

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Bedfordshire
Unit of Assessment: 35 - Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study: Re-thinking choreographic histories: the impact of practice-based research on choreological historiography
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dance research has frequently suffered from the divide between historical investigation and performance making. This case study focuses on an innovative approach to a practice-based process of making dance histories, or choreological historiography. This approach brings together the narratives that are central to research in Music, Dance, Drama and Performing Arts (MDDPA) at the University of Bedfordshire. Since 2010, this approach has informed choreographic work or performance-lectures across Europe. Events such as the Royal Ballet School's <i>Focus on Style</i> highlight the benefits a practice-based historical investigation in dance brings to both dance scholars and dance practitioners.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Background</p> <p>In May 2012, Dr Giannandrea Poesio, Reader in Dance at the University of Bedfordshire, was invited by the Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet School in London, to join an international team of dance experts involved in explorations of notions of style relating to five world-famous ballet 'schools': the French, the Italian, the Danish, the Russian and the English. These practice-based investigations were finalized to public performance-lectures, grouped under the title <i>Focus on Style</i> and held at the Royal Ballet School in London between October 2012 and March 2013. The invite stemmed from knowledge of Dr Poesio's findings in the fields of dance reconstruction and dance history [3.2, 3.3] and, more significantly, of his specifically devised practice-based historiographical methods. These were first presented in Dr Poesio's paper/demonstration at the 1998 Society for Dance History Scholars conference in Oregon [3.1], which prompted the invitation to contribute as 'historical consultant and reconstructor' to the 1998 reconstruction of the 1890 production of the ballet <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> by the Kirov Ballet in St Petersburg. The production, which premiered in New York, saw Dr Poesio's contribution praised in the international dance press [5.1]. What started as a tentative mode of practice-based investigation soon developed into a method of revisiting past choreographic practices which informed the revival of the 1886 Italian ballet <i>Amor</i>, commissioned in 2007 to Dr Poesio by the Italian Ministry of Culture for the centenary of composer Romualdo Marenco. The finished work, <i>Amor 2007</i>, premiered in Rome in June 2008 and was subsequently televised and broadcast by SKY later on in Italy, France and Germany [3.4] attracting the praise of the specialist press [5.2].</p> <p>Methods</p> <p>Although Dr Poesio's interest in formulating potentially new approaches to reviving movement dance from the past started in 1998, it was only in the academic year 2007/8 that his research concentrated on the formulation of a practice-led approach to choreological historiography, following the <i>choreographic</i> commission mentioned above. The 2011 appointment at the University of Bedfordshire proved instrumental in refining such formulation, thanks to the university's supporting research strategies and culture. Poesio's approach relies on a triangulation of data relating to both the performance in question and, more significantly, aspects of performance tradition that Poesio, as a dance historian, uncovered. Central to the investigation of the named performance tradition is both a historiographical and a practice-based study of theatrical solutions that transcends the mere and traditionally employed diachronic analysis of a specific ballet schools and styles, and considers other, and often overlooked, factors derived from an in-depth study of performing contexts of the time. Key to this approach is the practice led and based experimentation that goes beyond the boundaries of the more traditional and historically well-established text based approach to dance reconstruction – whether the text be dance notation or written records. This approach found an ideal context in the practice-based research narrative that characterizes the MDDPA culture at the University of Bedfordshire.</p>

3. References to the research

- 3.1 Poesio, G. (1998) 'Carabosse Revisited: Enrico Cecchetti and the long lost language of mime', paper/demonstration addressing a potential new approach to making practice-based dance history. Presented at the SDHS annual conference, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 1998. Published in SDHS Proceedings, 1998.
- 3.2 Poesio, G. (2000) 'Reviving the gesture', *Dancing in the Millennium*, Society of Dance History Scholars, Washington, 2000, *Dancing in the Millennium Proceedings*, 339 -341.
- 3.3 Poesio, G. (2002) 'The gesture and the dance', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Winter, 40-50.
- 3.4 Poesio, G. (2008) *Amor 2007* televised broadcast of the whole 1886 ballet reconstructed and re-choreographed by G. Poesio and A. Borriello, Rome, RAISAT (European ART Channel) – first broadcast on 15 September 2008. DVD included.
guidatv.sky.it/guidatv/programma/ragazziemusica/musica/amor-a-borriello-e-g-poesio-cor-160043.shtml

4. Details of the impact

Each of the study days in the *Focus on Style* [5.3] series, included a historical introduction on the *selected* school, followed by a master class for young professionals, in which distinctive features of each national 'style' were explored practically.

As the scholar/choreographic expert in charge of the study day on the Italian school, Dr Poesio was faced with the problem that little or nothing was known until recently of that particular dance tradition. In agreement with the Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet School, it was thus proposed to revise the given structure of each study day by including practical sections in the historical introduction, in line with the choreological historiography methodological approach Dr Poesio had used for both the reconstruction/revival of the 1890 *Sleeping Beauty* and the 1886 Italian ballet *Amor*. The purpose of such inclusions, namely never seen before extracts from a duet from *Amor*, was twofold. On the one hand, the reconstructed dance substantiated the historical narrative researched and expounded by Dr Poesio, by showing practical rendition of unique features of the Italian school, relating to both training and dance making. More significantly, the practical demonstrations highlighted the already mentioned triangulation process (see section 2) that Dr Poesio formulated when reconstructing or reviving dance works. Each section was thus performed first in its entirety and then divided and performed again in sub-sections, to be examined in detail, thus allowing the audience to partake in the proposed historiographical process. As such, the danced sections highlighted a number of issues that had been long overlooked by dance scholars, as well as exposing commonplaces that have long underpinned Western ballet history. Particularly significant, in this sense, was the way the duet's structure and compared to what is erroneously believed to be the standard composition of the ballet duet in the *second* half of the 19th century – an aspect that was later to become central to the final *Ballet Evolves* performance lecture discussed below. Similarly, well-established notions of gender in ballet were challenged by the reconstruction of the long-lost duet and its historicisation, thus opening new possibilities for research at international level. Both prompted a vibrant, audience-centred debate, which followed the showing of the duet.

The audience of the *Focus on Style* study day included 7 dance choreographers/reconstructors (1 from France, 1 from Sweden and the rest from the UK), 5 dance scholars from the UK, 45 dance teachers from diverse European countries (32 from the UK, 7 from Italy, 4 from France), 6 dance journalists and writers (1 from Germany, 1 from Italy and 4 from the UK), three company directors (the Royal Ballet, English National Ballet and Florence Opera House Ballet Company), two dance festival directors from Italy, 25 dance students and 27 dance goers [5.3] Such an audience of specialists and professionals was then invited to further explore issues relating the Italian school by attending/participating into a master class that occupied the second half of the study day. Dr Poesio in collaboration with Cara Drower, MA – Director of the Cecchetti Centre in London and internationally renowned ballet mistress – devised the class in line with the *principles* explored in the earlier section; as such it contained explicit references to the choreographic elements

highlighted by reconstructed duet, which were thus offered to the participants to experiment with.

The outcome of the event was thus three-fold as remarked by dance writer Patricia Linton [5.4] in the international magazine *Dancing Times*. Firstly, the event validated a particular approach to dealing with past choreographic traditions, which, unlike other forms of reconstruction, goes beyond the mere use of notated sources and/or other choreographic documentation. Secondly, it cast light on an area of dance history that has long remained in the shadows, in spite of it *conventionally* being deemed by most dance historians as a truly significant one. Finally, it proposed a model for a fertile cross-disciplinary collaboration between scholars and the industry, aimed at filling that gap that remains to date a problematic aspect of contemporary dance culture.

Focus on Style informed the *Ballet Evolved* performance-lectures series organised by the Education Department of the Royal Opera House in London, presented in October, January and June 2013. These performance-lectures too draw upon the collaboration between scholarly research – represented by Dr Poesio – and the industry – represented by Ursula Hageli, ballet mistress for the Royal Ballet – and dancers from the company. Aimed at re-assessing dance history the *Ballet Evolved* series was performed to a live audience (between 120 and 200 people each time); it was also filmed and posted via 7 videos on both the Royal Opera House website and YouTube, where it has been seen to date by 103, 481 viewers [5.6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Craine, Debra (2000) 'Now and Then: The Kirov authenticates *The Sleeping Beauty*', *Dance Now*, Vol.9, N.3, Autumn, 2-11.
- 5.2 Pedroni, Francesca (2011) 'Amor 2007', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 June, 19.
- 5.3 *Focus on Style* – Information pack, inclusive of aims, description, source list, and specificity of the event.
- 5.4 Linton, Patricia (2013) 'A Focus on Style, Part Two: The Italian School' in *Dancing Times*, January 2013, Vol.103, Issue 1229, 19-22 - Full report on both the study day and the masterclass.
- 5.5 Acting Director of Royal Ballet School (2013) Testimonial on Focus on Style event, inclusive of audience figures and audience's appreciation.
- 5.6 *Ballet Evolved* performance-lectures series (7 videos) Royal Opera House/You Tube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=auDNcfK0Wcs&list=PLFEuShFvJzBww3IVbFABGB0HblxNQ2TiA (inclusive of all 7 videos).