

Cecchetti Epaulement - impetus for movement

Epaulement and the Cecchetti ‘method’ are generally considered synonymous. A well known trait of the *Maestro*’s exercises is a marked use of the upper back, giving impetus to turns and assisting speed in the change of direction. This subtle use of the back can be difficult to explain to students. The following explores ideas for the teaching of *épaulement* and illustrates how it adds colour and depth to *enchaînements*.

The definition of *épaulement* in A manual of Theory and Practice of Classical Theatrical Dancing by Cyril Beaumont and Stanislas Idzikowski, reads, ‘the shoulder on the same side as the working leg is slightly advanced’ (1977, 29). It also states that *épaulement* means ‘shouldering’. This can be misinterpreted. The movement is not activated from the shoulders, but from the upper back, below the shoulders. As this is a difficult part of the body for students to feel it is helpful to use imagery when introducing the concept. If they are asked to imagine admiring a new dress or jacket in the mirror, they would find themselves looking forward at their image, while twisting and turning the spine in order to survey the garment. The ‘feeling’ of *épaulement* is now implemented i.e. ‘A movement involving the rotation of the spine,’ (Glasstone, 2001, 23).

The correct ‘feeling’ and therefore ‘look’ of *épaulement* in the Cecchetti work comes from the fact that it is taught with the focus directly to the front. If the eye focus is allowed to wander towards the corner of the leading shoulder, an element of *écarté* will be introduced, making the movement broader losing the subtle contact with the audience. It is also worth mentioning here, that when the head is turned, the dancer no longer has the ability to change direction at speed; the

bigger the movement, the longer the time the body will take to travel through space.

One of the earliest steps students learn with use of *épaulement* is the *demi-contretemps*. In introducing the idea of using the upper body in finding direction it can be useful to set a sequence of *chassé coupés* in the *effacé* alignment. The number of *chassés* to either side may vary, but the eye focus should remain to the front, arms *en bas*. The student becomes familiar with this concept of direction change without a change in focus. The same exercise could then be executed on the *croisé* alignment thereby executing a slight ‘twist’ in the spine. With the eye focus firmly to the front *épaulement* is now introduced. It is a simple progression after this to set a series of *demi-contretemps* allowing the ‘twist’ to occur with each one. The student’s thoughts may then be directed towards developing the dynamics of the movement as a linking step. An appropriate *enchaînement* to think of here, is the *demi-contretemps assemblé élançé* in *écarté*, in which the ‘twist’ of the *épaulement* turns back on itself into the broader movement of *écarté*. In this *enchaînement* the eye focus changes from the front in the *demi-contretemps*, to the corner in the *assemblé*. A common fault in the *demi-contretemps* of this exercise, is to ‘push’ the front shoulder forward, instead of ‘pulling’ the other back. This tendency causes the body to ‘drop’ forward, hindering both the quick change of direction needed into the *assemblé*, and the elevation required to travel. To achieve this quick change it is vital the *épaulement* of the preceding *demi-contretemps* is executed ‘with both shoulders moving equally’ (Glasstone, 2001, 23), something which can not be demonstrated unless the back is held.

The use of *épaulement* in the assisting of turns can not be under estimated. When considering the value here, it can assist in conjunction with elevation or as the sole means of impetus. *Fouettés à terre en tournant* are a very good example of the latter. The dancer is generally static before this movement and can, only with a sharp ‘twist’ of the upper body into *épaulement* on the first *fouetté*, turn, ensuring enough impetus to continue into the second *fouetté*. This applies both *en dehors* and *en dedans*. The Tuesday *enchaînement, pas de bourrée dégagé, petits battements, dégagé, petits battements, tombé pas de bourrée, fouetté en tournant, pas de bourrée, pas de chat* provides a clear illustration of the quick body movement required for *fouettés en tournant à terre*. In this exercise the *tombé, pas de bourrée* and *fouetté en tournant*, which follow each other consecutively, are executed with *épaulement*. It is the quick ‘twisting’ of the upper body from one side to the other, while keeping the eyes focused front, that make the movements and change of direction possible. One ‘twist’ in effect rebounds into the next. If the dancer’s eye focus changes to the corners, the movement becomes ‘looser’, and the impetus and speed from the centre of the body, is lost.

The technique of *épaulement* assisting turns of elevation is born out in the *jetés en tournant en diagonale*. The first *jeté*, taken *élanqué*, is executed with an eighth of a turn but the strong use of *épaulement* on the landing propels the body round on the next *jeté* to complete the turn. The eye focus remains to the audience, altering only with each *jeté élanqué*, ensuring *épaulement* provides the impetus for each revolution.

Throughout Cecchetti’s work there are many examples of ways in which the body assists movement, but nowhere more so than in the *allegro*. The principle of using the body to produce impetus is of course, a very natural one. When observing a

tennis player serving, or a cricket player bowling, one notices the player steps back on one leg, allowing the other side of the body to come forward, before hitting or throwing the ball forcefully with the ‘power’ of the side initially retracted. In this action are the rudiments and value of *épaulement*. Cecchetti seems to have utilised the most natural ways of moving and clearly appreciated the importance of the body’s assistance in movement. Ninette de Valois admitted ‘we had to learn the head, arms and *épaulement* first’ (1989). *Maestro* would not allow a dancer to mark an *enchaînement* with the feet alone. De Valois remembers, ‘If the top knows where its got to go, I can’t tell you how easy it is to learn the steps afterwards’ (1989). These words of advice are particularly helpful when applied to the *jeté battement*, *rond de jambe sauté*, *relevé battement*, *rond de jambe sauté* exercise. It is only when the dancer has mastered the quick rhythmic change of body alignment between the *jeté battements* and the *rond de jambe sauté* that the execution of the footwork becomes possible in the short space of time. In other words the body should lead the movements.

One of the most difficult of Cecchetti’s steps is that of the full *contretemps*. Many dancers make the mistake of thinking about all the steps that are involved, instead of trying to feel the three changes of *épaulement* needed. When the use of *épaulement* is understood, legs will indeed follow, with the ‘tripping’ effect that is required. The word ‘feel’ is used here because all too often the movements are ‘put’ into position, resulting in a robotic quality which hinders flow of movement so necessary for speed. The concept of ‘allowing’ a movement to happen can be construed as laziness. However, in a movement of this kind, the shoulders need to be relaxed enough to make, what could be described as a ‘shaking’ movement from side to side. When executed *en diagonale*, the first half of the full *contretemps* finishes with a *chassé* in second towards the front corner. By the time this *chassé* is

completed two of the *épaulement* changes have taken place. In effect, the quick ‘shake’ of the shoulders has precipitated the quick foot work into the *chassé*. The third *épaulement* is merely that of the *demi-contretemps* explained earlier.

Most of the allegro described so far have been of the quick *terre à terre* variety. When looking, in particular, at Cecchetti’s Saturday *enchaînements*, those of rebounding jumps, one observes another phenomenon. In many of these exercises the body is required to bend a great deal. In these instances *épaulement* is used to bring the body back to its centre, if only for a moment, so as to ‘take off’ in another direction. *Temps levé, chassé en arrière* (twice), *temps levé posé* twice etcetera is a case in point. When dancing the two initial *chassés*, the body turns and bends over each backward movement. After the second of these, with only a lift and twist of the upper back *épaulement* helps propell the body through the air in the *temps levés grands battements* that follow. The same can be said of the *temps levé, chassé croisé, temps levé in arabesque croisé*, etcetera. A strong use of *épaulement* is needed at the end of this exercise after the *posé* into the *temps levé* at the beginning of the second side. Having bent the body sideways over the *posé*, it is the ‘twisting’ of the body through to *épaulement* that helps take it forward into the *chassé* on the other side and adds generosity of movement to the ‘blow a kiss’ gesture of the *temps levé in arabesque croisé*.

It is certainly the use of the body in all Cecchetti’s exercises that give them the feeling of ‘dance’ and add excitement to the execution of them. *Epaulement*, when executed with understanding, adds a wealth of dynamic possibilities to all movements. However, the subtleties of Cecchetti’s use of the upper body are not only a valuable stylistic heritage, but a profound insight into the technical possibilities of balletic movement today. Cecchetti students are fortunate indeed to

have the opportunity of studying these time tested intricacies, enabling them to perform at speed and agility enviable to those not so privileged.

Bibliography

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