A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a black dress with a textured, possibly sequined or beaded, bodice and a ruffled skirt. She is standing in front of a large, abstract painting in a cubist style, featuring geometric shapes and a palette of purples, blues, and greys. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

British Art Studies

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**Theatres of War: Experimental
Performance in London, 1914–1918 and
Beyond**

**Edited by Grace Brockington,
Impermanence, Ella Margolin and
Claudia Tobin**

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Theatres of War: Experimental Performance in London, 1914–1918 and Beyond

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Cover image: Film still, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018.. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

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Inspirations, Grace Brockington

A repeating pattern of stylized parrots in flight, rendered in shades of blue and green against a light background. The parrots are depicted in various poses, some with wings spread wide, others in mid-flap. The style is reminiscent of a textile or wallpaper design.

Inspirations

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Introduction

Maxwell Armfield's "pictorial commentary" on *The Ballet of the Nations* relates only loosely to Vernon Lee's text. Its real subject is rather the plays that he was producing with his own theatre company at around the same time, and the wider culture of experimental performance that informed his work as a stage designer. That culture was European in its orientation and anti-realist in its aesthetic, rooted in the symbolist experiments of Maurice Maeterlinck and Edward Gordon Craig, the Hellenic choreography of Isadora Duncan, and the revolutionary productions of the *Ballets Russes*. This section of the exhibition draws attention to these sources of inspiration and explores their impact in Britain before the First World War, when the little theatre scene was beginning to emerge. It shows the different ways in which the work of European practitioners was experienced in Britain, and it demonstrates a close connection between the London little theatres and the circle of artists and writers who promoted the *Ballets Russes* to a British audience. During the war, the persistence of these ideas in the work of the little theatres was to acquire a more dangerous, political significance, as commitment to European-wide movements became associated with pacifism. Theatre which might otherwise have seemed dreamy, archaic, or abstracted became implicated in topical debates about the conduct of the war and the shape of international organisation. It mattered, therefore, that the London little theatres continued to experiment with dramatic form after 1914, and to make theatre which was, as John Rodker explained, "marionette-like but with the dolls speaking" and devoted to "the evocation of a pure emotion."¹

Exhibition

Figure 1.

Flyer for a week of performances by Mrs Patrick Campbell at the Prince of Wales' Theatre, Birmingham, 1-6 October 1900, 11.5 x 9 cm. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Symbolist theatre of the 1890s projected dream-like, spiritual worlds in which stage realism and the personality of the actor gave way to ritual movement and a unity of aesthetic effect across all elements of the production. It initiated a revolution in theatre practice, which spread across Europe from the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris to the Moscow Art Theatre.² The playwright Maurice Maeterlinck was particularly important to the development of the movement in Britain, where he influenced playwrights from W.B. Yeats to Harley Granville-Barker.³ His *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892) was key, made famous in Britain by the actress Mrs Patrick Campbell in the role of Mélisande. When Maxwell Armfield saw the play in Birmingham in 1900, he experienced it as a religious revelation, what he called "the raising of the

veils" onto spiritual reality.⁴ Afterwards, he "dreamed all night long of strange pale-faced ladies with never-ending black tresses and voices like morning water, and of flaxen haired youths and love and beautiful sorrows."

⁵ The flyer for that Birmingham production, exhibited here, was found among the papers of his wife, Constance Smedley Armfield.

[mul]

Mrs Campbell commissioned the French composer, Gabriel Fauré, to write the incidental music for the London premiere of *Pelléas and Mélisande* in 1898, and returned to his score each time she revived it.⁶ For an English audience, Fauré was therefore the "sound" of Maeterlinck, although over the next decade other major composers – Debussy in 1902, Schoenberg in 1903 and Sibelius in 1905 – were also drawn to compose for the play. These various musical interpretations, all different in their approach to the text, are now better known than *Pelléas and Mélisande* itself, but they give a measure of Maeterlinck's importance at the time, and of the suggestive ambiguity of his work.

Figure 2.

Postcard reproduction of a poster for Maurice Maeterlinck's play "The Blue Bird", staged at the Haymarket Theatre, London, 1909-10. Designed by Frederick Cayley Robinson. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Maeterlinck's work was popularised in Britain through a staging of his play *The Bluebird* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in 1909-1910.⁷ The cast included a young Margaret Morris as the soul of Water, in which role she was instructed to dart "streaming, disheveled and tearful" across the stage and provoke a fight with Fire.⁸ Stage instructions indicated that the characters of Water and Light should both be dressed in "Neo-Grecian or Anglo-Grecian (*a la Walter Crane*)".⁹ Morris brought something of her own to the performance by incorporating the Greek dance positions that she learned from Raymond Duncan and his student Annea Spong at around this time, when she attended some of his classes in London.¹⁰ "He explained that these positions, with their accentuated opposition of arms and legs, must have

been the basis of the athletic training and the dance of the ancient Greeks,” she later related. “In a way they have become the equivalent, in the M.M. technique, of the daily barre practice.” ¹¹

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 3.

Maurice Tourneur (director), Maurice Maeterlinck (playwright), *The Blue Bird*, 1918, silent film, 1 hour 15 minutes. Digital image courtesy of Film courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird* imagines two children chasing the bluebird of happiness through a magical, symbolic landscape before discovering that it was waiting for them at home all along. The play was first staged at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1907 and quickly became an international success, touring to London (1909), New York (1910), Paris (1911), and Berlin (1912). The first film adaptation was made in England in 1910; the second was made in New York in 1918 by the prominent French director Maurice Tourneur. Tourneur’s film was rich in visual references: “six reels of what might be described as living etchings in color”, as the critic for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* observed. ¹² It was billed as an antidote to war in Europe, “a mighty cheer from the great Belgian author to this war-torn nation”. ¹³

Figure 4.

E.O. Hoppé, Edward Gordon Craig, 1911, print on sepia-toned veribrom paper, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery (NPG 132913). Digital image courtesy of E.O. Hoppé Estate Collection/Curatorial Assistance Inc. (All rights reserved).

Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) was a leading exponent of symbolist theatre and a crucial influence on the little theatre movement, famous for his theory that the actor should function as an *Übermarionette*, a super-puppet, controlled by the director and working in harmony with all the other elements of the production to deliver a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. He began his career in London but moved to Germany in 1904, settling in Italy from 1906, where he established his own school of theatrical design.¹⁴ His work was generally considered to be impracticable and was rarely produced. Nonetheless, he attracted a cult following amongst young British artists, who followed his work through exhibitions of his drawings and models, and in publications such as *The Mask* (1908–1929), the theatre journal, which he largely wrote himself.¹⁵ He was, in the words of Paul Nash,

“the one really imaginative English artist of his generation [...] romantic, daring, scandalous and brilliant”, and enjoying “the dual distinction of *cher maître* and a voice crying in the wilderness.” ¹⁶ This photographic portrait by E.O. Hoppé conveys something of his charisma and of the stylised quality of his “Art of the Theatre” (the title of his seminal essay of 1905).

Figure 5.

Edward Gordon Craig, Study of Isadora Duncan Dancing, 1905, photo lithograph, 29 x 19.8 cm. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum (S.5300:6-2009). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 [Unported]).

Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) was a pioneer of modern dance in the West, who set out to restore art to its ancient condition as “the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body’s movement”. ¹⁷ She rejected classical ballet, drawing her technique from ancient Greek vase painting, the observation of natural forces such as the sea, folk and social dancing, and modern athletics. ¹⁸ Other artists, including Michel Fokine at the *Ballets Russes* and Edward Gordon Craig, were crucially influenced by her

work.¹⁹ Craig believed that she had rediscovered a universal language of movement which could communicate profound emotional truths and rejuvenate the theatre.²⁰ The print shown here is one of six studies that he made of the dancer in motion.²¹ It conveys the flowing, improvised quality of her movement, as well as his own characteristic attention to stage lighting and shadow.

Figure 6.

E.O. Hoppé, Tamara Karsavina in *The Firebird*, 1911, reproduced in *Studies from the Russian Ballet*, (London: Fine Art Society, 1912), plate 2.

The photographer E.O. Hoppé (1878–1972) was the leading photographic portraitist of his day, whose work has recently been reinstated after decades of accidental neglect.²² This exhibition contributes to the reassessment of his work by highlighting his role in London's cultural networks during the First World War, as a portraitist, as co-founder of the Plough Club, and as art editor of *Colour* magazine from its launch in 1914. *Studies from the Russian*

Ballet was his first major publication. It comprises fifteen portraits of dancers from the *Ballets Russes* posing in character in different performances from the company's repertoire. The two photographs of Nijinsky were provided by Auguste Bert as Nijinsky had not yet posed for Hoppé.²³

Figure 7.

Pamela Colman Smith, Scheherazade, illustration in Ellen Terry, *The Russian Ballet* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1913), 3. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Ellen Terry (1847–1928) was one of the most celebrated actresses of her day and the mother of Edward Gordon Craig and Edith Craig, both of whom were key to the cultural networks explored in this exhibition. Her book *The Russian Ballet* is inflected by a commitment to internationalism in the arts, which also shaped the politics of the wartime little theatres. The *Ballets Russes* was an “international possession”, she insisted, the impact of which was particularly strong in Britain, but which was “neither the property of a nation nor the result of patriotism”.²⁴ Her illustrator, Pamela Colman Smith, also worked for

Edy Craig's theatre company, the Pioneer Players.²⁵ As Terry herself pointed out in her Introduction, Smith's pictures for *The Russian Ballet* relate only tangentially to the text, and they agreed to share equal rights to the book.²⁶ The approach, then, is similar to that taken by Armfield in his indirect "pictorial commentary" on *The Ballet of the Nations*.

Figure 8.

Geoffrey Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913), cover design by Dorothy Mullock. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Geoffrey Whitworth (1883–1951), the editor at Chatto & Windus who commissioned *The Ballet of the Nations*, published this study of Vaslav Nijinsky when the dancer was at the height of his fame. It was in 1913 that Nijinsky performed *The Rite of Spring* in Paris, and it was also the year that he fell out with Diaghilev and left the *Ballets Russes*. Whitworth was intent on establishing a National Theatre in Britain, a project which became his life's work, after it was initially scuppered by the outbreak of war in 1914.²⁷ He explained that he wrote *The Art of Nijinsky*, with the dancer's cooperation, in order to "preserve an impression" of an ephemeral art form, and he was one of the few critics to give an appreciative account of *The Rite of Spring*.²⁸ Little is known about the illustrator, Dorothy Mullock (1888–1973), except that she worked also with the writer Clifford Bax, illustrating his set of *Studio Plays* (published 1918–1923).²⁹ Bax was an active member of the Plough Club, which was part of the network of theatre groups in London during the war.

Figure 9.

David Bomberg, Russian Ballet Lithographs iv 'Impressions crowding collide with movement round us', ca. 1914-1919, lithograph on paper, 13.4 x 21.5 cm. Collection of Tate (P07011). Digital image courtesy of Tate (All rights reserved).

Around 1914, the Vorticist artist David Bomberg made a series of abstracted drawings of modern dance, some based on the *Ballets Russes*, which was then performing in London, and some based on a Margaret Morris summer school in Bournemouth.³⁰ One of the drawings was reproduced as the cover design for John Rodker's *Poems* (1914). Others he converted into lithographs in 1919 and incorporated into a book with a short poem of his own evoking the experience of watching the *Ballets Russes*:

Methodic discord startles...
Insistent snatchings drag fancy from space,
Fluttering white hands beat—compel. Reason concedes.
Impressions crowding collide with movement round us—
—the curtain falls—the created illusion escapes.
The mind clamped fast captures only a fragment, for new illusion.

David Bomberg³¹

Footnotes

- ¹ John Rodker, "The Choric School", *The Drama* (August 1916): 436-445.
- ² Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
- ³ Anne Cnudde Knowland, "Maurice Maeterlinck and English and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study of Parallels and Influences" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1984); Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

- 4 Maxwell Armfield, "My World and I—the Cotswolds and London in War" (unpublished, 1970), 34, Tate Archive: TGA 976/3/2/10.
- 5 Maxwell Armfield, "The Confessions of a Painter, II" (unpublished, n.d.), unpaginated, Tate Archive: TGA 976/3/1/11.
- 6 Robert Orledge, "Fauré's 'Pelléas et Mélisande'", *Music & Letters* 56, no. 2 (April 1975): 178.
- 7 Jane Munro, *Chasing Happiness: Maurice Maeterlinck, the Blue Bird and England* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum, 2006).
- 8 Margaret Morris, *My Galsworthy Story* (London: Peter Owen, 1967), 28. Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Blue Bird: A Fairy Play in Six Acts* trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, illustrated by F. Cayley Robinson (London: Methuen, 1911, first published 1909), 24.
- 9 Maeterlinck, *The Blue Bird*, xi–xii.
- 10 Margaret Morris, *My Life in Movement* (London: Peter Owen, 1969), 20. For the lessons with Annea (Annie) Spong, see *Margaret Morris Movement Magazine* 2, no. 4 (June 1936), 5, cited in Richard Emerson, *Rhythm & Colour: Hélène Vanel, Lois Hutton & Margaret Morris* (Edinburgh: Golden Hare, 2018), 493, note 11.
- 11 Morris, *My Life in Movement*, 20–21.
- 12 Mae Tinée, "The Blue Bird", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6 May 1918, cited in Kristian Moen, *Film and Fairy Tales: The Birth of Modern Fantasy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 101–102. Moen argues that Tourneur drew particularly upon the murals of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (99–102).
- 13 Advertisement in *Variety*, 29 March 1918, quoted in Moen, *Film and Fairy Tales*, 111.
- 14 Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013).
- 15 Between 1911 and early 1915, there were at least ten exhibitions of Craig's work at galleries in London, Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool. There was then a gap before the next showing of his work in the UK, at the *International Theatre Exhibition* in London in 1922, which features in this exhibition in the section on the British Drama League.
- 16 Paul Nash, *Outline: An Autobiography and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 166, 167, and 171.
- 17 Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), 75.
- 18 Duncan, *My Life*, 2. See also Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). Isadora Duncan researched ancient Greek vase painting together with her brother Raymond.
- 19 Richard Buckle discussed her influence on Fokine in his Introduction to Valentine Gross, *Nijinsky on Stage* (London: Studio Vista, 1971). For her influence on Craig, see Edward Gordon Craig, "Memories of Isadora Duncan", *The Listener* 47, no. 1214 (5 June 1952): 913–914; Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 113–116; and Irène Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement, and the Actor* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 62–71.
- 20 Jennifer Buckley, "'Symbols in Silence': Edward Gordon Craig and the Engraving of Wordless Drama", *Theatre Survey* 54, no. 2 (May 2013): 210.
- 21 They were published as Edward Gordon Craig, *Isadora Duncan: Six Movement Designs* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1906). The plate shown here is number five in the set, and was based on a watercolour and pencil drawing which is also in the V&A collection (museum number S.196-2008).
- 22 E.O. Hoppé Estate Collection: "Biography", www.eohoppe.com/about, accessed 11 December 2018. Recent exhibitions of his work include *Hoppé Portraits: Society, Studio & Street* (National Portrait Gallery, London, 2011), and *Rediscovered Fotos: Emil Otto Hoppé* (The Gemeentemuseum Helmond, 2016).
- 23 Andreas H. Bitesnich, "E.O. Hoppé and Bert, Studies from the Russian Ballet, 1913", www.achtung.photography/e-o-hoppe-and-bert-studies-from-the-russian-ballet-1913/, accessed 11 December 2018. Bitesnich based his analysis on Hoppé's diaries. Email to the author, 11 December 2018.
- 24 Ellen Terry, *The Russian Ballet*, illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1913), 1 and 15.
- 25 Katherine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players, 1911–1925* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 177–178.
- 26 Terry, *The Russian Ballet*, 4. The contract between artist and author of 9 June 1913, in which they agree to be joint proprietors of *The Russian Ballet* and divide the returns equally, is preserved in the Ellen Terry Archive. ET-D2179 Memorandum of Agreement. British Library.
- 27 Geoffrey Whitworth tells his story in *The Theatre of my Heart* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1930) and *The Making of a National Theatre* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951).
- 28 Geoffrey Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky*, illustrated by Dorothy Mullock, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913), 6, 88–100.
- 29 The plays were: *The Rose and the Cross* (1918), *The Cloak* (1921), and *Prelude & Fugue* (1923). They were published together as *Studio Plays* (London, 1924).
- 30 The making of the series is described in William Lipke, *David Bomberg: A Critical Study of his Life and Work* (London: Evelyn, Adams and Mackay, 1967), 115, note 37; and Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age*, Vol. 2 "Synthesis and Decline" (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), 392; both cited in the Tate online catalogue entry for this item: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-i-p07008>.
- 31 Bomberg's own account of the making of the book is quoted in Lipke, *David Bomberg*, 50.

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