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"The Stage is a Painting that Moves and Speaks." Painters on Stage during the Last Century

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Sound Box

Perhaps we need a brief introduction to this century of set design, upon which the curtain is about to fall. In fact it is not only a history (the relationship, sometimes fecund, sometimes not, between artist and stage) that is ending. The very role of the theatrical spectacle seems almost over, replaced by other events. These new phenomena are global, like the rock concert, or solipsistic, like TV or the Internet. Many of our century's events are marked by obstinate planning and are almost always utopian in nature. Very often these are in search of a public, which almost always reacts with indifference or secret hostility. Almost all painters, but sculptors and architects as well, have ventured onto the stage. The results have been varied, but nearly always destined to failure and frustration.

Naturally the beginning of the century was optimistic. That "grand illusion" was summarized in 1926 by Oskar Schlemmer, professor at the Bauhaus: "The painter well knows that the stage opens up for him possibilities that can greatly broaden his restricted frame. In fact almost no other artistic field is open to so many interpretations as the stage, almost no other includes - similar to an orchestral ensemble - so many elements in and of itself, which is why the concept of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) emerges as both ideal and problem."

The task of the new set designer was set out by Anton Giulio Bragaglia, a survivor of Futurism, in his programmatic book *Del teatro teatrale*.

And it was Bragaglia who intuited that the new century was, for all practical purposes, a continuation (a negative one?) of the nineteenth century.

"It is infested by the bad taste of the too full and the detailed, in the presumption of a conventional, false realism, a monstrous expression of an era of regurgitation, fermented with the evident satisfaction of painters and spectators."

Let's search for the truth (or truths) in the Dioscuri, also present in this show. Alberto Savinio was speaking of his "sound box," and his definition of "theater" in the *Nuova Enciclopedia* was as lucid as ever: "Theater is the reflection of the condition of the universe on the stage," he begins. But which universe? Theater will have to reveal characters who, until now, have remained in shadow, it will have to reveal the parts of man that, until now, have remained hidden, it will have to speak of things and elements and even "memories that have remained unclaimed," it will have to ensure a vital tangibility, even to objects ("The armchair will evoke its childhood memories and will reveal to us the relationships between furniture and men"). Only then will theater be: "worthy of the name it bears, of something *worthy to be seen*."

In 1947 De Chirico wrote a provocative piece condemning the vogue for open-air theater, taking advantage of the occasion to explain that theater, like painting, is the most sublime of fictions. In this same piece, in order to criticize "realism," De Chirico also brought up Stanislavsky's ideas for

"Theater of the arts": "To have its full impact, a performance must take place in an enclosed place. It is necessary for the spectator to sense and to know that above the painted sky of the stage set that he sees at the back of the stage, lies the solid roof of the theater, which separates and defends him from the infinite... and from reality. A good performance is unthinkable without theatrical realism, but theatrical realism has nothing to do with realism of acting or realism of sets."

Thus it was at mid-century that De Chirico arrived at the idea of the set designer as a creator of a fiction for a fiction.

The stage is a canvas that moves and speaks, said an Enlightenment theoretician. De Chirico seemed to reinforce this idea when, in the first scene of *Le Bal*, performed during the Ballets Russes final season, he placed on stage two colossal figures of gladiators that played cymbals and snapped their fingers, using them to diminish the Gulliver-dancers. The set contained a revealing slip in the signature and date placed at the lower right edge of the curtain. Attention gentlemen: this is a painting by Giorgio de Chirico of 1929.

Between two centuries: from truth to symbol

Let's call as witnesses four personalities who came from different cultures (a Parisian, a Russian, a Genevan, an Englishman), active between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I. It was a rapid slide from naked truth to the negation of the set design to the psychological stage (it is Dr. Freud's intuition, above all, that constitutes the source for the past century).

Truth, or André Antoine (1858-1943). The director of the "Théâtre libre" was an enemy of all idealisms and classicisms. A sort of late Courbet or a contemporaneous Zola, he preached verisimilitude and the necessity for the stage to be understood as a mirror of life. But, as is often the case, those who preach the Truth practice the absurdity of the False. What comes to mind is his butcher shop set, where, within the careful perspectival focus, there was an actual dismembered steer...

Realism, or Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938). His "Theater of art," which opened in Moscow in 1898, navigated between Italian premises (he was a student of Tommaso Salvini) and a broader awareness (his "system" went as far as Zen and the vivid-physical idea). For a theory of the theater meant to be embodied in the physicality of the actor, the set design was almost naturally negated: "What does it matter to me, as an actor, that hanging behind me there is a backdrop that came from the brush of a great artist? Often this marvelous backdrop is even an impediment to me, since the set designer and I are not in agreement and, in the majority of cases, we tend to go in opposite directions."

From the point of view of "psychological realism," Stanislavsky maintained that an armchair was more important than a backdrop, going so far as to utilize a "black velvet," prescribed as a panacea against every dangerous visual embellishment. And yet even that "black velvet" seems like a refined set design, a sensuous environment for the Depths, and even a parallel "metaphysical" operation. "Imagine that against an enormous black sheet, which, from the spectators hall, seemed like the proscenium, there were traced white lines delimiting in perspective the outlines of the room and its furnishings; beyond these lines one senses, everywhere, terrifying, infinite depth."

Idealism, or Alphonse Appia (1862-1928). After a Wagnerian apprenticeship he developed a concept of luminous space, or "espace rythmique." His idea for set designs (modern, perhaps) was to paint with light. It was a means that opened up toward progress: "without its vivifying force, objects would show themselves to be what they are, not what we want them to signify." And finally, in the floodlights, each thing is itself but must refer to something else beyond the physical world. His simple structures, struck by diagonal lights, are metaphysical; they stage states of mind, not

characters. The backdrop is negated, in these set designs intended as idealized piazzas for shadow actors (or mannequins).

Synthesis, or Gordon Craig (1872-1966). Born to a theater family, Craig began with the struggle against Naturalism, "abominable in art, as artificiality is in everyday life." Everything was reduced to zero. Color was present in only a few tonalities and tended toward monochrome. The actor was crystallized into an automaton (his "über Marionette" also came from Japan). The stage was bare, replaced by abstract, luminous solids. He had memorable productions in Germany, Italy (Ibsen's *Rosmershølm* for Eleonora Duse, at the Pergola in Florence, in 1906) and Russia (his extraordinary Hamlet dedicated to William Blake). Many Italians were also enchanted by his set design idea for mobile screens that, with the added complicity of light, could generate infinite variations. "When theater has become a mechanical masterpiece, when it has invented its own technique, without any effort, then it will generate true creative art."

What I glimpse, above all, behind Gordon Craig's technological dream, is a practice that is worthy of this century of creativity: "the thousands scenes in one".

Ballets Russes: from symbol to the avant-garde

And then the polar bears arrived, thirsty for sun and nourished by color, lovers of the body (preferably of the male variety), their souls starved, guided by a Genghis Khan with a feminine, pliant sensibility.

Serge de Diaghilev (1872-1929), with his ballet company that grew out of his experience with the "Mir Isskustva" ("World of art") group, conquered Paris.

Early on there was Alexandre Benois, along with Lon Bakst: a vividly colored set design for male dancers as flexible as they were hysterical. His 1910 staging for *Shéhérazade* in Paris was memorable, completely resolved in the brilliance of painterly impastos clashing with the highly colored music. Then came Michail Larionov with his companion Natalia Goncarova, who found new lifeblood in the Rome of Balla and Depero. This was, above all, an affirmation of the genius of Igor Stravinsky: what they called disharmonious harmony, ordered uproar...

From his last little room on the island of San Michele, the lovely Serge brought into slow motion that pacific conquest of the west. The Ballets Russes represented almost an apologue for art during the first quarter of the century. After a fierce, wild beginning there was an outright rupture of the avant-garde movements: Picasso and the Cubists, Balla and the Futurists, the Parisian experimentalists, the Constructivists Gabo and Pevsner, and then all the true painters (from Léger to Max Ernst), crowded together in the caravan of wonders (and weighted down with francs). And so there were the painters who betrayed their vocation as pure researchers (remember the reproaches and clouts of Papa Breton?); and there were visual researches committed to creating backdrops for ballerinas (to be loved) and male dancers (to be feared). This is how their colleague Oskar Schlemmer described their set designs of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes were interesting and exciting; he gave various Parisian painters - Picasso, Derain, Laurencin, Gabo, Max Ernst - the possibility of being shown. It was interesting to see which of these were able to see the canvas as anything other than a painting to be transported on stage, and which, instead, were conscious of the new means being offered them, that is, space, keeping it in mind, and, indeed, using it as a point of departure."

The 1917 *saison* at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome was a focal point. The *Tribune* ported that Pablo Picasso (he got as far as Pompeii), Léon Bakst, and Jean Cocteau were present in Rome (the latter was enamored of Massine, the boss' favorite). Clearly Picasso drew new life from the color of Rome: "The Spanish Cubist, Pablo Picasso, in his second sojourn in Rome, has shown changes in his color and sense of transcendence," read the infrequently published Dada magazine, *Procellaria*.

Another Futurist document gave a brief estimate of that Italian year; in his autobiography, Gino

Severini recalled: "From what I could understand, his collaboration with the Futurist painters in Rome had not given the results that Diaghilev expected, so much so that, back in Paris, he didn't show any of the works created with them. From what I have heard, Balla stated the problem in an absolutely new way, relying a great deal on the completion of the electric light, which was to have reflected continually on the forms of a plastic stage. Unfortunately the technical resources of the old Teatro Costanzi didn't comply, but this in no way diminished the value of his innovative idea. However it seems that Depero's sets and costumes were very successful."

Futurism: "theatrical theater"

Educated by the Jesuits, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was well aware of the significance of "propaganda." And he immediately understood that speaking to people was easier from the stage of a theater. Thus the Futurist evenings came into being: those spectacles of theory and fusillades of tomatoes, painting exhibitions and hisses. Then he attempted to propose a new idea of theater: in January 1915 the *Synthetic Futurist Theater* manifesto was issued, preceded by the extraordinary *Variety Theater* manifesto, which called for "synthetic, atechanical, dynamic, simultaneous, alogical, unreal" performance. Provocation was the first commandment and inventiveness took care of the rest.

We know that Giacomo Balla, who was close to fifty years old, threw his weight behind his young friends. He then immediately experimented with theatrical syntheses, including with sketches of sets; then came the great opportunity. On December 2, 1916 he signed a contract with the Ballets Russes, then touring Rome, to stage a short Stravinsky piece, *Feu d'artifice* (*Fireworks*). And the old boy from Turin became the prodigy. Are Diaghilev's ballets a triumph of Massine's and his friends' extremely agile bodies? Then Massine left the scene. Is a Ballets Russes performance above all a triumph of choreography? Let's annul the choreography dances, then. According to Giacomo Balla; it was all his doing. He designed luminous solids that abstractly delineated an artificial landscape crowned by the "feu d'artifice"; on small sheets he meticulously designed the forms, he painted three or four sketches to show the final effect, he programmed the lights that would reverberate in the prompter's box. That slip of paper I discovered in 1967 gave me the true meaning of Balla's research: experimental, complex, projected toward a future that was incomprehensible to almost everyone.

We knew about the performance's history, through many accounts, from Virgilio Marchi's to Margherita Sarfatti's. We know of various sketches sent by Balla to his friends (De Nardis, Balilla Pratella). I even had the chance to publish a photograph of the Teatro Costanzi stage on that evening of April 12, 1917. A war was going on, there was a revolution (that evening the impish Igor had Ernest Ansermet play a sort of hymn for Soviet victory), everyone was poor. But the old magician pulled forth from his hat a rabbit both rich with the past (the old dream of Music - painting) and aggressive with the future. There were five brief minutes dedicated to light - movement- music: an instantaneous performance that faded away forever with the final applause.

Balla sought to harmonize with the composer's pyrotechnical inventions; he constructed a plastic composition with disquieting crystalline forms, symbols of infinity (spiral, recurring waves), emblems of light (obelisk, pyramid, rays of sun, crescent moons), aerodynamograms (flights of swallows, firebirds). Light was introduced to facet the entire composition and to unleash the "feu d'artifice." The third dimension (solids placed at the front of the stage) and the fourth (the perpetual motion of the light) were joined in a pyrotechnical ballet. Novelty and surprise lay at the source of this spectacle, which abolished barriers between the visual arts, set design and life.

On numerous occasions I have lovingly tried to reconstruct this performance, from an experiment with a maquette, with Elio Marchegiani (*L'Obelisco*, 1968), to a full-scale rehearsal attempted with

Giuseppe Bartolucci and Gabriele Oriani (Teatro Stabile, Turin, 1968-1969), to the glorious staging in the comfortable Teatro dell'Opera (Rome, 1976-1977), for which I illustrated the program. And now we will be seeing a new attempt at reconstruction, an enchanted homage to the Great Sorcerer who, in the sixteenth century, was known as Leonardo. Depero also designed an artificial landscape, less abstract, perhaps, than that of his teacher. It was a gigantic piece of natural choreography (in metal and cardboard), a sort of virgin jungle inhabited with flowers, a toy on an urban scale, an artificially reconstructed universe. News of *Le chant du rossignol*, for which Depero was to have created the costumes, also reached Paris (in the pages of Pierre Albert-Birot's magazine *SIC*, according to Severini's memoirs). But this too was an unlucky undertaking. A staging of human sentiments and aspirations with abstract forms and non-naturalistic light, even avoiding the actual presence of man: a utopia. Was his research too early, or too ingenuous?

Today one might perhaps venture a hypothesis. Futurism died, and those who have sought to bring forth a "second futurism" have always seemed somewhat laughable. But in fact, Futurism survived brilliantly on the stage. It was Anton Giulio Bragaglia who clarified the meaning and value of those painters and intellectuals who tried to "retheatricalize the theater." Examples of the retheatricalizing of the theater during periods of its decline can be seen in the seventeenth century in Italy, first with the Commedia dell'Arte, a theatrical action of actor- music - dancer, and then with the rebirth of the Marvelous, classical basis of the theater, the dramatizing movement of changing machines (prodigious, transforming states, multiplications of action and places). In ancient times, in cases where performance and all types of representation had become fundamentally lifeless, an initiative to retheatricalize the theater can be seen in many countries and in various eras, as an infallible cure for reconstituting the theatrical organism.

Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890-1960) was the provoker of *Futurist Photodynamism* and later an impassioned gallery dealer (for De Chirico and Balla, and then for Donghi). But he ended his life working in the theater. His Casa d'arte Bragaglia was established in conjunction with the theater, and beginning in 1922 his "Teatro degli Indipendenti" promoted a renewed commitment to theater, resulting in his being described as a "corago," or chorus-director. In 1925 his wonderful and definitive book, *Del teatro teatrale*, appeared, but his experiments with "psychological light" (Rosso di San Secondo's *La bella addormentata*, 1919), which continued the "drama of independent color" (as he clinically wrote) of Giacomo Balla for the Ballets Russes, are also noteworthy.

Fortunato Depero (1892-1962) was clearly not discouraged by the failure of his Ballets Russes production, *Le chant du rossignol*, to be staged. He thought about "artificial living creatures," designed spectacles like *Mimismagia* (1915), invented the *Balli plastici* (1918) with a different type of "super - marionette," and worked on his "magical theater." During his time in New York (1930) he designed a production, *New Babel*, along with his rediscovered "Roman" friend, Léonide Massine. He then came to understand the multi-dimensional space of New York, or the metropolis of the future made real.

Enrico Prampolini (1894-1956) thought about theater throughout his life, alternating theory and practice as a true man of the theater. In Paris he developed his idea for "polydimensional stage space," shown at the "Exposition des Arts décoratifs"; he won the "Grand prix pour l'Art Théâtral" in this Art Deco show. His performances at the Théâtre de la Madeleine in Paris were memorable (*Il mercante di cuori* by F. Casavola, 1927), and many will consider him to be above all a man of the theater (I recall the stagings at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, at San Carlo in Naples, at the May Music Festival in Florence). It is perhaps thanks to this activity that, in the postwar period, a new Prampolini, perhaps the most important one, came to the fore: the maniacal "multi-material" painter, who created with all the artifice of stagecraft.

Finally, I mustn't fail to mention the work of Achille Ricciardi (1884-1923) and his *Teatro del colore*, an experiment worthy of Gordon Craig, which found some applications after 1920. Then there were also the contributions of Gino Severini, who, like Prampolini, also ended up becoming a true architect of the theater, in both Rome and Paris. The performances of Ivo Pannaggi (1901-1981) and Vinicio il Paladini (1902-1971), two young artists who appeared on the scene in 1922 with the *Manifesto dell'arte meccanica futurista*, are also noteworthy. Their mechanistic and golem-like vision was, in a certain sense, on axis with Berlin.

The Soviet Utopia

The space-time of Moscow and its surroundings between the outbreak of war and 1920 was another veritable laboratory for theatrical set design. Space was the "grand illusion", and this was the time for its defeat. Beginning with Mejerchold and proceeding with the impulsive proposals of Constructivism (from Malevič's zero-level to futurist reconstructions of Lissitzky) to the work of Eisenstein, who gave up the stage in favor of film. His aphorism is famous: "It is absurd to perfect a wooden plow; one needs to move on to the tractor."

Vsevolod Mejerchold (1874-1942) was a son of Stanislavsky whose experience spanned the events of October through the Thirties. His stylized and emblematic stage aspired to what was called "materialist symbolism": "To stylize an epoch or an event signifies clarifying, with every expressive mean, the synthesis of a given epoch or an event, it signifies reproducing the hidden characteristic aspects, which result in the style hidden at the bottom of certain works of art."

Mejerchold focused on the actor-man; he experimented with mime and Oriental techniques, dance and psychology, physical exercise and the equestrian circus. In his rejection of Chekovian bourgeois intimacy, he turned to set designers such as Aleksandre Golovin (a painter who came to "Mir Isskustva"), but all in all paid scant attention to the sets. Ernst Blok coined the term "Mejercholdja" to describe Mejerchold's productions; the designation implied "every theatrical universe that combines the circus, juggling, drama and the music-hall."

This brief summary does not allow an in-depth discussion of Mejerchold's "Theatrical October." I will mention in passing the experiments of Kasimir Malevič', who, in his quest for the "supremacy of pure sensation," also brought his white and black canvas to the stage. His 1918 production of Majakovskij's *Odd Mystery* followed elementary stage sets for Krushenik's *Victory over the Sun*. There were spectacular proposals by Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodčenko and El Lissitzky, all of whom had the ability to transform the stage into a space both vital and political, half-circus and half-propaganda.

Aleksandra Exter deserves special mention. Her work is related to that of the Italian Futurists, whose relaunching of their "variety theater" and whose theory of a "Futurist reconstruction of the universe" had considerable influence in Moscow, and on the set designers of the Revolution.

Sergej Ejzenštejn (1898-1948) is also particularly important. He began his career in the theater with tragedies like *Macbeth*, performed at the Proletkult theater in Moscow in 1921. Eisenstein's was an acrobatic theater, one that looked to the music hall invoked by Marinetti. It was, above all, a stage space that attempted to encompass the public. This led logically to Eisenstein's work in cinema, which became a lode of special effects and psychological montages, territory that was, in part, still open to exploration.

Central Europe: from Expressionism to Epic Poetry

The language of Expressionism, which triumphed in the German-speaking world, presents a world view that rejected form in favor of distortion, in an extreme revival of Symbolism. The eye joins the impulses of the psyche, and seeing becomes, instead, a visionary exigency. Oskar Kokoschka's

attempts, where violations of the stage were accompanied by violent color, were among the early experiments in theater, in terms of both words and sets. An equivalent to this alienated world was also found in cinema. In 1920 Robert Wiene made his *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* with the help of three set designers from the "Der Sturm" group. After the dream, the nightmare.

Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), who started out as an actor, turned to directing, where he was extremely attentive to set design. And then the developments in theater at the Bauhaus, first in Weimar and then in Dessau between 1919 and 1933, were extremely interesting.

Early on the constructivism of El Lissitzky and the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy were influential, but then a new direction opened up with the experimental theater of Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943). An intimist room became a utopian microcosm, involving movement and light, while man aspired to the anonymity of the mannequin and the mask. One of Schlemmer's significant productions was the *Triadische Ballet*, performed frequently after the war. In this piece Schlemmer aimed to "produce, through the unfolding of the dance on the plane and stereometry of bodies in movement, that dimension of space that an investigation of elementary forms like the grid, the diagonal, the circle, the ellipse, cannot help but create with relationships."

Like Gropius, director of the Bauhaus, Schlemmer felt obliged to reflect a mystical event, aided by metallic costumes, nurtured by Kandinskij's and Klee's geometries and tied to the mechanism of Léger and the Futurists. In the end, his rational "illusion" was imbued with the lessons of Nietzsche: in a desolate Oriental landscape, one ought to mistrust a god who doesn't know how to dance.

A decisive change in direction, favored by complex social conditions, came with the director Erwin Piscator (1893-1966). Piscator came out of the world of Dada, a background that left him with a passion for variety theater, photography and cinema (Anton Giulio Bragaglia, in *Comoedia*, 1931, considers him a child of Futurism). He introduced the use of projections on stage, animating a dancing, syncopated set and creating the "grand illusion" of audience involvement (an audience now made up of common people). His *Total Theater*, developed with Walter Gropius, involved a search for a new form of theater space as a prerequisite for developing ideas about the performance itself. In 1927 the Piscatorbühne (Piscator-theater) presented Toller's *Whoops, We're Alive!* and the famous production of Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schwejk*, with assistance from the painter George Grosz, then, in 1928, Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*.

In his quest for "epic fluidity," Piscator not only resorted to film projections, but also motorized actors, placing them on complicated tapis roulants ("the symbol of a social condition: the disintegration and slide of a social order"). Brecht and Grosz shared Piscator's vision of class and the masses; all three were obsessed with a "new objectivity." Failure and exile were the logical result, leading to a fruitful period in New York (Piscator's Dramatic Workshop) and a failed postwar experiment (Brecht's Berliner Ensemble) that greatly influenced the "province" of Italy (in the same way that Cubism electrified the painting world).

Paris: The Atmosphere of Art Déco

The Twenties, the great crash, and then the Thirties: Paris remained, as always, the great theater capital of the world. Acrobats and black dancers, effeminate young men and fur-covered venuses, starving painters and well fed managers, clowns and gigolos made up an entire populace of adventurers and aliens, spangling the final whirl of Performance's "grand illusion."

In Paris, Rolf de Maré's *Ballets suédois* celebrated the mystical union between painter and theater. The vividly colored sets by Fernand Léger for the black ballet, *La Création du Monde*, were particularly memorable, as was Francis Picabia's staging of automobile headlights, performed as an intermezzo during René Clair's film *Entr'acte*. It was a response to the Ballets Russes, and lasted the duration of the applause.

I shall mention here only one performance of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Performed on June 20, 1924, *Le Train Bleu* was an operetta, danced by Jean Cocteau to the music of Darius Milhaud. Sets were by Henri Laurens; Coco Chanel designed the costumes (fashion designers gave back to the theater a bit of what they had received). The curtain was by Picasso, a pantographic enlargement of a neoclassical gouache, depicting wretched women fleeing along the sea.

In the program, Diaghilev wrote: "The most important thing in *Train Bleu* consists in the fact that there is no blue train. Since this is the era of velocity, the blue train has reached its destination and has already unloaded its passengers. You have to imagine them on a nonexistent beach, in front of an even more improbable casino.

A hypothetical airplane passes above their heads. Nor is there any plot. Moreover this ballet is not a ballet, but a danced operetta. The music, while being by Darius Milhaud, has nothing in common with the work for which he is generally known.

The dancers are from the original Ballets Russes, but the ballet has nothing to do with that company's work. It was conceived for Anton Dolin, a classical dancer who does nothing classical. The sets are painted by a sculptor and the costumes are by an arbiter of fashion who has never made a costume."

I think it is important to include this long quotation, in order to specify that the stage was the site of a schizoid and surprising world; contributors all did things other than what were usually called upon to do and were allowed to create something contrary to their line of work. This was also part of Diaghilev's genius, and, indeed, was the basis of his theater: to negate the obvious in the vicious circle of contradiction.

After Diaghilev's death his work was carried on by his pupils. The Opéra de Paris continued from 1929 to 1935, and the Ballet de Monte-Carlo pursued the course of the "prodigal son." Serge Lifar returned to the Opéra during the second half of the Thirties, just as Léonide Massine reappeared in Monte-Carlo on the eve of the war...

Giorgio de Chirico's theatrical path developed amid this climate, this glow (blinding and doomed). His debut was an anonymous staging of *La Giara* for the Swedish ballet, a production where the metaphysical esprit insinuated itself. Many have spoken about Appia and Craig in connection with the birth of "*piazze d'Italia*" imagery, but it was only at this point that De Chirico looked at Appia's work. In 1923 the Bottega di Poesia in Milan published his richly illustrated pamphlet, *Art Vivant ou Nature Morte?*. The last illustration, identical to De Chirico's set, reproduces a set design from 1909, *L'ombre du cypres*.

De Chirico's metaphysical activity continued with the Ballets Russes, first with his proposal to re-stage *La mort de Niobé* by his brother, Savinio, followed by the triumphant *Le Bal*, which seemed like the final flowering of his Parisian period, before the economic crash (and the necessity of invention). Working again with Serge Lifar, De Chirico prepared enameled sets and costumes, which he would take to the United States at the time of *American Dream* (1936-37). All his later theatrical activity attempted to evoke the carefree nature of those earlier years.

The Postwar Period: Set Designs for Set Designers

Specialists in the visual arts, painters and sculptors, seem prominently excluded from the postwar stage.

When, by luck, they were asked to participate in a production, their work was more decorative than structural, almost as if they were being allowed to hang their paintings in some important person's fancy living room.

And yet during the postwar period, up until the Sixties, there was no lack of artists who worked in the theater: Piero Dorazio, Toti Scialoja, Giulio Turcato, Achille Perilli, Alberto Burri, Emilio

Vedova made numerous attempts to enhance and adapt their work and philosophies to the stage ("Theater is our plastic conscience, our speaking conscience", Savinio stated).

Like his abstractionist predecessors, Piero Dorazio believes in the transformation of the theater space. I remember an installation for Aucassin et Nicolette by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco at the 1952 May Music Festival in Florence. And there were also sets and costumes for the ballet *Notte trasfigurata* by Arnold Schönberg at the Teatro della Scala (1972) and sets for *Klangarbenspiele* by Marcello Panni, again at the Scala (1973).

Toti Scialoja was fanatic in his interpretation of the stage space and was involved in numerous productions during the Fifties and Sixties, ranging from sets for the choreographic performances of Aurel Milloss at various theaters in Rome after the war, to *La morte dell'Aria* for the music of Goffredo Petrassi at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome. On the latter occasion, a memorable evening in 1949, Scialoja found himself seated next to Alberto Savinio. All his painting, mad up of gestures and marks, seems to owe a debt to the world of set design.

Another protagonist of "Forma" (Form), Achille Perilli, was obsessed with the space of the proscenium stage, ranging from a performance of Collage with Aldo Clementi at the Teatro Eliseo (1961) to theater projects carried out with "Gruppo 63." Emilio Vedova did sets for *Intolleranza 60* at the Teatro la Fenice, set to music by Luigi Nono, and indeed, all his paintings are stage events: from *Absurdes Berliner Tagebuch* (1954) to *Spazio/Plurimo/Luce* for the 1967 Montreal Expo. His work goes beyond autonomous esthetic boundaries, to enter the space of the public, in pursuit of the Boccionian utopia of old: "we will bring the spectator to the center of the painting." Alberto Burri was involved in a half dozen or so memorable performances, settings for musical events at the Teatro della Scala (1963), Teatro dell'Opera (1972), up to *Tristano e Isotta* at the Regio in Turin (1975). He also designed sets and costumes for prose productions (Pisa, 1969). There was a utopian theater event at the Parco Sempione in Milan in 1973: a series of mobile sets and rotating wings, worked from a distance, which doubled the (opaque or reflective) effects in a dematerialization of the natural surroundings.

There are other artists, other events that could also be mentioned, but the logic is always the same. The painter longs to climb onto stage, but is only allowed on the condition that he will bring with him his signature work, acting as "matador" who is (perhaps) capable of improving the chances of increasingly less coveted productions.

The frustration built, leading to an epilogue that was perhaps logical. There was no longer space on stage for the artists of the Sixties, and they fragmented and found articulations in various characters, all of whom tended toward a new, different illusion. Pop artists were pushed by the microcosm of consumption, there were Happenings and the social optimism that preached environmental awareness. In other words, innumerable characters in search of a stage. These artists have attempted to bring the stage within their work, adapting their methodology to create what amounts to a performance. This can happen in the street, but above all in that little room-size theater known as the gallery.

And so now the stage is being invoked in the name of art. Allan Kaprow does this, as do, in different manner, Pino Pascali and Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz; just as Giulio Paolini and Enzo Cucchi, the artists chosen for *Sipario*, have experimented in other forms. As always, what is sought, more than anything, is an evasion: a flight from the ivory tower, but also from the *bohème* ceiling and from the off-off underground setting. Perhaps there is a desire to return to the people, certainly with the awareness that even evasion is a form of freedom. Decreasingly Zarathustra and increasingly Human - too human (if not precisely Spartacus), the artist approaching the millenium is once more experimenting with a renewed utopia, one that is as deeply felt as it is, perhaps, unwelcome.

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