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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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Contents

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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. 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. 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. 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.”

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

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. 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.
Maeterlinck’s work was popularised in Britain through a staging of his play *The Bluebird* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in 1909–1910. 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. Stage instructions indicated that the characters of Water and Light should both be dressed in “Neo-Grecian or Anglo-Grecian (a la Walter Crane)”. 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. “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.”

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. It was billed as an antidote to war in Europe, “a mighty cheer from the great Belgian author to this war-torn nation”.

View this illustration online
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. 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. 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).

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

Figure 6.

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. 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](image)

**Figure 7.**

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. 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. The approach, then, is similar to that taken by Armfield in his indirect “pictorial commentary” on The Ballet of the Nations.


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. 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. 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). Bax was an active member of the Plough Club, which was part of the network of theatre groups in London during the war.
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. 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 Bomberg

**Footnotes**

Geoffrey Whitworth tells his story in *Memorandum of Agreement*. British Library, proprietors of *The Russian Ballet*.


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).


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.

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