

VOM SCHÄFERIDYLL ZUR REVOLUTION

Europäische Tanzkultur im 18. Jahrhundert



2. Rothenfelser Tanzsymposion

21.—25. Mai 2008

Tagungsband

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von

Uwe Schlottermüller, Howard Weiner und Maria Richter



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Für unseren Tagungsband wurde sie mit einem roten Halsband versehen:
Mit diesem Erkennungszeichen durfte man bestimmte Bälle besuchen, wenn
(mindestens) ein Familienangehöriger auf der Guillotine hingerichtet worden war.

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Uwe W. Schlottermüller
Postfach 5266
79019 Freiburg

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Getting through the French Revolution as a Female Dancer

The Life and Works of Marie Madeleine Guimard

MARINA NORDERA

The female dancers have naturally a greater ease of expression than the men. More pliable in their limbs, with more sensibility in the delicacy of their frame; all their motions and their actions are more tenderly pathetic, more interesting than in our sex. We are besides prepossessed in their favour, and less disposed to remark or cavil at their faults. While on the other hand, that so natural desire they have of pleasing, independently of their profession, makes them studiously avoid any motion or gesture that might be disagreeable, and consequently any contortion of the face. They, instinctively then, one may say, make a point of the most graceful expression.¹

This text, published in 1762 by dance director Giovanni Andrea Gallini, clearly reveals the ambiguity about what is »natural« for a woman dancer. Nature could be seen here as a limitation or an expansion of the freedom of the dancing woman on stage. This way of viewing the body of a female dancer echoes the tensions between the new ideas promoted by the Enlightenment and the active (or passive) social role of women during this very special period of upheaval and historical transition.

Marie Madeleine Guimard (1743–1816), a well-known female dancer at the Paris Opera, was also an outstanding protagonist of artistic and intellectual Parisian society during the pre-revolutionary period. Her artistic talent, her professional career, as well as her life experience contributed to the formation of a new image of the female dancer on and off the stage owing to the fact that she succeeded in asserting her personal choices in terms of interpretation, costumes, employment contracts, and so on. As the testimony of her contemporaries shows, she was doing this in a very »natural« way.

The aim of this paper is to show how Guimard developed specific strategies in order to cope with social, artistic, and historical changes. Her character, carefully fashioned by the roles she chose to interpret at the Paris Opera and in her private theater, is a kind of paradigmatic figure that focuses on the contradictions of the transition from Enlightenment to the Revolutionary period. For my investigation, I'll be employing theoretical tools from social history, the history of mentalities and imagination, and gender theory. In particular, I am interested in the definition of her economic status, in the processes that structured social, intellectual and artistic networks, in articulating subjectivity with intersubjectivity, in the elaboration of symbolic systems through embodiment and performativity, in the imaginary projections produced by narration and myth, and in the porosity between public and private space. The corpus of sources is made up of a very limited number of autograph manuscripts (mostly having to do with her professional life, and often second-hand), texts by persons embedded in her social and artistic network, caricatures and portraits, etchings and prints, archival documents

(gazette, police reports, judicial records, private or public chronicles, registers, contracts, and so on), and, finally, the biography authored by Edmond de Goncourt, which was reconstructed largely from the »Registres des Menus Plaisirs« of the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra and published in 1892.

It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of the sources was produced by men and, quite often, for men, and that those rare sources by or for women are not immune to the discursive construct that is produced by a dominant male culture. In the 18th century, cultural promoters, teachers, theoreticians, and choreographers were men. Women were performers who more often than not went down in history for their beauty or sensuality, rather than for their technical or artistic talent. The current feminine connotation of the art of dancing and the idea that it is unseemly for a man to dance are the heritage of this mindset.

Guimard was born in 1743 as the illegitimate daughter of Fabien Guimard, a textile inspector. Her mother, Anne Bernard, who is only known through her role in her daughter's life, provided her with a good education and did her best to prepare her for an artistic career. Only after the mother's death did Monsieur Guimard legally recognize Marie Madeleine as his daughter, when she was 21 years old and already a star. Her first engagement was at the »Comédie française« in about 1758. Around the same time she fell in love with Leger, a dancer at the Paris Opera. Her mother did not approve of this relationship and denounced Leger, however without any repercussions. This first »liaison amoureuse« was marked by adversity: Marie Madeleine lived in poverty and gave birth to a baby in a shabby room without heating.

Although the beginnings of her career remain obscure, the main elements fit to what we know of the training system of that time: family tradition, poor origins, and illegitimate birth were the conditions that predestined a woman for a career as a dancer. From 1713, the year in which the ballet school at the Académie Royale de Musique opened its doors, poor girls who displayed promise in terms of physical skill and beauty were admitted for free into the dance program (and given board and lodging). They were called »filles du foyer de l'Opéra« and constituted a sort of reservoir for the »corps de ballet« – and hunting grounds for noblemen and libertines from a certain stratum of Parisian masculine society.

Starting in 1762, Guimard was employed at the Paris Opera as a »danseuse seule double et figurante« thanks to the protection of Monsieur d'Harnoncourt and Monsieur de Saint-Lubin, two noblemen who were well known as talent scouts for – and, according to their 19th-century biographers, as lovers of – promising young female dancers. While occupying this position, she was called upon to replace the injured première danseuse Marie Allard in the role of Terpsichore in *Fêtes Grecques et Romaines*.

According to Noverre, Marie Allard was the only female dancer of that time able to compose her dances by herself. Unfortunately, we do not know how Guimard dealt with the role of Terpsichore, how she learned it, and whether she was able to use her personal compositional and improvisational skills, rather than merely reproducing Allard's

composition. In any case, the performance was an immediate success. Guimard was only 19 years old, yet she understood that she had been presented with the opportunity to raise her standard of living as well as her social standing, and, with her mother's valuable contribution, she became her own manager, both of her career as a dancer and of her life as a woman. The contract published by Goncourt, although from a later period, specifies a monthly fixed salary, plus an annual fee for unlimited availability for performances at court and in the opera house, for unscheduled rehearsals and performances.

Marie Madeleine Guimard becomes »La Guimard«

Starting in 1762 she was for ten years the mistress of Jean Benjamin de la Borde, »premier gentilhomme de Compagnie du Roi, gouverneur du Louvre«, and an amateur composer. In 1763 she gave birth to a daughter, Marie Madeleine, who remained illegitimate until the age of seven, but died at the age of 15. Since women and men working in theatrical professions were excluded from the church, their babies were often registered as being born of unknown parents (as was the case with Guimard's daughter) or false information was provided (Guimard's birth certificate, for example, was a falsification made for the act of legitimation). The identification of maternity or paternity is difficult for the historian, and is sometimes only possible at the moment of legitimation when the parents provide the details of the birth. This is probably the reason why no traces are to be found of the son born of Guimard's relationship with Leger: he may never have been legitimated, or may never have existed, merely being the imaginary offspring of sinful behavior, fantasized by the institutionalized gossip of the time. Marie Madeleine Guimard subjective experiences as a daughter and a mother probably had consequences for the maternity rights battle that she was to fight during the last years of her career at the Paris Opera, organizing several early union movements in that institutional context that was predominantly male-dominated, conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian.

During the 1760s, Guimard surrounded herself with wealthy patrons: the »amant de cœur« Benjamin de La Borde, »fonctionnaire de la cour et musicien amateur«, the more generous Prince Soubise (in 1768 he provided her with 6000 livres a month, much more than her salary as a dancer), and Monsieur De Jarente, an aristocratic clergyman and bishop of Orleans. The choice of lovers reveals a precise strategy in the creation of social and economic networks: the court, the nobility, the high urban bourgeoisie, the clergy, the colleagues from the stage, the artists ... Guimard entertained relations of different natures with several men at the same time. Each of them represented a specific sociological and economic category: the »amant de cœur« (less generous), the honorary lover (the most generous), the useful lover (the most politically influential), and the simple lover. The management of these relationships was a serious business for her.

Each man represented an economic investment within the larger project of self-promotion. This network of lovers established rules for an alternative social order which corrupted the domination system from the inside and created an economic structure parallel to the usual manner of financing show business. This phenomenon, which disregarded the moral and moralistic categories of »commercialization« and the »trafficking« of female bodies constructed by 19th-century mentality, and still effects present-day historiography, has yet to be studied as such.

The faithful La Borde built a charming residence for her in Pantin, in the suburbs of Paris, where she organized »salons« three times a week for different, specifically invited audiences: artists, intellectuals, aristocrats, women of the stage and/or »prostitutes« (sources disagree about this specific point, displaying the ambiguity of the professional status of female dancers at that time). The house had its own theater, seating 250, where parodies and erotic pieces were given on a regular basis by professional and amateur artists. Guimard, too, took roles allowing multilayered possibilities of interpretation.

Beside the profession of female dancer, the organization of social visibility seems to have been a strategy of parallel self-promotion. Guimard was a public personality and we know so much about her because she was at the center of the worldly, cultural, and even financial life of her time. As a result of her fabulous years of success, Marie Madeleine became wealthy enough to commission a villa, located in the elegant new residential area of the Chaussée d'Antin, from the renowned architect Nicholas Ledoux. This house had a theater in which pieces of a particular genre – salacious, frivolous, parodistic and erotic (Topfer) – were presented on a regular basis. The theater, which was decorated with ionic and Corinthian columns, provided enough space to seat an audience of 500. The tradition of the salon was maintained in the new residence.

Guimard made the main decisions concerning the technical conception of this theater (Hinchcliff). The chronicles of the time note the perceptive proximity and a sort of illusion of continuity between the stage and the audience, phenomena favored by the shape of the hall. This is a strategy for gathering society inside a private territory, a kind of appropriation of public space realized by absorbing it into the private space. This continuity of public and private space is also evident in the structure of Guimard's house: from the entrance there was a direct access to the bathroom, since it was quite »natural« in 18th century to receive guests while bathing.² This opening of the intimate sphere has a social function in consolidating networks in a context where the decency threshold admitted this practice (it was to change in 19th-century bourgeois life³). And if »the corporeality could be seen as the material condition of subjectivity«⁴, Marie Madeleine Guimard, thanks to her perceptive and choreographic experience as a dancer, knew how political the relation between body and space could be.

The ornamentation of Guimard's villa was entrusted to the young Jacques Louis David and to Honoré Fragonard. The latter portrayed the dancer several times. An initial analysis of the portraits shows some elements that indicate small transformations in the form of a body that was imagined not only by the painters but also by Guimard herself

(she was without a doubt party to the iconographical organization and the setting, as was the usual practice of those years). Comments by her contemporaries make it obvious that Guimard's body did not correspond to the epoch's ideal of beauty. No one ever said that she was beautiful, but everyone agreed that she was fascinating. She had »la plus jolie gorge du monde«, but she was too thin.

Guimard got rid of rigid petticoats and heavy coiffures, and preferred naturalness in clothing, which was more appropriate to the new directions taken by the »ballet d'action« and the pantomime. She usually wore a multi-layered and colored skirt that exposed her ankles and was decorated by garlands and pompons. This kind of dress is certainly more comfortable for movement, but it is not less expensive: in 1779, the Opéra spent 30.000 livres for her costumes, causing the other female dancers to protest. Her stage-dress influenced everyday fashion. She was called the »goddess of taste«, and the couturiers produced dresses »à la Guimard«.

Guimard displayed great skill in fashioning her image as a dancer in a number of »demi-caractère« roles in Maximilien Gardel's ballets (for example, *Ninette à la cour* of 1778 and *Le déserteur* of 1786). In this context I would like to quote a comment made by Grimm in his literary correspondence of 1778 about Guimard's role of Nicette in *La Chercheuse d'esprit*, a »ballet-pantomime« by Gardel:

une gradation de nuances si fine, si juste, si délicate, si piquante que la poésie la plus ingénieuse ne saurait tendre les mêmes caractères avec plus d'esprit, de délicatesse, de vérité. Comme sa simplicité est naïve sans être niaise. Comme sa grâce naturelle se cache sans affectation, se développe par degrés et plaît sans se presser de plaire.⁵

Nicette could be considered the paradigmatic figure of the characters preferred by Guimard and by her public: young, simple, naive, fresh, spontaneous, and vivacious. In a print by Jean Prud'hon, after a drawing by Sébastien Coeuré (end of the 18th — beginning of the 19th century), Marie Madeleine Guimard is portrayed in this role: posing in fourth position, her hands delicately placed on the double skirts embroidered with flowers, the slightly tilted head wearing a charming hat, with a timid smile on her face, and an oblique glance of the eyes. On stage, Guimard created a character that contrasted strongly with her public image. In doing this she activated a form of feminine creativity and constructed a multi-layered subjectivity as a means of emancipating herself, albeit in an ambiguous way. At the end of her career, while still in her forties, Guimard continued selecting the roles of innocent girls whose gestures and movements expressed »natural character« rather than »social codes«. The hesitant and immature grace of an adolescent brings out the eroticism of the female body in a very particular way, underlining the contradictions between life and stage. An analysis of the typologies of her roles throughout her career reveals very clear choices concerning the symbolic projection, imagery, gender, posture, and exposure on stage: stratification of the biological body, a body transformed by dance practice and technique, erotic body, social body, expressive body and so on.⁶ We might ask whether Guimard was choreographing

her own dances. How is it possible to think that a woman so skilled in the fashioning of her public character could be subjugated by the will of the »maîtres de ballet«?

Throughout her long tenure at the Paris Opera, Guimard had a strong influence on the decisions of this institution, influencing the opinions of her colleagues to such a degree that she was called »the occult female director of the Opera«. In 1775, for example, in a letter to the Queen she voiced her opposition, together with a group of female dancers from the Paris Opera, to the nomination of the Franco-African Chevallier de St Georges as director of the Académie Royale de Musique, and she also actively participated in the »expulsion« of Noverre from the Opera.

The context was probably more favorable, and Guimard's personality strong enough to profit from the changing political and social situation. She managed to create a feminine political power base inside the Opera, a very hierarchical and conservative institution. Female dancers managed to express their opinion and also to influence their colleagues. This feminine public opinion had to negotiate with the masculine institutional power. In the case of the Chevallier de St Georges, for example, the dancers, by writing to the queen, brought into play a feminine network that efficiently interacted with the masculine network.

Various aspects of Guimard's life provide subject matter for moral discourses, but also for panegyrics such as that by Duplain, who celebrated the dancer in the poem *Guimard, ou l'art de la danse pantomime* (1783). Starting in 1768 there exists evidence of charitable deeds that were skilfully planned to counter negative gossip, but that were certainly also prompted by memories of the deprivation she suffered at the beginning of her career. The winter of 1768 was very cold. Guimard asked her lovers for money instead of jewels. The 6.000 livres collected in this manner she then personally distributed to the poor living in the Saint Roch parish. This event is depicted in the engraving *Terpsichore charitable ou Mademoiselle Guimard visitant les pauvres*.

Social solidarity and charity: these are traditional female virtues active already in the early modern period, but that take on new meaning and social value in the pre-Revolutionary era. Guimard collected money from the rich to distribute to the needy. But it should be noted that, besides this charitable activity, she also made loans to dealers and artisans facing economic problems, charging interest (possibly bordering on usury) on the money. From the evidence we have, it is difficult to determine whether she was »purifying« or »rehabilitating« her public image through charity, or building a lucrative business.

However, Guimard's extravagant life style was ephemeral, since it depended on the generosity of her patrons whose wealth was increasingly eroded by pre-revolutionary and revolutionary developments. Her beauty and her seductive powers faded. The Revolution was approaching.

Before losing her fortune as a result of the Revolution, Marie Madeleine Guimard became a leader of and spokeswoman for her colleagues. She demanded that the Opera pay her the same salary as that received by Vestris, allow her the privilege of deciding if

and when she was to dance, and grant her exclusive rights to certain roles. When she retired from the stage at the age of 46,⁷ on the 14th of August 1789, exactly one month after the »storming of the Bastille«, she married Jean Etienne Despreaux, a 31-year-old former dancer, poet and dance theoretician. As a result of the irregularity of pension payments under the new regime, she and Despreaux lived in precarious circumstances. Guimard died in 1816, all but forgotten. These were some of the effects of the political upheavals of the time and of the changes imposed by the new regime on the lives and status of both female and male dancers.

To conclude, one might discuss the hypothesis that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had allowed a form of feminine emancipation on and off the stage. In fact, the need to legitimize the egalitarian order had actually prompted revolutionary society to assign fixed roles to masculinity and femininity, even while basing them on renewed values such as that of the family.⁸ The egalitarian utopia and the crisis of difference were articulated in dance and in the way in which theatrical roles were assigned. Besides the »maîtres de ballet«, who put themselves at the service of the new regime, the political implication of female and male dancers in the pre- and post-revolutionary movements has yet to be systematically studied. The epistemological revolution introduced by the Enlightenment and the renewed interest in anatomical knowledge of the female body and its particularities (fragility of the bones, reduced muscular tonus, etc.), as expressed, for example, by the physician and philosopher Pierre Roussel, are rationalized within a previously constituted social order in which the presence of the woman assumes the role of a sedentary, procreative human being. The female dancer represents the antithesis of this model and a pathologic deviation from natural functions. The social and theatrical dance practice of the time, as well as the theoretical writings about dance, assimilate the contradictions inherent in this rationalization of difference – without discussing them. Paradoxically, the possibilities for Guimard's emancipation as a woman and as a dancer were greater before, rather than after the Revolution.

Notes

- 1 GALLINI: *A treatise about the art of dancing*.
- 2 See BOLOGNE: *Histoire de la pudeur*, pp. 40–43.
- 3 See HABERMAS: *The Structural Transformation*.
- 4 GROSZ: *Bodies-Cities*, p. 381.
- 5 GRIMM: *Correspondences littéraires*.
- 6 DALY: *Done into Dance*.
- 7 See GUEST: *Letters from London*.
- 8 See BAXMANN: *A balance lost*.