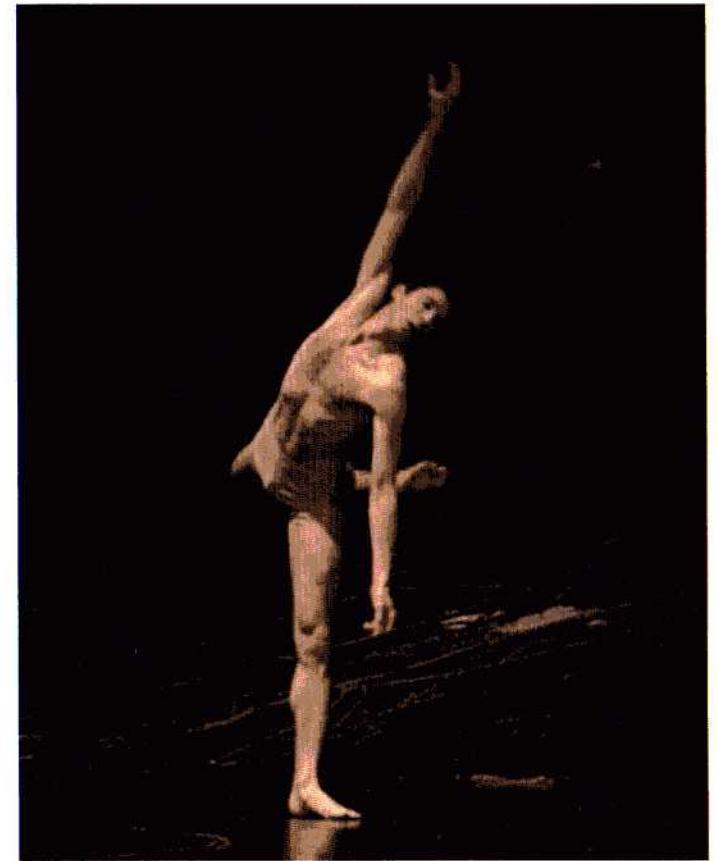


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# Trisha Brown's Choreographic Staging of Rameau's *Pygmalion*

A tri-partite collaboration between dance, music and baroque imagery

By Dominika Hens

(translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones)

It comes as a surprise when a post-modern choreographer – in whose work over the past few decades the predominant sounds have been that of bodies sliding across the stage, the spoken word or other noises – turns to the field of Baroque opera. In her choreographic staging of Rameau's *Pygmalion*<sup>1</sup>, the world premiere of which took place in 2010 at the Théâtre Carré in Amsterdam, Trisha Brown has created a taut

<sup>1</sup> Rameau's *Pygmalion* was commissioned in 1748 by the Paris Opéra to a libretto by Ballot de Savot, which was based on an earlier work by Antoine Houdard de La Motte, who in turn had written the libretto for the opéra-ballet *Le Triomphe des arts* to music by Michel de La Barre in Paris, 1700. This act in de La Motte's work was entitled *La Statue*. The one-act work *Pygmalion* is regarded as an 'acte de ballet' – a blend of the genres of opera and dance – as well as a baroque machine spectacle. The plot is based on a condensed version of the *Pygmalion* episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Metamorphoses*, X. 243–297); For further information on Rameau's 'acte de ballet', see Mathias Spohr, 'Pigmalion', in *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, ed. by Carl Dahlhaus and the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater of the University of Bayreuth under the direction of Sieghart Döhring, 7 vols (Munich: Piper 1986–1997), V (1994), pp. 176–177 (p. 176); On the act of bringing the statue to life in Rameau as well as interferences in the material in stage dance history and the paradox of the 'statue animée', see generally Gabriele Brandstetter, 'Der Tanz der Statue. Zur Repräsentation von Bewegung im Theater des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Pygmalion. Die Geschichte des Mythos in der abendländischen Kultur*, ed. by Mathias Mayer and Gerhard Neumann (= Litterae 45) (Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach, 1997), pp. 393–422.

relationship between historical periods and fields of the arts. The composition, libretto and paradigms of baroque imagery contrast here with a post-modern mode of movement that integrates both 'pure movement' and manifold gestures. What unfolds in front of Trisha Brown's sweeping ink drawings and Elizabeth Cannon's loose-fitting, flowing costumes is an enigmatic dialogue between music, dance and baroque imagery.

Trisha Brown's preoccupation with baroque music began in 1995 with *M.O.* This sequentially structured choreography, which is based on her intensive exploration of Johann Sebastian Bach's writings on counterpoint, is arranged to excerpts from Bach's *Musical Offering* (1747). Equally, in her choreographic pieces based on baroque stage works from which *L'Orfeo* (1998), *Pygmalion* (2010) and scenes from *Hippolyte et Aricie* (2009) arose, Brown engaged intensively with composition even during the preparatory stage. Guillaume Bernardi describes this approach as an extension of her ong-term practice of artistic collaboration<sup>2</sup>, a concept that she adopted from Merce Cunningham and John Cage.

In contrast to Cunningham's collage-like choreographies, Trisha Brown uses synergies between the participating artists during the process of the production, such as in *Glacial Decoy* (1979), one of her collaborations with Robert Rauschenberg, in which imagery and dance enter into a dialogue on the silence of the room.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even across the

<sup>2</sup> "In many ways, Brown's opera work was a continuation of her collaborative practice. Just as *M.O.* was a dialogue of equals between Brown and Bach, *L'Orfeo* [...] [was] indeed [a] dialogue [...] between Brown and Monteverdi [...]. She was less intent on furthering the expression of [...] [Monteverdi's] ideas [...] than exploring the possibilities of the dialogue. Brown [...] was able to envision the relationships between the various components of an opera [...], each element responding to the others but keeping its own identity." Guillaume Bernardi, 'The voice is a muscle': Trisha Brown and opera', in *Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001*, ed. by Hendel Teicher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 251–255, (p. 253).

<sup>3</sup> See also Louppe, 'Chaos made tangible', in *Danse, précis de liberté*, ed. by Doucet and Boulan, pp. 117–118.

centuries, she does not shy away from seeking a dialogue with the artist. To this end, the acte de ballet *Pygmalion* offers diverse potential for collaborations between dance, imagery and music in its hybrid form of musical theatre.

### Pure movement featuring baroque music and imagery

Trisha Brown's choreographies live from a fascination with 'pure movement'. This is illustrated by her interest in "*natural daily movement*"<sup>4</sup> as well as other movements that are biomechanical in nature. This vocabulary of movement, one that consciously seeks to break with classical ballet and modern dance, is rooted in Trisha Brown's artistic disposition as a member of the Judson Dance Theater and The Grand Union in the 1960s-70s. Research ranging from simple movements to complex motion patterns became Trisha Brown's trademark during this time and led to her ideal of 'pure movement':

Pure movement is a movement that has no other connotations. It is not functional or pantomimic. Mechanical body actions like bending, straightening or rotating would qualify as pure movement providing the context was neutral. I use pure movements, a kind of breakdown of the body's capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

In *Pygmalion*, such post-modern choreographies with an emphasis on movement patterns occur above all in the purely instrumental passages such as the dance suite. Here, Trisha Brown takes up the baroque tradition of the dance 'figure' (French) as will be illustrated.

<sup>4</sup> An-Marie Lambrecht, *Kunsten Festival des Arts*, 1995; cited by Corinne Diserens, 'Tracé brownien', in *Trisha Brown. Danse, précis de liberté*, ed. by Michèle Doucet and Marie-Sophie Boulan (Marseille: Musées de Marseille, 1998), pp. 9–11 (p. 9).

<sup>5</sup> Trisha Brown, 'A Profile', in *Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark: pioneers of the downtown scene, New York 1970s*, ed. by Lydia Yee (Munich: Prestel, 2011), pp. 182–185 (p. 184); First published by L&S Graphics (1976, unpaginated); reprinted in Ann Livet (ed.), *Contemporary Dance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978), p. 45.

The 'figure' initially appears in choreographic-poetic discourse from the 17th and 18th centuries as a technique of movement as well as in formal categories relating to physicality and space. When the term 'figure' is used, it refers to a descriptive, depersonalised figure or a combination of steps. It was Claude-François Ménéstrier who first differentiated the term to a further extent by including the spatial alignment of the body and both the individual's and the group's floor paths besides archetypal figures that are marked by distinctive attributes<sup>6</sup>:

[...] les figures sont les diverses dispositions des danseurs, qui dansent de front, dos contre dos, en rond, en carré, en croix, en sautoir, en croissant sur une ligne, en évolution, en se poursuivant, en fuyant, en s'entrelassant les uns dans les autres.<sup>7</sup>

Raoul-Auger Feuillet retains the term 'figure' in his notation to refer to the relationship between bodies and space, and divides choreographed floor paths into regular, mirrored, and irregular, parallel movement patterns.<sup>8</sup> Besides its regular form and ornamental character, the dance 'figure' also holds a baroque 'surplus': its allegorical-representative character. Despite its ephemerality as a phenomenon on stage, it contains ambivalent moments of imagery by representing, and at times even reproducing – for instance, in emblematic, choreographies that simulate letters of the alphabet – and in creating or suspending similarities to its object of reference.

<sup>6</sup> Claude-François Ménéstrier, *Des Ballets anciens et modernes selon les Règles du Théâtre* (Paris, 1682), pp. 140–142.

<sup>7</sup> Ménéstrier, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> "On doit remarquer deux sortes de figures dans la Dance, sçavoir figure reguliere & figure irreguliere. La figure reguliere est quand deux ou plusieurs Danceurs vont par mouvement contraire, c'est-à-dire que tandis que l'un va à droit, l'autre va à gauche. [...] La figure irreguliere est quand les deux Danceurs qui figurent ensemble vont tous deux d'un même côté." Raoul-Auger Feuillet, *Chorégraphie, ou l'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* (Paris: L'Auteur et M. Brunet, 1700), p. 92.

The following will address the question of whether and in what way Trisha Brown contends with this allegorical surplus of baroque stage dance and the role played by composition, according to Brown's definition of pure movement as a "non-neutral context".

Rameau's dance suite at the end of scene IV, a purely instrumental arrangement, is devised by Trisha Brown using only pure movement. The dance suite is composed in a condensed and abridged way; Rameau forgoes several of the usual repetitions in individual dances, among others, in favour of dramatic tension. The suite, introduced by the Air, is seamlessly followed by several consecutive dances: Gavotte gracieuse, Menuet, Gavotte gaie, Chaconne vive, Loure très grave, Passepiéd vif, Rigaudon vif, Sarabande, and Tambourin. Trisha Brown does not follow the scene directions in the libretto whereby the graces teach the statue the various 'caractères de la danse' and thereby introduce her to court etiquette. Instead, the dancers, without the singer performer, enter into a tightly woven dialogue with the music.

During the introductory air in 3/4 time, two pairs of dancers attempt simultaneous swings that course not only through their own bodies but also incorporate the bodies of their partners, continuing there. The rhythmically lively Gavotte gracieuse in alla breve time is designed to make a choreographic transition: on the repetition of the melody, the formation is extended by a third pair thereby creating a choreographic equivalence to the musical phrasing. The Menuet in 3/4 time is choreographed sequentially by Trisha Brown. Lined up on a diagonal that serves to establish a geometric pattern from the front right to the back left, the three pairs carry out the same dance phrases with a time delay. The choreographic phrase lasts eight measures, just as the musical phrase does. However, only the front pair dances their phrase for eight measures. The pairs in the middle and furthest back begin their movement material each with a one-measure delay so that choreographic "overhangs" of one or two measures result. The repetition of the phrase is similarly sequential but is carried out with other movement material. During the Gavotte gaie, the pairs re-establish simultaneity by taking out the "overhangs" from which the second pair then liberates itself from with its own movement phrase, becomes the focus and thereby establishes a choreographic centre of

