

# Dancing the bouffons

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Buffons/bouffons/buffens is a dance published in *Orchestography*, by the frenchman Thoinot Arbeau, published in 1589. *This is a silly dance. Think young buffoons showing off with a mock-serious sword dance. Think a feast of fools. The amusement is greatly enhanced by the dancers, who have taken upon themselves a pompous air, being well known to the crowd.*

Links to original images of and transcriptions of Arbeau's work (in french) can be found at: <http://www.rendance.org/primary.html>

(the buffons begins on page 97 of the library of congress document).

A translation by Mary Stewart Evans (ISBN:0-486-21745-0) is readily and cheaply available.

*Points that Arbeau did not mention but which we found made the dance flow better are indicated in italic.*

## Costume

The dancers dress in gilded cardboard armour, with bucklers and swords and a what looks like a morion helmet.

## Music

The same eight bar tune, consisting of two four bar phrases, is repeated throughout the dance.



The music given by Arbeau is mostly for the aid of dancers, not musicians, and he freely modifies it for pedagogical purposes. Here, after giving the tune of the buffens for the first time, he divides the long notes so that he has a note to align with each action of the dancers.

*The piece "The Parade des Bouffons" by Tielman Susato might also be suitable for this dance.*

## Feet

Throughout the dance, the dancers flueret. A flueret is simply two small kicks followed by a

slightly larger kick.

The pattern is: kick kick Kick pause kick kick Kick pause ...

Start by kicking the left foot.

1 passage  
= 2 repetitions of the music  
= 4 phrases  
= 16 bars  
= 32 fleurets

Note that the first two small kicks of the first fleuret come before the start of the music.  
**OR** you can think of the pattern as: Kick pause kick kick Kick pause kick kick ...

There are six passages, plus some extra parading around the room, *during which the dancers fleuret continuously. Try not to die.*

## Forming up

The dancers are assigned letters: A B C D. Note that throughout the dance these letters refer to dancers and not positions. *Positions A and C are slightly more difficult to perform in the first passage than B and D. We recommend placing new dancers in positions B and D initially.*

Arbeau's introductory parade around the room is rather drawn out. A enters brandishing his sword, circles the room *anticlockwise*, and challenges B. Then A and B circle the room *anticlockwise* and challenge C. Then A, B, and C circle the room *anticlockwise* and challenge D. Then all circle the room *anticlockwise*. Finally they all circle *clockwise* and form up thus:

D C  
A B

with A facing D and B facing C.

*Note: The formation is in anticlockwise order, therefore you must form up clockwise. Starting position of your formation is actually quite important as if you line up anticlockwise, your gestures will need to be modified. A handy hint to help remember which way you should be facing is that the first and last person face each other, and person A and C should have their swords towards the inside of the square, while B and D will have their swords on the edge of the square.*

+D +C  
| |  
  
| |  
A+ B+

## Sword gestures

*Note all these gestures must be performed with the sword in the right hand. The only way we can conceive of a left handed held sword is in an entire set of left handed dancers, who may need to mirror many actions.*

**feint** (feinete)- not hitting, sword upright. Abreau speaks of both feet on the ground even with each other, but it is not clear if he describes the swordsman's position or the dancers. Either stationary feet or moving feet work, the latter is probably slightly easier.

**high** (taille haulte) - a right to left swing with the sword pointed up

**reverse high** (reuers hault) - a left to right backhanded swing with the sword pointed up

**low** (taille basse)- a right to left swing with the sword pointed down

**reverse low** (reuers bas)- a left to right backhanded swing with the sword pointed down

*We often found that performing the gestures in a certain way produced a far more economical motion. Especially important was not twisting the wrist too much. The reverse motions are back-handed.*

Feinte



Eftocade



Taille haulte



Reuers hault



Taille basse



Reuers bas



## First passage

In the first passage, an action is performed on the third kick of each flueret. *Don't get too used to this, subsequent passages go at a faster pace!*

The sequence is:

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| Kick left  | <b>Feint</b>                                 |
| kick right |  |
| kick left  |  |
| Kick right | <b>High</b>                                  |
| kick left  |  |
| kick right |  |
| Kick left  | <b>Reverse high</b>                          |
| kick right | Turn left, so A faces B and C faces D        |
| kick left  |  |
| Kick right | <b>Low</b>                                   |
| kick left  |  |
| kick right |  |
| Kick left  | <b>Reverse low</b>                           |
| kick right |  |
| kick left  |  |
| Kick right | <b>High</b>                                  |
| kick left  | Turn right, so A faces D and B faces C again |
| kick right |  |
| Kick left  | <b>Reverse low</b>                           |
| kick right |  |
| kick left  |  |
| Kick right | <b>High</b>                                  |
| kick left  | Change places, <i>passing right</i>          |
| kick right |  |

Note that A and C do three-quarter (*outside*) turns, while B and D do quarter (*inside*) turns.

*Arbeau does not specify on which side to pass your opponent. In 4 of the six passages, he directs the dancers to pass on (or to) the right (ie by reference to his bransles, passing left shoulders)., in the other passages no mention of passing direction is made. This could be interpreted as applying to all passages, or it could be assumed that where passing direction is not specified it is to the left. When a high sword hit must be executed during a pass (as in 5 of 6 passages), passing to the left is slightly easier, but in the footwork, a natural bias towards passing right occurs. Passing either to the left or right will work for this passage, as long as the entire group passes in the same direction.*

After changing places, the dancers will be arranged thusly:

A B  
D C

with A facing B and C facing D (*ie turned 90 degrees from before as well as changing position*).

The passages is repeated four times (two repetitions of the music), so that everyone ends up back where they started.

## **Between passages**

Between each passage, a shorter version of the introduction is conducted. The dancers depart from formation by following A in an *anticlockwise* lap of the room. The dancers then follow A back into formation (as described in forming up) with a *clockwise* lap of the room. *A should pay attention to D's position - as last to join the formation, the dance cannot begin until D is ready, so we often follow D's lead on when to start.*

## **Second passage: three cuts**

Each dancer performs a pattern of 3 hits: high, reverse low, high, followed by changing places with their current partner. The timing of the sword hits to the kicks is different from the first passage, a *more rapid pace*:

|      |                              |
|------|------------------------------|
| Kick | <b>High</b>                  |
| kick | <b>Reverse low</b>           |
| kick |                              |
| Kick | <b>High</b>                  |
| kick | Change places, passing right |
| kick |                              |

As in the first passage, dancers are now facing a new partner, with whom they repeat the above set of movements. Dancers continue around the circle until 32 fleurets= 16 instances of the above 3 hits=4 complete circles of the set are completed. *We find it useful to have a member of the group (for us D) count each lap of the circle aloud during practise to ensure a synchronous finish.*

Arbeau specifies that dancers should pass each other to the right, ie *by reference to his bransles, passing left shoulders.*

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*Consult Arbeau for further passages. There are six in total. We can currently manage the "first passage", "three cuts", and "thrust" with footwork, and we are working on "fifteen cuts" but haven't yet added footwork. We haven't looked at "bastion" or "hay" yet. Note that two passages can be quite enough for an entertaining performance. Two passages with lead in and out and about in between is also a very long time to be dancing without even a pause.*