

Dene Barnett's Eighteenth Century, Or, What Is Historically Informed Performance?

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There can be no doubt that the opera world owes a great deal to the erudition and artistic vision of Dene Barnett (1917-97) whose influential book *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting* (Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1987)¹ remains a *locus classicus* among practitioners occupied with the so-called Historically Informed Performance (HIP) of especially seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera. Trained neither as a musicologist nor as a theatre historian, Barnett originally came to the theatre from the Early Music Movement, in which he had been active throughout the 1950s and 60s. Obviously inspired by the way musicians and musicologists had immersed themselves in the revival of musical instruments and practices of the past – Barnett himself built the first harpsichord ever manufactured in Australia² – in 1968 he turned towards the study of what he described as historical 'acting techniques', which he then strove to revive in an equivalent manner. In 1971 he began giving courses in these techniques, and the following year he used them as the basis for his first opera production (Rameau's *Pygmalion*). *The Art of Gesture*, which draws on a vast compendium of sources, may be regarded as his crowning achievement.

Barnett's approach to the historical sources thus always had a didactic and artistic rather than an actually scholarly purpose. The teachability of the historical principles were central to his concerns, and hence he strove to establish an acting 'system' on the basis of his interpretation of the sources, which he presented as a "recovery of 18th century acting techniques" (7). In this endeavour, however, Barnett was very much a man of his century, following in the footsteps of such theatrical reformers as

¹ Page numbers refer to this edition.

² See his obituary: <http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/o/documents/Fellows/Obituaries/IraDeneBarnett.pdf>.

Konstantin Stanislavsky, Bertolt Brecht and Vsevolod Meyerhold who in their different ways had introduced acting methods that challenged contemporary ideals of performance. The difference between Barnett and his predecessors lies less in the artistic vision – with Brecht and other modernists he certainly shared a predilection for ‘art’ at the expense of ‘nature’ – than in Barnett’s insistence on being faithful to the eighteenth century. From an artistic point of view, this can hardly be called a problem, since artists cannot generally be required to be ‘true’ to the past, but since Barnett’s view of the eighteenth-century stage has even gained currency among researchers, it may be necessary to offer a critical reading of his book as a work of historical scholarship. In the following, therefore, I will read his introduction to *The Art of Gesture* with the eyes of a theatre historian.

Above all, though he had received no formal academic training, Barnett was clearly influenced by the theoretical traditions of semiotics and structuralism, which prevailed from the late 1960s and into the 80s. During this period it was common to view cultural expressions as comparable to linguistic systems, and this framework shaped Barnett’s view of eighteenth-century visual acting. This had relied, he claimed, on “a vocabulary of gestures each with an individual meaning known to all in advance” (10), including what he called the “Indicative, Imitative and Expressive gestures” (7). A basic function of these was “to create for the eyes of spectators a concrete picture of the ideas expressed by the words” (10), the familiarity of the educated spectators with the gesture language of the rhetorical tradition allegedly explaining “the acute responsiveness of many theatre audiences” (12).

Behind this model of theatrical communication one recognizes the theories of the linguist and semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure who at the turn of the twentieth century established that the relationship between the ‘signifier’ (the physical form of the decontextualized word) and the ‘signified’ (the mental concept represented by that form) is essentially arbitrary and determined by cultural convention. Although quoting the singing teacher Pier Francesco Tosi (1723) for mentioning the need of “a certain natural imitation” in the singer’s body language (quoted on 16n10), Barnett emphasized the relationship between the physical gestures (the signifier) and the content of the words (the signified) as being determined by the conventions defined by the rhetorical tradition rather than by any imitation of nature, as if eighteenth-century concepts of nature were ultimately ‘artificial’. In his conception of physical performance as a sign system, however, Barnett not only departed from the theories of Saussure himself who stressed that the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified concerns the abstract and systematic principles of language (*la langue*) rather than its concrete uses in spoken sentences (*la parole*), in which the words acquire a unique emotional and intellectual meaning (the same would clearly apply to the language of gestures). Barnett even departs from the tenets of the rhetorical tradition itself, which does not focus on recipients’ passive decoding of verbal or other signs, but on the

appeal to the audience, which necessarily involves communication strategies that go beyond the mere employment of conventional signs.³

According to another source quoted by Barnett, the singing teacher Giovanni Battista Mancini (1774), “a suitable action [...] gives strength, expression, and vivacity to the speech. Gesture, is the thing, which wonderfully expresses the character of that Person, whom one wishes to represent” (quoted on 16n10). Barnett’s indebtedness to semiotics appears most clearly from his departure from this view, when observing that the gestures should express (general) “ideas” – rather than the (individual) “character”. Notably, when drawing a distinction between the art of gesture as practiced by the actor and as practiced by the priest, the teacher, the lawyer, or the politician – all sharing the same schooling in classical rhetoric – he makes no mention of the importance of theatrical illusion and of the representation of character, but merely observes that “some actions in the theatre were more violent, there was more delight in the delivery on stage, and in content on the rostrum. There were also some largely mechanical differences such as the stage movements, the prohibition against looking at the spectators while acting, and certain requirements of propriety for pulpit oratory” (14). In Barnett’s view, in other words, the language of gestures is an autonomous sign system essentially divorced from dramatic context or character as well as from verbal language. When the actor declaims a given passage, “the significant word or idea is to be accompanied and reinforced by a gesture with a similar or related meaning” (7), but the relationship between word/idea and gesture is semiotic rather than emotional, which implies the detached manner of performance, for which Jed Wentz criticizes Barnett’s system.⁴ Barnett’s admission that “[d]escriptions of the passions inside the actor are ignored, unless accompanied by descriptions of how the outside of the actor was used to represent the passion for the spectators” (10), reveals the extent to which he selected sources that fitted into his own theatrical aesthetic while ignoring the calls for characterization and emotional involvement in Mancini and others.⁵

Throughout his introduction, Barnett frequently emphasizes the centrality of empiricism to his approach, echoing the scientific discourse of late nineteenth-century positivism. His approach starts from “the factual data of the 18th century”, he claims, and ends with “factual descriptions of the acting techniques”, and he explains that he prefers sources that give “specific physical details of gestures, postures and attitudes” (9). He only uses “contemporary, authoritative, exact and well-corroborated descriptions of concrete details of the acting techniques”, for only through such

³ Cf. Jette Barnholdt Hansen’s text in this issue on the crucial rhetorical concept of *kairós*, conspicuously absent from Barnett’s system.

⁴ See Jed Wentz’s forthcoming essay “‘Mechanical Rules’ Versus ‘Abnormis Gratia’: Revaluing Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia* (1806) As A Source for Historical Acting Techniques”.

⁵ Cf. my article on acting in eighteenth-century opera buffa as well as Deda Cristina Colonna’s discussion of Luigi Bassi’s portrayal of Mozart’s Don Giovanni (1787) as contradicting Barnett’s views on eighteenth-century acting.

“empirically-based, factual methods” can we gain knowledge of the works of Shakespeare, Racine, Handel, etc. “as they were once seen on the 18th century stage” (10). This knowledge, furthermore, “should be as specific and concrete as that which the art historian must have of the colours, tones, lines and proportions of the paintings and sculptures which he studies and enjoys” (10).

These claims to scientific objectivity reflects Barnett’s conviction that the eighteenth-century art of gesture constituted an all-pervasive if conventional, autonomous sign system, the grammar of which it is possible to reconstruct with almost infallible exactitude. Furthermore, they apparently serve to lend authority to his vision of the eighteenth century among the artists he intends to inspire. However, the author’s exclusive focus on what he regards as the *facts* of the *principles* (from a scientific perspective a contradiction in terms!) leads him to somewhat idiosyncratic selections and readings of sources. It is revealing, for example, that a source telling the actor not to “raise your hands too high” is ignored on principle, while a source telling the actor not to “raise your hands above your eyes” is considered useful (9-10). Barnett clearly discards the former source as being less accurate than the latter – but an alternative interpretation of these sources could be that the former takes account of the specific rhetorical-theatrical situation in which the gesture is made (*kairós*), while the latter fails to do so, perhaps because the performers could be expected to adapt to the concrete situation without being told to do so. In his search for the *langue* rather than the *parole* of the gestures, however, Barnett refuses to consider the dependence of their meaning on the rhetorical-theatrical *situation*, and thereby he is led, not to a *recovery* of eighteenth-century stage practices, but to the *construction* of an acting system inspired by eighteenth-century practices but ultimately designed along the lines of twentieth-century semiotics and modernist aesthetics (such as the Brechtian acting principles popular in the 1970s).

Barnett’s stated predilections inevitably lead him to texts that include information he regards as “precise, professionally competent and reliable”, and that are “complete enough for us to identify, and to teach for use on the modern stage, the basic 18th century techniques of acting” (8). These texts include books on acting, acting techniques and opera performance by professional actors and singers, theatre directors, dramaturges and teachers, books on classical rhetoric, as well as annotated prompters’ copies, singers’ parts and conductors’ scores. In short, texts that are *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*, Barnett making clear that anecdotes are used “merely as illustrations” (10). While such a selection is certainly well-suited to form the basis of a gestural sign system, it is far too limited, unfortunately, to give us a rounded picture and a deeper understanding of eighteenth-century acting. What is lacking is not only the iconographical sources that have served as inspiration for other ‘historically informed’ performers and directors, but above all the quite crucial *accounts of theatrical performances written by critics and other spectators*. Barnett’s reasons for avoiding this body of sources is obvious: the accounts are not concerned with general ‘rules’, but with specific artistic achievements and aesthetic effects, and to transform them into

teachable acting principles would require a comprehensive study of eighteenth-century theatricality and aesthetics, which was beyond his powers. If Barnett had ventured to study the selected sources in the context of contemporary accounts of performances, however, his system might not have differed as fundamentally from eighteenth-century theatrical aesthetics as it does.

Under the influence of the ‘synchronic’ approach of structuralist historiography, Barnett regards the entire eighteenth century as constituting one comprehensive system of thought that involves a single theatrical language, without taking account of the multiple and often radical reforms and developments occurring in the course of the century, and of the various competing trends. For example, he divides the gestures into “the epic, the plain and the intermediate” style (II), and maintains a strict division between comedy on the one hand and tragedy and opera on the other, the two latter allegedly containing “more of art than of nature” (15). Since the techniques “are easier to identify” in tragedy, Barnett’s focus is on the serious genres, though comedy was apparently also “rather more formal and less naturalistic than that of modern comedy” (15). Naturally, such divisions inspired by classical rhetoric suit his didactical purposes, but it also tends to create the image of a century far more rigid and conservative than most historians think it to be. The reforms of Goldoni, Diderot, Lessing, Beaumarchais, Mozart and others, for example, served to soften or even dissolve the borders between the serious and the comic genres, in the name of naturalness, from the middle of the century onwards. However, each of the techniques discussed in his book, Barnett says, “was presented in its own time as a long-accepted part of the acting employed by all actors, and none was advanced as a new idea which the stage *should* adopt” (9), and later he claims that “art in the 18th century sense of the word” meant “a skill in the performance of actions using accepted, proven techniques and precepts” (II). In other words, the new ideals – which were, one might argue, the ones *characteristic* of the century – are systematically ignored, Barnett projecting his ‘system’ onto the *whole* century, although the prescriptions of classical rhetorical acting, as well as the rhetorical concept of art in general, were seriously challenged already in the second quarter of the century, and were regarded as old-fashioned in the last. Concepts such as ‘nature’, ‘truth’ and ‘pity’, which were at the core of theatrical aesthetics in the second half of the eighteenth century, have no place in Barnett’s system of conventional gestures, or are radically reinterpreted to suit his purposes.

On p. 90, Barnett sums up his view of eighteenth-century theatrical aesthetics with the following list of principles:

- a. Pictorial beauty,
- b. Nobility,
- c. Idealization and the imitation of nature,
- d. Clarity and precision,

- e. Variety in gestures,
- f. Ornament, beauty and ceremony,
- g. Repose.

Of these, ‘ceremony’ and ‘repose’ are probably the most questionable. Personally, I cannot remember reading any eighteenth-century authors who highlight these qualities as central to the art of acting, but they seem to fit well with the kind of statuesque performance that Barnett apparently favoured, as did other twentieth-century theatrical reformers of modernist leanings (cf. the operas of Igor Stravinsky, the stage productions by Brecht and Robert Wilson). Though ‘Clarity’, ‘precision’ and ‘ornament’ are derived from classical rhetoric, their place in the eighteenth-century discourse on acting seems to be equally peripheral, but they fit well with the semiotic theory of communicative gesture that Barnett projects onto the period. ‘Nobility’, ‘the imitation of nature’ and ‘variety of gestures’, however, are certainly recurring terms of praise in the eighteenth-century discourse on acting, but it is worth noting that the meaning of ‘nobility’ seems to undergo a development in the course of the period, from being a primarily external quality associated with social decorum to being a primarily internal quality associated with the dignity and idealization of character.⁶ Particularly intriguing are, finally, the concepts ‘idealization’ and ‘beauty’, which in the later eighteenth century were closely interrelated. According to Barnett, beauty was, in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “largely a matter of decorum in its classical sense of harmonious proportions, order and grace” (91). Etymologically, however, the rhetorical concept of *decorum* denotes ‘that which is proper’, and this is far removed from any meaning of beauty, and most especially from that promoted by the idealistic thinkers in the second half of the eighteenth century who laid stress on the autonomy of art. According to Barnett, “many techniques” – apparently shaped according to the demands of decorum – “were available to *ensure* that the characters’ gestures and postures were pictorially *interesting* and *always beautiful*, even in the representation of intense passion or death” (10, italics are mine). This idea, however, which is incompatible with the aesthetics of the period, is probably the cause of some of the gravest misunderstandings generated by Barnett’s book: it has led to the misconception that the graceful observance of his principles will ‘ensure’ beauty. According to the theorists of the eighteenth century, interesting and beautiful artistic creations are, by definition, unique; they are products of the artistic imagination, not of any rules or precepts. Similarly, a distinction should be drawn between ‘stylization’ and ‘idealization’, of which only the latter was employed in the later eighteenth century: a stylized character is a *generalized* character shaped according to a certain style, while an idealized character is a *unique* character that is beautiful due to the removal of its disagreeable aspects (Luigi Bassi’s *Don Giovanni* is an example of this).

⁶ Cf. my paper “On Acting in Late Eighteenth-Century *Opera Buffa*” in this issue.

Barnett, however, seems to mean ‘stylization’ when he writes ‘idealization’, and ‘decorum’ when he writes ‘beauty’.

In view of the status of Dene Barnett’s *The Art of Gesture* as a classic within the so-called HIP movement, it seems appropriate to ask, after this critical reading of the introduction, how ‘historically informed’ it actually is, and also more generally what the concept ‘Historically Informed Performance’ might imply. Barnett’s book is certainly rich on information about the use of gesture in the eighteenth century, but considering that it presents itself as a book on eighteenth-century *acting*, it is remarkably destitute on thoughts on declamation, character, dramaturgy and theatrical aesthetics in general. Somewhat polemically, one might ask why an opera production based on Barnett’s principles should be more ‘historically informed’ than a so-called modern production that takes the characters, the dramatic build-up and the rhetorical structure of the work very seriously – aspects for which Barnett shows little concern, though they were of the greatest concern to eighteenth-century poets, composers, actors and critics. One answer to the question might be that we all form our own vision of the past, that we all ‘construct’ the past differently. But does it make sense for a director, conductor or performer to describe him/herself as ‘historically informed’ (inevitably as opposed to others who are therefore *not*, or *less*, historically informed), if the artist is unwilling to let his/her view of the work or the period be challenged when *new* historical information emerges, or when *new* perspectives on history reveal the traditional ones to be obsolete? For example, the view of classical rhetoric implicit in Barnett’s book is clearly too limited today when we have much greater awareness of the crucial importance of the rhetorical *situation* (cf. Hansen’s text in this issue), and hence of the interdependence of the performer’s words, movements and attire on the one hand, and the audience with whom s/he communicates on the other. If the audience is ignored, are the gestures still rhetorical, one might ask, or are they rather semiotic signs or hieroglyphs? And is it appropriate to describe a performance, in which the contextually determined rhetorical meaning of the gestures is ignored, as HIP?

Barnett’s ‘semiotic’ understanding of rhetoric is closely related to another theoretical problem: his overwhelming focus on the *general* at the expense of the *specific*, i.e. on the *style* of a period, nation or genre, at the expense of the form and content of the individual *work*, the understanding of which requires dramaturgical analysis. This focus might be said to reflect an assumption that ‘interpretation’ is a later phenomenon, whereas eighteenth-century productions were somehow ‘pure’ or ‘naïve’. In consequence, productions that respect Barnett’s principles, that allegedly mimic the sets, costumes and lighting of the eighteenth century, and that are therefore self-consciously styled ‘historically informed’, may nevertheless violate the works themselves, because they ignore the dramatic build-up, the characterizations, conflicts and rhetorical structure unique to each piece. This paradox would seem to go against

the grain of HIP itself and therefore needs to be confronted by artists seriously devoted to the movement.

If we assume, for example, on hermeneutical and historical grounds, that it was of the greatest importance to Mozart that Don Giovanni manages to theatrically and musically 'seduce' members of the audience in a way that is equivalent to the way he seduces the women in the opera, and that these spectators are deeply disturbed when he is violently killed in the end, why is a HIP of the opera not the one that tries to create that effect, by whatever means? Some readers might object that we cannot know whether this was really Mozart's intention, since he has written nothing about it, which is true, of course. Any staging of a work involves interpretation, however, just as the writing of history involves interpretation. There are no such things as non-interpretations in the theatre; these are merely *shallow* interpretations. And there is no such thing as historians non-interpreting the past; these are merely *keepers of archives*. Only historiographically uninformed historians believe in the possibility of reconstructing a 'factually' true conventional system of gestural signs as it was practiced on the eighteenth-century stage. It is on time that Barnett's prescriptive system is recognized as a construct rather than as a reconstruction.

It does not require academic training to find a source and imitate what it prescribes or describes, but as historians we spend years, sometimes even a lifetime, learning *how* to read the sources, i.e. how to read them in a 'historically informed' way that takes the practical, rhetorical and ideological contexts into account. I think of myself as a historically informed dramaturge, since my specialty is the study of the dramatic works of the past in their original aesthetic, theatrical, social, etc. contexts. Sometimes so-called historically informed directors, and even some scholars, have reacted against my interpretations on the grounds that they are 'subjective' and hence 'modern', rather than 'objective' and hence 'historically appropriate'. Not only do such objections reveal a refusal to accept that interpretation is always *both* subjective and objective, but what I find puzzling is that sometimes the very same people who object to my historically informed interpretations of the works expect researchers to provide them with accurate 'rules' about how certain types of historical repertoire were originally performed. To give into these demands, however, would be to accept that our obligation as scholars is to construct rather than understand and interpret the past, and my response would be to stress that the theatrical conventions of the eighteenth century were far more open and dynamic than Dene Barnett would like us to believe. On the one hand, this means that interpreters were expected to adapt more to the rhetorical situation than the adherents of reconstruction usually acknowledge (as Hansen stresses), while on the other hand it means that the individual works often contain very specific if implicit directions that interpreters were expected to follow. Searching for the balance between the specific (situation and work) and the general (principles and techniques of performance) is, in my view, the basis of Historically Informed Performance.