

By Dorine Sosso Ndobe

L'Histoire générale de la danse

Even though Jacques Bonnet considered himself unworthy to write about a subject as noble as the history of dance, he does a remarkable job in his book entitled *Histoire générale de la danse, Sacrée et Prophane; ses progrès & ses révolutions, depuis son origine jusqu'à présent. Avec un Supplément de l'Histoire de la Musique, & le Parallèle de la Peinture & la Poésie*, dedicated to S.A.R. Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans, petit-fils de France. Published in 1724, this work eventually became a cornerstone for many authors on dance in the centuries that followed. Today, many scholars of dance cite Bonnet as a seminal reference, even referring to him as "le père Bonnet." The title page of *Histoire générale de la danse* appears in the French review, *Culture et Recherche* 90 (May - June 2002), under the section "Sources, traces et mémoires de la danse."¹

Bonnet goes as far back as the Ancients to open his discussion on dance. He treats the sacred dances of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, and early Christians in his presentation on the evolution of dance. Bonnet recounts the various ends to which these different peoples used dance. While the Greeks saw dance as a means of education for the proper upbringing of their youth, the Hebrews considered their sacred dances an integral part of their worship sessions. The Early Christian church, for its part, saw dance as a pagan activity that distracted its followers, on public holidays when they were expected to be at church. In addition, Bonnet's description of the origin and practice of various dances is very thorough. He describes ceremonial dances, masked balls, tightrope and gymnastic spectacles. He also lists 150 ballets performed in the courts of Europe (mostly in France) from 1450-1723.

Bonnet believed that the link between music and dance was too strong to dissociate the two arts from each other. He thus includes two chapters on music in this work since "on ne peut pas faire un beau spectacle sans musique." In his last chapter, he draws an interesting parallel between dance, painting and poetry. According to Bonnet, a dance performance would express humanity in the same way as a painter would in painting, or a poet through his poetry.

The University of Utah's copy of the *Histoire générale* is preserved in a clamshell box and must be opened carefully due to its tight binding. It is decorated with false ridges and is full of engravings on the title page, at the end of its nine chapters, and on its edges. There is no English translation of this work and, according to WorldCat, there are presently fewer than five copies in libraries worldwide. Luckily, this rare book is available in modern edition from Slatkine Reprints (1970).

¹ <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/editions/r-cr/cr90.pdf>