

Dance Index



THEATRE OF MARVELS by Marian Hannah Winter



Professor Risley and his Two Sons in the *Ballet Aérien*. Lithograph by Victor Prevost, c. 1845. Professor Risley in fourth position, *croisée derrière piqué à terre*; Master Henry, same position, *de côté*; Master John in first *arabesque*, arms in third position (*attitude allongé*)

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THEATRE OF MARVELS by *Marian Hannah Winter*



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Comment

DANCE INDEX climaxed six years of continuous publication with the recent Stravinsky issue, which has received wide acclaim as a document of unquestioned merit. It is being used for class-room study in a number of music schools and has elicited much favorable comment from musicians, writers and theatre people in general. Through it we have made many new friends. We hope we may keep these friends—that those among them who were first attracted by the appeal to their specific concern with music will find the material in subsequent issues of parallel interest.

Since theatre dancing does not exist in isolation, its progress, set-backs and stand-stills are closely related to corresponding states among the collaborative arts; hence a great deal of apparently remote dance history may be found, on closer study, to have some bearing on the work of composers, painters and even poets, as well as choreographers and dancers. Any attempt to magnify the status of "The Dance" by asserting its independence of other art forms can only result in narrowing its appeal to a small number of individuals conversant with a private language.

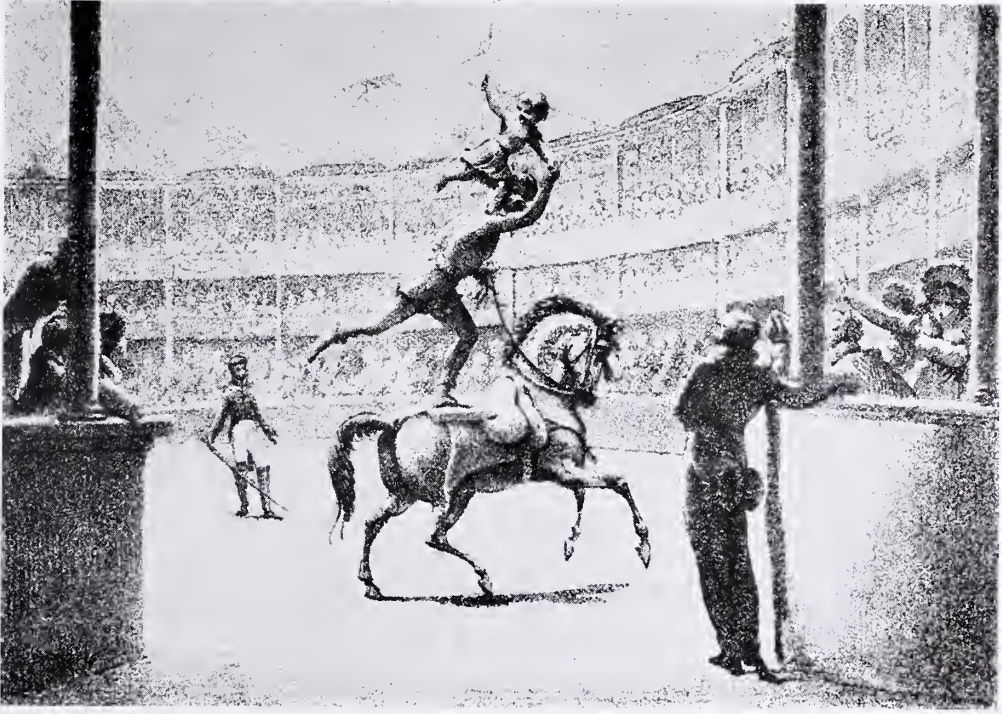
DANCE INDEX has always emphasized the importance of the various different elements involved in the progression of theatrical dancing, and will continue to publish exten-

sive articles dealing with influential features and personalities active in all these related fields.

By way of introduction to the present sprightly issue, we print a brief salute from Dr. William Van Lennep, guardian of Harvard's Theatre Collection:

"How would you like to see a ballerina dance *Sylphide* on the back of a galloping horse, or a youth perform a graceful *entrechat* and land lightly on his father's upstretched palm? Judging from two lithographs (pages 32 and 27) in the Harvard Theatre Collection, I gather that such feats were altogether possible in the Theatre of Marvels.

"What was the Theatre of Marvels? It was the most exciting of all theatres, the one in which anything could happen and almost everything did, the theatre. . . . But this is Miss Winter's subject, and she does it full justice. After you have read her delightful monograph and looked at the truly amazing illustrations, I think you will wonder with Gautier: 'What could not an imaginative choreographer attempt, with such gay creatures as Auriol, Lawrence and Redisha, Ducrow, Risley and his sons?' And you will certainly conclude that Nijinsky's famous leap in the *Spectre de la Rose* would have been child's play to the young Risleys."



Le Cirque-Olympique. French lithograph, c. 1825

“The theatre of which we dream is a singular theatre.

“The personages are of no time or any country; they go and come without anyone knowing why or how; they neither eat nor drink, live in no particular place and have no particular calling; they do not own lands or properties or houses; sometimes they carry under their arms a little case full of diamonds the size of pigeons’ eggs; walking, they cause no raindrop to fall from a flower petal, nor raise a single grain of dust on the road.”

Théophile Gautier, *Le Théâtre tel que nous le rêvons*.

“Between the adjective *possible* and the adjective *impossible* the mime has made his choice; he has chosen the adjective *impossible*. It is in the impossible that he lives; it is the impossible he does.”

Théodore de Banville, *Mémoires des Hanlon-Lees*

The Theatre of Marvels is the realm of the realized fantastic. It is classically essential, pure escapism, a swinging door marked *Entrance* on one side and *Exit* on the other. One side opens on other-world, supernatural or exotic habitats, which man attempts to reproduce literally, in tangible, visual form, defying time, space and natural forces. On the other side man plays the part of supernatural power, and attempts to create human attributes in such unlikely subjects as dogs, elephants, fleas, horses and machinery called automata, or vies with the supernatural by means of magic, legerdemain, juggling and the defiance of gravity. Acrobats, ballet dancers, equestrians and animal trainers, stage designers and magicians are the ideal initiators and interpreters of the Theatre of Marvels, which is a theatre not only of the fantastic but of the impossible.

It defies time by going back into the past or projecting a Wellsian future. It defies space and plunges into Vernesian ocean depths or volcano hearts. In travelling to locations farthest from its point of origin, it accounted for centuries of *fausse Chinois*, *fausse Grecque* and *fausse Turque* in painting, and helped spawn that bastard of all arts—the *pastiche*. It is always spectacular and “popular.” It achieves Karma through well-oiled machinery instead of mystic introspection. It is a replacement of that ritual, etiquette and protocol which once served to separate the court-world from the rest of humanity with a semblance of supra-reality. As the machine impinged on daily existence it was incorporated into the Theatre of Marvels as an “infernal machine.” The Romantics had an insatiable passion for auto-

mata and mechanical instruments; Vaucanson, Kauffman of the mechanical trumpets and harmoniconcorde, and the Baron von Kempelen are prototypes for its librettists.

Of all its manifestations it is most fully realized in the ballet, the nineteenth century melodrama, and circus-spectacle, or in a fusion of these. The spoken word is completely unimportant to it.

Because the concept of the word “melodrama” is so different today, it might be well to explain the nature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century “melodrama.” The essential components were spectacular scenery, an almost continuous musical accompaniment, which had much the same function as modern film music fulfils, and ballet. A clue is provided immediately by its first two syllables—“melo—”. The libretti of these early melodramas, for this is the term which most nearly fits their text, had highly dramatic, extremely moral, emotionally supercharged plots. The speeches were either of a certain lush poesy, with great appeal as sound, *per se*, very much like recitative, or sharp, brief sentences, so keyed to audience comprehension by accumulated usage in certain situations, that they provided a short-hand clue to the action. Paul Ginisty, the great authority on early melodramas, wrote: “The mélange of music and pantomime dance came from the ancient theatrical booths at the great fairs, as the patent theatres imposed this hybrid genre by refusing to let them employ the spoken word. In these theatres, dance played an important role, which it held until the advent of romantic drama. It is dance united to pantomime, even dominated by it. No melodrama

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without its ballet. It was as indispensable as the music. The ballet in *Robinson Crusoe*, staged by Aumer, was a sensation, for example." Guilbert de Pixérécourt, "*le Shakespeare du Boulevard du Crime*," was the most prolific author of these hybrids, and the fact that material for numerous ballet libretti was lifted right out of his text is some indication of the dependence his theatre had on ballet.

When melodrama depended completely on its pantomime, ballet and music, and its libretto concerned allegorical or fairy-tale figures, it was usually called a *féerie*. Machinery was essential to the *féerie*. For some centuries the art of the stage machinist had been applied to effecting "transformations" of characters and locales before the eyes of the audience. It might be a simple trick of characters arrayed in cardboard cut-outs,

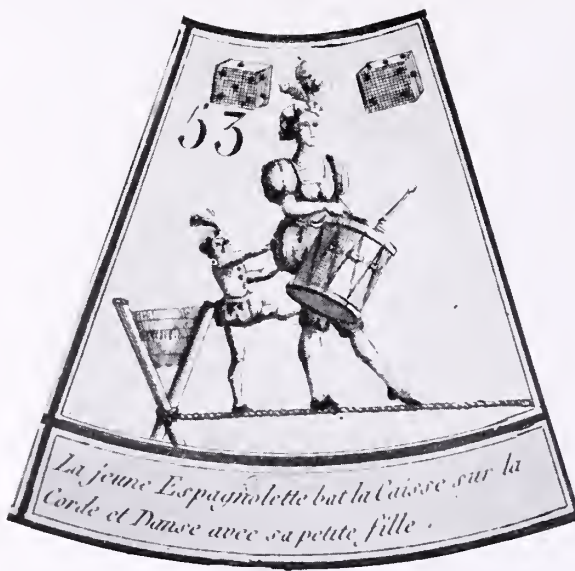
with only their faces showing, then discarding these cut-outs to appear in their next costumes—a device cherished in the early American theatre and not too unsophisticated to please a Parisian audience in 1806,—or a great lowering of elaborate structures and *coryphées* suspended on wires, the whole bathed in "Bengal fire." The London pantomimes, equivalent of the *féeries*, had a distinctive cachet because they were assembled to display the talents of the acrobatic clowns, who were extraordinary eccentric dancers.

Grimaldi's name traditionally heads any list of these personages, but Matthews was quite a phenomenal dancer, and the Cirque-Franconi employed three English clowns, Kemp, Boswell and Candler. The clown in America took his direction from the minstrel shows, and contributed importantly to the

" . . . fine nonsense and nonsensical finesse, swaggering poltroonery, skeptical credulity, disdainful servility, busy unconcern, idle activity . . . "



Plate from *Versaameling van Koorde-Danssers, Springers en Postuurmaakers*. Amsterdam, c. 1730



Above and opposite: plates from *Le Grand Jeu des Danseurs du Corde, Sauteurs et Voltigeurs*. Paris, c. 1750

dance repertoire. In France the clown was always something of an exotic, a curiosity which was amusing but disquieting. French theatrical dictionaries seem to find some gloomy pleasure in noting how many Anglo-Saxon clowns died of alcoholism. In contrast to “pure” gymnastics, for example, LeRoux evolved a curious theory of the clown’s art which has just enough half-truth to bear quotation. “The work of a gymnast is of a special traditional character which no whimsical variation is ever allowed to tamper with. Its immediate aim is the display of the human body, and above all it is a plastic performance. The clown’s art, on the contrary, should aim at evoking laughter, not applause. It appeals less to the sense than to the intellect, and, unlike gymnastics,

it is not confined by classic fixed rules. It is not a Greek art, but an English one, and it reflects all the most curious characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon people.

“The prevailing note in the Anglo-Saxon character is melancholy. This produces the spleen, the gloomy ideas and the systematic first tinge of madness which the English themselves call ‘eccentricity.’ To this habitual sadness the Anglo-Saxon joins a certain brutality, which is visible in all his games, sullies all his pleasures, and even gives to his vices a peculiarly sombre hue.”

This analysis completely ignores the extraordinary grotesques of the Dutch and Italian clowns, the similar tinge of brutality in Russian and German clowns. There is no question, however, that the French clown had a quite different direction and nuance in his work. The common ground on which they all met was a perpetual battlefield with the animal world. Grand-Carteret called this tendency a desire to *hommifier*, which can be inadequately translated “to make human,” much in the manner of the early Disney animals. The clown was continually involved in an antagonistic dance-duel with some oversized animal, either mechanical or impersonated by an acrobatic dancer.

The London print of “Clown and Grasshopper” in the pantomime *Jack and Jill*, (1812), is such a duel (p. 10). In *le Sylphe d’Or* (Paris Gaité, 1839) a gigantic rabbit jumped out of a pie which a huntsman wished to eat, and was joined by an entire ballet of rabbits, who executed a dance of insult directed at the human being. Lawrence and Redisha in *les Pillules du Diable* (Le Cirque-Olympique, 1839) impersonated mammoth frogs who jumped out of a pond to harass the comic. The artist Grandville produced a series of fantastic costumes and drawings for these animal personifications, as well as constructing people from flowers and vegetables. In the remnant Theatre of Marvels which we have left, these bizarre

impersonations and convolutions remain.

The anatomy of the fantastic is constructed of certain realities in subject or technique, which in juxtaposition create the marvelous. These may be arbitrarily divided in two main groups—first, subjects and libretti; next—techniques and media.

Subjects and Libretti

Lineal descendants of court ballet *entrées*, the pageants of historical and allegorical characters, with dancing interludes, are dignified by their elegant endurance. They proceeded from eighteenth century formalism to nineteenth century dramatization, which incorporated tableaux curtains or crystallized pictures, attendant on melodramas, "Gothick" mysteries and the vogue for Kotzebue. As in the sixteenth and seventeenth century *entrées* decorated by Buonacorsi, Lancia and the Parigi, among others, there was continual alternation of the grotesque and the beautiful. These *entrées* are among the few survivals of classic mythology on the nineteenth century stage.

Realistic details of "local color"—Aumer's ensembles and dances for *la Muette de Portici* are classic examples—recurred continually. The use of scenes in dance or pantomime, paralleling genre painting (the Romantics' initial type of colloquial realism) was integral in the technique of juxtaposition. In the *féerie*, *Bijou ou l'Enfant de Paris* (1835), Laloue, the scenic artist and Franconi, the equestrian star and director, took the Cirque-Olympique audience back and forth between meticulous reproductions of Parisian locales and imaginary islands of exotic fantasy. Sword fights and combat scenes were staged with balletic precision. A favorite device was to interrupt a gay ballet of happy peasants or waltzing elegants with sinister musical chords and darkening stage lights to introduce some supernatural power by a sequence of fleeing merry-makers.



"The work of a gymnast is of a special traditional character which no whimsical variation is ever allowed to tamper with . . ."



The contrast and contiguity of locales—a palace followed by an abyss, the dim grandeur of an abandoned mine preceding a teeming, sunlit market-place, a stage divided in two levels for simultaneous Heaven and Hell—were constantly employed. In *La Tentation* (1832) of Coralli and Cavé, staged by Duponchel at the Paris Opéra, Oriental scenes were succeeded by the interior of a volcano. Coralli's *Valse Infernale* in Goethe's *Faust*, danced by the superb actor Frédéric Lemaître, who had trained as dancer and mime in the *Funambules*, contrasted with

the final apotheosis. An 1832 pantomime lists "figures à la Jérôme Bosch" as grotesque counterbalance.

The libretti of these spectacles, whether produced in Paris, London, New York, Copenhagen, Vienna or St. Petersburg, were often based on explorations, scientific discoveries and historical events, which gave a curious element of documentary realism to the fantastic. This technique may still be studied in the Méliès films. The pseudo-scientific concept of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Eve future*,

" . . . involved in an antagonistic dance-duel . . . "



Penny-plain. London, 1812. *Grand écart*

and Jules Verne's realistically presented and scientifically projected imaginings were of this pattern. The assembled fantasies of the baroque genius Arcimbaldo were constructed of an accumulation of real objects—vegetables, plants, utensils—with this same scientific, documentary exactitude.

Techniques and Media

One element of strangeness could always be introduced through presenting human beings in strange accoutrements or strange entanglements. Among the photos by Nadar are two of figurants, fairly beefy and carefully made up, in tights and skin-tight satin jerkins—the one enclosed in a giant bird cage, the other straining against an enveloping fishnet—which crystallize this perversity. Curiously, the French authority on circuses and spectacles, Hughes LeRoux, continually attempts to make the English responsible for all the grotesque and disquieting contrasts of this sort, ascribing it to generations of gin-drinking and the prevalence of tuberculosis! Although the British have a wonderful genius for the grotesque and unexpected, M. LeRoux should not have ignored such magnificent French examples of this genre as “the walking-sign,” which was incorporated in these spectacles. Jacomin (ca. 1819) has sketched one such, the juggler who carried a sign reading, “*Héros de la Grande Armée, obligé de demander sa vie à l'industrie*”; his military garb is completely festooned with packets of needles and pins, artificial flowers, patent medicine bottles, watches on chains, bits of feathers and ribbons—a peddler's knapsackful of gimcracks—in startling contrast to the uniform. He is completely a spectacle. The clown who takes countless objects, including tremendous bunches of bananas and a menagerie of small and medium-sized animals from his pockets, sleeves and coat-tails is of this company.

There is also an extraordinary amount of



Mlle. Ferzi of the Cirque-Franconi. Sketch from a portfolio of unsigned drawings, possibly by Carle Vernet. c. 1810

archaeological exactitude in the presentation of these spectacles whether the designer is Sanquirico at La Scala in Milan, Charles Ciceri at the Park Theatre in New York, or P. L. C. Ciceri (his cousin), Laloue and Duponchel in Paris at the Opera and Boulevard Theatres. The Grecian temple, the Gothic castle, the Chinese pagoda of the Taj Mahal were reproduced with the greatest possible fidelity. The word “picturesque” came to have a special significance to the Theatre of Marvels as the nineteenth century progressed. The “impenetrable forests of the Americas,” as yet mysterious and even exotic not only to Europeans but to Americans as well, were backgrounds for such ballets as Luigi Henry's *Les Sauvages de la Florida* (1807). James Fenimore Cooper



Gli Minieri di Walachia. Basoli's design for the ballet by Gaetano Gioja. Milan, 1810

“ . . . a curious element of documentary realism . . . ”

had a greater influence throughout Europe than at home; his works were a treasury for librettists and scene designers, subjects of countless dissertations, and his *Chien-Cailou* was the adopted name of that most fantastic genius, Rodolphe Bresdin.

From Venice to Peking to Cairo, from baronial Rhineland fortresses to Constantinople bazaars, the “picturesque site” was sought out and set forth, and so described on the playbills—*sites pittoresques*, *pittoresco*, *pittoresk*, picturesque. In Paris a volume on comparative religion even appeared as a “Picturesque History of Religions.” Locales were so important that they appeared repeatedly in subtitles of these spectacles as a

species of attractive advertisement. Paul Ginisty and M. A. Allévy have made extensive researches into this usage of locales.

From the sixteenth century, Italy was the great wellspring of scenic splendors and the technical machinery for achieving these effects. It was one department in which they often exceeded the French in sheer elegance. Luigi Servandoni had brought much of this magnificence with him to Paris at the end of the eighteenth century. The traditions were passed on to the adopted French family of Ciceri, as well as other French designers, who often repaired to Milan for study under such masters as Alessandro Sanquirico. It is curious, too, that the Italian productions

during the years of Napoleonic occupation achieved an unmatched beauty. The Basioli design for *Gli Minieri di Walachia* (1810), a ballet by Gaetano Gioja (p. 12) had even more theatrical beauty than the equally typical Parisian simultaneous setting for Mazilier's *Marco Spada* (p. 15) some fifty years later.

Nature was presented with extreme realism, almost always as an actor, acting up in volcanoes, deluges, waterfalls, sunrises and sunsets, storms at sea and lightning flashes. "Bengal" fireworks, that wonderful invention which bathed stage and audience in sulphurous and vari-colored blazes, was indispensable for combats, eruptions and explosions. Doubtless the all-time favorite was Vesuvius in action.

One of the great contributions to this spectacular *mise en scène* was the development of the panorama. These mile-long views, painted on canvas and gauze, with the earliest approach to indirect lighting in a darkened room, had been introduced in Paris by the English painter Barker in 1787. They attained at first a success of incredulity, and finally achieved miracles of beauty and reality. Robert Fulton, more often associated with steamboats, set up a great panorama in Paris during 1799. Daguerre, more often associated with photography, contributed the "cross-view" to his Diorama in 1822. The prodigal Baron Taylor engaged Alaux to set up his Panorama-Dramatique in 1821. These "optical spectacles" presented coronations, historical and Biblical scenes, inventions, battles and famous views. They were indispensable to the technical progress of the theatre proper.

The use of menageries is a distinctive phase of the "optical spectacle." Two most extraordinary animal trainers were the Americans Van Amburgh and James Carter, the former with a Noah's Ark of a menagerie, the latter a specialist in lions and tigers. Barkham Cony and His Dogs were starred in spectacle

and melodrama adapted to their talents in England and America. Laurent, known as *l'homme-truc*, the human trap-door, was the greatest French animal trainer of the nineteenth century. He was acrobat, author, machinist, actor and mime as well. With Anicet Bourgeois and Ferdinand Laloue, the scene designer, he wrote *les Pillules du Diable* (1839) for the Cirque-Olympique. This pell-mell spectacle even used a host of human beings as animal impersonators, and Laurent's entourage included the trained stags Rubi, Coco and Acteon, and the elephant Baba. Among the dancing quadrupeds, which should be distinguished from the acting quadrupeds that served as motivation for plot and ballet, the delicious bears who danced the polka in *les Sept Châteaux du Diable* (Paris Gaîté, 1845) are worthy of mention. (page 28)

A spectacle with elephants inevitably meant a ballet of *Péris*; in *Les Eléphants de la Pagode* the pachyderm stars appeared drawing a chariot "in splendid bad taste, glistening with British lacquer" (Gautier, December 15, 1845), surrounded by the Cirque-Olympique's cohorts of soldiers and *bayadères*. Carter's animals, docile as the beasts of "The Peaceable Kingdom," had thrilled Europe and America in a vehicle with the entire range of spectacular accoutrements called *The Lion of the Desert*, concerning which Gautier produced yet another masterpiece of critical appreciation in 1839. As animals were featured, so too were strange human beings. Although the exhibition of freaks has become basically repugnant to western audiences, there was perhaps some dignity in using them (much as the surrealists have employed "found objects") in performances designed for their abilities, rather than as sideshow exhibits. The Belgian giant Bihin appeared in the spectacle *David and Goliath*, and a dwarf named Leach had the "Gothick" mystery, *Dwarf of Drachenfels* tailored to his acrobatic feats.

The Theatre of Marvels prolonged that macabre laugh which had echoed through the Middle Ages at the Dance of Death; the panorama of skeletons, dressed *à la mode* and performing daily occupations, has always had an atavistic irresistibility. Borromino's murals in San Gratta at Bergamo, the Capuchin fancies in Rome, and Posada's lively skeleton world are graphic realizations, matched only by some fancies of the "optical spectacle." A most theatrical form of this preoccupation may also be found in those eighteenth century portraits called *Memoria Mortis*, where a line is drawn down the center of a bejewelled, beribboned, creamily elegant young woman, and a skeleton is painted on the other half, usually holding a coquettish black velvet mask. A Pixérécourt melodrama of 1831, *Les Quatres Eléments*, introduced a ballet of articulated skeletons raised up by a Magician Macabre, the whole designed as a black burlesque of the black fantastic of the new lunatic-fringe romantics. The dancers wore black tights, with skeletons painted on the front. They danced against a black backdrop, and gave the illusion of disappearing when they turned their backs to the audience. This indestructible classic of comic macabre was introduced to America by the Ravels in the 1830's and has persisted, enhanced by luminous paint, to Radio City Music Hall. From the delights of skeletons to theatricalizing the spirit-world is not too vast a flight of imagination or technique. A spate of spirit-world fancies—*Les Spectres de Robin* ("dissolving ghosts, living and impalpable"—done with mirrors), Stenegrý's *House of Metamorphosis*, *Les Soirées fantastiques de Robert-Houdin*, the *Soirée Mystérieuse* of M. Rodolphe and his Automata, Elphodor—represent perhaps some fundamental nineteenth century reaction from the limpid eighteenth century reasonableness and clarity.

The "pleasure gardens" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with exotic, fretted, turreted, latticed, grilled and terraced archi-

tectural fantasies of pavilions and rotundas, set amid grottoes and waterfalls equally artificial and lovely, became public playgrounds for payment of a moderate fee. Lanterns gleamed as improbably as fireflies, and fireworks rose against the stars. Often Chinese bells were hung on pagoda roofs, chiming with every breeze. Lustres and mirrors glittered through the windows. The projects for pavilions by Louis Jean Desprez and Charles-Frédéric Adelcrantz for the Swedish Palace at Drottningholm (which also contains the world's loveliest surviving spectacle theatre) are the apogee of outdoor fantasy in architecture and landscape gardening. Created at the end of the eighteenth century these gardens had a lovely name—Château de la Plaisance. A highly spiced melodic potpourri from the salons of Musard, Métra, Jullien, Mabile and a host of Viennese sounded continually. In these places, as well as the Opéra, the great theatres and circuses, the booths at the fairs, the Theatre of Marvels found a welcome. Here were ravishing backdrops for small troupes of rope-dancers, for pantomimes and ballet, for prestidigitators, acrobats and ventriloquists, and for little shows of dancing automata. The illuminated bouquet of flowers hung on the trees and bushes of the *Château des Fleurs*—real flowers, real trees, living bushes—became unrealistic and fantastic because they were placed together; the espaliered vines were a victory over nature. The Theatre of Marvels triumphed again.

The vocabulary of this theatre was international to the point of jargon. On Reisinger's lovely series of circus-ballet sketches, which served as choreographic notation, (pages 36 and 37) there is this multilingual cachet: *J. Reisinger, Balletmeister und Solo Tanzer. Romano A. Constantin, Ital. Mimik des Konigl. Neapl. Theater, Cirkus, Mimik, Pantomimen und Balletten, Arrangeur oder Régisseur*. Often a mixture of English French, German and Italian was employed to describe an act.



Marco Spada or *La Fille du Bandit*. Décor by Cambon and Thierry, stage effects by Sacré for the ballet by Mazilier, Paris, 1857

“ . . . transformations must multiply, mountains rise, clouds lower, the ocean foam to the footlights, desert sands change to polar icebergs, Hell to Heaven, without intermission, without pause . . . ”



Jean-Baptiste Auriol. French lithograph, c. 1845

“ . . . a dainty Hercules . . . ”

Although every nation contributed to this hybrid world, the analysis of its elements and functions was particularly undertaken by French writers. De Banville, Nerval, Montégut, Asselineau, and most particularly Théophile Gautier, were preoccupied with its realization. Gautier carefully considered the potentialities of his performers, and in his critique of the Risleys, presented some pages further on, he names the elect. Here they are, as he described them.

First, Jean-Baptiste Auriol. Born in 1806, son of Louis Auriol, who was a member of *les Grands Danseurs du Roi*, Jean-Baptiste was a pupil of Pierre Foriose, the great rope-dancer. In every department of acrobatics and eccentric dancing he excelled. His *pirouettes* rivaled those of a ballet dancer. “The genius of Auriol is its marvelous flexibility; he is encyclopedic in his art; he is acrobat, juggler, equilibrist, rope-

dancer, riding master, grotesque actor, and to all these accomplishments he brings prodigious powers. He is a dainty Hercules, with the tiny feet of a woman, the hands and voice of a child. It is impossible to find better integrated muscles, a more athletic neck, a lighter and stronger structure; the whole surmounted by a jovially Chinese face, from which a single grimace suffices to put the audience in an uproar. . . . One can conceive with all conviction that one might have been Homer or Raphael or even Napoleon; it seems possible that one might equal Talma as a tragedian; but it is beyond comprehension to understand how one might hold one’s self like a guide post on one leg, or how to imitate the wing of a windmill with one’s body. People don’t sufficiently admire acrobats. . . . I prefer them greatly to the male dancers of the Opéra, who profess for them ineffable contempt.”

Next, Lawrence and Redisha, the English clowns. “By what transitions are they able to pass beyond pedestrian movements to these coxcomb contortions? Lawrence and Redisha, less gracious and less petulant than Auriol, have a stamp which is completely distinct and completely remarkable. Although they say not a word, although their faces are plastered and painted, one can sense their Britishness, a profound Britishness; they put into everything they perform a precision, a detachment, a Britannic conscience pushed to its final limits. Everything that it is possible to obtain from the muscles and sinews of man they have obtained. They split themselves, crack themselves, flatten themselves, roll themselves in a circle, they are prodigious! Their costumes are of startling comicality:—the first is half red and half black, with a peruke scarlet on one side, brunette on the other:—the second is all white, relieved and highlighted by buttons the size of oranges: he has a chalk-white face, with apple-round and apple-red cheeks, and accentuated by the most extravagant *circon-*

flexe eyebrows. This arrangement is of a fantasy which one could not imagine, and goes extraordinarily well with the discreet and silent bearing of the personage. As soon as they have finished a turn they execute a little step probably designed to express their joy. This step consists of stretching the back like a cat who wants to be scratched, of shaking the head three times like a Chinese mandarin, of swinging on one leg like a goose on a hot griddle. Nothing is more droll, pantagruellesque and superlative. These Siamese twins of frolic surpass everything we have seen to date. They tie their thighs into slings, make rosettes of their legs, as with a knot of ribbon; they cut themselves in two and the two halves dance. They turn themselves into frogs and jump on their bellies with feet bent back against the joints like real and naive frogs, who might leap out of a marsh to get a breath of fresh air; they double themselves up, shrink down, and

swarm before one's eyes like a knot of grass-snakes. Gravity does not exist for them! O great buffoons! miraculous acrobats! One is humiliated to walk on one's feet and has a crazy desire to return home walking on one's hands or rolling along like a cartwheel!"

Ducrow, the Continental Cockney, Britain's greatest equestrian and most ardent Francophile, dancer on the ground or on horseback, glorifier of Napoleon in an England which had just concluded Waterloo, inheritor of Astley's Amphitheatre, and one of the great British eccentrics, represented the dynastic circus families much as the Franconis did. There is no description of him by Gautier, and the best contemporary documents are prints such as those reproduced on pages 19 and 24. Gautier gives something of his spirit in a critique of his son, in 1844:

"The little Ducrow is already an equestrian full of fire, sturdiness and sang-froid;

"A costume to enchant a rope-dancer!"



Mme. Romanini, "La Sylphide aérienne." Viennese theatrical print, 1837

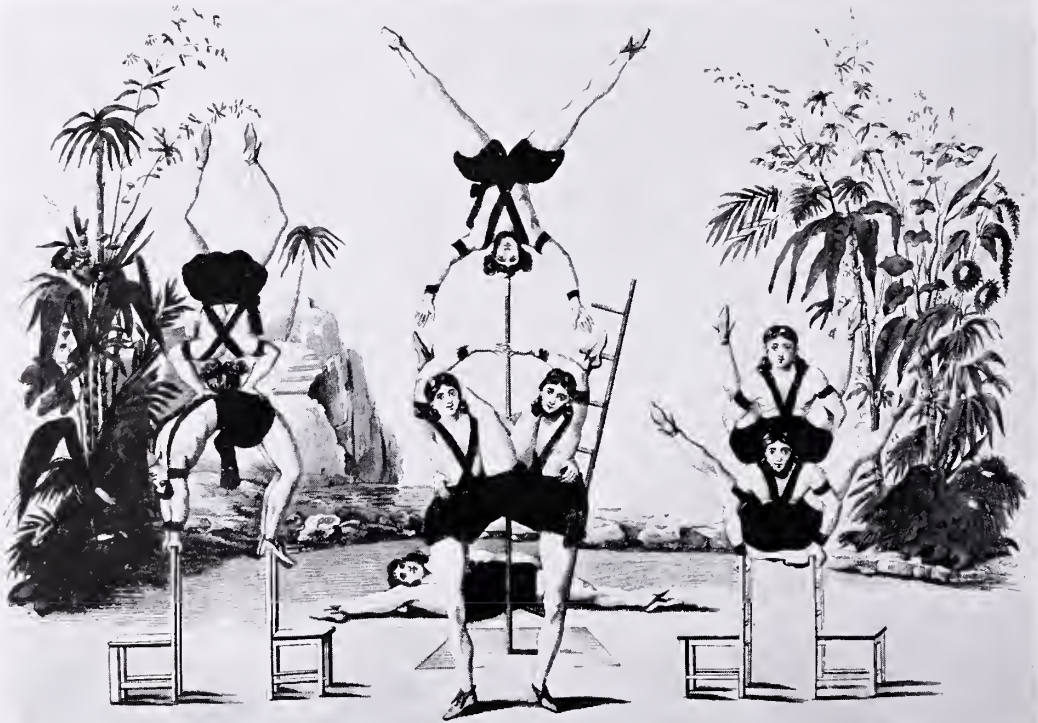
he has a charming fair face, and withal a singular audacity and energy; under this feminine delicacy one feels a virile resolution." That this should be so may be seen in the tremendous repertoire of Ducrow prints, both French and English. The points of reference to ballet are always clear, and Ducrow disdained the spoken word to an even greater extent than his peers, the Franconis. The Pyrrhic Dance on horseback in which he is pictured by William Blake, (who drew a Ducrow gallery for the "pennyplain, tuppence-colored" theatrical sheets), or his ballet *Zephyr*, with or without benefit of horses, are achievements in the grand

style both of ballet and *haute école* horsemanship.

Into this entire theatre ballet was integrated. It gave a physical training which complemented the traditional fundamental alphabet of acrobatics, a vocabulary of expression which was intelligible to any audience, and elements of grace and style.

The physical training of the actors and dancers who served these spectacles was likewise rooted in the sideshows of such great fairs as *La Foire de Saint-Germain* and Bartholomew Fair. The extreme skill of its performers is recorded in various eighteenth century prints as on page 7, from a Dutch

"... a Britannic conscience pushed to its final limits."



Lawrence and Redisha. Viennese theatrical print, c. 1845

handbook on acrobatic training, and the little cuts from *Le Grand Jeu des Danseurs du Corde, Sauteurs et Voltigeurs*, published by Basset at Paris, undated, but probably mid-eighteenth century. This has a particular interest because of the number of nationalities represented in the approximately two hundred vignettes of which the table is composed.

Rope-dancers, gymnasts, carpet acrobats and contortionists have a basic training vocabulary which closely parallels exercises at the bar for ballet dancers. For rope-dancers this basic equivalent of bar work includes: walk forward, walk backward, dangerous spring forward, dangerous spring backward, horse spring and *sabottière* (elementary heel and toe dance which hardens the feet). Gymnasts have backward and forward somersaults, curvets, exercises in posturing, bends, *rondades*, and a series of different leaps. Acrobats have vaulting, simultaneous and alternate upstarts, *demi-pirouette* swings, cutaways, and a tremendous number of variants of these. Equestrians take something from all of these and add an arduous training in ballet as well. Thus the technical physical equipment required from the performers is in itself worthy of far more than this brief précis, taken largely from Hughes LeRoux.

The elements of surprise, or even shock, which we have already noted as the juxtaposition of realistic elements to create unreal effects, is apparent equally in literature or acrobatics. Of the group of authors associated with the so-called "black novel" or fantastic story, certain names have survived—Mary Shelley, Clemens Brentano, Adalbert de Chamisso, and E. T. A. Hoffman. Edgar Allen Poe towers above this company but is often of it. The "Faust" story, whether projected by Goethe or Gérard de Nerval, employed the technique of marvels for realization. To the extent that these authors employed precision, logic, and extreme realism of detail, do their works endure.



Mr. Ducrow as Zephyr. Penny plain, London, 1830. *Arabesque piqué et plié*; Cupid in *attitude croisée*

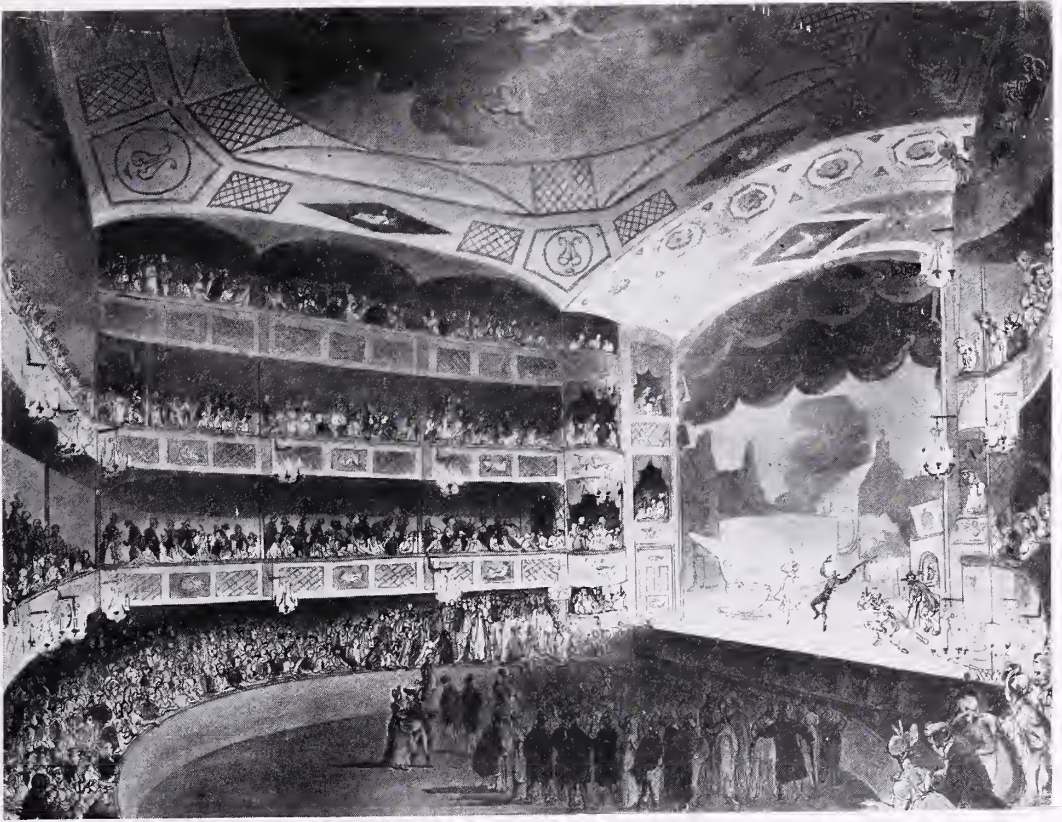
This technique of startling contrasts was employed with just as much precision in acrobatics and pantomime. The Seven Craggs, as the curtain rose, stood in nonchalant rank behind the footlights, impeccable in white tie and tails, gardenia in buttonhole, completely indifferent to audience and stage alike. Suddenly seven figures catapulted in seven somersaults landing almost on top of the orchestra! The Pinauds were pantomimists with a surrealist, hellzapoppin style, who placed a series of unrelated actions in breakneck succession, accompanied by innumerable lightning costume changes and entrances of strange characters leading small animals togged out as musical instruments. The Hanlon-Lee's pantomimes had



Astley's Amphitheatre. Aquatint by Hill after Pugin and Rowlandson. London, 1808

“All the elements of which the fantastic genre is composed are tangible, material, physical; there is not one element, isolated, which would be spiritual and moral. Fantastic impressions proceed from the tyranny of the body and material moving forces on the soul, from the coincidence of certain exterior circumstances which the imagination is not accustomed to associate; but each of these circumstances is natural and each of these forces can be described scientifically. The very spectacle which seems mysterious because it catches us unprepared would leave us cold and seem the most natural thing in the world, if we had seen, day by day, these circumstances, these forces unfolding singly at first, then drawing closer, identifying themselves and finally uniting. All of these elements have no mysterious poetry of themselves, and yet, assembled and associated, they take on a magic soul, which exerts on us an occult power.”

Emile Montégut, *Dramaturges et Romanciers*.



The Royal Circus. Aquatint after Pugin and Rowlandson. London, 1808

“Words bore and fatigue one today; in this time of general dissidence, where not one idea is questioned less than twenty times a day, it is difficult for any piece not to contain passages which will displease and revolt one. It is the reason for taking refuge in music, where the vague and indeterminate expression displeases no one and allows individual interpretation. And then modern activity is so devouring, so full of cares and worries, so many political or ambitious preoccupations, which attack one the livelong day, that, comes the evening, the least concentration is one more effort which one rejects and flees away from. In such a mood, what more amusing, lolling nonchalantly in one’s box, than to see all creation, arranged and cut neatly into tableaux, unfolding processionally before one, gathering here and there casually, between a fusillade and a fanfare, just enough words not to have to understand the pantomime.”

Théophile Gautier, *Cirque-Olympique*. Murat.

such a curious atmosphere of eccentricity that a repeated accusation (which even appeared in print) claimed that one of the brothers got drunk while the other sat by taking down the alcoholic reveries for their next libretto. The Hanlon-Lees made their debut in London in 1847, performing Risley feats. In their pantomime *Pierrot Ménuisier* they had a picnic of undertakers and nurses; bring on a funeral to brighten a situation was their motto (the same which René Clair used in *Entr'acte*). "It is rumored that the British have a lugubrious sense of humor," added Théodore de Banville in his *Mémoires des Hanlon-Lees*.

The peripheral attributes of scenery and costume, which so enriched circus and spectacle, were almost all taken over from the ballet *mise en scène*. The circus-spectacle constructed a series of houses dedicated to its purposes as the Royal Operas were the many-mansioned home of ballet. It engaged the same scenic artists and costume designers, often employed the same composers and librettists, and tested its amalgam, first in disassociated *entrées*, finally in "book" productions. Like ballet, it pilfered from opera, to its inevitable detriment. It survives in scattered manifestations, which, because of their beauty and rarity, deserve some special comment.

For a long introduction to this brief comment we shall turn to the life and works of Professor Richard Risley.

Richard Risley

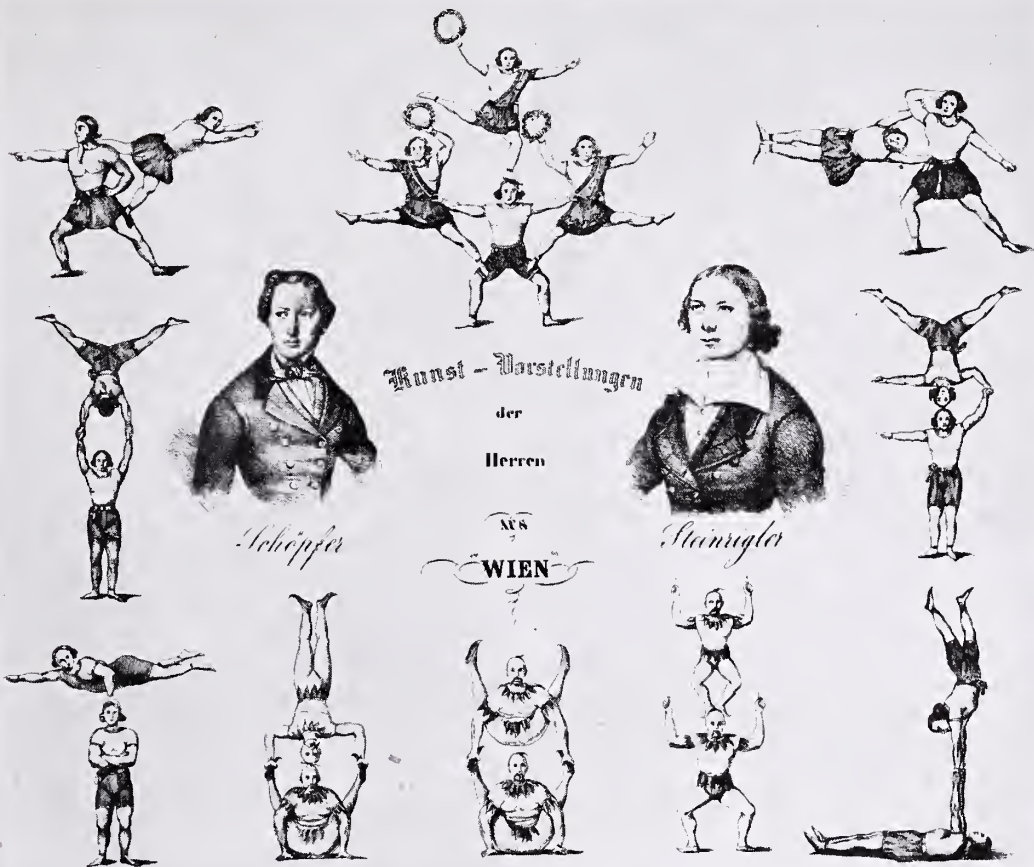
Until quite recently, when vaudeville became extinct and its rich vocabulary passed even from the pages of *Variety*, there was one phrase which appeared in almost every number of that brisk chronicle—a risley act. This was used to describe the acrobats, who were indispensable to any well-organized vaudeville program. In England also the words were common coinage, but it was in

the pages of Théophile Gautier that the first inspiration and first clue for tracking down the life and work of "Professor" Richard Risley appeared. Because Risley was far more than acrobat—he combined circus, horsemanship, vaulting and ballet as elements in his theatre—because of the lavish, superb and reckless gestures which his passion for the spectacular kept impelling him to make, and because of his contemporary influence, it is time to examine his career. Furthermore, it was in his critique of the Risleys that Gautier set forth his theory of, and project for, the Theatre of Marvels.

Born Richard Risley Carlisle, in Salem, New Jersey, sometime in 1814, he seems to have moved to Pennsylvania and been identified with the territory round and about Philadelphia as a native son. According to his contemporaries' reminiscences he was champion athlete of his community, and when a travelling circus passed through the town he joined its company. "Professor Richard Risley, athlete and performer on the flute" read his first announcement, and this title and name be retained all his life. During his theatrical apprenticeship it is likely that he fell strongly under the influence of the Ravels, who appeared first in America in 1832, and first presented here the type of performance which had developed in Europe as a marvelous hybrid. Herewith a short digression on the Ravels.

The Ravel family consisted of four brothers, Jerome, Antoine, François and Gabriel, its most notable member. Grandsons of that François Ravel mentioned by Dr. Véron as one of the three great rope-dancers of the First Empire (Madame Saqui and Pierre Foriose were the other two), they appeared in acrobatic *divertissements* from infancy. All of them danced on the tight-rope, as well as introducing their acrobatics into comic dances.

They equipped their company with sumptuous scenery and costumes and incorporated an extraordinary galaxy of ballet dancers,



The acrobats Schöpfer and Steinrigler. Viennese lithograph, c. 1850

“ . . . people don't sufficiently appreciate acrobats . . . ”

including Paul Brilliant, Yrca Mathias, Josephine Bertin, Pauline Gênet, the Lehman sisters, Hermine Blangy, Leon Espinosa, Henry Wells, and a brace of Petipas. The ballet served an essential function as bridge between the trick and transformation scenes. The titles of their pantomimes—*Asphodel*, *Mazulme*, *The Green Monster*, *Jocko*, *Godenski*, for example—are redolent of fairs and popular spectacles on the “Boulevard du Crime,” where Debureau enthralled the multitude. For over thirty years the Ravels

trouped with a substantially unchanged repertoire. It was perhaps this consistency, as well as sound business sense, which profited them more than the vaulting imagination of Risley was to profit him.

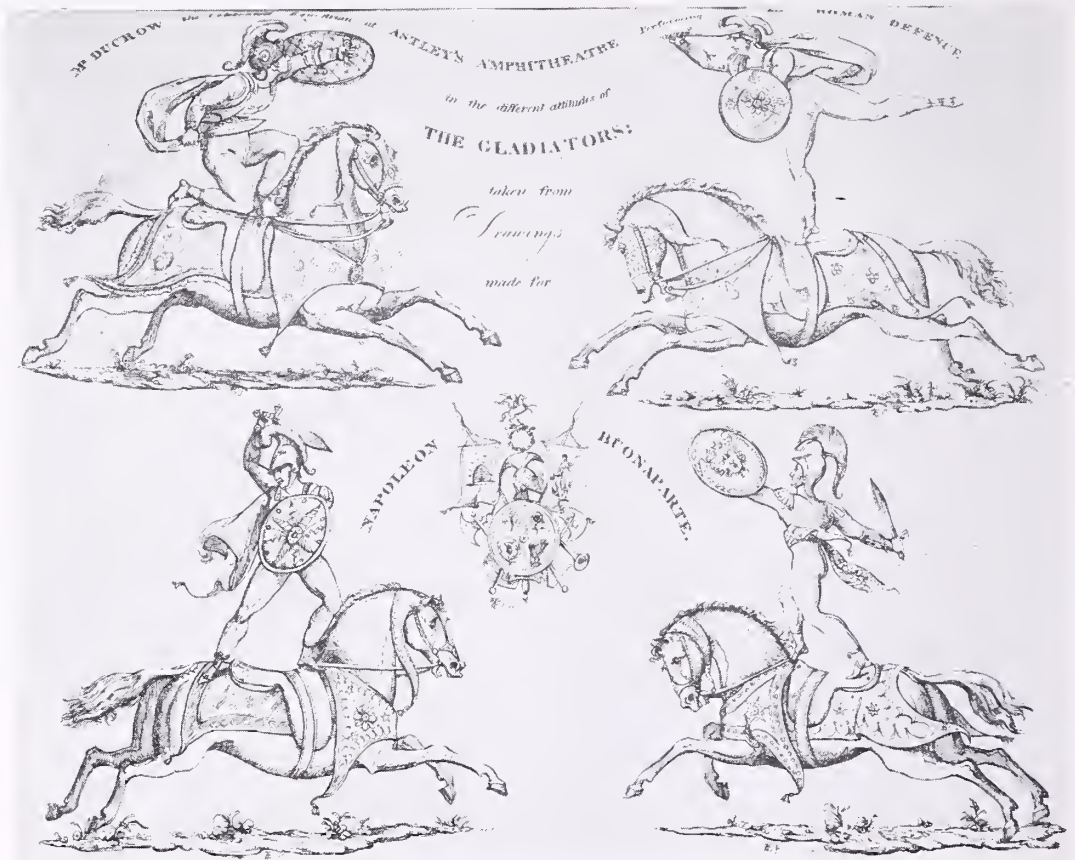
The first appearance of Professor Risley in New York was in November, 1841, at the Bowery Amphitheatre, imitating, with his son, Master Risley, the well-known acrobatic team of The Polish Brothers. Nowhere, in any biographical notice, in any letter, or any single document on Risley, has a reference

to a marriage or a wife ever appeared. The first extensive notice of the Risleys appears in the New York papers for April 30th and May 1st, 1843, from which the following excerpts are taken.

“Most Extraordinary Escape from the Guadaloupe Earthquake. We noticed yesterday the fact that Professor Risley and his little son of six years old had arrived and also alluded to their having made one of the most astonishing escapes in the Guadaloupe earthquake that was ever recorded in verse

or prose. Mr. Risley has a most remarkable and original genius for classic gymnastics and his little son is a perfect prodigy.” A description by Risley himself follows, telling of the earthquake, and his miraculous reunion with his little son John, who had gone to visit a Mrs. Montague, where he was waltzing the while his father had breakfast at the French Coffee House in Point à Petre. The Professor, awaking from unconsciousness as the quake subsided, found himself in the square, his napkin-ring crushed in his hand

“Cut ruthlessly every word which takes the place of a horse . . .”



Ducrow. Attitudes and arabesques in his Pyrrhic dance. Penny-plain by William Blake. London, 1817

and his son in his arms, although neither of them ever knew how the child had found his way to him.

They had lost receipts of \$4000 in gold, and \$6000 in all, from their lodgings, and returned to the States with the help of the American Consul at Guadaloupe, P. A. De Cranz. There is no mention of a wife or of another son at this period.

On May 4th, 1843, Professor Risley and his son John opened at the Theatre Royal of America—the Park, on a bill with Henry Placide, famous acting son of the great ropedancer and ballet director Alexandre Placide, and Mr. Hackett. Master John Risley was the sensation of that evening. Thus the *New York Herald*: “We do but express the unanimous sentiments of even the severest critics, when we say that this is truly a very remarkable child, and equally claims admiration both for his adroitness, skill and astonishing physical abilities, and also for the exquisite grace and inimitable naiveté.” Or: “One of the chief attractions, if we may judge from the applause bestowed, was Professor Risley and his boy. We call him the Elsslerian boy, because he has a certain inimitable and fascinating smile and manner, and a peculiar naiveté, together with a very high degree of polish in all his movements which were so peculiar to Elssler.”

There is no real analysis of the *style* of the Risleys in any of these notices; actually, criticism of style and technique in any of the theatre arts was at low estate in England and America. It was in Italy, and above all in France, that Risley’s innovations were first competently assayed.

Risley and one son, Master John, left for England in early summer of 1843, and opened at London’s Surrey Theatre in July, to a tremendous ovation, which carried them shortly to the elegant Haymarket Theatre. At this point the absence of a Mrs. Risley, and the subsequent developments in the act, seem to point to a certain logic in the story



Mm. D'Egville and Deshayes in *Achille et Déidamie*. Aquatint by Cardon. London, 1804. Rare instance of a *pas de deux* by two danseurs

that Master John was a “son” by adoption. The Harvard Theatre Collection playbills list these items:

“Professor Risley and His Infant Son, sur-named Le Petit Mercure, and denominated Le Petit Wonder (sic), divided into Two Parts of Classical Illustrations by Living Statuary! Poetry of Motion and Aerial Dancing. . . . Professor Risley and His Infant Son . . . will appear in a Ballet to be called *A Midsummer Night’s Dream; or the Frolics of Puck and The Elf King Oberon.*”

After a brief foray in the provincial theatres, Risley and Master Risley returned to the Haymarket on April 8th, 1844, and continued under that billing through April 13th. Unfortunately, the program for April 14th is missing, and suddenly, on April 15th, the playbill announces “Professor Richard Risley and His Two Infant Sons Master John and Master Henry!” Where the other child had been, how he had arrived, is still a mystery.

The programs now listed Master John and Master Henry in a retitled *Midsummer Night's Dream*, called *The Fairy Gambols of Puck and Gossamer, with the Elf King Oberon*. Whether "sons" or sons, the filial-paternal relationship was so enduring and so sincere that John and Henry, in this article, will always be Risley's sons. However this may have come about, the act was now more successful than ever, and after a final appearance on April 20th the Risleys left for Paris, preceded by the reports of their London conquest.

On June 15th, 1844 they made their debut at the famous Porte-Saint-Martin in Paris, and Gautier's review appeared on June 24th.

"... The curtain rises to disclose a rather pretty forest decor. The floor of the stage is covered by a canvas stretched like a carpet, which represents a greensward diapered and dotted with flowers. This is an innovation which we cannot praise highly enough. Truly, isn't it absurd to see trees and thickets growing out of a parquet floor whose every plank and splinter are clearly visible? A host of young things clad in those frightful gauze tunics which have now replaced every sort of costume for dancers emerge from the deep of thickets, from the breast of a clump of trees, and explain in pantomime that Titania, their queen, is tolerably bored and would very much like to see something new. Charming Titania! doesn't the fairy kingdom maintain the prestige of its enchantments? Oberon your spouse, is he less tender? Puck, your page, less mischievous? Very well, you will be entertained at once, for, were you more blasé than a young millionaire or an old newspaperman, you couldn't help being amazed, fairy though you be, at the spectacle which is going to unfold before you.

"The blades of grass part, and from them emerges a little being, delicate, gracious, spruce, fresh, rosy, something prettier than a cupid, more charming than an angel; an English child; one understands immediately

on seeing him the reply of Titania, as she refuses him to Oberon, who wishes to take him for a page. 'You may as well give up; not all the empire of fairyland would pay for this child.'

"And, if she speaks thus for one, what would she say of two? For here is another, who springs up from the cup of a flower, like one of those fantastic figures in arabesques, serving as pistil to some marvelous lily. He is rosy, fresh, spruce, gracious, delicate, and if he were not a fraction taller one might take him for the mirrored reflection of the other.

"These two elves, these two sylphs, these two sprites—all these names suit them well—begin to vault here and there, to make prodigious leaps. It has often been said of celebrated ballerinas that they might step on the head of a daisy without causing a dewdrop to fall, but this was one of those figures of rhetoric, those hyperboles taken seriously only by those to whom they were addressed; applied to the little Risleys it is Truth coming naked from her wellspring; the eye can scarcely follow them, and the silver sequins which be-star them are a perpetual trembling mass like rippling water reflecting the moon.

"Shortly after there appears a great devil of a genie, perfectly constructed, with magnificent pectorals, muscular arms, but without the enormities of professional strongmen; he is costumed exactly as his children, whom he throws at once some twenty-five feet into the air, as something of warming-up or preparatory exercises.—Then he lies on his back, crosses his arms and legs in the attitude of a Polyphemus or a Gulliver in repose.

"Then begins a series of *tours de force* the more incredible in that they betray not the least effort, nor the least fatigue, nor the least hesitation. The two adorable gamins, successively or together, climb to the assault of their father, who receives them on the palms of his hands, the soles of his feet,



Professor Riskey and his Two Sons. French lithograph, c. 1844. Professor Riskey lunging forward in fourth position (*botte*, in fencing); Master John in *arabesque à deux bras*; Master Henry in a *saut d'ange* or *pas de poisson*, arms in perfect fifth position



Plate from the *Galérie Dramatique*. The Polka in *Les Sept Châteaux du Diable*. Théâtre de la Gaîté. Paris, 1844

launches them, returns them, throws them, passes them from right to left, holds them in the air, lets them go, and picks them up with as much ease as an Indian juggler manoeuvres his copper balls. A ball doesn't rebound with more lightness and elasticity from a racquet, and never was more grace united to more strength. These turns accomplished, they next execute them heads down on his feet, without being excited, or breathless, or sweaty—a rare thing; they resemble not at all those unfortunate stunted creatures, enervated and broken-down, whom the mountebanks 'de-bone' and who are disarticulated by force of beating and ill-treatment; they have the air of children who amuse themselves, and nothing alters their pristine freshness.—It is impossible to see anything more comical than the pantomime

they go through before the footlights each time they announce their next turn, and the little salute they make, feet in second position, hand on heart, smile on lips, with a naive little Anglo-Saxon gaucherie, the most charming in the world.

“The success of father and sons was complete: they were recalled, bouquets were showered on them, and these were merited bravos and bouquets.

“While watching them catapulted so far, falling from so high, we thought to what degree the training of dancers of the opera is incomplete and backward.—One day, we spoke to Perrot of the superiority of his dance; he made us this profound reply: ‘I was three years *Polichinelle* and two years *Monkey*,’ meaning thus to say that he had filled the roles of Mazurier. In reality, the

exercises of equilibrists and acrobats, as gymnastic, as dynamic, are very differently understood than those of the dancing-class; they give an extraordinary suppleness, agility, strength and assurance. What could not an imaginative choreographer attempt, with such gay creatures as Auriol, Lawrence and Redisha, Ducrow, Risley and his sons? A ballerina who would be at the same time an acrobat should realize marvelous effects in a fantastic ballet. Use of the springboard would help obtain prodigies of elevation, and the balance would give groups and turnings a completely new effect. The famous jump of Carlotta, in *la Péri*, shows to what good account these means might be turned—and, with a well instructed ballerina, it would be simple to invent things of even more striking and daring grace. . . .”

Of this theatre to which Gautier aspired, and the degree to which the various names he mentioned achieved it, we have spoken already. In the search for Risley’s style, a few lines by the critic of *Charivari*, the wittiest and sharpest critical organ of its day, whether in politics or the arts, may give a further clue.

“What one finds of the curious, the truly fantastic, of an eccentric and extravagant poetry, are M. Risley and his sons.

“M. Risley is an Englishman (excuse us, M. Risley), an American who with his brood performs the most extravagant *tours de force*, the circle, the pyramid, big and little splits, carp-leaps, tiger-jumps, serpentine twists, etc. Everything that you may dream impossible, imagine improbable, M. Risley and his sons, as the barkers say, execute without pain, with ease and facility; sometimes the children are held in balance, head placed on the father’s hand, legs in air; at times they stand with their feet on the soles of the father’s feet as he lies recumbent, juggles thus with them, throws them up and down, from side to side, and receives them always standing on his hands or feet, as a ball or shuttlecock between two racquets.

“One would say these little creatures are elastic to see them jump and rebound ten times their height. Truly, one shouldn’t treat Christians thus. M. Risley and his sons are made not only of flesh and bones like you and me; a little rubber must have entered their make-up. In any case, M. Risley and his little family are very courteous, which hurts not at all. Their salute is made, moreover, with a slightly exotic grace, whose stiffness contrasts amusingly with the agility of their turns. In short, it is a curious spectacle, amusing and brief, which has its charm in this heat; in a word, a midsummer night’s dream.”

It was probably a joint decision of Risley and the Porte-Saint-Martin directorate which offered the family in *Le Songe d’une Nuit d’Eté* presented in the form of a *divertissement* of a certain pretentiousness, but the title and theme had already been worked out by Risley in their London performances. During this sensational Paris engagement theatrical correspondents of all Europe were sending out ecstatic reports on the Risleys, and engagements were booked as quickly as they were willing to make commitments. Thus, the Paris correspondent of St. Petersburg’s *Repertuar I Panteon* (Vol. VII, 1844) reported that the Porte-Saint-Martin had defeated the unwillingness of audiences to sit in the hot and stuffy theatre by engaging the Risleys who were more irresistible than the weather was discouraging. An engagement for Russia was shortly after effected.

After passing an entirely successful month (August) at the Théâtre de la Monnaie of Brussels, the family started eastward across Europe; their engagements en route even included Warsaw. Finally, in January, 1845, the Risleys arrived in the middle of the Russian winter, which appeared not to distress them at all. In addition to the furore which they created in the theatre, the Professor won a number of figure-skating contests and rifle matches. Their first appearance was in

St. Petersburg in that most elegant Alexandra Theatre on February 3rd, 1845. The critic of *Sievernaia pchela* (*The Northern Bee*), wrote an unanalytic and ecstatic review, ending with the statement that “. . . the two small children (are) the outstanding acrobats in the world. The main feature is their gracefulness. In this they are truly unsurpassed.” The Risleys’ St. Petersburg production was billed as “The Games of Ilius on Mt. Eta. *Ballet-divertissement.*” It is typical that the Professor should have chosen Ilius, son of Tros, brother of Ganymede the cupbearer to the gods, champion of the Phrygian matches and founder of Troy, rather than the banal Hercules or Samson themes of the routine acrobats, as a *nom de théâtre*.

In March the Risleys were off to Moscow. The Professor was given one of those fabulous orders, or *décorations de fantaisie*, which the Czar was pleased to confer on favored ballerinas such as Ellsler and Taglioni, and the more important opera stars. The Risleys, to the extent of our present researches, are the only acrobats so honored. The ornament, in blue and white enamel on gold, was used often for honorary decorations, thus avoiding confusion with the official and hereditary orders which were usually in red and white enamel. In May the Risleys returned for a final performance in St. Petersburg where their appearance was noted in the official court daily, the *Journal de Saint-Pétersbourg*, a French-language publication, which was normally devoted to ukases, reports of court functions, and carefully screened political reports. The glowing enthusiasm for the “celebrated American Risley and his two charming children” was unusual for its prideful pages. It also announced his next engagement in Vienna.

By August of 1845 the Professor and his family were back in Paris, where they appeared at the Porte-Saint-Martin on a bill with *La Biche au Bois* (ancestor of *The*

Black Crook) in *Les Jeux d'Ilius*, “*divertissement en une acte, deux parties, de Pichler.*” Thence to a rapturous reception at Rouen, where the critic notes the amazing *cabrioles* of the young Risleys. By November 29th they were again playing to ecstatic audiences at London’s Drury Lane, together with Flora Fabbri and Bretin.

There is every evidence from both playbills and critics that Risley considered his work as something of a bridge between acrobatics and dance. One of his Paris prints is titled “*Ballet Aérien*,” which it most certainly is. However, not even the Porte-Saint-Martin could provide him with the complete production, built around the Risley capacities, which he continually attempted. It was in Italy that the apogee of the Risleys was achieved, although watered down imitations of their turns and balletic style became almost world-wide.

Giovanni Casati, the renowned Milanese choreographer, trained by Jean Coralli and Armand Vestris, was *maître de ballet* at La Scala in 1846. His ensembles, or *ballabili*, were considered the direct inspiration of Giuseppe Rota and many of the great choreographers who followed him. Several of his works remained in repertory long after his death. He had also considerable reputation as a composer of ballet music.

Acrobatic dancing was not new in Italy; there were often comments that even in classic ballet the virtuosity and technical *tours de force* of Italian dancers made for wonderful theatricality and marred the lyric quality of ballet. The little French 18th century print of *souplesse à l’Italienne* (p. 9) was as true of ballet as of acrobatics. Such troupes as the Zanfrettas, *la Compagnia Rappo*, known as “*Atleti danzatori*,” and the *Compagnia mimica-acrobatica-danzante dei fratelli Chiarini*, had already experimented with this synthesis, much as the Ravels. It was a new departure for a choreographer of Casati’s renown to build a



Carlotta Grisi and Lucien Petipa in Coralli's ballet, *La Péri*. Lithograph by Alophe. Paris, 1843

“A ballerina who would be at the same time an acrobat should realize marvelous effects in a fantastic ballet.”

Théophile Gautier, *M. Risley et ses fils*.

“Why do stories of spirits, of apparitions, produce so profound an effect? Because they are based on the desire of the soul to be immortal, a desire which is the most certain proof of the soul's immortality. Despite the fear which a ghost inspires, it consoles and reassures in demonstrating that earth has not completely swallowed us up. Belief in apparitions, then, is only a corollary of immortality of the soul and a vague perception of the extra-sensory world which envelops us, and which we cannot discover save under conditions of particular vision.”

Théophile Gautier, *L'Apparition*.

MADE LOUISE

TOURNAIRE



IN HER VARIOUS ACTS

OF

Horsemanship.

DANS SES DIFFERENS

EXERCISES

d'Equitation.



Mlle. Tourniaire, famous equestrienne, in her ballet characterizations. London lithograph, c. 1855. Top, and reading clockwise: *La Fille du Bandit*, *Bathilde in Giselle*, *Esmeralda*, the *Grisi-Perrot Polka*, *Florinda in Diable Boiteux*, *La Sylphide*

great historical ballet with all the scenic, musical and ballet resources of La Scala, around a group of acrobats. It was, perhaps, because of that extreme grace and lyric quality so inherent in the Risleys that Casati made this innovation.

On September 1st, 1846, the playbills of La Scala announced "*Primo ballo grande storico, 'Sardanapolo,' di Casati, poi intermezzo da danze mimo-aerea della famiglia Risley.*" The music was by Pio Bellini and Casati himself. The story of Sardanapulus, (based on Byron's poem) which provided ballet material for some years, was a "natural" for the Risleys, particularly with its final scene of leaps from the flaming tower, in which the epicene ruler makes one last gesture by sweeping his family to death with him. The demands of mime must have been considerable. The ballet was a tremendous success, and achieved fifty-three performances.

Casati next occupied himself in turning the sketchy *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had been dear to the Professor since his first London appearances and which the Porte-Saint-Martin had made a more pretentious production, into the ballet *Un sogno di una notte d'estate, "danza mimo-aerea, eseguita dalla famiglia americana del signor Riccardo Risley."* The critic of the *Giornale dei Due Sicilie* who considered much of their performance "projectile choreography," uses the current, although somewhat obscure mythological reference to Dedalus and Icarus in describing their performance. It has never been clear how these games became known as *jeux icariennes*. Their costumes, described in detail, were skin-tight silver coats of mail, with green silk bandolets, and knots of crimson ribbon across the heart. Their heads were bound in antique fillets, and their whole appearance suggested some mythological ocean genii, like three silver-scaled Tritons. The critic preferred their choreographic inter-

ludes to the preliminary acrobatic feats, although he added that even these were worthy of a far better name than mere acrobatics. There is an interesting comment on the novelty of the way in which they used their musical accompaniment, how the children danced in counterpoint one to the other, and the creation of a *saltarello* to cymbals, which opened a new approach in the use of percussion instruments. He closed with a lament that the boys were not to be entirely devoted to pure ballet.

This was likewise brilliantly successful, and the Risleys now were signed for an Italian itinerary which took them to Turin, Genoa, and Bologna, and to important engagements in Rome at the Teatro Valle in February and the Teatro Argentina in March, 1847. Had they chosen they might have garnered yet a greater fortune in a Europe which was still able to offer fortunes to its favored artists. Yet no matter what wanderlust inevitably seized the Professor, America was always home base, the object of his pride and affections, which occasionally produced a reckless chauvinism.

The Italian tour drew to its close with a round of farewell appearances by "the famous Risley . . . who is shortly to depart for his native America, and the like of whose games and dances we shall not see again" (*Rivista di Firenze*, April 17, 1847). Enrico Montazio, critic of this same Florentine journal, refers to them as "*questi miracolosi saltatori-equilibristi-ballerini!*" And the greatest ballet artists of the period with whom they had come in direct contact continually, added their testimonials. Henry developed his extraordinary flair for dancing *sur la pointe* into a series of imitations of noted ballerinas, which had everything to do with illusion and almost nothing to do with caricature, as the burlesque ballerinas of the clowns Matthews or Mitchell. The children learned a ballet Mazourka which they performed at La Scala, and later in Amer-

ica, with little Henry *en travestie*.

For three years the Risleys had earned plaudits and profits the length and breadth of Europe. Countless imitators appeared but none captured their grace, elegance and style. They returned to America, after yet another Paris engagement, with wealth on which to retire gracefully and a reputation from which they might garner a final harvest of dollars. Their reappearance at the Broadway Theatre, New York, on October 4th, 1847 (announced as their "First American Appearance in Five Years") went splendidly and preceded a year's tour. John was now growing considerably, and the Professor placed him in school, later in college, and after 1848 he was lost to the theatre. Henry, the youngest, continued for some time with his father who accumulated another "son,"

Master Charles, known to be an apprentice.

A madly theatrical episode, unconnected with the theatre, was the cause of Professor Risley's first financial setback. During his last London appearance of 1846 he had wagered that he was the best shot, toughest wrestler, best billiards player and farthest thrower of the hammer of any man in London. He won at all except billiards, an omission which irked him. He decided that if he could not win the title it must at any cost be won by another American.

His antagonist had been a Mr. Roberts, the English champion. The Professor, on his return, sought out the American billiards champion, Andrew Stark, and took him to London in 1849 where he matched him against his former adversary, Roberts. He backed his confidence in an American vic-

"... one finds the tiger a courtier like the cat ..."



M. Martin and his Tiger, Atir. Lithograph by Engelmann, Paris, c. 1844

tory by wagers totaling \$30,000 and lost. This was the first setback in his dazzling career. Nevertheless he found time to introduce a brilliant equestrian named Young Hernandez, exhibit a panorama of the Mississippi some four miles in length, painted by John R. Smith, enter into a correspondence with the artist Catlin, and open an American Bar and American Bowling Alley in Vauxhall Gardens!

In February 1850 the panorama was exhibited at the Théâtre Royal du Parc of Brussels, billed as "*Immenses vues Mouvantés des Rives du Mississippi.*" While touring about Risley discovered the Rousset sisters, a bevy of skillful provincial ballerinas, and decided that they would make a great effect in the States. He brought them over and they were a success, but Risley took another financial beating through some unscrupulous business associates in the enterprise.

The Professor decided to retire on the healthy amount that remained of his fortune, bought a beautiful estate in Chester, Pennsylvania, and endured gentlemanly leisure for a year or so. By 1853 inactivity became intolerable, and another Risley troupe was in formation. Henry, who must have been about sixteen years old by this time, and the apprentice known as his son "Master Charles Risley," were his first recruits. A playbill from Hartford, then a major theatrical town in the North East Circuit, advertises this program at Wyatt's Dramatic Lyceum, some time in 1854: "Professor Risley and Troupe, whose entertainment has won for them the autograph encomiums of the potentates and highest literary and scientific men in Europe and America. Professor Risley and Son Master Charles Risley in their aerial flights and poetry of motion, Monsieur Devani, contortionist. Master Henry Risley whose assumption of the female character has been the admiration of Cerito, Taglioni, and the most celebrated danseuses of modern times.

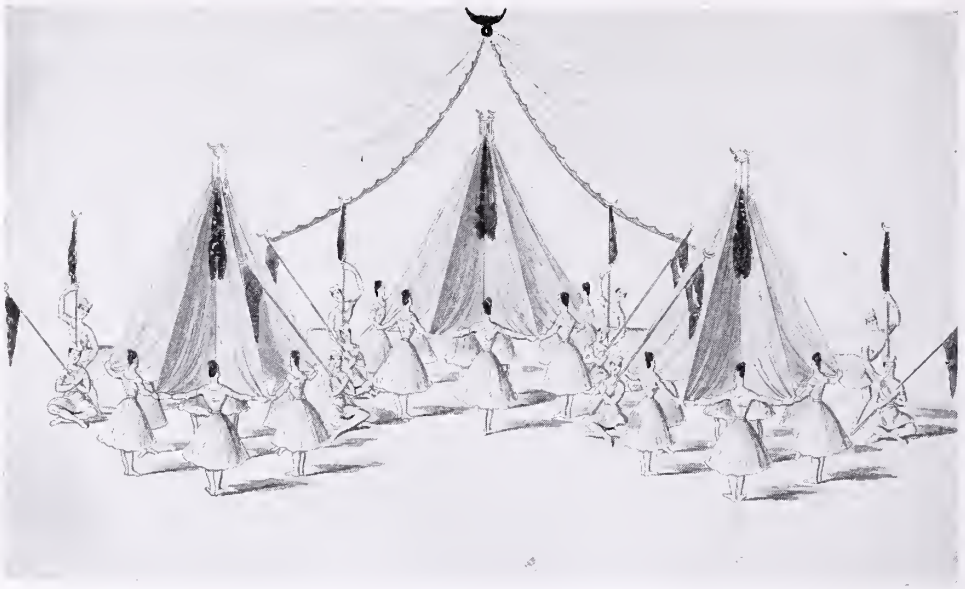


Emmeline Renz, member of the noted equestrian family. German lithograph, c. 1860. *Sauté en arabesque*, arms in fifth position

Mr. G. W. Pike, the popular ballet dancer. Comic ballet pantomime of *The Miller's Daughter*, with Mr. Pike, Master Risley and Master Le Normand."

After a continued series of Eastern and Southern performances the Professor struck out for California, with its new riches and insatiable appetite for cultural pursuits. There have recently been so many excellent studies on the overpowering array of theatrical offerings which can only be described by the current California "colossal," that it is unnecessary to detail the various enterprises. Note only that in the 1850s the Monplaisirs, Roussets, and Ravels were among the ballet companies, that several French and Italian opera troupes and four or five circuses were in constant circulation.

Henry was no longer in the company, but Risley had his "Infant Son Charles" and strong support. Like most of the California

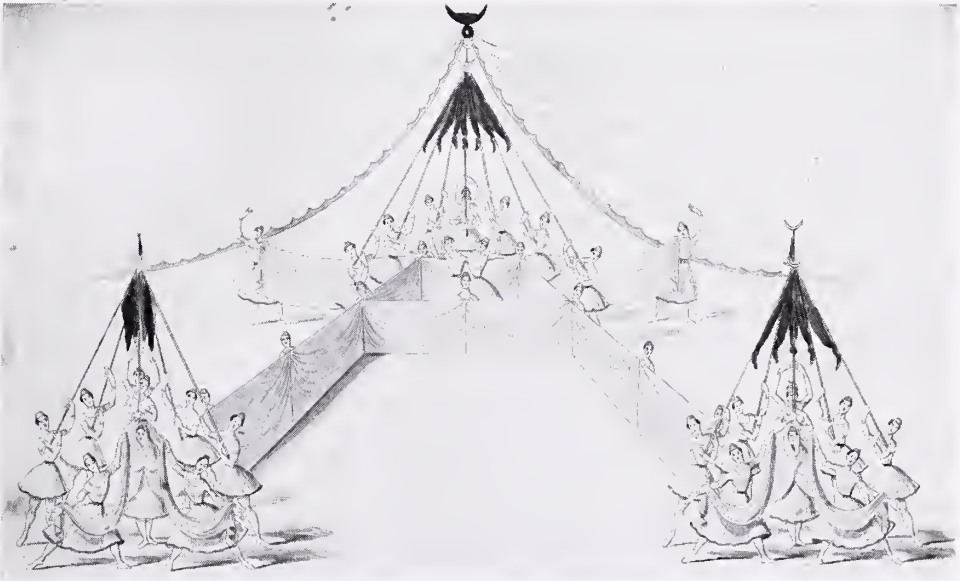


Above and opposite: choreographic notation for a circus-ballet. Drawings by Reisinger and Constantin, c. 1835-40

troupeurs he went far south of the border into Latin America, and also had several seasons in Havana, as well as making continual forays into the mining towns. In his own grandiose style this assemblage was titled *Risley's Vatican!* The company included Monsieur Devani the esteemed contortionist, the Caroni family of tight-rope performers, La Petite Cerito ("The graceful infant *danseuse*"), Miss Lizzie Burbank, Chorist, Vocalist and *Danseuse*, Mike Mitchell, "The greatest living Ethiopian dancer," Herr Lothamer the gymnast, a brace of comedians, Edmund's Brass Band and the Professor with his infant "son." "An efficient police and polite ushers" were in attendance and ladies were advised that they might attend with complete propriety. In 1856 the Professor was ready in San Francisco with Risley's Ballet Troupe, with a Mlle. Thérèse, Monsieur and Madame Schmidt, and the famous Willis Brass Band from New York, in a program of "Ballet

and Tableau Vivant," which had already been presented successfully in New York, New Orleans and Havana. The performance commenced with a ballet in one act, *Phanor and Azemas*, and concluded with tableaux of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, and an allegorical *Faith, Hope and Charity*. *Diana and the Satyrs* was the alternate ballet. Risley had ever a professorial regard for classical mythology. He was indulging his love for spectacles, his unsated instinct for trouping, and readying the cash for a new venture farther afield than any other performer had yet attempted.

Risley returned to Europe (London was a fruitful spot for raising capital, he found) assembled another circus, and started across Asia as the first full-scale enterprise of this sort attempted to the scarcely accessible reaches of the Far East. In 1863 we have a playbill from Shanghai, China, with Italian gymnasts, French dancers and pantomimists, Arab acrobats ("The Sons of Syria"), Mr.



“The period of purely ocular spectacles is at hand.”

Tate the Australian equestrian and his horse, Voltigeur, all under the sole proprietorship of “Richard Risley of world wide fame in London, Paris, Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg and all the principal cities of Europe, America and the East.” He headed next for Japan, determined to be the first to bring a Japanese troupe of acrobats to the western world. His persuasive personality enlisted the support of influential members of the western diplomatic corps in Japan, and he posted a huge sum as guarantee to the Japanese government that the tour would be correctly conducted and the acrobats returned safely to Dai Nippon.

The Risley Japanese Troupe was indeed a sensation, from San Francisco to New York, then to London in 1868 where the program credits were signed by such estimable personages as Sir Harry Parks and Betheny of the British and French Legations, Andrew Johnson, President of the U.S.A., and General Grant. He had previously taken

the Japanese to Paris in association with Thomas Maguire, director of the San Francisco Theatre, an unwise move since Risley always seemed to suffer when he took business associates. They returned to the States in 1869, and a playbill from the *New York Herald* for January 22nd gives some idea of their performance at the Tammany Theatre:

“THE WORLD FAMED

RISLEY TROUPE OF JAPANESE ACROBATS who were the first to bring among the Caucasian Races the wonderful and mysterious acts of Contortion and Equipoise in their varied phases, which startled the civilized world, and were the immediate occasion of bringing The Insulated Empire of the Pacific into commercial relations with the other continents, having returned to this city, after a Triumphant Tour of the European Capitals, and prior to their departure for Japan, commence a brief Farewell Engagement at the Tammany. . . . A magnificent

Scene illustrative of the peculiarities of the Japanese Empire, painted expressly for Professor Risley's production at Her Majesty's Opera House and which escaped the conflagration of that Amusement Temple, will decorate the Stage during the performance of the Japanese."

The Theatre of Marvels is always literal when it visits an exotic locale. A Japanese moppet called "The Little All-Right" was star of the company.

Although the Professor was fairly stripped by his various business associates after the huge profits of the Japanese, and his beautiful estate at Chester had been sacrificed to provide him with working capital, he was undaunted. He went off to London, raised funds from a wealthy stationer who was a longtime fan of Risley's theatre, collected a troupe of ballet dancers and circus performers and returned to New York in 1870, where a series of blizzards and shaky financial con-

ditions finished whatever hope he had of recouping his fortune. The final blow came when an evening was scheduled for his benefit for which every important person in the New York theatre world offered his services and one of the most terrible snowstorms in New York history closed the theatre and cancelled the performance. Completely shattered, the Professor finally gave in, retreated to Philadelphia and the care of his son, Henry (proprietor of a newsstand and book store at Girard House) and a private world of his own which was finally judged insanity. It was in an insane asylum that he died on May 25, 1874, and his obituaries occasioned extensive memoirs from various members of the profession, published in newspapers and theatrical journals. It had been a life consecrated to his own marvelous and spectacular theatre. His innovations had long since become a part of it, his name an adjective in its lexicon.



Nostalgia is inextricably necessary to the Theatre of Marvels, as are wanderlust, simple morality, spiritual uncertainty and aesthetic wonder. It seems always to have more glamour in some preceding period. We imagine the dancers to have been more eloquent, the costumes more fantastic, the scenery more exciting, the animals more talented, the magicians more colorful, the acrobats more imaginative. Its current manifestations appear vestigial. Faded photographs of Thompson and Dundee's spectacles, of Amazonian ranks marching into the Hippodrome's great pool of *real* water and disappearing, the while Odiva and Her Trained Seals frolicked in a glass tank upstage, the ice-skating ballerina improbably named Charlotte Russe, Toto the Clown,

the elegant matriarch of Hanneford's Equestrians, regal as Queen Mary, and the ebullient Poodles, whose grace as a horseman was exceeded only by his genius as a clown (how near that Steichen photograph of them is in time, how far in mind)—all seem to have something which we have not.

Or do we not?

Set aside the snobbism which seems so necessary in mentioning Radio City Music Hall, and evoke the splendors which Vincent Minelli achieved when he designed its productions. The Infernal Regions, for example, wherein all the characters catapulted on stage from two gigantic slides. A mirror-like floor reflected crimson lights, two mid-gets attended Satan in scarlet traditionalism, and Stuart and Lea danced with great swirl-

ing red capes. At the finale a smoke screen rose from the footlights.

There were the Aquacade water-ballets and there are Miss Henie's ice-ballets. There are those extraordinary canines, The Bricklayers, who construct better buildings than any contractor, and the aggressive French poodles who bedevil the Gaudsmith Brothers. There are John Mulholland and Cardini and Dante's Magic Show. There is the theatre music of Paul Bowles and the choreography of Ruthanna Boris' *Cirque de Deux*, which are commentaries on the text.

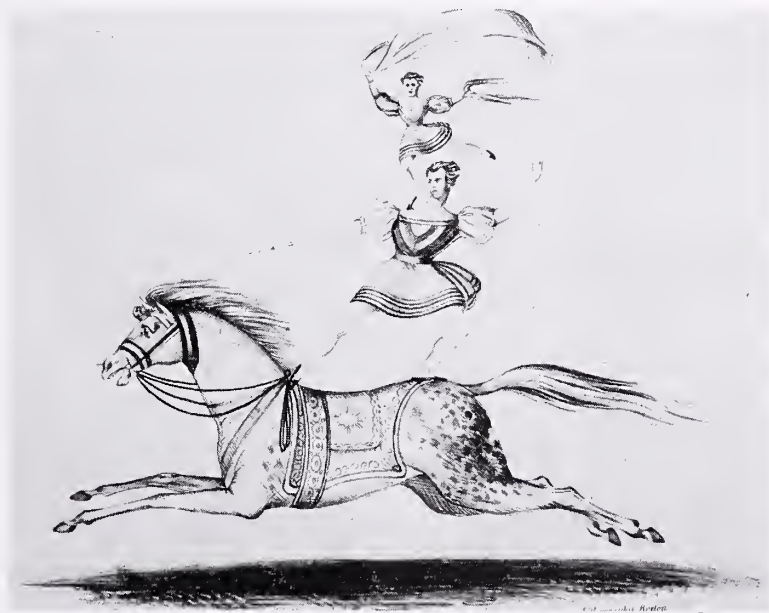
There is the world of Joseph Cornell, full of lovely objects and visions which crystallize all the ephemeral beauties of the past, the future, and the world beyond space or time.

Although the American nineteenth cen-

tury woodcuts of Mr. Brock, his horse and his small protégé, or the equilibrist in his posturings, seem but lost Americana, we do have the circus, still with us, always not quite as wonderful as it is remembered from the last time, always with something new and wonderful to be remembered the next time.

To what degree the Theatre of Marvels exercises its power depends on two mediums; its oldest ally, the ballet, its newest, the motion picture. Since Méliès and the early René Clair films, and the exciting first years of Disney, the films have had a random relationship. With the grinding pressure of current events this may change—perhaps for the better. It is primarily for the dancers to explore its new possibilities. They can achieve the illusion of the impossible.

Opposite: Risley decorations from England, Russia and Austria. Below: Mr. Brock and Master Gardner. Lithograph by Pendleton. Boston, c. 1840. Lunge in second position, Master Gardner in *arabesque à la seconde*



Acknowledgments

The foregoing study was inspired by, and could not have been written without, Théophile Gautier's *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France* (Paris, 1858). I have tried to preserve the author's spirit in my translations, but enthusiastically urge all who are able to read the original French for themselves.

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M.H.W.

