



Scenic space

“Take four steps up to garden! Then jump down to courtyard!”. Well, those are rather strange orders for anyone who does not understand theatrical language! This vocabulary which is used to inform dancers of the way they should move across the stage is part of an organization of the scenic space that appeared during the Renaissance period and was adopted during the reign of Louis XIV. Its principle? The place where a choreography is performed is a setting that is viewed from the front and obeys the rules of perspective. Lines and plans are organized around a favoured area: the centre, in front of which sits the person for whom the show is first and foremost performed – the king – and where the main actions take place. Georges Noverre, the ballet d’action theoretician, confirmed this idea in the 18th century: “If the painter complies with rules of perspective to create illusion, then how would it be possible for the ballet master who is, without any doubt, also a type of painter, to refuse to follow such rules?”.

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the scenic space became the subject of research work and experimentation. Work carried out by the director Adolphe Appia hand-in-hand with the rhythmist Emile Jacques-Dalcroze on the subject of three-dimensionality that led to the creation of a new theatre in Hellerau. In 1911, Nijinsky created *Afternoon of a Foehn* as an animated bas-relief: centre-stage lateral and profile movements give rise to a choreography on a single level.

In the 1970s, the American postmodern movement, which called performance codes into question decreed that dance could be performed anywhere: in lofts, parks, on the roofs of buildings... Highly-unusual for spectators! Spaces and places, therefore, condition the relationship between the public and the performers and have a role to play in the artistic, social and cultural intentions of dance. By proposing other surfaces, other configurations, they also offer an opportunity to explore the myriad of possibilities of the body in movement.

1. Moving towards an Italian-style stage-setting

La Belle dame / Swan Lake

During the era of ballet de cour (court ballet), ancestor of classical ballet, the performance, which combined poetry, music and dance, took place in the centre of large function rooms, which were frequently rectangular-shaped with one or several rows of gallery seating along three sides where spectators would sit. The one that was built in the Petit Bourbon Hotel, one of the largest in Paris, was richly decorated with columns composed of capitals, friezes, cornices and arches. The royal family, seated on a podium in the centre of the audience, would discover a succession of “appearances” or choreographed sequences including the: grave and jester-type ones which depended on



the style of the steps and the number of dancers. Significant work, undertaken by Francine Lancelot and to whom Béatrice Massin pays tribute here, had gone into reconstructing this “belle danse” (French noble style), which is today known as baroque. The different “appearances” in the Belle Dame highlight the geometrical figures and combinations that the choreography sketches on the ground, through the rich repertoire of steps.

With the arrival of permanent structures, based on the “Italian-style” model of a scene, dance moved from the courtyard to the theatre and adopted a centrestage scenic set-up. A year before Louis XIV cast dance aside, in 1670, which as such marked the beginning of the professionalization of the choreographic art, the first theatrical dance stage opened. It was the ancestor of the Opéra de Paris.

As well as offering an opportunity to develop the use of machinery, the scenic set-up also influenced ballet codes and rules, which the dancing master, Beauchamp, began to determine. The en-dehors, which requires the femurs to rotate outwards and which facilitates lateral movements, the organization of movements around the axial plan and the enduringness of the centre of gravity is based on and incorporates the rules of perspective. The “corps de ballet” arrangement must also integrate these rules: the dancers, arranged based on their height, serve as a setting for the soloists who are centrestage. The splendour of collective choreography relies as such on the way the plans, lines and axes of the space are perceived by the spectators. Marius Petipa excelled in this register, as illustrated in this extract from Act II of *Le Lac des cygnes* (Swan Lake). Watch how the dancers spread themselves out, creating an interplay of horizontal then vertical lines, transforming a wave-like circle into a large rectangle, all symmetrically perfect. One of the jewels of classical dance!

2. The centre is everywhere

Roaratorio / Sanctum-Imago

Cunningham’s dancers move in a totally different way, based on a totally different conception of the scenic space. The American choreographer, who focused on Einstein’s theory of relativity, rejected the idea of a single perspective and of the centre as the spot where the gaze is held. If there is no fixed point in the space, then all points are potentially favoured. The scenic space is free from any form of hierarchy and takes on another dimensionality: It becomes an area of multiple, complex forces that the dancers reveal through their movements. Henceforth, they no longer evolve through a centrestage-type relationship but are able to turn their back to the public, which is free to choose what it wishes to see. They can also remain sitting down, on the stage, before beginning to dance, as is the case in this sequence from *Roaratorio*. Because, as Cunningham said, “a motionless body takes up just as much space as a body that moves”.



As far as the choreographer was concerned, it is unacceptable to limit the choreographic space to a theatrical framework: it can be established in gymnasiums, museums, universities, etc. No matter where it takes place, dance is first and foremost “the visible expression of life”.

Like Cunningham, Alwin Nikolaïš chose multipolarity. Lighting, décors, costumes and choreography work hand-in-hand to produce a theatre of abstraction, composed of shapes that are constantly changing. The projections of light on the dancers in Sanctum, who were covered with strips of fabric and elastic materials, helped set the entire scenic space in motion. On both sides, along the whole length and whole width, strange, moving and colourful shapes appeared and disappeared. In Imago, accessories extended the arms of the dancers, whose enhanced trajectories sketched elusive architecture throughout the scenic space. Nikolaïš’ exploration of the scenographic possibilities of the space was accompanied by specific work on the body. Because to inhabit the space on the stage, dancers need to inhabit the space within themselves.

3. Scenic set-ups

Moving target / Collection particulière / Défilé

Setting up a large mirror to create play on the reflection of images was something that Nikolaïš had already done in *Crucible*, in 1985. The Belgian choreographer Frédéric Flamand took up the idea in *Moving Target* to develop a totally different intention. To work on mental dissociation that characterizes schizophrenia, he asked the New York architects Diller+Scofidio to create a set-up that would illustrate a split personality. They imagined a gigantic mirror, tilted at a 45° angle, suspended above the stage, that slid along on the fly system. As such, the dancers produced a double image of themselves, in a sort of rivalry between horizontality and verticality, between a standing position and a lying position. The spectators were faced with a choice. They couldn’t see both at the same time. The scenic set-up obliged them to decide between reality – the dancer’s body, on the ground – and the virtual – the reflected image, above – and, as such, to experience a form of duality.

Collection Particulière (a private collection), by Maria Donata d’Urso reconfigures the scenic space in another way. Here, the space is not augmented by a mirror, but is split horizontally into two parts by a thick plate of glass comprising longitudinal slits. The dancer, who is positioned between the two edges, has to organize their supports with great agility in order to remain suspended. The oscillating movements between the upper and lower parts of this phospholuminescent line divide the body vis-à-vis its axis of symmetry. By using this ground that is raised and divided, whose material – glass – alters adherence and mobility relationships, the choreographer and performer develop a reflection on the body, its structure and its surface.



The dancers in Défilé (The Fashion show) also move through a longitudinal space. Through this piece of work Régine Chopinot reinvents a burlesque-style fashion show. Restricted by the dimensions of the podium and its set-up, right in the middle of the spectators, seated along the three sides, just like in a “real fashion show”, Chopinot’s choreography focuses on back and forth movements, between front-facing and at-a-distance, which create mini entertaining vignettes. Marc Caro produced a video clip of the performance which, thanks to the camera, highlights even more the impact of the narrow depth produced by the scenic set-up. To see this for yourselves, go and check out the extract from the performance on Numeridanse!

4. Outdoor set-ups

Le défilé / Desa Kela Patra / Stronger

The parade? Everyone in Lyon knows it! This celebratory event is one of the high points of the Dance Biennial in Lyon, which takes place in September every even-numbered year. Inaugurated in 1996, the défilé (parade) is in keeping with the popular tradition of street performances. But the particularity of this one is that it is the work of amateur performers. From winter onwards, the inhabitants of the greater Lyon urban area are called upon to join one of the numerous groups that a choreographer from the region has promised to accompany. Rehearsals can then begin. Floats are then created, costumes made. It is an intense moment of sharing, working together, which helps strengthen social links. After months of effort and preparation, D-Day arrives! Hundreds of participants dance, sing, play music along the Rue de la République, spurred on by loud cheers and applause from the myriad of onlookers. During the 2012 Biennial, around 300,000 spectators watched this choreographic parade! And, among them were many tourists from abroad!

In Bali, the tourists who discover this Indonesian island’s music and dances are over the moon. Performances take place outdoors, like here in front of the Sebatu village temple, and where most of the activity focuses on the arts. The area used for dancing is based on the set-up of the xylophone orchestra, known as Gong Kebyar (or Gamelan). Almost face-to-face but with enough distance to enable the dancers, the two drums (or Kendang) to enter the scene. To the right, melodic instruments with suspended tines, one of which plays the role of conductor, and the barangans responsible for embellishing the melodic line. To the left, two other rows of gongs and cymbals. The dancers, surrounded by musicians and inspired by their rhythms, perform one of the treasures of Balinese choreography, once reserved only for the court of kings and princes. As for the village children, it seems they are only allowed to watch the performance from the steps of the temple, right behind the performers!

Public places, stations, woodland, stairways. Fields, construction sites, museums... A



myriad of places open to highly-unusual choreographic experiences spearheaded by contemporary choreographers like Pierre Deloche, Julie Desprairies, Valentine Verhaeghe, Daniel Dobbels and Nathalie Pernette. As Sylvie Clidière and Alix de Morant emphasize in their work dedicated to the subject - to venture into “unprepared” places exposes artists to a certain number of inconveniences and risks related to weather conditions, to the irregularity and hardness of the ground, to the fleeting attention of the spectators, etc. But, these constraints also offer new perspectives for experimenting on the moving body and on the relationship with the scenic space. In the video-dance *Stronger*, the ground decorated with a forest, scattered with leaves and roots, offers unstable supports for the break-dance figures. The rolling landscape, obstructed by rocks and trees, offers the two B. Boys, Wilkie Branson and Joel Daniel, unusual supports, irregular heights and depths, which induce the choreography to blend climbing and sliding.



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