

Mr Kellom Tomlinson

English dancing master

A play by Ken Duncum

Sonnerie, the Wellington-based baroque music and dance ensemble, designed a programme to premiere the dances from the Tomlinson Workbook, in a 1989 Wellington season which was then followed by a North Island tour. The six dances, if performed on their own, would have lasted mere minutes. (The man's solo sarabande was not used but the Tomlinson version of the minuet was included.) Ken Duncum was commissioned to write a play based on the few known facts of Tomlinson's life, incorporating the dances at key points of the script. By separating the dances and providing them with a dramatic context, the play serves to highlight the distinctive quality of each.

A MAN comes forward holding a book.

MAN. Young Tomlinson? The English dancing master. I remember him. I still have his workbook. I keep it to remind me of him. I can even remember the time it was first given him, when he was still just a boy. It was the spring of 1707. The day he was apprenticed to that most celebrated dancing master Mr. Thomas Caverley of Queen's Square, St. George the Martyr, London – for the purpose of being taught the art of dancing. The boy knew nothing about it of course, but it seemed a simple enough thing to him. What was a dance? Some steps in time to music. Simplicity itself. He knew nothing.

This was the book he copied his exercises into – other people's work to begin with, so he could learn the proper form and notation.

His apprenticeship lasted 7 years. He spent the time dancing, copying, studying. When he had learnt enough to be trusted he taught the younger pupils. Then some of the older.

But most importantly he began to compose his own dances, his first precious few. And he copied them down in here. Very proudly.

At the end of his apprenticeship, having learnt as he thought all there was to learn, he left Mr Caverley to earn a living in his own right as a dancing master.

A light comes up, revealing the YOUNG TOMLINSON seated at a desk.

You see, there he is. Young ... eager ... worried. But sure of himself. Sure that much would come of his advertisement in the *White-Hall Evening Post* urging all those who desired to learn the principles, rules and execution of the 'Art of Dancing in the Genteel or

the Theatrical Way' to contact him without delay; and further inviting a startled world to purchase one of his very own self-composed dances, at a mere five shillings per dance, to be had at the author's lodgings at Mr Smith's the Coachmaker, the corner of King's-Gate St, Holborn – or from Mr. Walsh at the Harp And Haut-Boy in Catherine St, The Strand.

He didn't know it of course but there was a world of things he had still to learn, and most particularly about that subject of which he called himself a master. Dancing.

Things Mr. Caverley could not teach him, lessons that couldn't be found noted down in his workbook, questions that he would suddenly stop and ask himself and find, to his surprise, that he had no answer. Such as why it was that two persons, performing exactly the same dance, both perhaps perfect in every step, should show such an unaccountable difference between them – one seeming stiff ... rigid ... yet not in the body exactly – while the other moved so lightly, was so graceful and expressive in space and movement that the watcher could not help but be moved also. He began to realise that perhaps he did not understand, truly, this art of dancing. But he made up his mind to understand.

There were some responses to his advertisement, not as many as he had hoped, but there were always children of the Nobility or Gentry who must be taught to dance, and Gentlemen and Ladies who must keep up with the new styles and modern developments if they were not to embarrass themselves at Court or in the ballroom.

And the dancing master's days filled up with lessons. Lesson, lessons and more lessons. An endless stream

of them. And pupils of course. Year upon year of pupils. And they were a great many heavy-footed inattentive trudging cart-horses with ears of tin and hooves of iron. Generally speaking. But they paid. And once or twice, now and again, there would come a student who had grace, who had wit, who had talent.

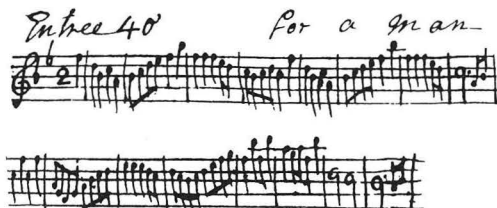
YOUNG TOMLINSON *is absorbed in a dance he is composing. Miss Frances enters, slightly startling and flustering him. He bows.*

YOUNG TOMLINSON. Miss Frances. You've studied the two small dances? The man's and woman's Rigaudons? Miss Frances hands a small roll of manuscript to him.

MISS FRANCES. They are so fine I wondered why I hadn't seen them before.

YOUNG TOMLINSON. They are . . . my own compositions. Perhaps if I perform the man's first – then you may like to attempt the woman's?

He dances the man's Rigaudon.



Now you, Miss Frances.

MISS FRANCES *dances the Woman's Rigaudon, while YOUNG TOMLINSON looks on approvingly.*



You astound me, Miss Frances.

MISS FRANCES. Thank you Mr Kellom.
She goes to leave.

YOUNG TOMLINSON. Next Thursday, Miss Frances?

MISS FRANCES. Next Thursday, Mr Kellom.
She exits.

MAN. Mr Kellom – that was the name he was called as an apprentice. A mis-pronunciation of his Christian name – Kenelm. All his friends called him by his surname – Tomlinson – but in order to have the professional advantage of being recognised as the apprentice of so great a master as Mr Caverley, he chose to retain the name of Mr Kellom.

Unfortunately this created confusion, and worked to his great disadvantage – since many of the Nobility who would have had their children taught by Mr Kellom refused to employ Mr Tomlinson though recommended to them, while many who would have employed Mr Tomlinson rejected Mr Kellom. It was all very distressing.

Even so, he was not without success. Many of his compositions were well received on the stage, often danced by some of his brightest student. Mr John Topham, for example, who under the name of Mr Kellom's Scholar danced many of his compositions to no small applause. There was 'The Submission' which by the name of 'Mr Kellom's New Dance' was performed to very considerable audiences every night for a whole week together by Monsieur and Mademoiselle Salle – 'The Two French Children' – brats though they were.

And of course Miss Frances – who at the Theatre Royal in Little-Lincoln's-Inn-Fields performed a Menuet consisting of above a thousand steps without making the least mistake.

YOUNG TOMLINSON *leads MISS FRANCES out on to the stage, then retires to the side. MISS FRANCES dances Caverley's Menuet Solo.*

*The slow minnett:
by M^r Caverley:*



YOUNG TOMLINSON *presents her to the audience once more, before she exits.*

MAN. His dances were so popular he published some and sold them - 'to be had only of the author at his new house in Devonshire St, the Last But One On The Right Hand before you enter Queen's Square, near Ormond Street'.

He'd already composed so many he was forced to choose which should be published. He decided to keep back those in his workbook. Perhaps for a later date.

But then a different idea started to occupy his mind. He suddenly began to wonder why no-one had paid the same regard in print to the art of dancing as had been accorded to most other arts and sciences – namely to compile a reference book of all its rules and principles. The more he thought of it, the more excited he became.

He would write the book. He could see it all quite clearly – the rules, principles and laws of dancing with both musical notation and illustrations of all the necessary movements. It would be the culmination of his career to date, the sum of everything he had learned. It would make his name, make him famous. And it would be the first of its kind in the world. He set to work immediately. He saw himself as giving the art of dancing the same standing in the world as Philosophy or Geometry. His book would appear in libraries, would still be consulted in years to come. He worked methodically, but with a passion, barely taking time to think about anything else. Until finally it was finished.

MISS FRANCES enters. YOUNG TOMLINSON rises to greet her, the completed manuscript in his hand. He reads her the title page.

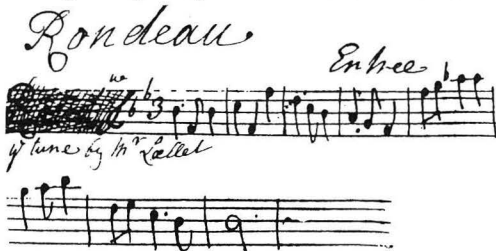
YOUNG TOMLINSON. 'The Art of Dancing Explained – by Mr Kellom Tomlinson, English Dancing Master – dedicated with humble and heartfelt thanks to those who offered him encouragement and inspiration in the undertaking'.

MISS FRANCES. Are we to have a lesson today, Mr Kellom?

YOUNG TOMLINSON is somewhat taken aback

YOUNG TOMLINSON. Yes, of course.

They take up their positions and dance the Rondeau.



MISS FRANCES exits.

MAN: The book was completed, but the cost of publication was well outside his means.

He began to look for patrons who could offer him subscriptions. He advertised extensively, showing some illustration plates done by way of specimens. The response was both meagre and slow. Several years went by. Undiscouraged, he persevered patiently, confident of the worth of his book.

Then, on Saturday January 13th 1728, horrified, he read an advertisement in the *White-Hall Evening*

Post.

YOUNG TOMLINSON. 'Next week will be published a new translation of a French book entitled *The Dancing Master, or The Art of Dancing Explained!*'

MAN. It was obvious to him that another person was attempting to bear away the honour of his invention, and the profit of it too. This book, it subsequently appeared, was a translation of a French text of which the title was only *The Dancing Master* to which the ingenious translator had added that of Tomlinson's own book, with the clear aim of making his work seem to be only a servile imitation.

YOUNG TOMLINSON throws his manuscript on the floor in disgust. After a moment he starts to pick up the scattered pages slowly.

Publication of his book forestalled indefinitely. It was a disaster from which he was never fully to recover. Bitterly discouraged, he turned back to his lessons, to his pupils, and to other disappointments.

MISS FRANCES enters.

YOUNG TOMLINSON. You are late, Miss Frances.

MISS FRANCES. And I must leave early.

She takes up her dancing position.

Shall we begin?

YOUNG TOMLINSON joins her. They dance the Canary.



The Canary ends with MISS FRANCES exiting abruptly. YOUNG TOMLINSON turns to find her gone.

MAN. Miss Frances chose to leave his tutelage in the midst of her improvement.

The book was finally published – some seven years later – no longer quite the event he had anticipated. However, the illustrations were improved – due to slow and careful work during the long delay – and all in all it was a solid work. 'Printed for the author and to be had of him: at the Red And Gold Flowerpot next door to Edwards Coffeeshouse over against the Bull and Gate in High Holborn'.

And then, I suppose, I grew old. Gradually, and the more I learnt of what I didn't know, the more presumptuous I found the title of my book.

The Art of Dancing, perhaps. But *Explained?* Never. More and more now I go back to my workbook. To

when I was a boy and an apprentice. To my first dances. Because it's still the simple questions which puzzle me most. What is a dance? What is the difference between a good and a bad dance? Where does a dance go when the dancer finishes? Does it disappear? Or is there something left - in your memory perhaps. Or on the page.

Yes, I like that. Perhaps the dance goes on as long as

you can see it - in here. Or in here.

I never forget a good dance. And once or twice, now and again - I've seen perfection. And that is always with me.

YOUNG TOMLINSON gazes into space as MISS FRANCES in a dim pool of light dances the Menuet Solo, growing fainter and fainter until the stage is in darkness.



Notes on contributors

Laurie Bauer, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, has taught at Victoria University since 1979. He is currently Reader in the Department of Linguistics. Among other research interests, he has studied differences between national varieties of English.

Ken Duncum has been a playwright and freelance writer for some years. His list of successful plays includes *Polythene Pam*, *Flybaby*, *Jism* (Dominion 1989 Play of the Year) and the award winning *Blue Sky Boys*. In addition to work for the stage Ken is involved in writing for television and is a theatre director.

Rae Marshall taught dance with her sister Pamela Lowe, and later established a dance studio in Lower Hutt. In Hamilton she has been the caretaker of the Lowe book collection, and active as a teacher of movement to music for pre-schoolers, and in recreational ballet.

Jennifer Shennan is a dance scholar, choreographer, teacher and performer who has specialized in Renaissance and Baroque dance reconstruction, as

well as in studies of Maori and Polynesian dance traditions. She has been dance critic for *The Evening Post* since 1982.

Allan Thomas is an ethnomusicologist specializing in Pacific Island and Asian musics in the School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington. He has written on 19th century music in New Zealand, and having edited the *Journal* of Joseph Lowe is engaged in research into the Lowe family in New Zealand.

J.M. Thomson has worked with Jennifer Shennan in recreating 19th-century dances on a variety of occasions, including 'Vauxhall Gardens - London and Dunedin', presented for The Friends of the National Gallery and The Early Music Union, Wellington.

Jane Woodhall is a freelance costume designer whose recent work includes the historical pageant *Waitangi* (1990), the film *The Governor*, The Royal New Zealand Ballet's *Swan Lake* (1985) and many productions of Wellington Opera, Downstage and Circa Theatres.