

Cecchetti Head Movement

The use of head in the Cecchetti work is often misunderstood. An exaggerated positioning demonstrated conscientiously by students is invariably the result. This article is written in an attempt to illustrate the logic behind the use of the head and the subtle and theatrical role it plays in performance.

Natural head movements contribute to normal human communication. When speaking to one another people tend to look towards each other, if they hear a sound they may turn to look in the direction from whence it came, indeed, eye focus appears to dictate how the head is used. When a person is looking at something, the head is erect, turned, raised or lowered - the inclination of the head, on the other hand, is different. The head inclines when listening or pondering; the eye focus is often not direct, thus portraying a gentle and soft quality of movement. The motivation behind the movement gives it its meaning and quality. Eye focus directs that meaning. Performance in any dance genre employs this art of communication.

The Cecchetti method teaches five positions of the head, 'head erect, head inclined to one side, head turned to one side, head raised, head lowered' (Beaumont and Idzikowski, 1977, 28). These may, as in everyday life be combined with each other, for example, turned-and-raised or inclined-and-lowered. In fact when used in this way it could be suggested the positions become

'movements' rather than 'positions'. For the purposes of this discussion the word 'movements' will be used.

In order to develop an awareness of the subtle uses of the head and eye focus it is a good idea to give students the task of making up a story to include these five Cecchetti movements, such as “I am at school sitting at my desk looking straight ahead at the blackboard. I lower my head to copy from the board. My friend next to me nudges me and I turn to look at her. She whispers to me and I give her my ear to listen. She has noticed a leak coming through the ceiling above us. We look up”. In making up stories like this the awareness of the naturalness is awakened and when executed in ballet the head is not so much ‘put’ in a position but ‘motivated’ through space.

It is easy to apply these natural movements of the head to dancing. Beaumont and Idzikowski refer to Cecchetti’s ‘eight directions of the body’ (1977, 32). In the three basic directions, *devant*, *derrière* and *à la seconde*, the head is erect with the focus straight to the front. This could be seen as a simple statement of clarity, whereas in the crossed and open alignments, the ‘conversation’ becomes more complex, with the head turned and inclined to face the audience in spite of the body facing a corner. In contrast, the *écarté* line does not retain this contact with the audience, the body faces one corner while the head is turned and raised to the other. These variations of body and head alignments provide an enormous range of possibilities of expression as noticed by Leo Kersley on observing Fredrick Ashton dancing.

his *croisé devant* in class looked as if he had just entered the stage and was delighted to see such a good house: his *écarté* was sharp and imperious, his *à la seconde* expansive, his *effacé* thoughtful and serene and his *croisé derrière* quite cheeky

(2000)

These directions are also of course beautifully incorporated into Cecchetti's adage work, a typical example of which is seen in the beginning section of *Temps de Courante*, known also as the third ending of the *battements frappé* and *petits battements* centre practice exercise. The simplicity of the first *developpé à la seconde* is followed by a *chassé en avant* to the *croisé* direction, which, in turn, is succeeded by a *port de bras* combining all the basic head movements and three directions of the body executed in one long phrase of movement. When teaching this somewhat complex *port de bras* it is helpful to give the students a thought pattern. What follows are some personal ideas using eye focus and imagination to govern head movements and develop communication with the audience.

Starting in the *croisé derrière* position of the legs, arms third *arabesque en croisé*, the eyes are lowered looking over the front, or upstage arm, as if at a reflection in a pool of water. As the arm lifts to 5th *en avant* to *en haut*, the eyes lift as if indicating clouds in the sky; there follows a breath while the lifted arm and eyes lower and the back arm comes forward through first position to sweep up, close to the chest with a back bend. During this bend the other arm passes back to arabesque and the focus lifts up and back, the head turning and inclining as if resting on a pillow, a feeling of repose in the sunlight. The front arm lifts to 5th *en haut* and a *dégagé en tournant* follows. The breadth of this movement may be likened to a stretch after sleep as the body alignments change through *écarté*, *effacé* into *croisé devant* on the other side. These thought patterns add breadth and dimension to the execution of the *port de bras*. Glasstone observes 'it is the change of eye focus that leads each change of direction. That (together with musical sensitivity) gives good dancing its look of natural ease' (2000, 273).

Allegro is another section of the work where the use of the head is of vital significance. The correct technical action becomes as important as the eye focus. It

should not be forgotten that the head, as the heaviest part of the body, will hinder elevation if used in the incorrect way. All Cecchetti students are familiar with the principle of head inclination over the foot that comes to the front, but it is questionable as to how many of them understand the reason for this practice. If one takes the simple combination of *glissade derrière, assemblé dessus* as an example, the head inclines over the foot that closes to the front in the *glissade*, after which, the same foot pushes off the floor for the *assemblé*. At the height of the jump the head is erect, inclining again on landing, over the other foot which has now come to the front. In both these steps the head, placed over the weight, has assisted the dancer into the air by working with the *plié* and the power of the supporting leg. A mere turn of the head during the *glissade* and *assemblé* would be of no assistance to elevation at all.

This general principle of ‘head over the weight’ is particularly important when landing on one leg in steps such as *jetés* and *sissonnes*. When executing these steps forwards it feels comfortable to incline the head towards the foot coming to the front. However travelling backwards may cause confusion. When these steps go backwards the dancer lands on the back leg, but inclination over the front, or lifted one would risk stability. In these instances by inclining the head over the back foot, the principle of ‘head over the weight’ is still applied.

It would seem then that Cecchetti’s use of the head, has both technical and artistic value. The technique is derived from the logic of natural movement and the artistic dimensions are founded in the art of communication so vital to all dance performance. Examples of this may be seen throughout all sections of Cecchetti’s work although two particular *allegro enchaînements* come to mind. In the exercise, *coupé sauté, ballonné, jeté en tournant, posé, jeté, posé jeté* the dancer begins in the *écarté* alignment and continues in that alignment until the *posé jetés*

when the focus changes from side to side alternately with each movement. In the *temps levé, chassé croisé, temps levé in arabesque croisé, coupé dessous, ballonné, grand jeté en tournant, posé* the head inclination over the weight is evident in each step, except the *grand jeté en tournant* when the head needs to come erect to ensure height of elevation. Both these *enchaînements* are listed as Saturday steps and should be executed with a quality of rebounding elevation; however, the use of head provides subtle movement differences which portray contrasting qualities to the onlooker.

Students of the Cecchetti method are fortunate in having such a wealth of beautiful exercises to study but the exercises themselves are not as important as the science which underpins them. It is so easy to enjoy a movement without bothering to analyse how it works. However, it is only when the logic and simplicity of the movements are understood, that their artistic value can be appreciated. By being aware of the subtleties of head movements and eye focus the dancer is able to communicate through the smallest of actions and bring them alive with meaning. It is not being suggested here that all ballets need a plot, rather that all movements, when danced with purpose and intention are easily received and interpreted. We are fortunate indeed that our Cecchetti heritage provides us with the means to make our future dancers inspiring communicators.

Bibliography

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