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Pagliaccio (Clown), 1918/1981

The Theatre of Fortunato Depero

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I have no wish to relate the entire body of work of one of the leading lights of Futurism, Fortunato Depero, but rather to talk about a minor, though important, theme that he explored concerning theatre.

Depero was an artist with a polymath, interdisciplinary vision, ranging from furniture to his highly rated clothing, tapestries, from toys to ornaments, from architectural and interior design projects to poster designs; a creator that more than any other, experimented in the aesthetics of puppetry and the automaton from 1917 onwards.

Depero's brand of Futurism should not be interpreted as an intellectual act but regarded as an outlook that formed part of his personal nature; in fact critics defined him as "a naturally Futurist figure, by way of temperament and for vocation". He joined the Futurist movement while very young, at the age of twenty-two.

Theatre is an art form held dear to Futurism, made evident from the quantity of material dedicated to the subject-matter and the number of its practitioners: from Balla to Depero, from Boccioni to Settimelli, and Prampolini, among others. This occurs because the stage show is a means of communication considered by Futurists to be fundamental in stimulating the world of fantasy.

Futurism sought only the liberating force of exhilaration through the surmounting of innovation, based on surprise, on wonder, on a sense of the absurd.

On this rationale, staged performances are not merely a passive, rather static imitation of reality, something which until then tended to prevail in theatre, but are creations that generate from a sense of unreality.

What lay at the core of Futurist poetics, and every other movement of the avant-garde, was the idea of pushing beyond a naturalistic form of theatre.

Depero was of the opinion that the work should be **agitated, dizzying, expressive, resounding, vibrant, loud, explosive, pungent, engaging.**

To appreciate how the concept of performer changes over time in Depero's work one need only examine the extraordinary invention of the mechanical tale of *I Balli Plastici*.

In this play, differing from previous shows (costumes as transformation and as protective shell, prime objects in the avant-garde performance), Depero's marionette takes the place of the dancer's movements, almost as if it were a happy interlude, since in the 1924 ballet *Anibcam 3000* (macchina [machine] read backwards) he reverts to using actors even though the performer is hidden beneath a type of steel boiler suit that conceals the body's expressiveness in favour of a highly mechanistic representation (the theme of the two locomotives in love with the station master falls within the main theme of the absurd, typical of the movement).

In 1929-30, at the time of the New York ballets, Depero abandoned the automats of the *Balletti Plastici*. He stripped the dancers of their rigid costumes and dressed them in simple close-fitting bodysuits that by contrast enhance their plastic corporeity. With this first theatre project Depero experimented with costumes made of stiff materials, he wanted to rob the performer of his individuality of movement by restricting him within a rigid costume. I am referring to the stage design project that met with little success, the 1917 production of Stravinsky's *Le Chant du Rossignol*.

Both in the case of 'costumes as transformation', and for the 'costumes as protective shell', the proportions of the human figure are altered and in particular the actor is compelled to perform unnatural movements.

The human body is oddly transformed by rigid, highly coloured apparel, geometric casings that alter the proportions of the human figure and influence his freedom of movement; the performer is therefore forced to adopt a mechanical gestural expressiveness that is angular, similar to that of a marionette, he is



Uomo dai baffi (Man with moustache), 1918/1931

therefore dispossessed of his expressive characteristics owing to the disguise that alters his appearance, and yet it is the performer who is delegated and who performs the function of a dynamic instrument.

This very much brings to mind another contemporary experience: the studies of Oskar Schlemmer for *Das Triadische Ballett* of 1921 with the Bauhaus school. Schlemmer's remark is significant: "it isn't so much the dancer wearing

the costume as the costume wearing the dancer. But it is also reminiscent of the figures that Picasso sketched for *Parade* adopting Depero's formula though with a Cubist slant. The traditional performer is substituted by the puppet actor that is not quite marionette.

This operation does not merely lead to a simple disguise of the actor but has more to do with the more complex issue of a revitalization of the scenic language.

One need only look at the tapestry that Depero painted some months after *I miei balli plastici*: in this tapestry a synthesis of the entire series of five ballets is depicted. These dances are the result of a close collaboration with the Swiss poet and Egyptologist, Gilbert Clavel, who approached Depero to illustrate a surrealist short story entitled *Un istinto per suicidi*, that he had just finished writing.

I miei balli plastici represents the first completed project for Depero in stage design. This was an elaborate play developed in Clavel's villa on the island of Capri, in 1917, and staged on 14 April 1918 at the Teatro dei Piccoli in Roma in Palazzo Odescalchi. The renowned composer Alfredo Casella worked on the musical score. Both for the theme and the site where it was staged may lead one to suppose that this was a show aimed solely at children: in fact press reviews at the time

noted among the audience of illustrious artists and literary masters personalities such as Picasso, Respighi, Cocteau and others. The show, staged just eleven times, was performed in five mime acts set to music, each lasting just a few minutes. Each scene was accompanied by a brief musical motif, all the authors for the most part belonging to Stravinsky's circle and chosen by Casella himself, composer of the music that



Marionette e scenario per *I Balli Plastici* (Marionettes and setting for *I Balli Plastici*), 1918/1982

accompanies the first scene (*I Pagliacci* – *The Clowns*). The stories belong to a kind of theatre of the absurd.

Scene 1: *I Pagliacci* (*The Clowns*) The yellow and red marionettes, the white Capri pants, the blue ballerina and the multi-coloured hens and butterflies inhabit a sort of bright floral hamlet.

Scene 2: *L'uomo dai baffi* (*Man With Moustache*) The marionettes act the part of grotesque men with gigantic moustaches in various sizes in the company of a ballerina in a purple dress, and white mice chased after by a black cat.

Scene 3: *I selvaggi* (*The Savages*) In a tropical scenario, the marionette of the Great Savage with a large puppet theatre in his belly dominates centre-stage,

surrounded by marionettes of red or black shield-bearing Savages.

Scene 4: *Ombre* (*Shadows*) In this the most abstract scene a group of shadows solidified into plastic volumes of varying forms dance to the rhythm of music by Bela Bartok.

Scene 5: *L'orso azzurro* (*The Blue Bear*) Groups together all the characters that animated the previous four scenes with the addition of a monkey and a blue bear.

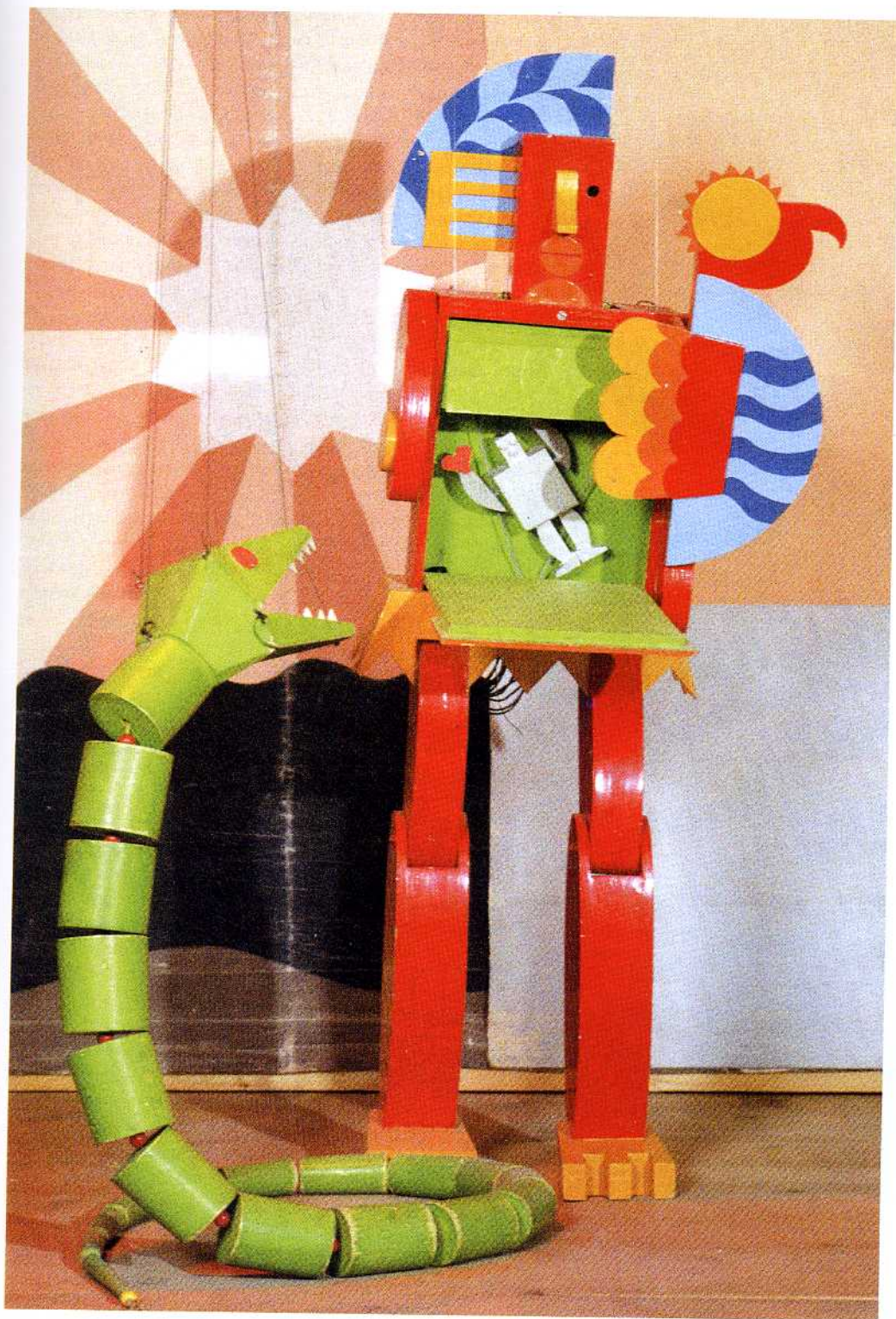
From the technical and structural angle the marionettes of the *Balli Plastici* use the idea of the age-old mechanical device animated by strings, while from the compositional and formal point of view they become the materialization of the artist's entire series of paintings.

The marionettes substitute the traditional

actor, they symbolize the actor that played a very important role in bourgeois theatre of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The marionettes are fashioned from wood, squared, vividly coloured, and without the addition of any other form of attire.

They become real automatons that take on movements that are rectilinear, angular, rigid, rhythmical and through their movements interpret the music of the emerging avant-garde musicians.

Depero designed them with great precision and thanks to his artwork full of measurements, details of the articulations, description of colours and annotations it was possible to reconstruct them with sufficient accuracy for revival at the Autunno di Como Musica Festival in the nineteen-eighties.



If we in fact compare the five musical scenes which make up the show (i pagliacci, l'uomo con i baffi, i selvaggi, le ombre and l'oca azzurra) with the *I miei balli plastici* canvas, it clearly demonstrates the close link that Depero developed between theatre and painting. In fact for him existed only a single underlying theme that firmly embraced painting, theatre, applied arts and advertising. ■

Fortunato Depero was born in the Italian town of Fondo (Trento) in 1892. He was a pupil at the Scuola Reale Elisabettiana in Rovereto. In 1914, Depero exhibited at the Esposizione Libera Futurista and a year later co-wrote the manifesto "Ricostruzione Futurista dell'Universo" (Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe). In 1919, together with his wife, he founded the Casa d'Arte (House of Futurist Art) in Rovereto. In 1925, he exhibited at the International Exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris. In the years 1928-30 and 1947-49 he spent time in North America. He died in 1960 in Rovereto, Italy.

Left: *La Grande Selvaggia* (The Great Savage), 1918/1981
Below: *Le Chant du Rossignol*, photo of model, 1916/1917

