Cahusac, a librettist, also wrote eloquently about ballet. He was responsible for several articles on dance in the *Encyclopédie* and in 1752 agreed with Batteux about ballet's enormous unfulfilled potential. "Sur nos théâtres nous avons des pieds excellents, des jambes brillantes, des bras admirables. Quel dommage que l'art de la danse nous manque."⁵ (In our theatres we have excellent foot work, brilliant leg work and admirable arms. What a shame that the art of dance is missing!) But the most celebrated heroes of this discussion were the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Denis Diderot, who edited the *Encyclopédie*, wrote extensively on many of the arts including painting and theatre. He also took notice of the ballet and in his *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* (1758), emphasised the goal of imitating nature as had the Ancients. He felt that ballet needed a genius, a writer who would bring down to earth those magical and enchanted regions.⁶

Jean Jacques Rousseau in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) included a brief exposition of ballet's decadence in his diatribe. He noted that dances were thoughtlessly thrown onto the stage without any dramatic reason. "The priests dance, the soldiers dance, the gods dance, the devils dance; people dance into their graves and everyone dances no matter for what reason. Dance continually interrupts the plot or finds itself on stage for no reason, really imitating nothing."⁷

Noverre's dispute with Gasparo Angiolini

Franz Hilverding's dance dramas profoundly affected Italian ballet through the activities of his pupil Gasparo Angiolini and most dance historians believe that pantomimic dancing was well established in Italy in the 1740s. Written scenarios or libretti were necessary accompaniments to performances of ballet pantomimes, since the gestures and plots were not always clear to the audiences. The ballet's scenes and plots needed a structure, laid out on paper, just as the plot and the scenes of a play were written. These well-written libretti became the occasion for a passionate conflict between Angiolini and Noverre. In his *Lettres*, Noverre had urged the use of the

libretti and the importance of a tight and moving plot without subplots and silly scenes, but instead libretti founded on logic and simplicity. Not only was Angiolini infuriated for his mentor Hilverding's sake by Noverre's claims to have invented the ballet pantomime, but he was appalled that Noverre had to depend upon a written crutch for the success of his ballets. Using his *aviso* or preface to his ballet *Le Festin de Pierre, ou Don Juan* (1761) and *Sémiramide* (1765) as forums for a debate, Angiolini quarrelled with Noverre's statements that ballets must be developed like plays. After all, plays lasted as long as three hours, while a ballet would not normally endure for more than one and a half hours. In 1773, Angiolini published a pamphlet, in which he criticised Noverre's use of overly long and detailed libretti. One year later, in the *aviso* to *Thésée en Crète* (Vienna 1774) Angiolini argued that programmes were an abuse. "If the ballets were unintelligible without the printed scenarios, the movements of the ballet should clarify the plot."⁸ The bitter dialogue continued; but history tells us who won this debate. It was Noverre, as fairly lengthy and descriptive ballet programmes continued to be used throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The letters on dancing and ballet

Noverre's greatest claim to influence in the history of ballet rests on his famous *Lettres*. Shortly after their publication, Noverre sent Voltaire a copy of the book and must have been delighted by Voltaire's response in October 1763: "The title of your book may only indicate dance, but you shed a great deal of light on all the arts. Your style is as elegant as your ballets have imagination." After expressing his sorrow at being unable to see one of Noverre's ballets, Voltaire added: "I think that your talent will be much appreciated in England, since they love the truths of nature. But where will you find the actors capable of executing your ideas? You are a Prometheus and you must create men and then animate them."⁹ Six months later Voltaire reaffirmed his high opinion of Noverre: "I find that all you do is full of poetry; painters and poets will argue with one another as to whether you are a painter or a poet."¹⁰ This praise from Europe's most prominent thinker encouraged Noverre to pursue his grand programme.

Like the Encyclopedists, Noverre was never content to make observations on a level of abstract criticism. He expected his ideas to yield practical results and from 1757 began writing a discourse that was inspired by practical experience. His own ballets, particularly *Fêtes chinoises*, presented in Lyons in 1751, Paris in 1754 and London in 1755, had already demonstrated his desire to go beyond traditional entrées and create an integrated cohesive presentation.

The writings of the philosophers confirmed his own thoughts. The first edition of the *Lettres* of 1760 criticised contemporary ballet and enthusiastically proposed reforms. Later he added letters to defend both his principles and his innovations in technique. In the final editions, those of St Petersburg, 1803, and Paris, 1807, he evaluated his previous attitudes, explaining why he had changed or modified certain ideas and expressing displeasure with current trends, some of which directly contradicted his basic tenets.

Noverre dedicated the first publication of his *Lettres* to the Duke of Wurttemberg who, as we have seen, allowed him to spread his wings and practise his newly found artistic principles. Following prevailing eighteenth-century aesthetics, Noverre insisted on truth, simplicity, harmony and the imitation of nature. He usually linked the word nature with “belle” and maintained that the artist must make choices in order to correct the defects of nature and embellish his subject sufficiently to arrive at a noble or picturesque effect. The artist must avoid servile reproduction, rejecting details that are confusing, useless or that delay action: the art was to disguise the effort.¹¹

The letters discuss their subjects in a question and answer format; they address an imaginary intelligent, genteel and educated reader. Though most letters begin with a specific problem, they quickly move to general observations and to the demands for reform that Noverre made. Noverre regularly attacked colleagues, ballet masters and dancers alike, which made him many enemies. But the polemics always lead back to his grand and unified vision of a new ballet aesthetic, which he explains over and over again. Noverre accepted the theory that the art of pantomime had its origins in antiquity and found this a convenient justification for his own innovations. Later he discovered that pantomime was not as effective as he had hoped, and he looked to the future of ballet by championing the dancing of his contemporaries. They offered more variety, more sophistication and truth in their simulation of natural sentiments.

Like Diderot, Noverre refused to limit his canvas to mythological and heroic subjects. He advocated unlimited choice and urged *maîtres de ballets* to be alert to subjects taken from daily life in the country and the city. They were not to preach but never to forget the moral purpose of art. “How many varied pictures will he not find amongst working men and artisans! Each has different attitudes born of the positions and movements which his work imposes. This stance, this deportment, this way of moving, always common to his trade and always pleasing, must be suggested by the choreographer” (*Letters*, p. 73). Indeed Noverre put peasants on stage in *Annette et Lubin* and in *Adelaïde ou la Bergère des Alpes* taken from Marmontel.

In spite of his claims to represent real life, he really preferred the depth and sublimity of tragedy. He showed in his grand historical works that tragedy could work in a ballet (*Letters*, p. 85). The term historical here

embraced historical, mythological and religious themes. He criticised the use of arbitrary, abstract, exaggerated allegory (*Letters*, p. 143), but accepted that it could be instructive as well as entertaining when used with circumspection to depict human virtue (*Letters*, pp. 279–83).

Noverre understood that the audience might be dazzled by virtuosic dancing, but he believed that ballet could not achieve its full potential if brilliant mechanical execution lacked warmth and feeling. He proposed a reorientation in purpose: dancers needed to understand that ballet was a composition of passions and that their souls spoke through their eyes (*Letters*, p. 94). For this reason dancers should sacrifice complicated steps, which detract from the natural. He advised them to learn the art of pantomime in order to hide the effort of dance and to evoke the passions being represented (*Letters*, p. 35).

Noverre assumed that facial expressions could be more expressive than words because words, which have to be arranged in sequences over time, can never have an immediate effect. Since the language of pantomime came from the soul of the performer, it went directly to the heart of the viewer (*Letters*, p. 140). He had watched Garrick as the best possible representative of this technique. Noverre rejected the use of masks, because they destroyed the true proportions between the head and the body, and prevented the communication of sensitive facial expressions. He compared wearing masks to giving a performance from behind an un-raised stage curtain (*Letters*, pp. 20–4).

Noverre associated ballet with all the arts, but especially with painting, either in detail of execution, or in overall effect: “A ballet is a painting, the scene is the canvas, the mechanical movements of the dancers are the colours, their facial expressions are the paintbrush. Thus the whole ensemble, the vivacity of each scene, the musical voice, the decoration and the costume comprise the subtle colorations – and finally the choreographer is the painter” (*Letters*, p. 88). Of all the arts, he saw dance as the highest expression because of its dynamic portrayal of a series of ideas or emotions in time. However, he expressed regret that dance was ephemeral and that time, energy and talent expended for a moment of beauty would disappear so quickly (*Letters*, p. 324).

Noverre’s methodology for the training of dancers paved the way for many future treatises, especially Carlo Blasis’s ground-breaking 1820 work *An Elementary Treatise upon the Theory and Practice of the Art of Dancing*. Noverre understood that human anatomy was paramount. In Letters 11 and 12 Noverre analysed why knowledge of the muscles, bones and nerves of the body was essential to the dancing master. How could a teacher ask the student to turn out at the knees if the knee was incapable of turning out? It could only bend and straighten. Each student had particular difficulties

with the ballet technique and the teacher had therefore to take them into consideration when giving corrections.

Noverre, never a modest man, announced that he single-handedly intended to transform the entire art of dance. He spoke about pulling the dance out of its lethargy and languor. He alone had the courage to struggle against deeply engrained prejudices and habits. If something went wrong, he quickly found someone else to blame: he was either successful or misunderstood and therefore less successful. But his conclusions in 1803 swept away all uncertainties: "The glory of my art, my age and my numerous brilliant successes, permit me to state that I have achieved a revolution in dancing, as striking and as lasting as that achieved by Gluck in the realm of music. The successes even by imitators today are the greatest testimony to the value of the principles which I have laid down in my work" (*Letters*, p. 2).