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MIRÓ WITH THE THEATRE COMPANY «LA CIACA». SANT ESTEVE DE PALAUTORDERA, 1977

MIRÓ AND THE THEATRE

FOR JOAN MIRÓ, THE THEATRE WAS A FUNDAMENTAL PASSION. HE HIMSELF SAID, IN 1932, THAT HE FELT THE NEED TO IMMERSE HIMSELF IN IT, STRICKEN AS HE WAS WITH ALL THAT BEATS IN THE HEART OF THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE, IN WHICH HE FOUND “SOMETHING MIRACULOUS”. MIRÓ LIVED THE THEATRE IN TWO WAYS: AS THE SUBJECT MATTER OF MUCH OF HIS EASEL-PAINTING, AND MORE ESPECIALLY IN HIS REAL-LIFE VENTURES IN THE WORLD OF THE STAGE AS THE CREATOR OF EXCEPTIONAL SCENERY AND COSTUMES.

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MIRÓ WITH THE FIGURES FOR «MORI EL MERMA», 1977

A photograph from the fifties shows Joan Miró sitting at a little table in a “tablao flamenco”, watching La Chunga. The artist seems to be spellbound, riveted by the image of the great dancer, not so much by her face, but by her movements, the harmonies of the sometimes combined, sometimes contrasting undulations of her body and her dress. Another photograph, taken in 1978, shows him in the studio where he created the characters for *Mori el Merma*, equally absorbed, motionless, gazing at one of the half-completed puppets. We see him oblivious to the world around him, sunk in deep and intimate dialogue with his work, in an inner remoteness which seems unreachable to us.

The theatre was one of his great passions. He felt the need to immerse himself in it, stricken as he was with those “many things” –he wrote in 1932– “that

beat in the heart of the theatre experience, which, he added, contained something miraculous”. Miró lived the theatre in two ways: as the subject matter of many of his paintings, and more especially in his real-life ventures into the world of the stage as the creator of exceptional scenery and costumes.

The theatre in his paintings

Throughout Miró’s career as a painter one subject that is constantly repeated is the dancer, a figure that fascinated him with its infinite possibilities for combinations of form and rhythm and whose movements achieved the same freedom that he looked for with his brush on the canvas. Often he speaks of her in terms that come close to the language of the theatre. In 1941, he wrote, “For *Ballarina Espanyola*, think of the monsters made in 1940; the one

I have drawn is too much a slave to reality (...); she must be cruelly comic, studded with nails”.

From the very beginning, he painted more or less figurative dancers (like those of the pencil-graffiti of 1917 and 1919 or the oil paintings of Spanish dancers of 1921), or else dancers unrecognizable as such, but present in the powerfully evocative movement (those of 1924), in the vibrant poetical synthesis of their elements (those of 1928), in the archaic allusion to their sexual fascination (those of 1940) or in the categorical affirmation of the strength of their character (those of 1945).

Apart from dance, Miró’s painting ventured into other areas of the world of the stage. One of these, the *commedia dell’arte*, he looked at through its stock characters, such as Pierrot and, especially, Harlequin, of whom he painted various versions and who provided the



THREE MASKS FOR «MORI EL MERMA», 1977

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inspiration for one of the artist's great masterpieces, *El carnaval d'Arlequí*, painted in 1924. Other genres contributed to the enrichment of Miró's world in different periods: *La cantant d'òpera* (1934), *La cantant melangiosa* (1955), *L'acomodador de music-hall* (1925) and, especially, different aspects of the world of the circus, a pure, dynamic world to which Miró constantly returned, from the drawings of 1919 of tumblers and clowns to the bronzes of tight-rope walkers in 1970, including the acrobats and above all the theme of the circus horse.

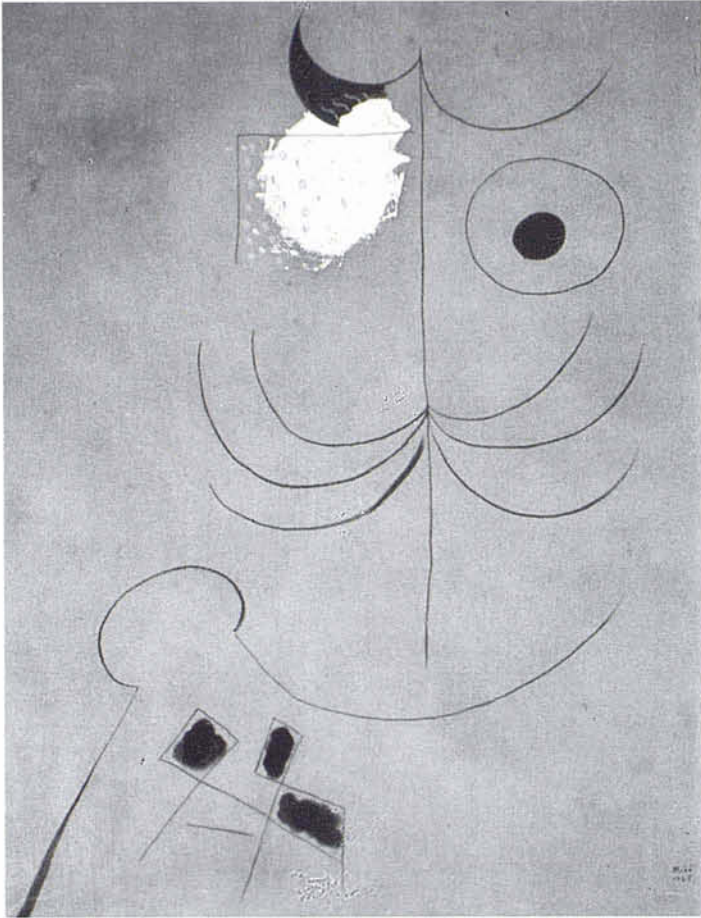
Scenographer and costume designer

Miró was drawn to the theatre as more than just another subject for his paintings; there was something that went far deeper, the connaturality between Miró's search for poetry in the movement, rhythm and colour of plastic ele-

ments, on the one hand, and on the other the unique magical synthesis of the arts that takes place on the theatre stage. Consequently, his loving involvement in the genesis of various shows provided him with a stimulus that he made full use of. From this passion were born *Roméo et Juliette* (1926), *Jeux d'enfants* (1932), *Arlequí* (1935), *Mori el Merma* (1978) and *L'Uccello Luce* (1981). This allowed him to realise one of his greatest ambitions, which was, in his own words, "to try, to the best of my possibilities, to go beyond the easel painting which in my opinion offers such a poor horizon". At the same time, Miró's art, once he had got to the heart of the dramatic fabric, greatly strengthened his expression of the basic themes, which were always linked to his own aesthetic and ideological world. Thus love, the innocence of children, dreams, the struggle against

monsters and tyrants, the victory of desire, all become evident.

Diaghilev was enthralled by Miró's free forms, and in 1926, following Picasso's advice, he entrusted him with the *Roméo et Juliette* of his *Ballets Russes*. Miró created a dream universe of extraordinary power, reflecting the overwhelming passion of the dancers who fall in love while they rehearse the play that gives the ballet its title. For the curtain and backdrop he conceived an immense foot ("strength", he once said, "enters by the feet"), an inflamed heart, a vagina open like a flower, a coiled, phallic worm, a star floating above the clouds, a framed moon and two simplified figures, one male, the other female, entwined, the boy like an arrow piercing the body of the girl whose hair blows in the wind. At the end of the ballet, the dancer rehearsing the part of Romeo, dressed as an airman, leads



L'ACOMODADOR DE MUSIC-HALL, 1925



DRAWING IN ONE OF MIRÓ'S NOTEBOOKS

the ballerina Juliet up to heaven. Despite the uproar of the opening night in Paris –partly brought about by the absurd elements in the plot, but especially by the protest by the other Surrealists, led by Aragon and Breton, who, with cries and leaflets, accused Miró and Ernst (responsible for the scenery of the second act) of collaborating with the reactionary bourgeoisie–, Lifar, who later wrote the history of the Russian Ballets, wrote, “*Roméo et Juliette* was, on an artistic level, one of the best ballets”.

In *Jeux d'enfants* (*Ballets Russes* in Montecarlo, 1932), the story of a young girl roused by the spirits that govern toys, Miró designed the curtain and the backdrop, the flats, the costumes –generally leotards painted with highly original motifs– and the many props and complements, especially the two large mobile geometrical forms: the white

ball and the black cone –elongated and curved at the top, with a small red disk at the tip– with dancers inside whose feet and hands protruded. It was a fictional world that was fully alive, complete in all its details, inhabited by human toys –tops, rackets, shuttlecocks, soap bubbles, hobbyhorses...– and by exciting characters –acrobats, athletes, amazons, travellers exploring different parts of the world (New York, Rome, Paris and Moscow), built up around the child and the spirits that bring the toys to life. The visual play of realistic movements –nothing like the traditional mechanical gestures of toys in pantomimes–, of geometrical forms and of pure colours, with the world of supposed innocence they created, stressed the difficulty for adults of entering into the spirit of the child.

In 1935 Miró created a delightful Harlequin outfit for the Barcelona debut of

the dancer Joan Magrinyà. He wrote, “It must look as if a blue light floats over the dancer (...), who seems wrapped in intangible light”, partly outlined in black, “so as to give it strength on the stage”. The whole thing was brought to life by a bright red rose in the dancer’s hand, a series of diamond shapes in black, red and green and by the magical yellow of a pocket from which Harlequin took “white missives” which he unfolded and released into the air like doves.

From 1933 on, Miró worked at great length on the project for a show which was to be entirely his own work, and which until 1935 he gradually developed in several notebooks full of drawings and notes. Many of his ideas later appeared in *Oeil-Oiseau*, in Saint Paul de Vence in 1973, a production restaged in Venice in 1981 with the title *L'Uccello Luce*, in fact the pretext for the



THE BALLET «JEUX D'ENFANTS»

Biennale's homage to the Catalan artist. In the sketches in these notebooks, Miró proposed a fascinating gallery of grotesque beings, some horrible or menacing, others ingenuous, fantastic or delightful. Often he himself described them: priests hiding amongst the flowers, naked bearded girls, flower-girls, men in tails, one with a moustache, another with huge breasts, enormous hands that come out of the ground, gauze-covered women playing with stars, moustaches hanging in mid-air, foul repulsive priests amongst fragile winged girls, naked men with bright red genitals, holes from which arms, legs, heads and bodies emerge, a ballerina in a white leotard, as if she were naked, covered with coloured snowflakes, males and females with their genitals exposed – a closed umbrella and an open umbrella – looking for each other, skeletons and hallucinatory characters violently

projected onto the scenery, monsters with enormous heads, others with gigantic gloves, dancers dismantling someone and putting the pieces on the ground, a naked girl with spiderlike genitals, another one under a cross, girls in white tights and letters forming the word "oiseau", a black shape with one large and one small hole: "through the holes a girl will show parts of her body without ever showing herself entirely, as if to excite more", village boys and girls trying to cover their yellow nakedness under subtle, softly coloured glass, ending in a shower of stars... and amidst all this, totally banal characters dressed realistically, performers who appear on stage as if by magic, falling from the ceiling, or others who have nothing to do with the ballet and who turn up without following the music, totally divorced from what is going on. The 1981 production featured some of

these creatures and others in three situations: the astonishment and joy of living before a curtain with a ladder, a star, a female's genitals, a patch of blue, a sun, etc.; the arrival of the monsters and the descent into the interior labyrinth with a background of volcanic formations, leading up to the dance of the stars and the poet's victorious struggle with the monster, and ending with the invasion of light and colour from the sky, bits of paper of different colours that rain down on the dancers, and with various objects and places Miró loved projected onto the backdrop, including the popular clay figures, and finally his face: the face of the poet, the painter, who calls the festival and opens the way to freedom.

This final victory over the monsters had already been profoundly and joyfully expressed in 1978 in a production to which Miró made a decisive contribu-



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REHEARSAL FOR THE BALLET «CEIL-OISEAU» AT THE MAEGHT FOUNDATION, SAINT PAUL DE VENICE, 1968

tion: *Mori el Merma*, a show using giant puppets designed and made in collaboration with the group Claca Teatre, who had started to create puppets based on some of Miró's ideas for *Ubú*, Jarry's fascinating theatrical character, in some ways the alter-ego of the Catalan Merma. At the first night in Palma de Mallorca, and immediately afterwards at the performances at the Barcelona Liceu, the public was electrified when Merma and his court burst onto the stage. Miró, who asked the actors to stress the purity, vigour and aggressiveness of the movements, made lively and free use of warty or jellylike shapes and pure, essential, earthy colours to put the characters across. They were violent creatures, but also grotesque; cruel, but ridiculous; nightmarish, but at the same time extremely funny, with eyes, mouths and paunches that showed the brutality and also the

clumsiness and triviality of power. Miró's ultimate objective in his work for the theatre was to create a fusion of music, movement, form and colour—in other words, of all the ingredients of theatre and dance. He himself, in some notes in 1940, outlined it as follows: "To work on large canvases on the basis of musical forms, with a great poetic and musical spirit, as impartial as a good poem, the sound of the air or the flight of a bird. Made with a clear head after some time for reflection, launch oneself without fear, think of Jarry". A great dancer, Vicente Escudero, recognized it from his own experience: "What paintings by Miró! I cannot sleep at night for thinking of them. These dots, these shapes, all this is what inspires me". Before that, Léonid Massine had expressed the same feelings: "Seeing the co-ordination of colours and shapes in his pictures, one suddenly

experiences an involuntary joy and a great need to dance".

Miró's theatrical work also included the design of posters for various productions, companies and festivals and extends to a number of para-theatrical activities the artist carried out for exhibitions of his paintings, such as the posters for the College of Architects of Barcelona or those for the city of Osaka. These brief pages are no more than a contribution to the year of his centenary in this particular field of the artist's creation: the theatre, an important part of his work, and one that is nevertheless little known to the general public. The exhibition the Fundació Miró is preparing for 1994 in collaboration with the Institut del Teatre will provide a good opportunity for more detailed study and for complementing these words with the images that reflect his enthusiasm for the theatre. ■