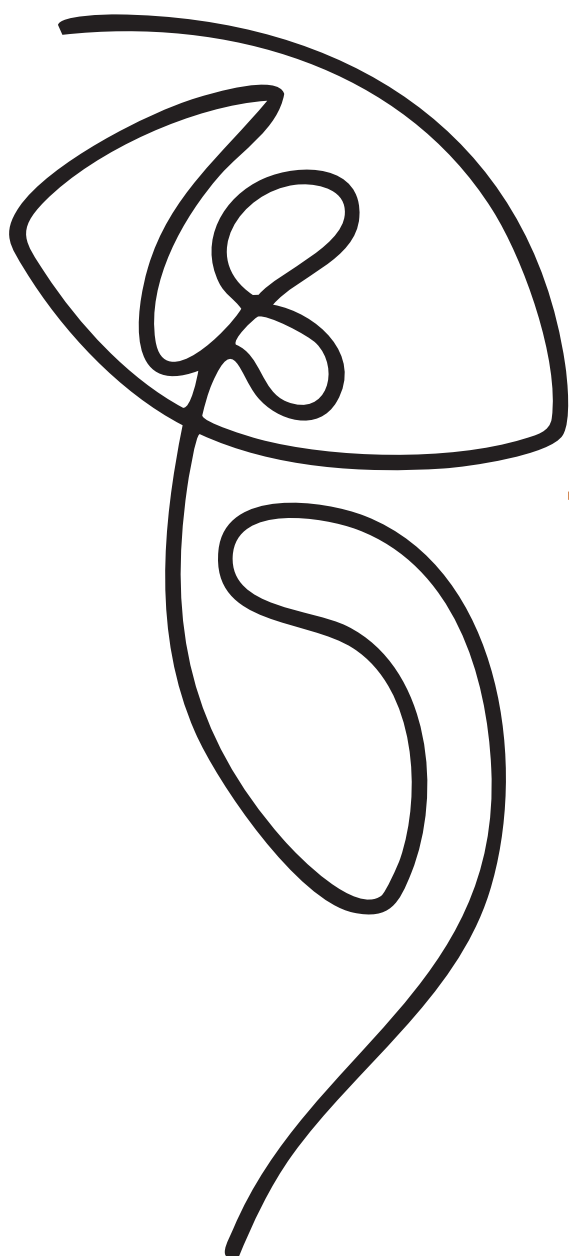


AIRDanza

journal

Fonti
Teorie
Didattica
Scena



N. 2, 2025
ISSN - 3035 - 3289

AIRDanza

Associazione Italiana per la Ricerca sulla Danza

KINETÈS EDIZIONI

Sommario

EDITORIALE

Alessandro Arcangeli e Paologiovanni Maione..... p. 9

STUDI STORICI

Rappresentazioni delle danze negli scritti dei frati mendicanti
nell'Occidente latino del XIII secolo.

Alessandro Campeggiani p. 13

«Il Francese balla di modo, che sembra quasi nuotare»:
racconto di un percorso di ricerca in danza tra onde melodiche e arie di baule

Bianca Maurmayr p. 25

Maestros de baile en Barcelona (1848-1900). Radiografía de una profesión

Alicia Daufí Muñoz p. 41

L'Éden-Théâtre e il ballo italiano nel cuore di Parigi:
figure straniere e spettacolari, 1883-1892.

Eléa Lauret Baussay p. 61

La riscoperta del mito di Flora nella prima edizione critica
di un balletto di Marius Petipa

Marco Argentina p. 85

Sergej Prokof'ev in confronto con Leonid Lavrovskij.
La rinascita della danza nel 'coreodramma sovietico' *Romeo e Giulietta*

Marta Mele..... p. 99

Estri di Milloss e Petrassi. Un'indagine coreomusicologica

Ida Zicari p. 115

METODOLOGIE E DIDATTICHE

Improvvisare nella complessità.

Danza, sistemi emergenti e pratiche di co-costruzione tra struttura e libertà

Rosaria Vitolo p. 141

ALTRI SGUARDI

Il *Batuque*. Storie di oggetti, animali e persone

Enrica Palmieri..... p. 157

RECENSIONI

Jeroen Peeters, *And then it got legs. Notes on dance dramaturgy*,
Veramo Press, Brussels/Oslo, 2022.

Simona Chiusolo p. 173

Madison U. Sowell, *Disdéri's Dancers and Carte-de-Visite Ballet Photography
in the French Second Empire*
Rome, Kinetès, 2023.

Olivia Sabee p. 179

Francesco Ciabattoni, *Dante's Performance: Music, Dance,
and Drama in the Commedia*.

Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024.

Madison U. Sowell p. 183

CALL FOR PAPERS p. 189

NORME REDAZIONALI p. 195

Recensioni



Madison U. Sowell

Francesco Ciabattoni,
Dante's Performance: Music, Dance, and Drama in the
Commedia.
Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024. 269 pages.

Standard definitions of non-verbal communication include any performance that conveys information by means of body language, facial expressions, physical acts, and other visual clues, rather than by verbal or scripted means. In Dante's *Commedia*, even though it is renowned for exalting written words and mimicking spoken dialogues, such non-verbal transmissions nevertheless can be considered to take place in the poet's use of hypotyposis, vivid descriptions of bodies and body movements that transmit coded messages. The poet seems to allude to this possibility in his incisive expression «visibile parlare» (*Purg.* 10.95), when he describes the «visible speech» of immutable bas-reliefs that are so realistic that they ostensibly talk or convey messages to the reader/viewer. Furthermore, much has been written about Dante's use of multiple linguistic registers to create his highly syncretistic epic. *Dante's Performance*, the book under review, interprets the *Commedia* both as a reflection of non-verbal performative art and as a blend of popular and sophisticated culture, whether linguistic or choreutic. The author approaches the poem, therefore, as a «unique blend of high and low registers, popular and scholarly themes, devilish performances and divine dance». ¹ In doing so, he provides a significant corrective to readings of the *Divine Comedy* that downplay the non-verbal aspects of the poem or are simply unaware of the pervasive medieval theatrical, musical, and choreographic traditions with which Dante's fourteenth-century audience would have been intimately familiar.

As exemplified by Dante's images of otherworldly bodies and their actions, non-verbal communication has long intrigued me and other readers of the epic poem. As a scholar, I have published on the significance of gestures and body parts, such as when Dante-Pilgrim places his index finger on his lips, points to his nose, and silences his guide Virgil (*Inf.* 25.45), or when the poet describes the winged body of Satan in *Inf.* 34.47 as being like that of an *uccello* (an Italian euphemism for the *membrum virile*). I have also analyzed the allegorical significance of the dancing that transpires in the *Purgatorio*'s Earthly Paradise. Now, in a thoughtful and well-researched book, Francesco Ciabattoni insightfully expands this area of inquiry to assess multiple types of “performativity,” a term he adopts that was coined by philosopher J. L. Austin to indicate that language can reproduce one's *Zeitgeist* and construct social realities.

1. Francesco Ciabattoni, *Dante's Performance: Music, Dance, and Drama in the 'Commedia'*, Berlin/Boston, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024, p. 236.

What are the roles of dance in Dante's *opus magnum* and what influenced his descriptions of dance? As is widely known, the medieval Florentine poet was profoundly influenced by his study of the Bible, which contains both negative examples of dancing (for example, the Israelites' profane dancing before the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the lascivious dance of Salome in Matthew 14 and Mark 6) and positive examples (David's worshipful dance before the ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6 and the dance of Miriam and the women of Israel in Exodus 15). As Ciabattoni notes, patristic writers and medieval preachers tended to emphasize the negative aspects of dancing: «The religious tradition of the Middle Ages did not view dance favourably, considering it rather a devilish invention and an unseemly practice, one better suited to jesters and histrions than good Christian folk».² Yet dancing is described both *in bono* and *in malo* in the *Commedia*. The book under review addresses aspects of both types of dancing in the poem and theorizes why Dante at times departs from conventional teachings of the Church Fathers to embrace a more popular and positive attitude toward dance.

Replete with over 600 footnotes, Ciabattoni starts his thoroughly documented study by revealing how «Dante animates his poem in an almost theatrical manner, utilising representations of dance, song, and dialogue that at times have an air of liturgical drama, at times the realism of an Auerbachian mimesis».³ The author's goal is «to reconstruct the historical and cultural context» behind certain episodes as he reviews «Liturgical dramas, pageants, street performances, church songs, psalm singing, lauds, and public feasts» that «informed the invention of many of the *Commedia's* passages».⁴ His stated aim is «to peek beneath the layer of the written text in order to discover its oral and performative aspects»,⁵ something he repeatedly accomplishes.

Noting that Dante referred to the title of his work as *Comedia* (comedy), Ciabattoni refreshingly does not shy away in his pithy introduction from underscoring the epic poem's pervasive theatricality. (He is not the first scholar, however, to compare Hell's inverted cone-like shape to a circular amphitheater or the rows of petals in Paradise's white rose to theater seats.) He then divides his solidly argued and richly illustrated study into five chapters: *Medieval Theatre before and up to Dante*; *Dialogue, Drama and Carnival in the 'Inferno'*; *Liturgical Drama in the 'Purgatorio'*; *Dancing in the Afterlife*; and *Theatre, Dance, and Polyphony in the 'Paradiso'*. The book concludes with a useful bibliography of primary and secondary texts as well as helpful indices of authors and subjects. Given *AIRDanza Journal's* focus on dance, as well as for reasons of space, I shall highlight and review chiefly those passages in the book that pertain to the art of Terpsichore.

Early on Ciabattoni makes the point that «there is a wealth of fragmentary but incontrovertible evidence ... showing that a variety of dramaturgical activity, often involving mime or music, persisted throughout the Middle Ages»⁶ and that «Dante had plenty of occasions to see actors, masks, carnival plays, sacred dramas, and dramatised dialogues in churches, streets, and piazzas, as these activities were common enough

2. Ivi, p. 164.

3. Ivi, p. 1.

4. Ivi, p. 4.

5. Ivi, p. 5.

6. Ivi, p. 16.

throughout Europe».⁷ He speculates, correctly from my viewpoint, that «Dante must have witnessed to many ... performances, liturgical dramas, mysteries and *rappresentazioni* in the churches and squares of Florence, Bologna, or Verona».⁸ The author's rationale for writing is straightforward: «The *Commedia* ... abounds with episodes that are reminiscent of liturgical dramas, theatrical staging, or carnivalesque street performances, and it benefits the contemporary reader to reconstruct and re-imagine in their minds the unwritten subtexts on which such episodes are patterned».⁹ Furthermore, he argues that «gestures confer on the text an aspect of rituality and symbolic bodily language that, while not necessarily dramaturgical are most certainly performative in nature».¹⁰ It follows that in Dante's poetry «bodily engagement as it [is] portrayed in words» constitutes «body language often acting as a codified grammar whose meaning needs to be unpacked».¹¹

The two concluding chapters will be of particular interest to dance historians. In these sections Ciabattani investigates «the poem's references to dance, whose controversial status in the Christian Middle Ages Dante exploits in order to represent more fully the metaphysical aspects of the afterlife». He rejects Giuseppe Ledda's indefensible claim that «dance is virtually non-existent as a motif in medieval literary and iconographic depictions of the after-life».¹² Instead, Ciabattani demonstrates that, in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, «The mimesis of dance and music serves as a means to articulate the metaphysical and the ineffable in the highest abode of the universe, a task that poetry could not otherwise complete». In accomplishing this, the author wisely frames «the mimetic representation of dance in the *Commedia* against the backdrop of medieval ideas about dance».¹³

While only a handful of references to dance occur in the *Inferno* (the *rida* of the avaricious in *Inf.* 7.24, the *tresca* of the blasphemous in *Inf.* 14.40, and the *rondeau*-like wheeling of the sodomites in *Inf.* 16.22-24), they occur, not surprisingly, in a satirical or negative light as part of the punishments of the damned. On the other hand, dancing assumes a dramatically positive role in the *Purgatorio*'s recreated Eden. In *Purgatorio* 31, whose «entire canto is a triumph of performativity», a central scene includes «the choreography of the four Cardinal Virtues joined by the three Theological Virtues, dancing what Dante calls a *caribo*».¹⁴ Citing Madison Sowell, Ciabattani asserts that in the dance of the seven virtues, Dante «is representing dance in a strongly allegorical context to embody immaterial entities that ... become attractive, tangible, and audible. Terpsichore's art lends a corporeal reality to abstract concepts, and through this materialization makes them fit for poetic performance».¹⁵ In short, «Dance, the performative and physical element par excellence, is the final step toward the full acquisition of harmony which Dante receives through his encounter with Matelda», whose «dancing movements, her singing,

7. *Ivi*, p. 19.

8. *Ivi*, p. 52.

9. *Ivi*, p. 57.

10. *Ivi*, p. 83.

11. *Ivi*, p. 101.

12. *Ivi*, pp. 136-137.

13. *Ibidem*.

14. *Ivi*, p. 153.

15. *Ivi*, p. 157.

her gathered flowers, her sacramental rites, her explanatory words all work together to create a state of perfect equilibrium».¹⁶

Similarly, in Dante's representation of Paradise, dance continues to symbolize ethereal, otherworldly harmony. In the heavenly spheres «the most famous Christian theologians combine dance, singing, and lighting effects in a divinely inspired performance that astonishes the pilgrim. Even the most important saints engage in *caroles* . . . , a choreography rather popular throughout Europe, in which dancers held hands in a circle, facing inward, and spun around while singing».¹⁷ (Ciabattone also acknowledges in a footnote that *caroles* could also be a line dance.) Dante's «language embraces choreographic performance because Dante wished to exalt the semantic versatility of dance, ousting it from an exclusive and refined figural repertoire».¹⁸ The circle is not merely a geometric figure or shape; it non-verbally communicates completeness, perfection, union. In sum, Dante employs «musical performance in the *Paradiso* . . . in conjunction with dance, paired in such a way as to mirror the diadic fusion of theology and poetry, truth and fiction».¹⁹

While this review cannot do justice to the many nuanced arguments that Ciabattone adduces, I close with three nuggets that I found useful to ponder. First, citing Erminia Ardissino, Ciabattone posits that King David's dance before the ark serves as a scriptural counterpoint to the «nefarious dance of Salome».²⁰ Second, he notes the possibility that the dances of Peter, James, and John in *Paradiso* 25, compared (in a gender reversal) by Dante to those of dancing women, are «parodic reversals»²¹ of the gyrations of the three Florentine sodomites, who, contrary to what Ciabattone asserts, were dancing *below* Dante-Pilgrim on hot sand, not *around* him. Third, I found convincing the scholar's reading of the word *tripudi* (dances), in rhyme with *ludi* (games) in *Paradiso* 28, to be «an expression of joyful celebration of spiritual love» and a symbolic and choreographic prelude to «the vision of the Trinitarian God»²² at the end of Dante's poem.

For the book's treasure trove of insights, I warmly recommend *Dante's Performance* to scholars of Dante and dance alike.

16. Ivi, p. 163.

17. Ivi, p. 163.

18. Ivi, p. 168.

19. Ivi, pp. 189-190.

20. Ivi, p. 151.

21. Ivi, p. 171.

22. Ivi, p. 225.



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