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Balla and Performance

Elena Gigli

On the eve of the first world war, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti proclaimed: "Today Variety Theater is the crucible in which the elements of a new sensibility that is being prepared are set to boil. Found there is the break down of all the worn-out prototypes of the Beautiful, the Grand, the Solemn, the Religious, the Ferocious, the Seductive and the Fearful, and also the abstract elaboration of new prototypes that will follow these others. [...] the authors, actors and stage-hands of Variety Theater have a single *raison d'être*, a single reason to triumph: to incessantly invent new elements of wonder" (*Il Teatro di Varietà manifesto* in *The Daily Mail*, November 21, 1913). In early 1915, along with Settimelli and Corra, Marinetti proclaimed the existence of a theater that was "concise, that is, extremely brief. In only a few minutes, in very few words and in few gestures it squeezes in innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts and symbols. A-technical, Dynamic, Simultaneous, in other words born out of improvisation, out of lightning swift intuition, out of suggestive and revealing actuality. Autonomous, A-logical, Unreal. Theatrical synthesis will be autonomous; it will bear resemblance to nothing but itself, while drawing from reality elements to be combined at whim" (*Il Teatro Futurista Sintetico*, manifesto, January 11, 1915).

1913 was the year of the Futurist Evenings. Coinciding with exhibitions at the Teatro Costanzi (the first was on February 21), Futurist friends got together, made themselves up like bohemians from the past century and staged rapid, improvised future events. Painters and poets, set designers and composers all came together to "create that art which defines the true expression of a people and leaves its mark on an epoch"; and, Balla continued (autobiographical note, 1913, Rome, Casa Balla), "looking around, you saw extremely lively, extremely audacious rebels, alone among the torpid crowds and the indifference of skeptics, Marinetti, Boccioni, Russolo, Severini and their followers began the new torment (the new struggle)." Still in 1943 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti recalled Balla's collaboration with Diaghilev: "Balla came in, with his tie made of iron and cork, along with Picasso, with his extremely black, plotting eyes and his briarwood pipe in his mouth, and they discussed movements taken from Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky and from paintings by Raphael, Leonardo. [...] With Balla, I proposed to Diaghilev the creation of the Futurist dances *La rotativa* and *La linotype*, but the rehearsals were arduous." (*Una sensibilità italiana nata in Egitto*, Milan 1969).

Only one performance planned by Balla (*Feu d'artifice*, 1917) came to fruition. That same year *Parade* (prepared in Rome) was performed in Paris, also for the Ballets Russes, with text by Cocteau, music by Satie and sets and costumes by Picasso.

But let's take a look at Balla's first attempts at theatrical synthesis, "crucible of a new sensibility" (Marinetti, 1913). In 1914 the first "Futurist afternoon" took place at the Galleria Sprovieri, where "an absolutely new event took place." Marinetti declaimed *Piedigrotta*. There was Francesco Cangiullo's free form words (*Parole in libertà*), where Balla, dressed in black like a dwarf, with a multicolored vessel that he wore on his head" was "Mr. Putipù." "The room was

illuminated by red lamps that intensified the dynamism of the Piedigrotesque backdrop painted by Balla." (*Lacerba*, April 1, 1914). In 1920 Bruno Corra recalled Cangiullo's collaboration with Balla and Marinetti in a "creation of many volcanic Futurist fantasies". Mixing dialogue with sound and mouth noises, he created prodigious fantasies like the *Lezione di equitazione* (*Lesson in Equitation*) and the *Vignaiolo dopo il temporale* (*Vinedresser after the Storm*) (*Battaglia*, Milan 1920).

This exhibition includes sketches for theatrical "syntheses" conceived, and in part realized, by Giacomo Balla. These range from *Macchina tipografica* (*Typesetting machine*) to *Inferno* (*Hell*), from *Mimica sinottica* (*Synoptic pantomime*), also known as *Primavera* (*Springtime*) to *Feu d'artifice* (*Fireworks*).

The film *Vita Futurista*, shot during the Autumn-Winter of 1916 by Arnaldo Ginna, and shown in Florence on January 28, 1917, is, for all purposes, an assemblage of Futurist sets. (The paternity of Balla's sets was reconstructed by Fagiolo, 1968, pp. 86-88). Concentrated and exalted to the maximum, the little Turinese artist's two poles of art - light and movement - hide and are developed in the spirit of the "Futurist reconstruction of the universe." The following sequence is noteworthy: "Balla marries a chair and from them a footstool is born." Light and movement, colors and sounds are (to an absurd degree) fused together, in another aspect of everyday life: clothing. He had himself photographed in front of his self-portrait painted around 1925, wearing the Futurist garment conceived by him (and sewn by his daughter Luce).

Finally, we mustn't forget Balla's continual (and parallel) interest in painting: these were the years he painted his oils *Forze di paesaggio + sensazioni* (*Landscape forces + sensation*). We know of twenty-five canvases where the sets for *Feu d'artifice* are joined, in a certain sense, with external sensations (amethyst watermelon, majolica, cretonne, turquoise, garden, evening, Japanese lacquer, orchid). "It truly seemed to us that the trees were solidifying in acute geometries and the rays of the sun were radiating like yellow knives and our skulls had become gracefully ovoid or frighteningly spherical, occupying the space with force-lines that the air accepted obligingly" (Virgilio Marchi, 1928). These work are none other than the visualization of the "Synthetic, a-technical, dynamic, simultaneous, a-logical, unreal" performance.

First one provokes, then one invents, finally one creates.

Typesetting machine, c. 1914

Giacomo Balla Summary

Diaghilev's and Semenov's salon, Unique rehearsal, Rome, 1916 (according to Virgilio Marchi)

Text, set, coreography: Giacomo Balla

Performers: twelve machine-persons, among them Virgilio Marchi and Giacomo Balla

Giacomo Balla's first work for the theater, this piece becomes a practical staging of Futurist formulations on machine culture, on both word sounds and pure sound.

A single word, written out (TIPOGRAFIA) suffices as the set, against which a figure-character-lead soldier "gymnastically" moves its arms (are we really very far from Giorgio de Chirico's mannequins?). Two non-colors (black and white) and one color (orange, a fusion of two primary colors, yellow and red) stand out on the stage. Then the actors outline a movement, their arms rotating upward, visually expressing the mechanism of a printing shop. Finally, the text to be spoken contains twelve sequences of noises for the twelve actors, who are there to create a "noise-like onomatopoeia." Luigi Russolo (*L'Arte dei Rumori. Manifesto Futurista*) is the theoretician of noise-sound; Giacomo Balla went beyond theory to create pure sound and color-words.

Balla's sketches for the piece are few in number but complete. Along with Virgilio Marchi's

description, these bear witness to this early pyrotechnical invention, this "Synthetic futurist Theater." Fifteen years later architect Virgilio Marchi reminisced (*La Stirpe*, Rome, March 1928, pp. 159-163) about preparations for "Giacomo Balla's mechanical invention", *Balletto Tipografico*, in Diaghilev's and Semenov's salon: "The author arranged us in geometric order and, with his ever present gray, rectangular stick directed our mechanistic movements and the gestures that each of us had to complete in order to represent the spirit of the individual pieces of a rotary newspaper press. I was assigned a 'STA', to be reiterated violently with a gymnastic arm movement. I felt as if I were in a barracks courtyard. Needless to say Balla reserved for himself the hissings, the onomatopoeic sounds, the most delicate verbalizations that emerged from his lips, alternating with that memorable Piedmontese 'neh' and the uncorking of bottles of Frascati by the incorrigible, bearded Semenov, which turned the whole thing into an extremely intelligent and very amusing grotesque."

Hell, c. 1914

Ballet by Giacomo Balla

Unproduced work

Text, set, coreography: Giacomo Balla

On April 13, 1914, at the Galleria Sprovieri in Rome, they performed Cangiullo's *Traditionalist Philosopher's funeral*. Balla took part in these new initiatives, inspired by the Futurist performances, and in a certain sense he succeeded in creating the pyrotechnical inventions proclaimed by the "Synthetic Futurist Theater" manifesto. In particular the reluctant, timid artist with the "periwinkle blue" eyes actively participated, "disguised by a small sack, brandishing a long brush like a torch, with which he periodically struck a cow bell, intoning in a nasal voice 'nieet-nieet, nieet-nieet, nieet-nieet'" (*Lacerba*, 1914). The Futurist writer Bruno Corra has also recalled the liveliness of this "action theater" (*Battaglie*, Milan 1920): "In the Roman Futurist space and in Balla's house at via Paisiello 39, Cangiullo collaborated with Balla and Marinetti on the creation of many volcanic Futurist fantasies. The funeral of a philosopher critic was typical, with a long tragicomic procession, with the young Futurists dressed up in stove pipes, the corpse shaped by Cangiullo's blows and carried about on a stretcher, under the solemn direction of Balla who, at the head of the procession, struck an enormous cow bell with a large painter's brush, murmuring funereal gniet-gniet sounds. "

In the context of these "volcanic Futurist fantasies" it seems appropriate to mention two sketches that illustrate the stage concept for *Hell*. In the first, Balla goes back to the *Compenetrazioni iridescenti* (iridescent compenetrations; triangular geometric shapes, wound in ascending, reddish spirals) to create the set. In the second the stage becomes dynamic and noisy, and, significantly, there are directions for improvised action.

These two studies, similar to the sheets that follow, are examples of Balla's continual experimental research. Indeed he was seeking to make the burning of fire as tangible as the freshness of nature, the whistling of three hundreds bells as tangible as the twittering of birds.

Synoptic Pantomime or Springtime, 1915

Ballet by Giacomo Balla

Unproduced work

Text, set, coreography: Giacomo Balla

Performers: Ballerinas dressed as plants

These six sheets were created by Balla for *Mimica sinottica (Synoptic pantomime)*, another action theater piece that was never produced. It is almost as if the performance becomes a poetic parenthesis between the fire of *Inferno* and the pyrotechnical light of *Feu d'Artifice*, a reflective pause before the chaos of the modern machine culture. It is a cosmic ballet, where the stage is the earth during springtime, the actors are the sky, the valley, the tree, and where the music is the song of May sung by the birds.

The sketch for the set design, signed and dated 1915, shows a cosmic ballet between sky and earth, which support the Queen of heaven, at the center amid three Leonardesque spheres. Sketches for the ballerinas' costumes depict the Queen of heaven, the Valley and the Tree, which form the corps de ballet. Finally there is the noise-like text: n. 1 *plants (bird cries, ciribiribiriciribiribiriciri)*; n. 2 *plants (bird cries, piiziiipiiziotpiiziiipiiziot)*; n. 3 *plants (crows' cries, a nasal gnach gnech gnach)*, n. 4 *(plants mouth closed, teeth clenched, uulluuuuuuuu!!!)*, n. 5 *(plants funnel-mouthed vouvouvouvou flute)*. The music of the violin accompanies the *aaaaaaaaaaaa* of heaven and valley.

It is all ready to be produced on a set representing the landscape traversed by the blue curve of the sky and by the lines that represent the arrival of the swallows on St. Benedict's feast day. And so also using brushes and canvas, Balla achieves a theatrical transposition of experimentation with the everyday.

Fireworks, 1916-1917

Stage action of sound and moving lights

Teatro Costanzi (today Teatro dell'Opera), Rome, April 12, 1917

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Set: Giacomo Balla

Director: Serge de Diaghilev

Conductor: Ernest Ansermet

Performers: rhythms of colored lights

On December 2, 1916 Serge de Diaghilev sent a letter to Giacomo Balla, instructing the painter "to make a model for a stage set, following the sketch seen and approved by me in your studio, for Stravinsky's *Fireworks*. You will be in charge of the execution of the entire set and will deliver this to Rome on February 1, 1917 at the latest. You will be paid for this work according to your estimate, namely the amount of 3500 lire maximum, and separately, 1500 lire, for your personal work, 5000 lire in all. [...] I retain the right to keep the model for the price of 300 lire."

Three models (plus a fourth larger one, still at the Casa Balla) affirm the artist's experimental research. The model for the set consists of geometric solids made from wood and covered in brightly colored satin, obelisks and pyramids, parallelepipeds with dynamic pointed forms, colored papers and silver-plated sheets.

Movement and vitality is conveyed by the light shining from behind the transparent forms. In a postcard sent to Luciano De Nardis (March 3, 1917) Balla describes the staging: "EVER + DEAREST DE NARDIS - FLIGHTS X FLIGHTS XXX FLIGHTS FULL SPEED AHEAD EXTREMELY BUSY PREPARATION THEATER MODEL. THERE ARE ARTIFICIAL STATE OF MIND SHAPES 5 AND 7 METERS WIDE LONG TALL MADE [?] WITH FLOODLIGHTS. "At the center he designed the set with directions for the position of the lights and colors: violet and white to the left, red blue and yellow at the center, green to the right.

Léonide Massine (*My Life in Ballet*, London 1968) recalled "the Cubist stage with transparent

conical and rectangular structures. Painted in bright red and in blue, and illuminated from behind, these structures switched on and off in tempo with the music. Balla explained to us that these elements represented 'the states of mind of fireworks' that the music had suggested to him."

The pyrotechnical spectacle, "3 minutes of fireworks," was presented in Rome at the Teatro Costanzi (now Teatro dell'Opera). The following, published for the first time, is a transcription of the handwritten account of that April 30, 1917 performance, courtesy of architect Virgilio Marchi (the two sheets of paper were published in the catalogue *Virgilio Marchi architetto scenografo futurista*, Spoleto 1977).

Rome 4-30-17

Stravinsky's Fireworks staged by Balla at the Costanzi

3 minutes of fireworks!

The curtain of the Costanzi had only to open to ignite an extremely violent fire of the expected battle of traditionalists > versus < futurists. The former were already in raptures over the romantic Reveries of Chopin and for Scarlatti's high spirited women, even if in the latter, staged by Bakst, they glimpsed a futurism that doesn't exist in his work at all. The latter group were impatient to decree a clamorous success for Balla, painter, architect, fanatic shaper of forms, electrical wizard, devourer of music... Asternens gave the first enharmonic beat. Silence - Pitch darkness - Then the second measure, a multicolored fire went up in smoke, growing bit by bit. It broke off. Murmur - Third measure: the same fire and two others to the sides. It goes out. Murmur 2. [?] measure, enharmonic: 7 - 8 - 10 violent fires, red, violet, yellow, green. Murmur 3. Everything lights up, reflecting. A collision of dynamic lights, animation of plastic cones. Our eyes enjoy it a lot! Beautiful! Beautiful! The others put up with it. Flashes, flashes. An intense thunder of applause.

Shouting - Murmuring - Buzzing - Laughing in the orchestra. Fokine's box.

[in a triangle, the synthesis of voices from the orchestra]: Clowns! Beautiful! beautiful! (ironic)

[in a triangle, the synthesis of favorable voices from the orchestra]: Worthless traditionalists! Long live Futurism, you cowards!

[in a drawing that sketches a box seat]: De Pero Folgore Semenoff and 2nd Class Lady.

[in a triangular section to the left] TRADITIONALISTS BEATEN Enough! (cretin minority) but what is this stuff?... Clown! - You whistle on key. An idiot, in the orchestra, is very flustered. Most of the grenadiers laughs, denture and mustaches open wide.

Packs of swindlers. Little papists. Stocky men etc... a clique of professors and ministry employees.

[in a triangular section to the right] FUTURISTS AND SYMPATHIZERS

Wild applause. Deafening roar. Most join in the applause: Imbecile! You don't understand anything about futurism!... but then... Be quiet!... Idiots! Out with Ballaaaaaaa... everyone - everyone big and small.

[at the center, between the two paragraphs transcribed above] [in a spiral with an arrow] Indecision of a frightened group, shocked at so much innovation.

[below] The confusion is at its height and overwhelms the music. It is no longer possible to perceive the symphonic harmony between music and color. Only a sharp rhythmic refrain rises up to the skylight. An artillery soldier (lingering on at the arms factory) with a large key (for a store-room?) repeats the rhythm again and again. Against his will he helps give greater color to the lights. But Balla sets off new fireworks and the applause exceeds all expectations.

BALLA

emerges from his chaotic volumes and salutes with a capacious gesture. Again he is called to the footlights. Then, slowly, a stream of intestinal rumblings descend over the orchestra, blurring everything... Discussion resumes in the foyer. I run off because I have a pass until 10:30 and its now 11:45.

Finally, Margherita Sarfatti's recollections must be mentioned. Boccioni's friend, Sarfatti was destined to become Fascism's muse. "There will appear on stage neither painted sets nor people, but nothing other than shapes. Constructions in wood and fabric, pointed upturned cones, geometric monstrosities, half-spherical and half-cylindrical, like mythical fairy-tale creatures, half-human and half-beast. They are organized according to an a-logical architecture and are, in the true sense of the word, eccentric. They will project asymmetrical shadows and lights on the stage, in harmony with Stravinsky's enharmonic chords, which will exasperate the spirit in the renewed and always disappointed expectation of the perfect chord to placate the soul and the outstretched senses. Continual plays of light and projection of varied shadows, colored rays of extremely powerful floodlights will all make an impression of dynamic change on the static nature of stage sets. The unique spectacle lasts not more than five minutes and is composed exclusively of two vibrations of ethers, luminous and acoustic waves. Arriving concurrently at the eye and ear to determine in the viewer the magnetic suggestion of states of sensibility, sometimes cheerful, sometimes sad, sometimes agitated, sometimes serene" (*La compagnia dei balli Russi a Roma*, in *Gli Avvenimenti*, Milan, April 7, 1917, reprinted in *La fiaccola accesa*, in *Raccolta di Breviari Intellettuali*, Milan, undated, pp. 124-126).

More than twenty small sheets were catalogued by Luce Balla (and then donated to the Museo della Scala in Milan). These are working drawings for the individual shapes, to be given to artisans, to create "the cubist stage", detailed drawings where Balla, almost like an engineer, indicates the consistency of the material (*transparent, red yellow orange*) and the dimensions (*90 cent., 1 meter, 40 centimeters*).

Finally there was the programming of the lights: on a small sheet of paper (discovered by Fagiolo dell'Arco in the Casa Balla in 1967), Balla gives instructions for the tempos. 50 different measures with repetitions of certain elements, totaling 70 measures in all. It begins with *Dark Stage Theater*, arriving at traveling lights green, red, blue... The instruction for measure 8 is *light up theater*, then *transparencies with 2 switches*, and so on for five brief minutes. At the end, *bring the festivities to an end and comments*.

Giacomo Balla delivered "the entire set on February 1, 1917. The model will remain in your possession," reads a letter of response to Diaghilev. Finally Michele De Semenoff writes to Balla from Rome on M24, 1918: "I have received from Mr. Balla the sum of five hundred (500) lire, for the set made by him for Mr. Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes. I am selling Mr. Balla this set with the complete agreement of Mr. Diaghilev. Michele De Semenoff."

Some years later Balla would make a self-portrait (now lost), where one can see behind him a piece of the set for *Feu d'artifice*, with the recognizable colored effect on the upper portion of the central pyramid.

And the show goes on ...