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## ***De Chirico and Performance***

**Elena Gigli**

In 1947 Giorgio de Chirico, condemning open air performances as "nonsense," spoke about theater uniquely from a theatrical, that is from a "performance", rather than a literary point of view. "Beginning from this point of view, that the performance must free us from reality and give us a way to immerse ourselves, if not in a different world, at least in a different life, beginning, I reiterate, from this point of view, 'I negate all realism, all realist tendencies' with regard to theatrical performance" (*Il dramma*, May 15, 1947).

During a half century of work, the Great Metaphysician created twenty-six performances for theaters throughout Europe (from Paris to Berlin, from London to Athens, from Rome to Florence to Milan). These performances brought the audience into a completely new atmosphere, into that "metaphysical" space that began emerging in De Chirico's paintings during the century's second decade. As Fagiolo dell'Arco has noted, it was no accident that, in the curtain with the two colossal gladiators for *Le Bal*, De Chirico placed his signature next to the date, 1929; when the curtain closed, the painting re-opened.

In 1910 De Chirico's brother, Alberto Savinio, wrote to him from Paris, describing the new theatrical climate surrounding Serge de Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1911 De Chirico joined him. Rolf de Maré and his Ballets Suédois arrived in the French capital in 1920. Various personalities gravitated to this crucible of innovation: Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, André Breton, Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, Vittorio Rieti... And there was no scarcity of artists: Depero, Prampolini, Picasso, Braque, Goncarova, Larionov, Léger, Picabia...

De Chirico's first theatrical production dates back to November 19, 1924: Alfred Casella's *La Giara* (*The Jar*), staged by the Ballet Suédois, with choreography by Jean Borlin. It was an Italian stage, and not terribly spectacular.

Six months later (May 14, 1925) the *Dioscuri* appeared at the Teatro d'Arte, in the Compagnia del Teatro di Roma's production of Alberto Savinio's *La morte di Niobe* (*Death of Niobe*), for which De Chirico created a sketch for the sets. Alfredo Cecchi described the set as follows: "The metaphysical painter, Giorgio de Chirico, has created a sort of mythological world transported to the Levant, particularly to Salonika, with a pleasure that is both nautical and awkward. In the background there are steamships in amusing colors and everything needed to bring the word 'bazaar' to the viewer's mind. Within these clever canvases, rather hermetic events are developed, including the legend of Niobe, which functioned like a blank canvas against which shadow theaters were projected" (*Il Tevere*, May 15, 1925).

De Chirico worked again with the Compagnia del Teatro di Roma, creating five sketches for Savinio's *Capitano Ulisse*, but the production never reached the stage (the sketches were published in his brother Savinio's magazine, *Colonna*, in 1934, and later in the magazine *Scenario*, in February 1938).

The *Dioscuri* were also at work on a personal level, again within the circle of Luigi Pirandello's

company. De Chirico met the Russian ballerina, Raissa Gurievich, companion of choreographer Giorgio Kroll (she would become De Chirico's first wife), and Savinio met his companion, the actress Maria Morino.

In December 1928 Roger Vitrac's opera, *Victor ou les Enfants au pouvoir*, was performed at Antonin Artaud's Théâtre Alfred Jarry. The sets (for which De Chirico may have given suggestions) depicted empty frames, mirrors on easels *Les arbres dans la chambre*, all De Chirico themes.

The Ballet Russes' last project took place during this period, a new version of Savinio's *La morte di Niobe*, for which we know of nine costume sketches (the back of one reads: "Mon. Ant. Shakeswitch Ballets Russes 16 Rue de Graman Paris").

In May 1929, with the production of Boris Kochno's ballet in two scenes, *Le Bal*, and the premature death of Serge de Diaghilev in Venice (August 19), De Chirico brought down the curtain on the Ballets Russes. This was perhaps his greatest achievement in the field of theatre.

Mythological themes returned in his later, in the "Thirties, in his set designs for productions ranging from Ernst Krenek's *Das Leben des Orest* (Berlin, Staatsoper, October 1930) to Abel Hermant's *Bacchus et Ariane*, with choreography by Serge Lifar (Paris Théâtre de l'Opéra, May 1922, 1931). His sketches for the Berlin sets depict the sun, invented for Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* and the bathing huts for *Bagni Misteriosi*; the costume sketches for Paris are still tied to those for *Le Bal*.

Still uncertain about whether to settle in Paris or Italy, in 1931, De Chirico created five sketches for Stravinskij's *Polichinelle* which reworked the 18th-century music of G.B. Pergolesi. The production was staged in April for the Ballet de l'Opéra Russe in Monte-Carlo (and then in London, at the Lyceum Theatre, May 27, 1931). A letter from Giorgio de Chirico to Jean Cocteau, dated April 1, 1931 (published by Fagiolo dell'Arco in 1981) states: "C'est le Pulcinelle déjà illustré par Picasso: j'espère que le maître ne sera pas fâché" (It's the Pulcinella already illustrated by Picasso; I hope the Master won't be annoyed by it).

Finally he received an important commission in Italy: Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*, for the first May Music Festival in Florence (Teatro Comunale, May 25, 1933). It was an opportunity for Florence to rouse itself from that "cultural death" described by Soffici in 1929 in *La Nazione*; for De Chirico it was a chance to participate in the rich, lively cultural climate that Florence had to offer at that time.

It was probably Luigi Pirandello, director of the production, who, in 1934, asked De Chirico to design the sets for D'Annunzio's pastoral tragedy, *La figlia di Iorio* (Rome, Teatro Argentina, October 12). Correspondence between D'Annunzio and Pirandello mentions the careful preparations for the production (which, however, ended up being a fiasco). Three sketches for sets, seven sheets of costume sketches and one for the stage props are now at the Vittoriale degli Italiani in Gardone Riviera. These depict a somewhat rustic and pastoral set; only the sketch for the first act shows a backdrop with a "metaphysical" piazza d'Italia, with two figures joined by their shadow. Traveling between New York and Paris, De Chirico worked on sets and costumes for a trilogy for the Teatro d'Atene in 1937; the production was to have consisted of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Euripides's *Bacchantes* and Louis Gauthier-Vignal's *Le Minotaure*. The outbreak of war prevented this imaginative production being staged.

January 20, 1938, the ballet *Prothée* was performed at Covent Garden in London, with music by Claude Debussy for the ballets of Colonel De Basil. Passing through London, Giorgio de Chirico finally experienced success in the theater: "The ballet at Covent Garden met with great success and, like many years before, in Paris at the Sarah Bernhardt Theater, I had to go on stage to receive the audience's acknowledgment, holding with my right hand the damp hand of the prima ballerina and with my left the hand, no less damp, of the lead male dancer" (De Chirico, 1945). While the sets are still typologically tied to the *Calligrammes* and *Bagni Misteriosi* motifs, the costumes anticipate De

Chirico's "baroque" period. Chirico's canvases executed after January 1938, when he returned to Italy, are characterized by a rich painterly impasto and by baroque set design. Small temples, stylized column-like figures, costumes constructed with archeological remains, chromatic groupings constructed against lumpy sand-like backgrounds, the narrative abundance, the desire to heap together diverse elements, like in a baroque church: all this signifies a negation of himself for a return to times of old, Renaissance and Baroque in this case. He abandoned tempera (except for costume sketches) in favor of tubes of oil paint applied to canvas on board.

In an interview (in Fagiolo dell'Arco, 1983, pp. 105-107), the choreographer Aurel Milloss recalled the production of *Amphion*: "Ida Rubinstein asked Paul Valery and Arthur Honneger to produce *Amphion*, and it was staged in 1942. [...] In 1941 Carlo Gatti, head of La Scala, asked me to participate in the 1942-43 season, [...] Gatti accepted the name of De Chirico. [...] The performance that evening, consisting of three pieces, was quite successful, with some repeat performances and many newspaper articles, although not all intelligent."

On October 14, 1944 *Don Giovanni* was performed at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome; the ballet was set to the music of Richard Strauss and the choreography was again by Aurel M. Milloss. The following year, on December 20, 1945, *Danze di Galanta*, with music by Kodály and choreography by Milloss, was performed at the Teatro Adriano in Rome.

De Chirico received a commission for the XII May Music Festival in Florence to design sets for *Orfeo*, an opera set to the music of Claudio Monteverdi; it was performed on May 4, 1949. He then staged Corrado Alvaro's *La lunga notte di Medea* for Tatiana Pavlova's company, reusing a sketch from 1937 (Milan, Teatro Nuovo, July 11, 1949).

Spiral columns supporting a portico (a memory of Bernini's Baldacchino?) provided spatial definition on the drop-curtain and in the second scene of *La leggenda di Giuseppe*, by Richard Strauss, at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, on May 5, 1951. During the Fifties Giorgio de Chirico worked on set designs in both Florence (at the Teatro Comunale) and Milan (at the Teatro alla Scala). On May 9 he staged Ildebrando Pizzetti's *Ifigenia* in Milan; on April 12, 1952, Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, Milan; on April 27, 1952, Vito Frazzi's *Don Chisciotte*, in Florence. He likewise seemed to go back and forth between Greek myth and Romantic nightmare.

The following year, on May 15, 1953, he worked on *La coda santa*, a comedy in three acts by Dino Terra, for the Teatro dei Satiri in Rome. The drop-curtain for *Apollo Musagete* (Milan, Piccola Scala, March 10, 1956) was more a painting than a sketch: seated, his eyes turned toward the heavens, Apollo holds a lyre. To the right, in a natural setting created in a painterly impasto, the winged horse attempts to rise (this is where De Chirico placed his signature). To the left, the nine muses dance and play instruments.

The Sixties: March 31, 1964, the Teatro dell'Opera, Rome, *Otello*. It was an attempt to bring back "the passionate and ardent atmosphere of theater from around 1830, when *Otello* was presented to European audiences through the grand interpretations of the likes of Malibran, Pasta and Rubini, father of nineteenth-century Italian melodrama, from Donizetti to early Verdi. Thus an 'Italian-style' direction, based on a tradition that should be recognized and respected, even if it needs to be renewed in late of contemporary critical taste" (from the program written by director Sandro Sequi). Finally there were two productions taken from sketches by De Chirico: *L'Estasi* by Aleksandre N. Skriabin and *Orfeo e Euridice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck. The former was performed in Milan at the Teatro alla Scala on September 17, 1968; Rudolf Nureyev was the principal dancer. In his stage sketch, De Chirico applied broad fields of background color and reused the figurative motifs from *Calligrammes* (the sun, the door that opens). The latter production took place at the National Theater in Athens, in 1971.

Born on Greek soil more than eighty years before, the Great Metaphysician chose to close the

curtain, returning to his origins. His sketches for *Orfeo e Euridice* are characterized by the Boeklin-like motif of the *Isola dei Morti*. And we have returned to our story's beginning: the eternal wanderer finally finds peace in his native land; Ulysses has returned to Ithaca.

### **The Jar, 1924**

Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris, November 19

*Text:* Luigi Pirandello

*Music:* Alfredo Casella

*Sets and costumes:* Giorgio de Chirico

*Choreography:* Jean Börlin

*Artistic direction:* Rolf de Maré

In Spring 1924 the composer Alfredo Casella (Turin 1883 - Rome 1947) requested the help of the Great Metaphysician (De Chirico, who was painting his portrait), to produce a "choreographic play." For the text Casella chose a short story by Luigi Pirandello, and, for sets and costumes, the art of Giorgio de Chirico. He recalls the commission as follows: "In Spring 1924 our friend from New York, Miss Wiborg, came to Rome, with a singular message from Erik Satie, [...] to write a ballet for the next season of Rolf de Maré's 'Ballets Suédois'. [...] De Maré wanted a typically Italian ballet, something to contrast with De Falla's *Tricorno*. And he wanted not only the poet, but also the set designer to be Italian. The situation was interesting, because Diaghilev had never done anything of the sort. He immediately had the idea to look for a subject in the vast body of short stories of Luigi Pirandello, an idea that De Maré liked very much. Just as he liked the name suggested for sets and costumes - De Chirico" (*I segreti della giara*, Florence 1941). The play was presented in Paris, at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées on the evening of November 19, 1924. The program, designed by Picabia, left pages for, among other things, portraits by De Chirico of Casella and Pirandello, as well as a self-portrait. Under the self-portrait De Chirico wrote: "My opinions on ballet? I think that when they have become completely liberated from a certain aestheticism that still contaminates them and when they are enriched with new elements, they, along with cinema, will be able to replace the theater of prose and opera" (in Fagiolo dell'Arco, Baldacci, 1982, p. 149).

The plot mentions a jar, owned by an irascible farmer, that is broken by some workers. During the attempt to fix it, a worker remains imprisoned inside. The owner, first unwilling to break the jar, finally accepts a third of the value of the original sum in exchange for breaking it. The worker refuses to pay and invites the farmers to drink to his health. The owner, fed up by the uproar, breaks the jar and gives the prisoner back his freedom. There are four rather similar versions of sketches for the stage set. The set is dominated by the red farm with a stairway leading to the center of the stage. It shows the same perspectival construction as works exhibited in Turin and Rome in 1923, from *Ottobrata (Indian summer)* to *La partenza del cavaliere errante (Departure of the errant knight)*. In front of the proscenium the curtain, at the sides, defines the stage space. It is similar to the metaphysical curtain that frames, that same year, the artist's face in his *Self-portrait* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna). It is the curtain moved by the wind in the background of the tempera painting *Mercurio e i metafisici* (Mercury and the metaphysicians) of 1920, or the closed (and then open to the left) curtain in the 1910 canvas, *L'enigma dell'oracolo (Enigma of the oracle)*. It is not purely a theatrical expedient, but the discovery (or veiling) of what will occur on the stage of life.

De Chirico used the opportunity of staging *The Jar* to return to Paris, where he made contact with the just-formed group of Surrealists. De Chirico was immortalized by Man Ray in three

photographs published on the cover of the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, December 1, 1924 (Fagiolo dell'Arco, Baldacci, 1982, p. 152).

The Museum of Dance in Stockholm contains the set, as well as sketches for the twelve costumes, from hunchback to peasant woman, from landlord to landlord's daughter. These costume sketches have an air of Sicily about them; on the one hand, De Chirico recreated regional costumes, but on the other he re-proposed the stylistic model with pleated tunic that he had already used in figures in certain paintings, such as *La partenza degli argonauti* (*The departure of the argonauts*, 1909-10), *Il saluto degli argonauti partenti* (*Greeting of the departing argonauts*, 1920) and *La partenza del cavaliere errante* (*Departure of the errant knight*, 1923-24).

### **The Puritans, 1933**

A serious melodrama in three parts

Teatro Comunale, Florence, May 25, 1933, I May Music Festival, Florence

*Libretto*: Carlo Pepoli from *Têtes rondes and Cavaliers* by Jacques Ancelot and Joseph Saintine

*Music*: Vincenzo Bellini

*Conductor*: Tullio Serafin

*Sets and costumes*: Giorgio de Chirico

*Director*: Guido Salvini

*Performers*: Carlo Scattala, Ezio Pinza, Giacomo Lauri Volpi, Mario Basiola, Adrasto Simonti, Nadia Kovaceva, Mercedes Capsir

On August 10, 1932 Giorgio de Chirico wrote back, from Florence, to Carlo Delcroix, president of the Florence May Music Festival: "I received your letter dated the 6th of this month, regarding the costumes and sets you are asking me to create for the opera *I Puritani*, and, by way of this letter, I am accepting what you have proposed to me" (letter now in the archives of the Teatro Comunale, Florence). Later (in 1945), the great painter recalled: "In 1933 I was invited to Florence to execute the costumes and sets for the Vincenzo Bellini's opera *I Puritani*, which was to be staged during the May Music Festival. At the first performance an uproar ensued. [ ..] Unfortunately all this organized hostility ["from the editor of the newspaper *La Nazione*, following De Chirico's refusal to exhibit at the newspaper offices"] my work is well received and has aroused great interest." At the same time he was working at the Milan Triennale, where, along with Sironi and Severini, he created the mural painting *Italian Culture* on the back wall of the Hall of Honor.

Bruno Barilli, a musicologist friend, reviewed the theater event in Tevere: "Sets, costumes and ambience constituted a veritable exhibition of white [...] Blue-white, golden-white, gaudy chiaroscuro, the entire range of whites knowledgeably extended to give the impression of a neoclassical bas-relief [...] In the spectral and violent pallor, lunar ladies and knights, talcum powder soldiers, gauze bodies, flour covered weightless warriors in long hospital gowns migrated among mosquito netting veils and transparencies. [...] Everything escaped reality. The painter was in the theater, during the rehearsal. He wanted to have his way with the lighting. 'The lighting is no problem', De Chirico told me, looking at the Fortuny dome. 'Just give me a million candles. It will be all the light you need, completely light. I like things clear, well done, erotic, cheerful. [...] The work is what it is. This bombardment of incandescent white was necessary.

Finally this metaphysical concept has come to the stage, shining vertiginously, like a new world beneath a suspended radiance - or, if you prefer, we have seen a production by a painter of genius." (The entire review is in Fagiolo dell'Arco, 1995, pp. 127-128).

Six sketches for sets are exhibited in Rivoli (one belongs to a private collection) along with

costumes and stage sets (from the Teatro Comunale in Florence). The second scene of the first act shows an interior. Two windows in the back wall open up onto a (dechirican) sky full of clouds and trembling architecture. To left, in the corner, a telo-curtain is held back by an unseen card. Dark doors to the right and left lend a single dark spot to the entire set. The third scene precedes openings to the right and left; against the backdrop, two breastplate-mannequins are inserted like sculptures in the niches at Orsanmichele in Florence. "A hall with side doors, second act, first scene" reads de Chirico's writing beneath the sketch for the first scene of the second act. Against backdrop a curtain covers the nothingness (it could cover a window, a painting, but De Chirico gives us no help in this regard). To the right the door opens onto medieval relics (Ferrara?). The first scene of the third act opens with a perspectival set constructed by two buildings in the foreground with a natural backdrop with a protected castle. The costume-sketches, from damsel to Cromwell's soldier, from châtelain to page, from groom to Lord Gualtiero Valton, From Enrichetta to Arnaldo, are realized in color that alternates positive and negative, with cold geometric motifs next to vivid organic elements. Greek heroines alternate with towers and columns; bizarrely colored headgear resembles heraldic coats of arms, heraldry in motion. Finally, the props: different graphic signs delimit the table and chair (furniture in the landscape?); halberds and swords bring to mind those used in Calcio according to Florentine custom.