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Judith Rock

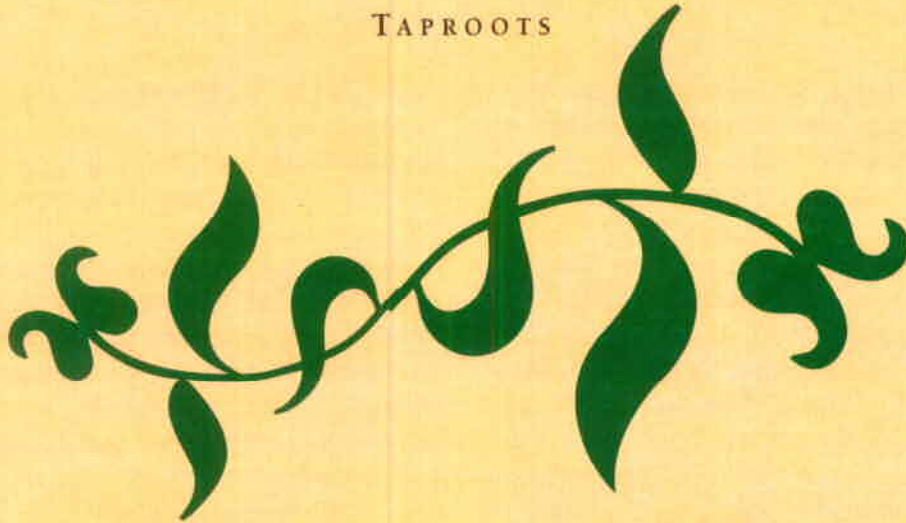
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TAPROOTS



# The Rhetoric of the Body

JUDITH ROCK

In the Jesuit colleges of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, students learned both verbal and physical rhetoric. Both were understood as rhetoric of the body. Students learned the skills of the preacher, lawyer, actor, and dancer: persuading, moving and pleasing an audience. Their Christian humanist teachers hoped that these young men would take their rightful social places in the Catholic Europe of the Counter-Reformation, as ideal men helping to build the ideal city. Toward this end, the Jesuit faculty produced tragedies, comedies, oratorios, operas, and ballets in their college theatres. In 1682, Claude Francois Menestrier, S.J., professor of rhetoric and producer of ballets, wrote, "we no longer dance as part of our religious practice... We content ourselves with creating honest theatrical presentations that form the body to noble action and decorum. We present them in public celebrations, and often under the veil of ingenious allegories representing the events which create the well-being of the state."<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-seventeenth century until the Suppression, these baroque ballets accompanied five-act tragedies each summer at college prize-giving ceremonies. The ballets included speech and song, glittering costume, lavish stage machinery and special effects: storms of sugar snow and rolling seas of satin ribbons. But their heart was the complex and precise baroque dance vocabulary, intended to incarnate and communi-

cate the essence of human feeling and the movements of the soul.

Physical communication and skill were continuous with verbal ability in this period to a degree not easy for us to understand. For example, actors, lawyers, and preachers shared a precise vocabulary of hand and finger gestures used to enhance verbal rhetoric. And the ability to dance reasonably well was an essential part of claiming and holding one's social and political place for both men and women of the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie.

The importance of dance had its roots in sixteenth-century court ballet, which, as Menestrier implied, was among the antecedents of the ballets produced on the Jesuit college stages. Intended as actual operations on the social, political, and intellectual order of things, court ballets were social incantations done in the presence of the king or queen, God's representative, who sat at the place where the lines of perspective joined, seeing everything whole and true. In the court ballets,

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Francois Menestrier, S.J., *Des ballets anciens et modernes* (Paris, 1682), preface.

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*Judith Rock is a writer, actress, and teacher based in New York City. She holds a doctorate in theology and art from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. Her most recent book is Terpsichore at Louis le Grand: Baroque Dance on the Jesuit Stage in Paris (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).*



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current political events, debates, and dangers danced and spoke and sang themselves into harmony with the royal—and therefore the divine—vision of order.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dancing at balls and in theatrical presentations still demonstrated one's ability to move through the social and political pattern. Social and theatrical dance shared the same technical vocabulary of complex steps and floor patterns, and mistakes mattered, because they literally and metaphorically damaged the pattern and changed its outcome. There are stories of rash young people disgracing themselves at court balls (where people danced two by two while everyone else watched, standing on chairs if they had to) and going into exile until the resulting scandal died down.

The ballets the Jesuits produced in this world of physical rhetoric were Christian humanist incantations. To a degree, the ballets mirrored the gorgeous painted ceilings of the period: solid-fleshed classical divinities and allegorized virtues in swirls of drapery, seated on clouds and tumbling through space with the message that physical reality and spiritual reality are continuous. For the Christian humanists, moral choice, religious orthodoxy, and relationship to God all began in the physical world. Not only could you get there from here, you must begin here in order to get there!

As I have researched the Jesuit ballets and their world, I have come to believe that understanding the physicality of these centuries is the key to understanding their intellectual, artistic, and spiritual legacy. Period costume provides a telling metaphor for the rela-

tionship of the thought and physicality of the past time. I have sometimes seen period costume attempted unsuccessfully onstage: the outer garment is accurate enough, but the effect is of someone trailing around wearing the dining room curtains. Much historically correct fabric is being earnestly worn to little purpose. That situation is created when the underwear is missing from the costume. It is always the period undergarments that give historical dress its vitality and accuracy, its shape and weight and sway. Those, in turn, inform the actor or dancer about correct movement and carriage of the body.

If we want to enter and communicate the art and ideas of the baroque centuries, or any other vanished time, we need to investigate and understand the "underwear": the physical experience of the people who had the thoughts and made the art. Otherwise, it is too easy to make the mistake of believing that they were just us in curious costumes and without running water. Would we read Moliere or Pascal with more insight, or listen to Vivaldi or Charpentier more deeply, or see farther into the Jansenist-Jesuit conflict if we read or listened or studied wearing the fifteen pounds of satin, steel, bone, canvas and leather which made up a seventeenth-century suit of clothes for both women and men?

For the producers of the Jesuit ballets, the human body was the theatre of revelation. The ballets and their creators can remind us, in our own century of disembodied digital images, that the rhetoric of the body is not a rhetoric the Christian scholar can forget.