

THEATRE PERFORMANCE²⁹

We love “the unreal”. We love everything that reminds us of our life, but “is not our life”; we love fiction.

As children we loved toys and fables. Toys are the pretence of real and serious objects; these are represented in houses, boats, shops, guns, cannons and dolls, which are our “make-believe selves”.

Toys are playful and delightful as their only function is to amuse. Toy houses are not for living in, ships will not sail away on long voyages, the shops have nothing to sell, guns and cannons shoot only for fun, and lastly, dolls, these toy-people, do not drink, eat, sleep, speak or feel joy or grief, in a word they “do not live”.

The fables that pleased us so much as children and still hold our fascination, are in reality the negation of all our experience, of all rules known to us. In fables we see an imaginary world, where everything ends well, where goodness is rewarded and wickedness punished. In fairy tales we are shown a world with rivers of honey, houses built out of ginger-bread and chocolate, where people are both beautiful and good, where brave vagabonds marry princesses; a world full of ogres and fairies, dwarfs and giants, in a word, everything “except reality”.

When we were little we loved the theatre. The day we were taken to the theatre as a child to see a beautiful performance, fascinating and full of mystery, will rarely be surpassed in our memory by any other single day in our life or episode we experienced during childhood.

Generally speaking, when people take children to the theatre they choose a play without intellectual pretension, one that is suited to what children expect from the theatre: this requirement is natural and is not premeditated or the result of a current trend or snobbishness. These attitudes do not affect children, but have unfortunately influenced a certain category of adults today.

Fear of not being informed of the most recent manias of snobbishness, or of not being sufficiently intelligent or of seeming downright stupid, these tremendous fears silence personal preferences and demands in many people and oblige them to accept with docility all the idiocies imposed upon them.

Let us see now what are the natural needs a man feels towards theatre. Man, from youth to adulthood, when seeing a play at the theatre wants to be distracted, he wants to experience pleasant emotions, in other words “he wants to enjoy himself”.

This need for enjoyment, which man has for the theatre, draws on an instinctive desire to escape from his own life and for a moment, “to be detached from himself”. This desire is stronger in adults than in children.

A very successful spectacle shows things that arouse passionate interest in the audience, that absorb the audience completely and make it leave and forget its personal existence. Man is all of a sudden transferred into another atmosphere; for a few hours he lives a totally different life, sad or gay, fantastic, heroic or sentimental, but above all intense, concentrated and thus almost “more real” than his own life, in which everything proceeds slowly and where emotions and events generally progress rather slowly.

There is no doubt that the success of the cinema is due to the possibility it gives to people to live in the space of an evening a more colourful, a more interesting life than their own which is often grey, mediocre and tedious but to which, alas, the greater part of people are condemned.

During this brief life, this toy-like life that theatre and cinema offer man, during this life without responsibilities nor consequences, man “knows how to live in the present moment”, a science he generally

29 G. de Chirico, *Il teatro spettacolo*, published with the title *Discorso sullo spettacolo teatrale* and illustrated with the stage set by de Chirico for the first scene of *Amphione* by Paul Valéry and Arthur Honegger in “L’Illustrazione Italiana”, Milan 25 October 1942, p. 417; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 189-197. Published in English here for the first time.

ignores, for he is much too absorbed and haunted by the future and the past and generally observes the present but very little.

Only in days of great suffering or great joy (in the latter I include those in which a man, especially an artist, devotes himself to work in which he finds satisfaction), only in these important and intense days of our lives is the theatre not necessary. Theatre does not console us in days of grief and it does not interest us in days of happiness.

Theatre for us adults is just as important as toys and stories are for children. The real aim of the theatre is to satisfy the need we feel for fantasy and fiction and to give us a way of escaping from reality. We Europeans have not reached the wisdom that results from very ancient cultures and we do not yet fully understand the metaphysical significance of theatre in our life.

The Chinese, full of wisdom and philosophy, pass entire days at the theatre. Food and drink is brought to them silently, they eat and drink quietly, never taking their eyes off the stage so as to be able to follow the show in full tranquillity and liberty without feeling the discomfort of hunger and thirst.

The theatre is born from our need of a supernatural world. Organised in honour of the gods, such pantomimes and festivals are the cornerstones upon which the theatre was built.

These pantomimes tried to represent a world beyond, to be identified with it, to satisfy our desire of touching and seeing the invisible, of being immersed in mystery and of having one's doubts dispelled. Theatre arose from these primordial sentiments, which have always obsessed humanity. This must not be forgotten.

In this essay of mine on the theatre, I speak only from a theatrical point of view, that is, of the spectacle, without touching upon its literary aspects.

Starting from a point of view that holds that the spectacle must liberate us from reality and give us a way to immerse ourselves, if not into a different world, at least into a different life. From this point of view, I refuse all realism and all realistic tendencies in the theatre.

Known for its realistic tendency, Stanislavsky's "Art Theatre" was of value, a fact due not its realism, but rather, because it was something very well done. A spectacle in which nothing is neglected, every detail is studied attentively and with care and every actor is first class with neither principal nor secondary actors and in which all of its collaborators are people of talent, must inevitably prove to be an excellent spectacle.

With an ensemble such as that of the "Art Theatre" there was no room for tendencies and orientations. The realism of this theatre consisted in the strength of emotion felt by the spectators; it was "theatrical realism" or, to express the idea more clearly, a factor that evoked distance between the spectator and his reality.

One cannot imagine a good show without theatrical realism, but theatrical realism has nothing to do with realism of acting or scenery. The shows some impresarios organise in the open air are almost always a mistake. They are only tolerable in countries where the sky is very low, and even then. In Greece, for example, where the sky, even when absolutely cloudless, gives one the impression of being easy to reach, as if one would touch it with a finger. In Greece the sky is spread over the country as if it were a piece of scenery rather than an immense vault. It is perhaps this that gave the ancient Greeks the profound and metaphysical sentiment of divinity existing just a little distance above mortals and taking part in their lives.

Ancient Greeks had open theatres where plays were given, but these theatres were not open-air for the aesthetic purposes, as occurs today when a play by D'Annunzio is preformed in the ruins of the Forum or a play by Shakespeare among Venetian palaces. The sole aim in Greece for open-air spectacles was to allow a greater number of spectators to enjoy the show; in those times the theatre way frequented by a far larger

number of people than it is now.

Now all open-air shows are produced exclusively for aesthetic reasons and do not correspond to any real necessity. The open-air spectacle of today is a non-sense; representations of Greek tragedies or of those by D'Annunzio, representations which attempt at being important spectacles, organised in the daytime or at night in gardens, on piazzas, among ruins (a typical example of all this is the famous Florentine May Festival of Music), these representations, I say, which have the blue sky or the starry night (when it is not raining) as their ceiling, are the most "false" things imaginable from a theatrical point of view.

In order for a show to give its full strength it must take place in a closed environment. The spectator must feel and know that above the painted scenic sky is the solid roof of the theatre, separating and defending him from the infinite... from reality.

The same phenomenon can be observed both in open-air spectacles and historical films, where the actors in ancient amour and costumes move about in real landscapes; the scene immediately takes on a false look; real nature, sky, earth, sea and mountains do not engage with costumed personages and whilst the countryside is real, it actually seems false. Consequently, the characters also seem false. This feeling of falsity is accentuated when the wind rustles the leaves of the trees, plants and grass, when one sees the motion of the waves upon the sea, rivers and cascades, and clouds sailing through the sky. One has the strong impression that in the epochs evoked by the armour and costumes, neither leaves nor plants, waves nor clouds moved in such a manner. We get this impression because we are acquainted with past epochs only through paintings; drawings and engravings and art always shows us an idealised or at least different nature, transformed by the fact itself of being drawn or painted. Nature represented in a painting lives and vibrates in an absolutely diverse manner to nature in reality.

One gets the same disagreeable impression in the theatre upon seeing, behind costumed actors set within classical constructions, a backdrop of the sky made with a Fortuny dome, which gives the illusion of a real sky with moving clouds that change colour. The Fortuny dome and other scenic "deceptions" can only be used for plays regarding modern life, where the actors are dressed like us and which are not in reality shows but rather stories narrated and orated by various people who accompany their words by gestures and movements. I am speaking of plays where the subject is taken from modern life and not of those modernizing and snobbish renderings where one sees for example, Shakespeare's personages wearing evening jackets or afternoon dress.

Modernism has been making itself felt in the theatre for some time now. A number of directors influenced by modern art have considered it their duty to renew the theatre, seeing that painting, sculpture, architecture, music and literature are undergoing renewal. Many of these gentlemen thought (as did the painters, sculptors, architects, musicians and writers for their respective arts) that by upsetting all traditional conceptions and doing what would formerly have been stigmatised as absurd, but that no one today would dare to name as such, that by doing, I say, the contrary of all that used to be done they would create a "new theatre". Although theatre is not the highest of arts, it is still an art and requires talent, even more so in order to renew it.

The "modernist" theatre had little success with the public and from the start, snobbish directors had to limit themselves to mixing a few "modern" elements into their shows that otherwise were almost normal; thus little by little the public became used to the bizarre and the ridiculous in theatre. In this regard, I want to describe a show I saw in New York and which I remember as being the greatest stupidity that could be created for the stage.

A famous director who had encouraged the production of this show wanted it to be exceptional, something immense, a "great show". The subject was taken from the Old Testament, naturally a "renewed"

Old Testament. The music that was considered necessary to accompany the action on the stage belonged to that sort of modern music interposing cacophonies and dissonances into a potpourri of known melodies taken here and there: popular airs, some bars by Beethoven, a little Stravinsky, some fragments from old Italian operas, then again Beethoven, a few dissonances, then tango, jazz, etc... All this was played to the rhythm of negro dances. The audience's patience tolerates music of this sort more easily than music that is a hundred percent "modern". As it is more melodious, this kind of music is often used in modernist shows not exclusively designed for snobs and intellectuals but for a wider range of public. The director was thinking of Meyerhold as far as theatrical tendencies were concerned. One saw old prophets on the stage executing a whole series of leaps and jumps, their efforts being accompanied by tango melodies. One must admit that the effect was comic, to say the least. What struck me most that evening was the audience attending in a perfectly impassable way to this outrage to common sense. "If it goes on like this – I thought – we will lose what little logic we have acquired over the course of thousands of years of effort. We will lose our common sense and our logic and this time it will be for good". Then I thought sadly, we would have to start over from scratch.

Something that has always struck me unpleasantly in modern "performances" is when snobbish directors, wanting to increase the interest in a scene, put mannequins next to the actors. The result is deplorable; it is not only lacking in any artistic interest but results in something cold, irritating, macabre, and even nasty.

It is curious to observe how a living person, actor or not, looks when standing near to a statue (naturally I mean by this an ancient statue, a fine, normal sculpture and not a "modern" sculpture). This aspect of a figure similar to a statue was created many years ago by Giorgio de Chirico in some of his paintings and stolen from him by international snobbishness, especially by certain magazines such as "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar". But a living person standing close to a mannequin makes a disagreeable, painful, snobbishly pretentious and extremely silly impression.

The more a mannequin resembles a human being, the colder and the more displeasing it is. The pathos and lyricism of de Chirico's mannequins especially those seated, like the "Archaeologists" is contained precisely in their remoteness from man. With the exception of de Chirico's paintings, a mannequin is always displeasing for it is a sort of parody of man.

The mannequin is an object that looks human but without life or movement; the mannequin is essentially not alive and this lack of life makes it odious and repulsive. It looks both human and monstrous, and frightens and irritates us. When a sensitive man looks at a mannequin, he must feel a frantic desire to accomplish great deeds, to prove to others and to himself what he is capable of, to prove clearly once and for all that the mannequin is a calumny of man, that we are not after all so utterly insignificant that any kind of an object is capable of looking like us.

Snobbish directors probably do not have an extreme sensibility such as this. Besides, they never have time to think deeply about anything.

It is well-known that directors are the busiest men in the world. Directors cannot waste time looking attentively at a statue or a mannequin, to notice that a mannequin is monstrous because it is trying to look human and be alive and because of this it is profoundly inanimate whereas a statue is a work of art, not aspiring to life but to the spirit and thanks to this has an immortal life, the life of art.

I speak at length about mannequins in relation to modern theatre, because the mannequin has been the point of departure and the foundation of modernist tendencies in theatre.

Snobbish directors are not satisfied with introducing wooden mannequins in a scene. They have wanted

to go further and give the actor the look of a dummy or marionette. These directors probably feel a necessity for fiction and for that which is “false” in a scene in a confused and obscure way; but they lack the talent that would have indicated to them in just what this fiction should consist and where they should have looked for it; and they have chosen the opposite of what they should have chosen.

The mannequin is not fiction, it is real, more specifically, a sad and monstrous reality. We will disappear but the mannequin will remain. The mannequin is not a fragile and ephemeral toy, that a child’s hand can break, it is not destined to give enjoyment to man, rather, man designed it for specific purposes, for painters, tailors, dress shop windows, police academy dog trainers, petty-thief training schools, etc. It is not a pretend representation of death or non-existence we are looking for on the stage. If man had indeed asked this of theatre, then the mannequin may have been a consolation; instead, we ask that theatre to pretend to be life, an unreal life, without start or finish like in fables in which the authors bring their stories to an end with admirable fineness specifying that the heroes they have spoken of will live happily ever after in calm and happiness right up to present times and further. Today, almost all those who have anything to do with art are slaves of modernism. The daemon of modernism which has, by the way, used up all possibility of renewal, impels those who work in theatre to search for “newness” and “modernism”. Now, it stands that “newness” can only be born from talent, which is in itself eternally new. They would need to become newly worthy of talent. The mania of a curious subject must be replaced by the mania of good quality.

As for performance’s look, the stage settings, etc., it must be specified that art and mechanics do not go together. In theatre, complicated machinery must be abandoned, all of those ingenious mechanisms that make the sky in a scene seem real, a storm on the sea like a real storm, rain that looks exactly similar to real rain etc. In theatre performances, machines have carried out the same artistic decadence that industrialisation of paint has in painting.

Coloured light projectors, Fortuny’s dome, the mechanical scenographic tricks, have taken from the theatre its lyrical, metaphysical or, to be even more clear, its artistic aspect.

For that which concerns the acting and the movement of the actors etc., the principle of the mannequin, the marionettes and other bizarreness which has been overly exploited, should be totally suppressed and attention should be concentrated instead on the perfect functioning of the performance as a whole. It is especially necessary to raise the level of the extras, of the ballet corps and choruses. It is necessary that all those who are on the stage know their craft well and have attended high-quality, serious schools. For a show to be at its best, the high quality of the human material is just as necessary as having good costumes, scenery, accessories etc. In fact, all effort, care and attention should be concentrated on its perfect execution, on the good quality of everything one sees on the stage.

The only way to renew the theatre is by paying attention to every detail of a performance’s execution. Theatre today is afflicted with the same diseases that are corroding other arts and which cause among “artists” and “intellectuals” such discontent, irritation, disquiet and unhappiness. These two terrible diseases are: the hunt for ideas and the mania for cleverness.

The majority of those involved in theatre today think mainly of what to do but never of how it must be done. Like those who work in the field of painting they search for novelty of subject instead of quality of execution; they begin at the end, not realising that it is only by avoiding half measures, only by striving for the fulfilment of a work’s execution, only through serious and conscientious work, will ideas finally come forth.