

Oskar Schlemmer

Das Triadische Ballett (1922)

Das Triadische Ballett (The Triadic Ballet) occupies a preeminent place in the totality of Oskar Schlemmer's work. To none of his other creations did he dedicate himself time and again with such intensity, for no other creation did he have such grand plans, and in none did he place so many expectations. It is a symphonic dance, divided into three parts, which evolve from the hilarious to the solemn. It has no more plot than that.

"Nonetheless there remains
a wide ancestral theme,
eternally new,
which is the star of the paintings of all time:
the human being,
the human figure.
Of it, it is said that it is the measure
of all things, so go ahead!"

Oskar Schlemmer, 1923

With *Das Triadische Ballett*, Oskar Schlemmer (Stuttgart, Germany, 1888 – Baden-Baden, Germany, 1943) gave life to one of most relevant dance creations of the 20th Century. His atemporal figurines are wrapped, even today, in a halo of utopia.

The first part, which takes place on a stage dressed in lemon yellow colors, is a comedic burlesque. The subject of the second part, on a stage dressed in pink, has a festival-ceremonial air. Finally, the third part is developed in a mystical-fantastical way before a totally black background. Three dancers, two men and a woman, perform twelve dances of alternating forms.

The costumes deliberately limit the participants' freedom of movement due to the weight of the materials they are made from, their forms, and the masks worn. They are walking architectural structures that move in a comic fashion, playful, sharp and clumsy across the entire stage.

For his figurines, Oskar Schlemmer took advantage of the new technologies of the era, "the scientific apparatus of glass and metal, the artificial members that are used in surgery, the fantastic military and diving uniforms" (Schlemmer 1924); military attire like those he knew during the First World War.

Das Triadische Ballett and, in particular, the figurines of *Der Abstrakte* (The Abstract) are motives that repeat time and again Oskar Schlemmer's work. The artist based his prototypical figures on the discoveries and experiences accumulated during the conception and undertaking of the figurines for the ballet; figures which he published in 1924 and which were converted into the bases for his theater classes *Der Mensch* (The Man) and for the experimental dances of the Bauhaus Theater in Dessau. The figurines establish the space and create the architecture, the edification becomes a stage, the figurines architectural structures which dance, motile, and in the dramatization of the

architecture of the Bauhaus in Dessau, the building becomes the stage. Despite his abstraction of the individual and his sculptural characteristics, the intellectual man holds a leading role.

The first representations took place in 1916. *Das Triadische Ballett* had its premiere in 1922, it was performed in the 1920s in, among other places, the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau and for the last time in Paris in 1932 by invitation of Fernand Léger. Figurines from it were exhibited in 1934, at the Universal Exposition of Paris, and in 1938, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1922, *Das Figurale Kabinett* (The Figural Cabinet) was premiered in the Bauhaus in Weimar.

Oskar Schlemmer

Oskar Schlemmer was born in the German city of Stuttgart in 1888. After finishing his studies in Fine Arts at the Academy of Stuttgart, he was called by Walter Gropius to become part of the recently-created Bauhaus, beginning as a teacher in Weimar and then in Dessau; much later in the academies in Breslau and Berlin. He was also a dancer and painter. A dual nature, a double gift, which would result in a conflict, in an indissoluble polarity: painter-dancer, Apollonian-Dionysian, the rigidity of antiquity—the mysticism of the gothic.

His first visions on dance of 1912, his experiences in the State Theater of Stuttgart in 1921 with *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murderer, the Hope of Women) and *Nusch-Nuschi* (The Mumbling), those of later years for *Spielzeug* (Toy) with music by Tchaikovsky, the musical pieces *Les Noces*, *Le Rosignol*, *Le Renard* of Igor Stravinsky and his creation *Das Triadische Ballett*, of 1922, kept a permanent dialogue with his pictorial and fine art work, with the central themes "Man and Artistic Figure" and "Man in Space" and, once again, with the forms of experimental dance and the beginnings of *Performance Art* which he experimented on with his students in the Theater of the Bauhaus.

His artistic facet covered a wide and rich array of forms of expression such as drawing, painting, sculpture, typography, and design, as well as dance, choreography, theater staging and costuming. Stigmatized by the Nazis as a "degenerate artist", Schlemmer died in 1943, sunk in "social exile", in the German city of Baden-Baden.

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München: Bauhaus Buch, libro 4, 1925

Playbill on Opening Night of *Das Triadische Ballett* (The Triadic Ballet)

Württembergisches Landestheater. Stuttgart, September 30, 1922

Ballet! If we consider the primary forms of performing dance, between the ritual dance of souls and the aesthetic dance of masquerades, ballet would come closer to the latter. The former therefore involves nudity; the latter, its costume—the mask. (In the middle, we find our dancers with their light scanty costumes, whose common sense makes them feel just as horrified by nudity as by clothing...)

The temple of nudity, which the body demands even though we have none, has become as strange as the spirit that edifies it. Yet, the theatre costume in its entirety, far removed from its own concerns by the way, is the thing that still “makes” or “presents” something whether or not we are aware of it. The world of appearances known as theatre is digging its own grave the more it concerns itself with reality and imitating it, the more it forgets above all else that it is an artifice. All artistic media are artificial, and each art form progresses by recognizing and accepting its own media. The book *Über das Marionettentheater* (On Marionette Theater) by Heinrich von Kleist is the most convincing reminder of artifice, and to complement it, we should cite *Phantasiestücke* (Fantastic Pieces) by E.T.A. Hoffmann (*The Perfect Machinist, The Automaton*). Chaplin is doing marvelous things today, fusing his perfect mannerisms and artistic perfection.

I do not know if today the act of mechanizing life through machines and technology, a trend we cannot ignore, will make us perceive the human machine and the body’s mechanisms with greater enthusiasm or awareness. I do not know if artistic processes, painting among them, will seek out any creative sources or roots after over-refinement has been proven a bankrupt endeavor; or if they will rediscover all that is original, all that is primordial. [...]

The will for synthesis that dominates art today, that invokes architecture to act as the organizing force of sectors shattered into splinters, to drive them not only to their own unity but to a universal unity—this very will also penetrates theatre in virtue of its overall artistic possibilities. Thus, in today’s era, which has wider perspectives on artistic creation, even though they may be substitutions, we say: Let us build on canvases and cardboard if we have no chance of finding stone or iron!

Dance theatre as the original form from which both opera and drama developed, is experiencing a precarious existence today. It did not used to be like this: universal histories were once danced to the shadow of a muse who was not constrained, who did not say anything and who limited herself to suggesting everything. In 1669, Louis XIV participated for the last time as a dancer in the *Flora* Ballet. The dates that historians catalog as progress turned into ones of decline. In 1681, ballerinas appeared for the first time, given that previously female roles in dance were played by men; in 1772, they removed their masks. The handsome Gardel appeared on stage, adorned by his own blond hair, defeating Vestris who always danced with an enormous black wig, a mask, and a large, copper-plated golden sun on his breast...

Dance theatre today could become a new point of departure for renewal. It does not bear the burden of tradition, as is the case for opera and drama, nor is it confined to words, sounds and gestures since it is free and predestined to absorb newness with sensual temptation: with a mask and—above all else—with silence.

The Triadic Ballet, the dance of the trinity, the changes of one, two and three in form, color and movement, must create both a plane geometry upon a choral surface and a measured, three-dimensional geometry of bodies in movement, a spatial dimension that should arise from the need to pursue basic elemental forms with straight lines, diagonals, circles, ellipses and their reciprocal joints. With these elements, dance becomes Dionysian in origin, filled with meaning for its ultimate form in rigorous Apollonian harmony—that is, in the symbolism of balanced polarities.

The Triadic Ballet, flirts with hilarity without falling into grotesqueness, brushes against conventions without running through baseness, and ultimately aspires to dematerialize bodies without purging itself through an occultist direction. It might demonstrate the beginnings from which a German ballet can be developed, grounded in style and peculiarity in such a way that it stands apart from analogies that are indeed admirable but foreign to the subject (such as the Russian Ballet, the Swedish Ballet).

Oskar Schlemmer, Oskar Schlemmer.
Escritos sobre arte: Pintura, teatro, ballet, cartas y diarios.

Paidós: Barcelona, 1987. [Original text reproduced with permission by C. Raman Schlemmer.]

The question regarding the origin of being and the world—whether the word, action or form came first; spirit, performance or figure; sense, event or appearance—is also experienced in the world of theatre and makes us differentiate among the spoken and heard representation of a literary or musical event, the interpretive representation of an imitated-bodily event, and the visual representation of an optical event.

Each genre has its respective representatives that correspond to it, namely: the poet (writer or musician) as one who condenses words or sounds, the actor as a person who performs using his or her figure, and the creator of images as one who produces forms and colors.

Oskar Schlemmer:

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