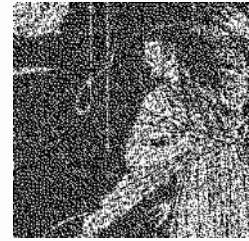


Theatres of War: Experimental Performance in London, 1914–1918 and Beyond

Introduction by **Grace Brockington**

WORD COUNT: 1,583



In autumn 1915, the writer Vernon Lee marked a year of global warfare by publishing a pacifist satire titled *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*, with a “pictorial commentary” by the artist Maxwell Armfield.¹ Lee’s text imagines war as a diabolical dance which degenerates into a massacre, choreographed by Satan and his Ballet Master Death to the Music of the Passions, and locking the Nations of the world into an endless cycle of slaughter and mutilation. Her story still challenges readers through its graphic descriptions of bloodshed and its discomfiting insights into the psychology of war; the ways in which people can be seduced into acts of violence and self-destruction by language that appeals to their sense of beauty, heroism, and moral outrage, as well as by instincts of fear and greed. It speaks to us also in its final warning that “the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing”. Already, in 1915, it was clear to Lee that the Great War would generate yet more conflict, despite initial public optimism that it would be “the war to end war”.²

The quality, and indeed the peculiarity, of Armfield’s “pictorial commentary” are immediately striking. Printed in dense red-orange, the images dominate the page visually, embedding Lee’s text in a series of theatrical tableaux which often relate only tangentially to her allegory. Men march naked with puppet strings attached to their wrists and ankles, or leap, blindfold and priapic, across the stage. Women kneel before them knitting socks, or strike strange, hieroglyphic poses suggestive of some secret ritual. The drawings are remarkably similar to designs that Armfield made for his own theatre productions around this time, often in collaboration with other “little theatres” and dance groups, in London and in the USA. In this context, it becomes clear that his illustrations to Lee’s *Ballet* elaborate their own narrative of heroism, exploitation, and modernist dance, raising questions about the function of art in times of conflict, and drawing us into a forgotten world of experimental performance that survived through the dark days of the war. It is those questions, and that world, that this exhibition brings to public attention.

This special issue of *British Art Studies* is conceived as an online exhibition. At its heart is the first-ever staging of *The Ballet of the Nations*, a film made by Impermanence in 2018, which brings Lee’s theatre-of-war to life a century after it was first imagined. Lee intended her book for publication rather than performance and took no steps to dramatise it.³ Yet the prospect that it might finally be realised as dance theatre, so long after her prophecy of endless war has been fulfilled, was irresistible. I approached Impermanence as a company that had recently worked with literary text, and they emphasised the importance of maintaining a relationship between the book and its historical and archival contexts. The exhibition and film presented here developed out of conversations with them, their partners, and *British Art Studies*. Online display has enabled us to embed the film permanently in the visual and musical cultures of the little theatres,

exposing the archeology of a creative and curatorial collaboration that has grown out of historical research and that references those sources on multiple levels. The exhibition is organised into five “rooms”:

1. “[Performing Pacifism](#)”, which tells the story of the publication of *The Ballet of the Nations*.
2. “[Inspirations](#)”, which explores the roots of the experimental theatre movement in Britain.
3. “[London’s Little Theatres](#)”, which examines each of the theatre groups in turn.
4. “[Beyond London and the War](#)”, which follows their fortunes in the immediate aftermath of the conflict.
5. “[The Ballet of the Nations](#)”, which displays the dance film alongside documentation of its making. Interviews with members of the production team describe the creative relationship that can develop between art history and art practice. They are interspersed with photographs and commentary by Ella Margolin, who was present throughout the shoot to record an otherwise fragmentary process.

The film develops still further the collective, multimedia project that was the *Ballet* by elaborating its own “performative commentary” on Lee’s text, Armfield’s pictures, early twentieth-century dance culture, and dance film as a genre distinct from live performance. The shockingly brutal nature of Lee’s narrative poses a challenge in performance. In the film, violence is implicit: mangled bodies are suggested by a tangle of cloth, the blood of battle by red ribbon, the trampled body of a child by a scattering of paper flakes—an image which is all the more shocking for what it requires us to imagine. Against this, the satire of Lee’s writing translates into moments of comedy and camp; the Orchestra of the Passions passing the bottle, Billy Zane checking his French on Google. Tension builds through dance solos, and sequences staged by an anonymous Chorus, which suggest both the choric element of Greek tragedy and the detached world of Armfield’s illustrations. Production design by Pam Tait evokes the richly eclectic world of Lee’s orchestra of the Human Passions who are “dressed, or in some cases undressed, in classical, medieval, biblical or savage costumes”. Rob Bentall’s score takes its cue from the cacophony suggested by Lee’s orchestration—“penny-whistles and fog-horns and a cracked storm-and-massacre bell”—and from composers such as Eugene Goossens, who worked with the wartime little theatres.

Different sections of the exhibition present objects and recordings relating to the little theatres as the original context for the making of the *Ballet*, and as a movement of great significance to the history of the arts in the twentieth century. A subculture of experimental performance developed in London during the First World War, against the grain of mainstream theatre, and often in sympathy with the dissenting politics of the wartime peace movement. It took its lead from European symbolists such as Maurice Maeterlinck and Edward Gordon Craig with their emphasis on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the *Übermarionette*, from the Hellenic dance rituals of Raymond and Isadora Duncan, and from the cosmopolitan version of Noh theatre developed by Japanese performers such as Ito Michio and Khorī Torahiko. After the war, it generated a new wave of community theatre that had much in common with the little theatre movement in America, and that impacted on the development of the British stage throughout the twentieth century.

An historical map of the key locations, curated by Claudia Tobin, makes visible the geographical reality of the community and the close connections between the groups involved. They included the Margaret Morris Theatre, run by the dancer Margaret Morris and her husband, the Scottish colourist J.D. Fergusson; the Greenleaf Players, run by Maxwell Armfield and his wife, the writer Constance Smedley Armfield; the Choric School, run by the poet and dancer Hester

Sainsbury; the Plough Club, founded by C.R. Mackintosh and E.O. Hoppé; the Pioneer Players, run by Edith Craig; and a circle of Japanese artists and performers who worked with Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, and who also collaborated with several of those listed above. In the Bohemian districts of Chelsea and Covent Garden, they would meet in each other's studios and in the public spaces of cafés and theatres, where they staged performances and debates and formed a free-thinking, creative community which held together at a time when wartime conditions made such networks particularly difficult to sustain. After the war, some of these groups continued, others dispersed, while new societies—the Arts League of Service, the British Drama League—emerged to continue their work.

All of these groups have been discussed elsewhere in isolation; the Margaret Morris Movement and the Pioneer Players in depth, others more schematically. This exhibition is different because it brings them together into one space and shows how they operated as a network with a significant collective presence. The fact that many of those involved were women has contributed to their subsequent obscurity, as has their alignment with political groups which challenged the status quo—women's suffrage, anarchism, and organisations which questioned the conduct of the war. While their party loyalties ranged across the political spectrum, those involved in the little theatres shared a commitment to freedom of information and expression, which became increasingly controversial as the war prolonged itself.

The material trace of their art and community is scattered through disparate archives, illustrated books, press reports, flyers, programmes, posters, memoirs, stage designs, film and audio recordings, and art collections, both public and private. The purpose of this exhibition is to excavate and collect that material, showing how objects, music, and movement connected in an intricate, sometimes entangled, pattern of collaboration and signification. Threads running through the different sections include the new religion of Theosophy with its theology of universal brotherhood; the Bomb Shop on Charing Cross Road with its list of radical literature; the photographer E.O. Hoppé as an active participant in the little theatres, who also photographed its leading players; Arthur Ransome, whose first successful book was a cultural history of Chelsea; the launch of new magazines during the war such as *Colour* and *London Vogue*; and a distinctive performance style which emerged from both a shared commitment to ideas of artistic synthesis and natural movement, and comedic qualities of lightness and naivety that point to a more serious underlying aesthetic. All the exhibits presented here tell stories which connect them with the artistic and political ambitions of the London little theatres. Cumulatively, they work to change the story of the arts in Britain in the early twentieth century, by demonstrating the reach, persistence, and vitality of experimental theatre in the period of the First World War.

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About the author

Grace Brockington is Senior Lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Bristol. As a specialist in modern British art, she has written about art in relation to war and pacifism, internationalism, the Bloomsbury group, puppetry, and universal language. Together with Sarah Victoria Turner, she convened the AHRC-funded research network “Internationalism and Cultural Exchange, 1870–1920” (2009–2014). She was guest curator of the exhibition *Gaudier-Brzeska: Disputing the Earth* (Royal West of England Academy, 2019).

Footnotes

1. Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*, with a Pictorial Commentary by Maxwell Armfield (London: Chatto & Windus, 1915). The book is unpaginated; some subsequent quotations from the text will not be footnoted.
2. H.G. Wells’ collection of essays *The War That Will End War* was published in 1914 (London: Frank & Cecil Palmer). In his book *In the Fourth Year: Anticipations of a World Peace* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), he noted that the phrase “the war to end war” had caught hold “amidst much sceptical comment. It was a phrase powerful enough to sway many men, essentially pacifists, towards taking an active part in the war against German imperialism, but it was a phrase whose chief content was its aspiration”, Wells, *In the Fourth Year*, 4.
3. When she returned to the project after the war, she republished it as the extended, unillustrated edition titled *Satan the Waster: A Philosophical War Trilogy* (London: John Lane, 1920).

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