

Summary

Playfully with gusto

Ballet productions at the Stockholm Royal Opera 1931–1938: *Theatertanz*, gender aspects and the writing of history

From 1931 to 1952, Julian Algo was ballet master at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. Algo (1899–1955) was born in Germany and trained under Heinrich Krölller, Eugenia Eduardowa and Rudolf von Laban. It can be said that he belonged to the tradition in *Ausdruckstanz* known as *Theatertanz*. Algo's productions at the Opera in Stockholm were usually positively received by critics and were described as modern, whereas as ballet master in Duisburg he was associated more with ballet. When Algo was hired, there had been frequent collaboration between the Opera in Stockholm and German artists for many years, and a number of German ballet masters had been employed at the Stockholm Opera. Thus, the fact that a German director was employed at the Opera in 1931 was nothing unusual, but after World War II and the fall of the Nazis, it was preferable to overlook previous artistic collaboration with Germany. Furthermore, the time around 1950 was a period when the opera ballet in Stockholm underwent a radical change in qualitative terms, which meant that from that point on, the 1930s (and 1940s) tend to be described as belonging to another era. In more recent books about the history of Swedish ballet, there is a consensus that the dance productions that Algo presented at the Opera from the time he arrived in 1931 through to 1938 were of poor quality. These critics maintain that he did not master classical ballet technique, that his choreographies were similar to musical revues or variety theatre, genres that had gradually come to be seen as not serious, that his background in German *Theatertanz* did not fit opera ballet and that he mixed different styles. After the world premiere of the ballet *Orpheus in town*, which gave events a local setting, Algo was ignored as a ballet choreographer until 1948, but remained ballet master. Algo was vindicated to some extent in 1945, when he won an international choreography competition in Stockholm with the ballet *Visions*, which was also performed in Helsinki and by the International Ballet Company in London and other places in Great Britain.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation consists of post-modern historiography (Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow) and queer theory (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Alexander Doty, Tiina Rosenberg). I have found inspiration in their historiographical discussions of how meaning has been ascribed to the past through canonisation, how the use of tropes and metaphors is inevitable, how epistemology, ideology and methodology are always present in all texts – in one's own and in others' – and the importance of how material is organised. The idea that history has its basis more in the present than in the past has played a role in my choice of queer theory, allowing new interpretations. In order to understand the way the Western world contextualises gender and sexuality, according to queer theory, it is

necessary to analyse cultural discourses in terms of sexuality (homo/hetero), gender (female/male) and human contacts (social/sexual), which queer theory sees not as dichotomies but as qualities and contacts on the same continuum. Also relevant are the observations that queer and straight always define one another and that older libretti always contained a story about heterosexuality. Throughout my analysis, I have tried to break with perspectives that have served as the basis for the canonisation of past dance events in Swedish dance history. Radicalness is thus recognised from the outside if it breaks with cultural norms rather than with the conventions of the theatre.

The dissertation is organised into three chapters: one on Julian Algo's background in Germany, one on his productions at the Stockholm Opera from 1931 to 1938, which also includes sections on the theatrical publication *Scenen*, and one on the later writing of history. The empirical material comes from archives at the Theatre Museum of Sweden, the Archives of the Swedish Royal Theatres (KTA), the National Library of Sweden (KB), the Music Library of Sweden (SMB), the Stockholm Music Museum, the Dance Museum in Stockholm, Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung Köln (TS) in Cologne, Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln (DTK) in Cologne, Bibliothèque nationale de France and Laban Centre in London.

Germany

The first chapter follows Julian Algo's career in Germany based on sources like performance schedules and programs from the theatres Algo worked in, articles in German theatrical publications and reviews in Duisburg's newspapers as well as correspondence between Kurt Jooss and Julian Algo. The aims of the chapter concern historiography and dance history, with the chapter highlighting the issue of what expectations opera management had when Algo was hired. The concepts of classical ballet and modern dance are historicised as I survey their use in theatrical publications, newspapers and theatre annual reviews. In dance history terms, the approach in this chapter is conservative because my aim is not to break with previous perceptions. On the contrary, I use other historical writing to provide a picture of Algo's inclusion in circles that are usually seen as important in dance history and thus argue against his marginalisation in Swedish dance history.

In the 1920s, Julian Algo was active as a dancer and choreographer in German theatre dance and worked with many of its key dancers and choreographers. Kurt Jooss, Edgar Frank and Julian Algo were colleagues under Rudolf von Laban; Walter Junk, Harald Kreutzberg and Julian Algo were dancers in Berlin at the same time Max Terpis was ballet master. For several years, Algo was Yvonne Georgi's dance partner in Gera and Hannover. When he was ballet master in Duisburg, among the dancers there were Werner Stammer and Aurel von Milloss.

Ballet premieres were covered in Duisburg in the newspapers *Rhein- und Ruhrzeitung* and *Duisburger Generalanzeiger*. A discussion in the press relating to Algo's takeover as

director showed that the clashes in German theatre dance between *Ausdruckstanz* and *Ballett* were also an issue in Duisburg and that Algo was associated with ballet, whereas his predecessor Aenne Grünert was associated with *Absolut Tanz*. In one newspaper, it was argued that, with Algo's arrival, the high ideals of *Absolut Tanz* would disappear and the old ways would return, while in another, it was argued that with Algo *dance* [more musically-centred?] would return to Duisburg. When Algo was criticised, it was usually because he had done something associated with what was "mechanical" in older ballet, in contrast to what was "spiritual" in modern dance. It is certain Julian Algo took part in the congresses in Magdeburg in 1927 and Essen in 1928 and he may have attended the one in Munich in 1930. In his correspondence with Kurt Jooss for the work planning the 1928 congress, it emerges that Algo proposed that the congress be held partly in Duisburg and that he expected to take part in some kind of performance, but this did not materialise nor was the suggestion backed by Kurt Jooss. Discussions in *Das Prisma – Blätter der Vereinigten Stadttheater Bochum-Duisburg* addressed, along with Algo's performances, the art of dance in more theoretical terms in articles by authors such as Max Terpis, Rudolf von Laban, E. Kurt Fischer, Kasimir Edschmid and Reinhard Indis. The articles indicate that there was involvement and flexibility in the theatre in Duisburg in the contemporary discussions about dance. The view that the clash between the old ballet and modern dance was out-of-date and that a synthesis was possible was increasingly fostered in the late 1920s in a number of articles as well as in two texts by Julian Algo, titled "Ballett und Bühne", which was published in *Duisburger Generalanzeiger* and in *Jahrbuch des Tanzes*, and "Randbemerkungen über Tanzarbeit", which was published in *Das Prisma, Singchor und Tanz* and *Der Tanz*. The boundaries between old and new were questioned, tested and transcended; the *attempts* alone to challenge these boundaries were an important part of the concept of *Theatertanz*. At the Munich congress in 1930, the discussion about dance was politicised, something noticeable in articles in *Das Prisma*, which wrote after the congress about dance and choreography as a means of creating a new kind of human and as a social phenomenon rather than as belonging to theatre.

Productions

Chapter two also has aims relating to historiography and dance history. In terms of dance history, the chapter takes a radical approach in that it constructs a vindication of the works of a choreographer who had not been included previously in Swedish dance history. In historiographical terms, it highlights the usefulness of applying ideas rooted in the present. The analyses of ballet productions and the articles in *Scenen* are not interwoven to produce a common narrative but can be seen as taking part in a common cultural-political discourse in the 1930s.

In studying Algo's productions in Stockholm (1931–1938) I consider "gusto" and "playfulness" of his work and analyse his ballet productions with a focus on the

representation of gender and sexuality. In post-modern historiography, writing history is an activity which bases its main production of meaning on ideologies and values contemporary with the author. To some extent, post-modern queer theory has given the theoretical agenda an unstable identity, which makes this approach suitable for an investigation of “gusto” and “playfulness”; I also wanted to be progressive and needed a perspective to counter the views that Algotz was not serious enough, not classical enough, arguments which fail to take into consideration Algotz’s formative background and creative approach. In Stockholm, between 1931 and 1938, Algotz staged *Tricorne*, *Petrusjka*, *La boutique fantasque*, *Le train bleu*, *Sylvia*, *Prima ballerina*, *Good-humoured ladies*, *Casanova* and *Orpheus in town*. Contemporary reviews described his ballets as playful, artistic, modern, ironic, stylised and functionalistic. In *La boutique fantasque*, the connection with functionalism was obvious in its characters, scenography and choreography. Compared to the Ballet Russe’s productions of *La boutique fantasque*, the Stockholm production was modernised and set in functionalistic scenery. I note that all libretti include a story about heterosexuality, and several ballets include a male character who, in the contemporary cultural context, represents ambivalent sexuality, such as the dandy in *Tricorne*, the snob in *La boutique fantasque* and Beau-gosse in *Le train bleu*. The analyses of *Tricorne* and *Petrusjka* emphasise the heterosexual violence and passionate feelings between the competing men, which is a common plot in Western fiction. In strong contrast, the focus in *La boutique fantasque* and *Le train bleu* is on flirtatious, non-passionate sexuality. In the program, the characters in *Le train bleu* are frequently presented as couples, such as “newlywed golf couple” (man+woman), “a tennis player and her partner” (woman+woman), “Perlouse and Beau-gosse” (man+woman), “a boxing couple” (man+woman), an actress and her secretary (woman+woman) and some singles: a journalist, a porter, an elegant man and a tennis habitué. The habitué wears a costume which makes him look very much like the Swedish king, Gustav V, who was a talented tennis player, connoting ambivalent sexuality. At first, the couples seem either homosocial or heterosexual, but the figures often play with gender identities: Perlouse with rationality; Beau-gosse with femininity; the female boxer with profession, the presence of Gustav V, and the tennis player and her partner with their costumes. In analysing *Prima ballerina*, I focus on the male stylised identities and their iconographic representation together with the female actress (as noted by Garelick 1998). From the point of view of feminist theory, the end is interesting when – after a scene with a mirror – Prima ballerina acts as an independent subject in the narrative. Instead of hiding and lying as she does earlier, she recognises her ability to duplicate, and uses this to deceive her male admirers by making copies of herself. The analysis of *Good-humoured ladies* emphasises strong femaleness and femininity expressed in various ways such as through scenography, the libretto, male characters and cooperation between the female figures. The ballet *Orpheus in town* (1938), with new music by the Swedish composer Hilding Rosenberg, is set in Stockholm. The narrative recounts how a group of sculptures (from

1936), among them Orpheus, is awakened outside Stockholm Music Hall (from 1926) by the music of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, performed inside the Music Hall. The following night, Orpheus looks for Eurydice in different places in Stockholm and finally finds her outside the Opera house. The ballet generated discussion in the media and was both criticised – for its ambivalence of style – and celebrated – for Algo’s ability to combine influences from Jooss and Schoop with the dancers’ classical ballet skills. *Prima ballerina*, *Le train bleu* and *Orpheus in town* all have in common the presence of the media and female actresses, and stylised men, which I have compared with the confluence of the media, the dandy and the female actress as described by Garelick. All the parts of the female actress were danced by Brita Appelgren, who was a spectacular actress herself, followed by the media in magazines and well known in Sweden both as a dancer and a movie star.

Scenen

In the articles and letters to the editor of the publication *Scenen*, foreign employees at the Opera are attacked mainly in the spring of 1934 and spring of 1939. Both periods coincide with the Nazis making a show of their power in Europe. Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich in January 1933 and head of state in 1934. In the spring of 1938, the Nazis began their expansionist policy with the annexation of Austria, and what came to be called Kristallnacht took place between November 9 and 10, 1938. The success of the Nazis and the stressful situation for many Germans did not lead to solidarity with those who then left Germany, nor to any moderation in xenophobia. On the contrary, at the publication *Scenen*, it was thought that Hitler’s succession as Chancellor legitimated a discussion about whether foreigners should be working at the Opera. A number of the articles and letters to the editor are explicitly anti-Semitic, but the emphasis was primarily on the Nordic/Scandinavian/native-born, while at the same time it was argued that the participation of foreign artists was *at the cost of* Nordic artists. Teddy Nyblom, who was the managing editor from 1932 to 1935, was highly critical of John Forsell, the managing director of the Opera, and foreigners employed at the Opera, especially Herbert Sandberg, but Leo Blech, Kurt Bendix, stage manager Julius Hälsig and Julian Algo were also attacked in articles and letters to the editor. Teddy Nyblom himself wrote in an article about the foreign invasion and demanded the conductor Herbert Sandberg to resign. Art from the time before Hitler came to power was readily described as worse and of lower quality than that under Hitler, and one argument against foreign employees was that Hitler did not want to take care of them himself.

Scenen published a few articles that took a positive, optimistic view on the work of Julian Algo and his scenographer Jon-And at the Opera in 1936 and 1937, a period when the opera ballet in Stockholm is generally thought to have been widely acclaimed. But in 1938 and 1939, with Georg Skogberg as managing editor, criticism of John Forsell and foreign employees at the Opera resumed. After a spiteful campaign in *Scenen* in 1938-1939, John

Forsell resigned in the spring of 1939. The arguments against employing foreigners were the same used in similar situations: immigrants would take jobs and educational opportunities from talented Swedish musicians, foreigners would take advantage of Swedish benefits, names that sounded un-Swedish would be found in various official contexts, they were foreigners in terms of Swedish culture etc.

With his article *Opera- eller revybalett, det är frågan* ('Opera or revue ballet, that is the question'), Calle Flygare put the difference between opera ballet and variety show ballet on the agenda. Flygare saw opera ballet as a higher art than revue ballet and argued that Harald Lander and Julian Algo were examples of ballet masters on the opera stage who would be better suited as directors of revue ballet. Later, Flygare's criticism of Algo hardened and in the article 'Operabalettens nödläge' ('Emergency in the opera ballet') he demanded Algo's resignation. There was a shared aesthetic between the criticism of Algo in *Scenen*, where readers could note that he lacked taste, used cheap dance hall tricks, acrobatics and provocative effects of nudity, and the Nazi view of art before Hitler, for instance in the exhibit *Die Ewige Jude* in Munich in 1937, which described art before Hitler as a shameful entertainment venture with rigged-out variety shows and spectacles in the nude instead of quality.

Writing history

The last chapter takes up how Algo's work at the Stockholm Opera between 1931 and 1938 has been described and communicated in the later writing of history. The chapter has a historicising function. If ideology and values are considered to be critical in determining what story is told, there is also reason to historicise older scholarship and historiography once there is a longer time perspective and it can also be assumed that hegemonic ideals and values have changed. In methodological terms, White's focus on the importance of figurative language and Jenkins' advice to speak more of the historian's than of historical concepts have led me to highlight rhetoric and figurative language in the writing of Algo's history.

Kajsa Rootzén's book *Den svenska baletten: från Stiernhielm till Brita Appelgren* ('The Swedish ballet: from Stiernhielm to Brita Appelgren') from 1945 can be seen as taking part in a discourse which, when the book was published, aimed to establish a strong position for classical ballet in Swedish culture. The book was reviewed when it came out and the criticism of several reviewers targeted the chapter "Nutida balettkonst på operascenen", ('The art of contemporary ballet at the Stockholm Opera'), which mentions Julian Algo's productions at the Stockholm Opera. Rootzén was severely critical of Algo in her book. She linked the section on Algo with German expressionism which was a term of abuse after World War II – and criticised the mixture of styles in Algo's productions – which was taboo in the discourse of that time, which aimed to establish a strong position for classical ballet, but which had been ideal in Algo's last years in Germany. Rootzén's views have been promoted since then, and

no one has questioned Rootzén's judgement or connected that Algo was neglected due to the political situation in 1938–39 since the book was published. Algo's background in *Theatertanz* has only been described as negative for an opera ballet.

My analysis has shown that, in a number of ways, Rootzén conveyed a critical view of Algo's work through the rhetorical organisation of her section on Algo and its figurative language: a) Like in a classic tragedy, from the beginning Rootzén foreshadows that something will go wrong. In the text that follows, this sense of foreboding intensifies and is in the end confirmed with *Orpheus in town*, which she describes as an impure mixture of styles and the worst he had produced; b) By using military metaphors to describe opera ballet that signalled orderliness and organisation, and metaphors associated with disorder, sickness and decadence to describe German modern dance, she establishes a hierarchical relation between classical ballet and modern dance; c) Topic sentences and closing sentences in her paragraphs are negative and as a result further her criticism, whereas positive opinions occur as "pure chance" in the sections on each ballet; d) Positive views are associated with the dancers or with a reservation, while negative views are attributed to Algo.

A study reviewing later historical writing about Swedish ballet shows that Rootzén's book has been the reference most frequently used to describe Algo's productions at the Stockholm Opera in the 1930s. The positive view of Algo's ballets conveyed in reviews and other articles in the 1930s is supported by criticism of Rootzén's description of Algo's work when *Den svenska baletten* was reviewed; nonetheless, Rootzén's negative account of Algo lives on in later texts.

To summarise, it can be said that, when Algo was hired, the opera management in Stockholm would have expected a ballet master who was skilled in both modern dance and ballet and who was active in the work to unite ballet with modern dance. The association that is often made in Swedish dance history between the national theatres and classical ballet would probably not have been what Algo had generally experienced because the choreographers and dancers he worked with in the 1920s had all been involved in what they themselves considered to be a project to renew modern staged dance, both in city theatres and the national theatres. The criticism of Algo has lived on in later historical writing based on aesthetic ideals that were not contemporary with the time he was employed, that were not obvious when Rootzén's *Den svenska baletten* was published, but have been re-examined today in both artistic practice and in the writing of history.