

Article

Nicola Guerra (1865–1942) at the Budapest Opera: A Crucial Turning Point for Hungarian Ballet

Francesca Falcone 

Department for Studies in Ballet History and Reconstruction and for Theoretical and Critical Studies,
Accademia Nazionale Danza, 00153 Rome, Italy; fran.falcone55@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to investigate the contribution that the Italian maestro Nicola Guerra brought to the Budapest Opera House Ballet (from 1902 to 1915), founding a corps de ballet capable of competing with the best corps de ballet of other international theatres and endowing the theatre with a consistent and valuable number of choreographies, some of which were performed even after Guerra had left Hungary. It also aims to investigate the transnational career of a choreographer in the early twentieth century, exploring the circulation of mindsets in a range of dance concepts. The investigation explores first-hand sources, many of which come from the Guerra family archives, dwelling also on the notations transcribed by the maestro himself, in particular of the ballet *Havasi Gyopár* (Edelweiss), which allow us to draw with some reliability on his compositional style that was particularly fruitful in choreographies for large groups.

Keywords: stage discipline; dance school reform; corps de ballet concept; dancer's identity; short story; libretto; Italian dance notation; *ballabili*; group dances



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1. Introduction

For several years now, I have been researching the dancer, choreographer, teacher and novelist Nicola Guerra (Naples, 1865–1942), whose work is still little known. As a matter of fact, he was a celebrated and international choreographer with a career built in many European countries (Italy, Great Britain, the Habsburg Empire and France), and even as far as in Russia and the United States. This article is a first approach to Guerra's work in Budapest. I have primarily considered sources included in the Guerra family archive. Articles in Hungarian have been translated. I have exclusively taken into account the events of his life and career which were described in those materials. The limited space available prevents me from dealing separately with several aspects of his activity.

2. Text

The *Ballet des Nonnes*, the grand ballet included in Act III of Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable* (Paris 1831), marked a watershed in the history of dance for its sensuality-filled storytelling, its disturbing and sinister sets and its revolutionary choreography. But above all it revealed the great talent of Marie Taglioni in the part of the Abbess Hélène. *Mutatis mutandis*, this short choreographic piece began Nicola Guerra's career at the Budapest Opera House in 1902 as choreographer, ballet master and teacher, albeit in an as-yet-unofficial capacity.¹ This event immediately marked a profound change in the situation of dance in Budapest, in terms of stage discipline.

This change was observed from the very first month after Guerra's arrival. The dancers in the Hungarian *corps de ballet*, until then considered 'scandalous'² by the critics for their sloppy and inaccurate preparation, already appeared in this dance "to respect the basic rules [. . .], to pay attention to the line, to move together and to display a great deal of discipline".³

Nicola worked at the Budapest Opera House for 13 years, until 1915. In his entire career, Guerra was never tied to another theatre for such an extended period. He established

a stable school, in which a capable *corps de ballet* was formed, and gave birth to a generation of *prime ballerine* and *primi ballerini* who had nothing to envy from the greatest European theatres. They no longer needed to perfect their skills at La Scala in Milan, as had happened under the previous directorships of Federico Campilli, and later of Cesare Smeraldi, Luigi Mazzantini and Cesare Severini. Nicola Guerra, who was prolific and talented as a ballet master, also created a varied and rich repertoire of choreographies, even writing the librettos of many of them. Several of his choreographies remained in the repertoire of the theatre for a long time, demonstrating the authority that Guerra gained in Hungary.

2.1. A Short Biography

Guerra recounts in a previously unpublished interview some curious anecdotes and behind-the-scenes stories of his life. He was born in Naples on 2 May 1865. He was the son of Raffaella Pollo, a housewife, and of a fireworks maker who was a spare-time extra in the operas held at the S. Carlo Theatre. Behind the scenes, little Nicola Giuseppe, who followed his father, loved to ‘ape’ the steps of the dancers, displaying a talent that did not escape a certain Mr. Guida, and later Salvatore Paris, a highly respected master and choreographer in Naples who had a monopoly on several minor theatres of the time.⁴ At the age of eight, Guerra made his debut at the Teatro delle Varietà in a small pantomime for the derisory pay of five lire. Here he was discovered by one of Carlo Blasis’ and Augusto Hus’ best students, Aniello Ammaturo, who took him under his guidance. Thanks to Ammaturo’s teaching, Nicola made his debut as a *primo ballerino* in 1884 in Piacenza, Northern Italy, in Luigi Manzotti’s *Pietro Micca* and in the comic dance in six scenes, *I Due Soci*, by Paolo Taglioni, who had recently passed away.⁵ The young Guerra, who recognised Ammaturo as his “great, and the one and only master”, showed off all his brilliant technique in a *pas de deux*, which he composed with the *prima ballerina*, a certain *Signora* Carrozzi, performing vertiginous leaps, and displaying *pirouette* skills, which earned him the nickname “living spinning top”.⁶ Guerra earned this virtuoso technique at the cost of great sacrifices. For example, his master Ammaturo forced him to wear iron weights tied to his ankles during the dance exercises. In the Adagio, moreover, the master demanded that his pupil keep his leg elevated in different poses in the air for a long time, in order to acquire more balance and stability. Many of these exercises and gymnastic strengthening devices had been part of the Italian training tradition for a long time⁷ and had been developed by Filippo Taglioni (who in turn had inherited them from Carlo Blasis) for his daughter Marie’s lessons.⁸ After Piacenza, Guerra was engaged in Naples in 1887 by Carlo Scalisi’s company, performing in Luigi Manzotti’s *Amor*. This contract opened doors for him at La Scala and in theatres all over the world, including in the United States,⁹ England and Russia.¹⁰

2.2. From Vienna to Budapest

With his engagement in Vienna from 1896 to 1902 at the Hoftheater, the so-called ‘Austro-Hungarian period’ began for Nicola Guerra, who made his debut as *primo ballerino* in a revival of Joseph Hassreiter’s ballet, *Amor auf Reisen* (25 September 1896) in the part of Der Quellengeist (The Spirit of the Source) and in a *pas de deux* with Amalia Bessone. It was enough for Julius Stern to depict him, with that quick expression with which he summarised the artistic character of all the artists at the Hoftheater, as “Der Plastiker des sprunges” (the sculptor of jumps).¹¹

In Vienna, Guerra made his debut as a choreographer in *Künstlerlist* (Artist’s List) in 1898 (17 March), a ballet in two scenes to music by Franz Skofitz that had no less than thirty revivals. This ballet, with the new title *Művészfurfang* (Artist’s wit), would also officially inaugurate Guerra’s activity as a choreographer in Budapest on 15 January 1903.¹² The *Pesti Hírlap* devoted ample space to this ballet, whose choreographic realisation it judged to be “perfect”, although it did not conceal its somewhat negative judgement towards the “clumsy, tasteless and senseless” music, which was only enfranchised in the *gavotte*, the *mazurka* and an eastern-style dance (played by Fuchs Rózsi).¹³ Guerra, less than a month after his engagement, preferred to rely immediately on the younger forces of the *corps de*

ballet, which he began to educate, according to his own rules, with iron discipline.¹⁴ In the ballet, Margit Kóos (Emilia) made her debut in a solo role, as well as the promising Emilia Nirschy (1889–1976),¹⁵ only twelve years old, in the role of Tiktek. Here, she was already performing prodigies on her toes and spinning “with the speed of a monkey”, already executing “special *pirouettes*”.¹⁶

Művészfurfang offers an early example of Guerra’s compositional theories. As he would argue more extensively in 1905, in the preface of his ballet *Alom* (Dream, 9 February 1905), one of his most successful ballets, “the subject matter is [for him] only a pretext, simply a thread to put the images in a logical order, thanks to which the choreographer can express himself and realise those aesthetic movements, those splendid parades that fill the stage with colour, light effects and musical accompaniment, giving delight to the soul without tiring the mind”.¹⁷ The story takes place in a ballet school and centres on the intrigues unleashed by members of a company in order to obtain an agreement from the impresario Brisson, whose fondness, initially bestowed on the most beautiful dancer in a fiery Russian ballet (performed by Emilia Nirschy), eventually falls on the most promising dancer (the *Étoile*, played by Gisella Schmideck). If, on the other hand, we give this story, with its light content and comic characterisations, another interpretation, namely that of responding to a precise desire to highlight the daily reality within which the dancer lives and the social context from which their expectations and desires for change are nourished, this ‘frivolous’ story no longer serves as a ‘simple pretext’. In *Művészfurfang*, one of the many possible stories that constituted the main themes and social background of the short story “*dal vivo*” (from life), published with a witty style and literary intelligence by Guerra in two volumes in 1899 and 1901, is reflected.¹⁸

2.3. Guerra as a Novelist and Ballet Librettist

These books of short stories proffer an invaluable testimony first and foremost of Guerra’s search for identity, as well as a demonstration of all the efforts he made in his attempt to obtain recognition from society for his dignified career as a theatre artist. But they also provide a glimpse that opens up between the most hidden folds of the theatrical life of so many artists, and not only Italians, who, wandering around the world, were forced into numerous subterfuges to obtain a contract, some of them enjoying undeserved fortune thanks to lucky marriages. Guerra restores great dignity to this painful and sometimes miserable state of humanity, in which real or fictional characters can be recognised. Above all, the female character is often freed from the connotations of harlot or bewitching seductress with which the ballerina was often considered. Certainly, it could happen that a dancer, paid miserable wages or bent by the vicissitudes of life (often widowed and with dependent children), was forced into prostitution, but this constituted one of the many sides of a dancer’s career, which often instead unfolded in an honourable and virtuous manner.

In these two books, the rhythm of the writing is fast and tight, as in a dance. It happens that the short story evolves into the dialogues of a dramatic text ready to go on stage. The characters, on whom Guerra’s gaze was directed, are described with witty, fast and dynamic prose, just like the depiction of characters on stage or on a film set. The improbable and curious situations, described with feverish animation, contain a perceptible rhythm in the dialogues in which the mimicry or dancing situation is also immediately visualised. In the creative writing of Guerra—a cultured man educated in letters and the arts (according to Blasis’ tradition)—it happens that the short story turns into a libretto, and the libretto into a short story. And, as if to fill the void of the real body, or rather, of the dancing body, the verbal texture in the short story and in the libretto becomes an act in movement and mutates into dance writing.¹⁹ In light of this, Guerra’s activity as an author of librettos (seven out of twenty choreographies were expressly created for the Budapest Opera House) and of short stories is a subject that deserves further investigation in the light of a textual analysis of the two different genres of writing adopted by Guerra.²⁰ This approach would be taken to deconstruct Guerra’s claim that he used ballet history ‘as a mere pretext’.

2.4. Building a Ballet School

Critics and Hungarian dance historians believe that the one-act *divertissement* ballet *A törpe gránátos* (The Dwarf Grenadier, 22 December 1903), performed by Ede Brada, was among Guerra's most successful works, not least because of the hundred or so performances that followed long after Guerra's tenure ended. The exhilarating story tells of four young men who, in order to escape enlistment, pretend to be injured and disabled, including one who "writhes so much that he looks like a dwarf".²¹ But in the end, they cannot escape the call to arms. The music, created by Adolf Zsiklás, with whom Guerra worked extensively for this ballet, also suited the comic situation and accompanied the mimicry. In particular, the Scherzo, the "Ball of the Cripples" and the "Ball of the Threshers", which featured thirty-two dancers, appealed enormously.

But more than anything else, the ballet was a success because Guerra's abilities as a teacher became evident. In a short time, he had achieved visible results, even for the less-experienced spectator, thanks to a real "Plan of Reforms" that included the reopening of the "Opera House".²² In 1903, thirty pupils were admitted, all between the ages of seven and ten, recruited directly by Guerra by means of an aptitude test held in the autumn. A desirable prerequisite was a pleasing and well-proportioned figure, but Maestro Guerra also looked for some marks of good or bad health, such as the pupil's teeth, and the shape of the chest, which had to be "wide enough for good breathing, necessary for the ballerina".²³ He then skipped to examine the pupil's arms, the flexibility of which was tested by pushing them backwards: "If the child felt pain, this was a sign of poor joint and muscle malleability".²⁴ Guerra then examined the shape of the legs, whether with femoral head, patella and ankle aligned along a vertical axis, X-shaped (more common among young Hungarian girls)²⁵ or arched. For the feet, adequate curvature was required. By observing the shape of the malleoli (those that were too small were considered to have little strength), Guerra guessed how the young girl's body would react to the stresses of fast weight changes in jumps and pliés. A careful observation of the spine and trunk structure brought the examination to an end. A few general questions served to allow him to understand the pupil's personality, literacy level and expectations.²⁶

Guerra divided the course of studies, which was completely free of charge, into three levels, the first lasting three or four years, the second lasting two or three years, and the last presumably lasting three years,²⁷ with a basic pay of 80 crowns, but which at the time the student became a dancer could reach 1000 crowns, and even more than double that amount, if they became a soloist.²⁸ The teacher of the first classes was Mme Szabados and the first ballet teacher was Mrs Filó. Both were students of Campilli.²⁹ Naturally, Guerra also taught the classes and supervised the work of his colleagues. A reporter from the *Tagblatt* hoped that the young students in the first class would also receive lessons in French and literature, just as they did at La Scala, to ensure a broader cultural education.³⁰ The transition from one year to the next and from one level of study to the next was guaranteed by an examination. The effort to reopen the school was due in large part to the energy and enthusiasm of Director Máder and the ministerial councillor Viktor Bezerédy who, having replaced the old intendant, had found the funds.³¹ This synergy of purposes, together with the enthusiasm of the public, who showed their appreciation of Guerra's new direction for the ballet by flocking to the theatre stands, contributed to the success of ballet on the stage of the Opera House, which had been greatly neglected under Gustav Mahler's direction.

2.5. Guerra and His Dancers

As in other European theatres, the audience in Budapest sided vehemently with one dancer or another. It happened that Guerra was even assaulted on Andrassy Street by a certain Count Geza Tsaky, on the pretext of having offended Szidi Balogh, the protagonist of the ballet *Sylvia* (whose premiere had taken place on 15 December 1904). Guerra had in fact prevented her from picking up the bouquets of flowers thrown by her admirers on the proscenium. In fact, the dashing count was not aware of the rule Guerra had imposed on his dancers about not picking up bouquets at the premiere because some unpleasant

accident could have occurred, such as “slipping on wet leaves”. The affair was on the verge of ending up in Court with lawyers, except that everything was providentially resolved with a public apology from the count, who was forced to pay a fine of 300 crowns, and with Guerra’s withdrawal of the complaint.³²

This shows how even the events surrounding the artistic life of Guerra, a well-known personality in Hungarian society, were widely reported in the newspapers. This helped to give him great popularity and set his figure as an example of strict and upright behaviour, even if he was sometimes badly tolerated by the dancers.³³ There was no shortage of moments of friction with the Madér management, as Guerra had a gruff and irascible, but at the same time generous, character. In order to increasingly improve the artistic performance of his *corps de ballet*, he made ever-more-pressing requests to the management, which were often not granted. On one occasion, he even threatened to resign if he was not offered a financial advancement for himself and his younger, better-prepared dancers, whom he wanted to be paid the same salary as the older ones for the same number of hours worked.³⁴

One of Guerra’s strategies was to produce ballets that perfectly fit the technical and interpretative qualities of his dancers. For the debut as *prima ballerina* of Emilia Nirschy, Guerra created the divertissement *Tánczezyveleg* (Corps de ballet, 20 April 1906), a miscellany of pieces by different composers, harmonised with music by Sziklás. The scene opens onto a garden at the centre of which is a fountain. It presents a party, probably held in the house of a prince. “The guests, dressed in graceful Rococo robes enter, accompanied by Mozart’s march. The ceremony begins with the minuet from Grétry’s ballet-suite, followed by the *Tambourin* from Rameau’s *Castor and Pollux* [. . .]. These two ancient and classical French pieces are followed by Berlioz’s *Danse des Sylphes de la Damnation de Faust*”.³⁵ The final *ballabile* was taken from the music of the “modern” composers Verdi (from *Il Trovatore*) and Delibes (from *Danse de Fête*, Act III of *Coppelia* and *Galop*). Nirschy danced first in a *pas de deux* with Ede Brada and then in a solo (*Danse de Fête*). This petite dancer, not yet 16 years old, had taken her first steps at the school of her mother, a certain Mme Filóne, but after being taken under Guerra’s wing, she quickly became the most successful dancer of his school. A rare talent, gifted with grace, elegance and lightness, this dancer astounded the public with her formidable pointe technique and her perfect execution of 64 *ronds de jambe fouetté*, twice as many as were normally seen on stage.³⁶

According to the tradition of the Italian school, the dancer was complete if they also had great pantomimic skills. As on other occasions, Guerra took great care in preparing Ilona Szoyer, the protagonist of *Pierrette fátyola* (*Pierrette’s Veil*, 7 May 1910), “to express [. . .] astonishment, fear and finally madness”.³⁷ Guerra, too, exceptionally appeared on stage with what had been one of his ‘workhorses’ in Vienna, the interpretation of Harlequin,³⁸ a character “in which he was able to express his gifts as an actor in such a varied and perfect way that he could compete with the best dramatic artists”.³⁹ This “silent musical performance”, from a text by Arthur Schnitzel, amazed audiences and critics alike as it seemed to go beyond pantomime, according to Ernó Dohnányi, the author of the music. “Opera in which singing is replaced by facial movements and the language of deaf-mutes, gestures and music replace dialogue. [. . .]. The events [. . .] unfold in a chain one after the other”.⁴⁰ This means that Guerra had helped to bring out in the characters a great naturalness of pantomimic interpretation, which was not stiffened in a conventional and stereotyped representation. We assume that improvisation was allowed, given the journalist’s mention of the “randomness of events”.⁴¹

2.6. The Master of Ballabili

A very successful ballet, even before *Pierrette’s Veil*, was *A csodavása* (The Marvellous Vase, 8 May 1908), with a libretto by Guerra, which marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration with Iván Hübös. He was a young man from the aristocracy who had studied composition and created music for operas and ballets. Hübös “succeeded in understanding Guerra’s dual intentions as a choreographer and as a writer, as his music precisely delineates

the mimicry details of the events with a strong atmosphere. He found the right basic tone and character of the individual dances".⁴² Something interesting is the relationship that both composer and choreographer have with an Asia that is more a product of fantasy and imagination than real or philological. "The exotic combinations of harmony and rhythm can be said with good will to belong to Japanese music," says a Hungarian critic.⁴³ And indeed, Guerra eliminates from the choreography all the "softness of moves and rhythms" with which choreographers used to imagine an indefinite Asia. Wanting the spectator to grasp all the 'speakable' of the story, Guerra entrusts a melodic synthesis of it to the voice of Countess Teleki Sándorné. The young Tokio (played by Nirschy), in love with the Japanese emperor Mikado (Ilona Kramer *en travesti*), manages to enter the palace hidden in an antique and precious vase, managing to save him from the assassins who wanted to kill him; the prince, impressed by Tokio's courage, takes her as his bride. The ballet ends with an apotheosis with large luminescent fans, which took on different geometric configurations, resulting in a highly spectacular performance.

Here Guerra demonstrated his choreographic genius in the *ballabili* and group dances, full of an imaginative whirl of dances, also relying on the sumptuousness of the costumes by the painter Jenő Révész. Particularly striking was the luminous fountain, from which gushes of real water spouted out, illuminated by beams of coloured light, around which the geisha dance took place. The famous Dance of the Mirrors was realised with a series of large, veiled frames arranged diagonally on the stage, simulating mirrors, on either side of which the ballerinas danced, facing each other in perfect synchrony. Guerra revived this ballet at La Scala in Milan five years later, with the title *Siama* (26 February 1913). The subject and music were the same, but the setting was in Burma, no longer in Japan. This was proof of how the choreographer's great success resonated beyond the borders of Hungary, bringing his fame back to Italy as well.⁴⁴

The ballet *Havasi Gyopár* (Edelweiss 1911), also to music by Hübner, marks the apex of Guerra's choreographic mastery in his work with the *corps de ballet*. This is perhaps because the second act of this choreography has been preserved thanks to a choreographic notation by Guerra himself, giving us the details of his compositional style.⁴⁵ This important manuscript, finely coloured by hand and enriched with India ink drawings, is inspired in its writing technique by the choreographic notations of the Italian masters.⁴⁶ Thanks to this document, I immersed myself in the 'heart' of Guerra's poetic sensibility and compositional style. From an initial analysis, it appears that the primary need he felt was to strengthen and increase the spectacular and technically expressive capabilities of the *corps de ballet*, making it ready to work in synergy and capable of developing unison modes. In the *Ballabile delle fate* (first part of the second act),⁴⁷ for example, the ever-changing formations of the corps de ballet certainly had to be performed by dancers who were aware and presumably in a state of alertness to what was happening on stage. At a conference held in Rome in 1999, at the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, *Recupero, ricostruzione, conservazione del patrimonio coreutico italiano del XIX secolo* (Recovery, Reconstruction, Conservation of the Italian Choreographic Heritage of the Nineteenth Century), I showed a film of my reconstruction of the first part of the *Ballabile delle fate* performed with forty students of the Accademia Nazionale di Danza.⁴⁸ This work allowed me to investigate on a practical and theoretical level some of the spectacular strategies of composition for large groups adopted by Guerra and still considered fundamental in the first decade of the twentieth century.

In order to move a 'small army' of forty dancers on stage, it was therefore necessary for Guerra to adopt new didactic-compositional strategies, and to train a *corps de ballet* that was concentrated and capable of maintaining a state of alertness for a long time. These qualities are exercised by training the so-called 'peripheral gaze'. This is an exercise that teachers normally resort to in order to broaden perceptive capacities based on listening to the presence of other bodies on stage with which to interact, increasing the functions of attention as all move together in unison, in a multidirectional space that is our own and belongs to everyone. It was precisely these qualities, particularly valued in choreography from the second half of the 19th century, that the *corps de ballet* at the Paris Opéra lacked,

ever since masters such as Arthur Saint-Léon and Leopoldo Adice had advocated a reform that would focus on new strategies for training the *corps de ballet* to meet the new demands of spectacularity.⁴⁹

The creation of new theatres, new venues and new strategies of the ballet industry provoked a diversion of the public towards other more varied stages or music halls, such as the Eden in Paris or the Alhambra in London, theatres that staged grandiose ballets by increasing the number of dancers on stage and renewing the costumes and scenography based on monumental props.⁵⁰ These were the strategies that Luigi Manzotti had begun to adopt, shifting the axis onto the movements of the masses in a complex scenic machine that had to work with kaleidoscopic effects.

Guerra, who found himself working in an opera house such as Budapest, had on the one hand to keep an eye on the new demands dictated by fashion and market, and on the other hand to keep the quality of the technical performance of his dancers to a high standard. For this, never yielding to routine and cloying military parade movements, which in the theatres where *les vedettes à la page* performed, could be interpreted by simple *figurants*, he used a *corps de ballet* capable of performing complex geometries with a highly aesthetic rendering. Movements from one figure to another by the *corps de ballet* were also realised with elaborate steps and not just simple transitional steps. This is how Guerra complained in one of his short stories about the discrediting of choreography of which Manzotti was guilty:

Alas! That unfortunately today, our theatre is full of this race of boastful and shameless asses. Manzotti is to blame for this. He had no education and no knowledge of dance and was—oh, the genius! Oh the will—the Bonaparte of dance! We are to blame for his *Excelsior*, which brought Italian choreography to the highest triumph in both worlds and marked its decadence; we are to blame for his mechanical and easy dance system, which, although wonderful, excluded art and attracted so many little monsters to the theatre.⁵¹

If it is possible to recognise an Italian matrix in the manner of notation of the dance (coloured circles indicating the dancers on stage, arrows and dotted lines for their movements, annotations at the foot of the page, etc.) as we have seen, the same cannot be said of the precise geographical and national characterisation of the compositional style. To have been born in Italy and to have had Italian masters (perhaps in close contact with French masters) does not justify identifying and isolating individual elements of style belonging to a nation or geographical entity. Guerra had lived abroad a great deal, and he worked in theatres where masters and dancers from different nationalities crossed paths. He was well aware of this, since when asked to specify what the Italian school, the French school and the Russian school were, he would answer several years later: “[. . .] in terms of school there is no difference: at most it is only a question of form; and this was entirely absorbed, a century ago (in the golden age of dance) by the Italian school”.⁵² The fluid character of these identity elements could then also apply to the French and Russian schools, in a way.

The *Ballabile delle fate* is built on complex spatial patterns. Its dominant compositional theme is the circular design, which gives stylistic unity to the forty dancers marked yellow, pink, lilac, green and blue, according to the rows they occupy, from the central to the outer ones.

Of the twenty-three figures on which my reconstruction was based, twenty are established on circular motifs (circles, semicircles, concavities and convexities) and only three on linear elements. The movement seems to spread from the dancers in yellow of the first *quadrille* to the most peripheral, giving the continuous movement the kaleidoscopic sense of making and unmaking. There is no doubt that the floral motif, so much in vogue in Hungarian Art Nouveau architecture and decoration, bewitched Guerra in these figurations that resemble embroidery and symbolic figures. In the notation of the ballet, there is never a detailed description of the steps and sequences interpreted by the *prima ballerina*, no doubt due to a custom adopted in this choreographic writing by the Italian school, as the

prima ballerina is left free to interpret steps and sequences according to her own meaningful qualities (after careful supervision by the choreographer).⁵³

2.7. Modernist Suggestions

One cannot close this brief overview of Guerra's activity in Hungary without mentioning his *Prometheus* (19 March 1913), which is a momentary turn towards the inspiration of Greek dance, of which Isadora Duncan had been the greatest advocate, among other things reviving the fashion for Ludwig van Beethoven's music for dance. The not-yet-extinguished echoes of the first recital given by Isadora at the Marijiskij in February 1908, and the just-completed tour of the Ballets Russes (in 1911 and 1912) at the Budapest Opera House, contributed to the management's decisions towards a modernist departure from the repertoire. Guerra, together with the writer Bródi Sándor, who created the prologue and libretto, created a ballet in three scenes, inspired by the choreographer Salvatore Viganò's ambitious work with Beethoven, who had created the music (*Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*—The Creatures of Prometheus—Vienna, Burgtheater, 1801), later recreated in a more monumental form for La Scala in 1813 under the title *Prometeo* (Prometheus). The myth of Prometheus is reinterpreted by Guerra and Sándor through the pages of Carlo Ritorni, author of an apologetic biography of Viganò, as the libretto itself of the premiere has not been preserved.⁵⁴ Here Guerra "leaves behind the usual tulle skirts. The choreography, taking its cue from the Russians, abandons toe dancing. It uses classical and modern dance steps, emphasising plastic movements, and mimicry. The director had the dancers remove the unsightly stockings from their legs and instead of a tulle skirt used very light fabrics that let the natural shapes of the body appear".⁵⁵ Introduced by a prologue played by Oskár Beregi, images opened up before the audience that "in every detail" seemed to recall the world of Ellas and "there [was] nothing, no anachronistic appearance that [could] disturb this uniformity of style. Miklós Bánffy's costumes and sets, Hévesi Sándor's 'Reinhart-esque' direction and Miklós Guerra's beautiful choreography of artistic conception [came] together harmoniously to create a grandiose work of art". The critic concluded enthusiastically: "this is the true 'Vereinigung aller Künste in Rahmen eines Kunstwerkes' (unification of all arts within the framework of a work of art) of which Wagner dreamed".⁵⁶

The dance is divided into three scenes, the first of which opens with the image of a storm, which was greeted at the premiere with a warm and long applause. The dance of the girls with pitchers, the musical image of night and dreams (a theme much loved by Guerra) and the dance of seduction were also very appreciated. In the second scene, "there was the poetic pastoral, the violent chorus of joy, and the grotesque dance of the fauns. In the last there was the Viganò chorus, as well as the grandiose finale".⁵⁷ In all, there were sixteen pieces by Beethoven, plus the grand *Ouverture*.

Further studies could shed light on the details of this choreographic creation, about which we currently possess little documentation. Guerra would revive this ballet for the Paris Opera at the end of his second-term contract (1927–1929),⁵⁸ with a musical arrangement by Jean Chantavoine and Maurice Léna, starring Olga Spessivtzeva. But the Director of the Parisian theatre, Jaques Rouché, after Guerra's abrupt resignation from the Opéra, entrusted it instead in 1929 to Serge Lifar, a brilliant young dancer from the Ballets Russes company, who would tie his fate for a long time to France's greatest theatre.

2.8. A Career in Constant Motion

The mobile career of Nicola Guerra, who had been forced to leave Hungary with Italy's entry into the war, would continue in Europe on several occasions. In Hungary, he had been awarded the high honour of the Cross of St Stephen, and some people, feeling he was one of their compatriots, had asked him to take Hungarian citizenship. In Italy, he would start two private companies, but they did not last long.⁵⁹ He went on to Austria, France, La Scala and the Rome Opera House and then back to France again, always full of choreographic projects and ideas.

No country but Hungary would have regretted, with the consideration and esteem due to the ‘Greats’, its Maestro Miklós, as he was called, who had left the indelible mark of his passage, founding a prestigious school and creating a generation of choreographers and dancers, who would continue in his wake for many years.⁶⁰ Today, a corridor of the Opera House is dedicated to Nicola Guerra. Among the dancers who have most closely followed Guerra’s legacy is Ferenc Nádasí (1893–1996), who became a soloist at the Budapest Opera House in 1913. Having studied with Guerra continuously until the end of his term in Budapest, Nádasí restaged many of his ballets at the Opera House. His major task was to accelerate the merger between the teaching principles of the so-called Italian dance with the Hungarian folk-dance tradition, to whose dynamic force Nádasí was particularly sensitive.

Having settled in Italy in the quiet of Lake Como, in Cernobbio, where many Italian dancers and choreographers, first and foremost Carlo Blasis, had retired, Nicola Guerra died there on 5 February 1942. He was cared for by his second wife, Livia Pasquinoli, Guerra having long been widowed by his first wife, Camilla Pagliero. Livia, too, was a dancer, 34 years younger, who gave Guerra, by then advanced in age, the joy of fatherhood, thanks to the birth of his son Livio.⁶¹

3. Conclusions

This text aimed to investigate the great work of Nicola Guerra at the Budapest Opera House, taking into account the important sources found at the Guerra family archive. Nicola Guerra was a leading master and choreographer on the international dance scene between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Drawing on the sources (newspaper clippings, letters, etc.), it was possible to synthesize the concepts that Nicola Guerra tried to use on stage as a choreographer, highlighting his skills as a *regisseur* and *directeur de la mise en scène*, especially for large groups of dancers. A series of future publications—the first on his still-unpublished literary production, and the second on his career spent in European theatres—will be able to restore this choreographer to his rightful place in history. A third important step may be to resume the work of reconstructing *Havasi Gyopár*, certainly his most successful ballet in terms of its choreographic intentions, which Guerra annotated in a richly and finely decorated notebook.

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Notes

- ¹ This ballet was commissioned by the Director and Maestro di Cappella, Roaul Máder, in April 1902. Guerra was officially appointed in September 1902.
- ² L.D, *Színház és Művészet, Opera*, in *Független Magyarország*, [n.d.], 1902 (*Guerra Archive*, from now on, G.A.)
- ³ V., *Operház, “Pesti Hirlap”*, [n.d.], 1902, G.A.
- ⁴ Guerra sketches the character and activity of Paris in his novella ([Guerra 1899](#)), pp. 187–224.
- ⁵ The ballo was staged at the Teatro Municipale in Piacenza by Antonio Giuri.
- ⁶ Vittorio Guerriero, *Italiani a Parigi. Serata con Nicola Guerra*, in *Roma*, 18 September 1931, Year IX.
- ⁷ The Italian dancer and choreographer Ugo Dell’Ara (1921–2009), who had just entered the Opera House Ballet School in 1931 and had only studied there with Nicola Guerra for a short time, told me about this in an interview in May 1997. A documentary, *La Scuola di ballo del Teatro Reale dell’Opera di Roma* ([Giornale Luce \(1932\)](#) B0056, 4 March 1932) shows the master giving his lesson with a stick to pupils of different levels ((24) Roma. La scuola di ballo del Teatro reale dell’opera—YouTube).
- ⁸ See Léopold [Adice \(1859\)](#), pp. 72–75.

- 9 Performing in *The Black Crook* at the Academy of Music in New York (12 December 1892), he was noticed by the English master and dancer Edouard Espinosa as “the best *grand premier danseur* of his day, combining correct technique and fine effects” (E. Espinosa (1946)).
- 10 Guerra was invited together with other Italian dancers to perform at the celebrations organised for the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in May 1896.
- 11 Julius Von Stern, *Das Wiener Hof-Opernballet in Wortbildern*, in Rudolph Lothar and Julius Stern, *50 Jahre Hoftheater. Geschichte der bieder Wiener Hoftheater unter der Regierungszeit des Kaisers, Joseph I*, ed. by Alexander Duschnitz and Julius Stern, II Vol., Julius Stern, *Hof-Operntheater 1848–1898*, Druck und Verlag der Buch Wien, [1898?], p. 172.
- 12 In the brief summer interlude of 1898, on 21 July, Guerra married in a civil ceremony in Naples ‘Die vollendete Mima’ (Expert Mima, J. Von Stern, cit. p. 172) Maria Camilla Pagliero (who had been engaged at the Hoftheater since 1879). Aniello Ammatturo was the wedding witness [Municipio di Napoli, estratto dal registro degli atti di matrimonio dell’anno 1898 (Naples City Hall, Extract from the register of marriage, acts of the year 1898)], G.A.
- 13 [-Id], *Pesti Hirlap. Művészfurfang* [16 January 1903], G.A.
- 14 The youngest who were previously in the last rows are advanced to the first Quadrille (*Tagblatt. Theater, Kunst und Literatur, Opernhaus* [15 December 1903]).
- 15 The dancer’s official debut took place on 6 April 1906 with *Táncgyveleg* (Dance Company), choreography by Guerra and music by Adolf Sziklás.
- 16 D.A., *Alkotmány, Színáz és Művészet* [n.d.] G.A.
- 17 Körtvélyes Ágnes, *Guerra Miklós ballettmester operházi működése*, in Vályi Rózsi, *A magyar ballett történetébö, Zeneműkiadó*, Budapest, 1956, pp. 175–90, p. 176.
- 18 Nicola Guerra (1901), *Tersicoreide*, cit.; N. Guerra, *Cavalleria forzata*, Tipografia cooperativa, Firenze 1901.
- 19 Cf. F. Falcone, *La danza della scrittura. Nicola Guerra (1865–1942) e il balletto Siana (1913)*, in *Il libretto di ballo. Riflessioni storiche e teoriche in omaggio ad Alberto Testa*, ed. by Patrizia Veroli, in collaboration with Mattia Scarpulla, Massimiliano Piretti, Bologna 2017, pp. 57–73.
- 20 I am soon to edit a volume containing some of Guerra’s unpublished novellas from his family archives, as well as republishing some of the most famous novellas from *Tersicoreide* and *Cavalleria forzata*.
- 21 [-Idi], *Pesti Hirlap*, [24 December 1903], G. A.
- 22 There are no documents in the Guerra archive containing regulations and dance didactics principles written by Guerra in his Hungarian period. In his *Méthode* (1928), written later when Guerra was *maître de ballet* and teacher in Paris, he felt himself as the repository of a hereditary lineage that started with Blasis. In these brief typewritten notes—addressed to teachers of the first and second elementary classes of the Opéra School—movements at the barre, and exercises and steps and centre are succinctly listed, as part of the lesson conceived by Guerra on the principles of progression. Several quotations from Blasis’ most famous treatise (*Traité élémentaire théorique et pratique de l’Art de la danse*, Beati and Tenenti, Milan, 1820) always stand out among the *Instructions and Exhortations*. (*Méthode à suivre strictement par les Professeurs de la première et deuxième classe élémentaire soit des jeune filles, soit des petits garçons*, Paris, 28 février 1928 (G.A.))
- 23 [Passepartout], *Tagblatt, Budapest Leben. Rekrutierung zum Ballet* [17 October 1903], G.A.
- 24 Ibidem.
- 25 Ibidem.
- 26 Ibidem.
- 27 Ibidem. The duration of the last study period is not specified here. The division of the courses into preparatory, lower and higher was probably taken from the regulations in force at La Scala (cf., e.g., the later *Regolamento per la Accademia di Ballo del Teatro alla Scala in Milano*, Pirola, Milano 1911). It seems that in the classes run at the Hungarian Opera House, the period of perfection did not exist, whereas it was present at La Scala and brought the ballerina’s course of study to 10 years.
- 28 [Passepartout], *Tagblatt*, cit.
- 29 [. . .], *Tagblatt, Budapest Leben, Die Ballettschule des Opernhauses* [17 October 1903], G. A.
- 30 Ibidem.
- 31 Ibidem.
- 32 [. . .] *Gerichtshalle, Graf und Ballettmeister*, 17 December 1904, G.A.
- 33 Ten years later, a complaint by Guerra for slander dragged into the Budapest Criminal Court another of his students, *prima ballerina* Térest Sebesi, who had accused him of discriminatory behavior against her for her refusal to take private lessons for a fee. Guerra, who in 1909 had overseen her debut as *prima ballerina* ([N.N.], *Pester Lloyd, Theater und Kunst*, 2 novembre 1909) and cared about making her a talented dancer, now found fault with her behavior that was undisciplined (she often missed rehearsals) and irreverent toward him (she teased him). For these facts, the dancer had been fined half her monthly salary by a committee set up in the theatre, but the matter had then continued in the Criminal Court ([N.N.], *Esti Ujzág, A ballettmester pöre*, 10 giugno 1914).

- 34 In this case, Guerra proposed to Máder that Balogh be paid the same as the older Schmeideck, both being on the same artistic level. But this request at that time was not granted (untitled and undated article, [Album reviews, p. 51], G.A.
- 35 [m.a.], *Magyarország. Színház és Művészet, Táncgyűveleg*, 20 April [1906].
- 36 Although later than the date taken into account, the information provided by this chronicler is interesting for understanding the exceptional technical level reached by Nirschy. [N.N.] *Nirschy Emilia és Guerra Miklós* [1914], G.A.
- 37 [N.N.], *Majar Hirlap. Színház és Művészet. Première az Operában* [N.D.], G.A.
- 38 Famous performance in *Harlekin als Elektriker* (Harlequin or the Electrician, 3 October 1896) at the Hoftheater.
- 39 Ibidem.
- 40 [N.N.], *Pesti Hirlap. Színház és zene, Pierrette Fátyola*, 7 May 1910, G. A.
- 41 Ibidem.
- 42 [m.a.], *Magyarország, A csodavása* [9 May 1908], G.A.
- 43 Ibidem.
- 44 For the staging of *Siama* at La Scala., cf. F. Falcone, *La danza della scrittura. Nicola Guerra (1865–1942) e il balletto Siama (1913)*, cit.
- 45 Nicola Guerra, *Edelweiss*, Second Act, [Manuscript autographed by Nicola Guerra] [N.D.], G. A., pp. 117–87. Page numbering indicates the existence of another manuscript containing an annotation of the choreographic movements also relating to the first act, which has not yet been found.
- 46 Cf., for example, the notations of the *Excelsior* by Cammarano, Casati and Cecchetti (Flavia Pappacena, *La trascrizione del Ballo Excelsior e i manoscritti del Museo Teatrale alla Scala*, in *Excelsior Documenti e Saggi/Documents and Essays*, Chorégraphie. Studi e Ricerche sulla danza, Di Giacomo, Roma 1998, pp. 55–74.)
- 47 The second act of *Edelweiss* is divided into five parts, including the *Ballabile delle fate*, the Dance of the Eagles and the Mimed Action, which includes the arrival of Mary, the ballet's protagonist, on the mountain peaks, and her encounter with Edelweiss, the beautiful and treacherous mountain fairy. The last part consists of the Snowstorm Dance and the Epilogue.
- 48 Cf. F. Falcone, *Dalla notazione alla scena: Edelweiss di Nicola Guerra. Analisi e ricostruzione*, in Flavia Pappacena, *Recupero, ricostruzione, conservazione del patrimonio coreutico italiano del XIX secolo*, Proceedings of The Conference, 10 December 1999, Consiglio Nazionale della Ricerche, Associazione culturale Chorégraphie, Roma, 2000, p. 212.
- 49 Cf. Olivia Sabée, *Re-envisioning the Paris Opéra's Corps de Ballet, 1856–1860*, in *Times of Change: Artistic Perspectives and Cultural Crossings in Nineteenth-Century Ballet*, ed. by Irene Brandenburg, Francesca Falcone, Claudia Jeschke and Bruno Ligore, Piretti, Bologna 2022, pp. 177–96.
- 50 In addition, this would result in the migration of prima ballerinas from traditional theatres to variety theatres, turning them into *vedettes à la page*. See, for example, the case of Giovannina Pitteri: Madison U. Sowell, *From Italian Opera Houses to English Music Halls: How Prima ballerina Giovannina Pitteri became Variety Ballet Performer Jeanne Pitteri*, in *Times of Change*, cit. pp. 283–301.
- 51 Cf. Guerra, *Tersicoreide*, cit. p. 307. It was not until the beginning of his tenure at the Budapest Opera House, when he still did not have a proper corps de ballet composed only of dancers, that Guerra resorted to large masses consisting mainly of actors and singers.
- 52 “[...] en fait d'école il n'y a aucune différence: tout au plus il ne s'agit que de forme; et celle-ci a été entièrement absorbée, il ya un siècle (à l'époque d'or de la danse) par l'école italienne” (Nicola Guerra, *Danse: l'école italienne, l'école française et l'école russe*, Opéra, 11 January 1929).
- 53 For reasons of space, it is not possible here to address an exhaustive analysis of the entire choreography, for which I refer to my text published for the journal *Chorégraphie* (F. Falcone, *Dalla notazione alla scena: Edelweiss di Nicola Guerra. Analisi e ricostruzione*, cit.).
- 54 Carlo Ritorni, *Commentarii della vita e delle opere coreodrammatiche di Salvatore Viganò e della coreografia e de' corepei scritti da Carlo Ritorni, reggiano*, Tipografia Guglielmi e Redaelli, Milano 1838.
- 55 [N.N.], *A Vilag* [19 March 1913].
- 56 [N.N.], *Pesti Hirlap* [19 marzo 1913]. Nirschy danced in the part of Psyche, Tesszát Sebesi in that of Pandora, and Anna Pallai, another great dancer trained by Guerra, in the Bacchante.
- 57 Ibidem.
- 58 For the first term, cf. F. Falcone, *Nicola Guerra coreografo all'Opéra di Parigi: gli esordi degli anni 1918–1922*, *Chorégraphie. Studi e ricerche sulla danza* (Year 5, n. 10, 1997), pp. 7–30. For the second term, cf. Francesca Falcone, *Nicola Guerra maître de ballet all'Opéra di Parigi: gli anni 1927–1929*, *Chorégraphie. Studi e ricerche sulla danza* (Year 6, n. 12, 1998), pp. 39–78.
- 59 The first company was called Pastelli coreografici, founded as soon as Guerra returned to Italy, and the second, I nuovi balli italiani.
- 60 However, Guerra's activity had also been spent in other theatres in Budapest. A thank-you letter sent to Guerra by Gábor Faludi, among the founders as well as director of the Vígszínház Theater, in 1907 attests that Guerra worked on the choreographic staging of *Salome* with Madame Goth in the leading parts (signed letter from Faludi to Guerra, 26 March 1907), G.A.

- ⁶¹ I sincerely thank the Guerra family and in particular Livio, who passed away in 2008, for giving me the opportunity to consult the family archives, on which I was able to base much of my studies on Nicola Guerra. My deepest gratitude to Madison U. Sowell who generously proofread the final text in English.

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