

## ***A Present-Day Morality for the Present Day***

Sally Blackburn-Daniels

For, whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault lit up by the flare of distant blazing farms, and its blue solemnity rent by the fitful rocket-tracks of shells and the Roman-candles and Catherine-wheels of far off explosions.<sup>1</sup>

Vernon Lee's *Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915) is, by period, not strictly of 19's concern (*Fig. 1*). It was not conceived during, nor thematically linked to, the events of the nineteenth century, but falls fifteen years into the twentieth. Yet despite Lee's protean use of language and her ability to 'hold her own' with some of the more notorious individuals of the Bloomsbury set, she was, as George Bernard Shaw called her, the 'old guard' of nineteenth-century thinkers. In 1920 he writes in the *Nation* (regarding Lee's publications on the First World War): 'Vernon Lee is an Englishwoman [...]. I take off my hat to the old guard of Victorian cosmopolitan intellectualism, and salute her as the noblest Briton of them all.'<sup>2</sup> It would appear that, for Shaw at least, being Victorian is a state of mind, and one that would be forever associated with Lee despite her literary output continuing for thirty-four years after the death of Victoria. So, it is Shaw's words that I offer as a caveat for the following anachronistic article, in which I discuss the recent theatrical production of Lee's *Ballet of the Nations* at the Villa Il Palmerino, Florence, on 31 May and 1 June 2019.

### **The book**

*The Ballet* was written during the Whitsuntide of the first year of the First World War as an allegorical satire of the populist and nationalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1915), unpaginated.

<sup>2</sup> George Bernard Shaw, 'A Political Contrast', *Nation*, 18 September 1920, pp. 758–60 (p. 760).



Fig. 1: Poster for *The Ballet of the Nations* at Il Palmerini. Photograph by Sally Blackburn-Daniels.

attitudes pervading Europe at the time. Lee attempted to shine some lime-light on the tragedy and waste of war through the *Ballet's* violent dance between nations. The original work was performed as a spoken polemic by Lee at 'Armfield's studio in Glebe Place, Chelsea, and again at the Margaret Morris theatre'.<sup>3</sup> It was at Morris's theatre that Lee was approached by Chatto & Windus and G. P. Putnam and Sons who wanted to publish the work as a Christmas book with illustrations by Maxwell Armfield.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Pulham, 'Violence and the Pacifist Body in Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*', in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature: Bodies-at-War*, ed. by Petra Rau (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46–63 (p. 46).

*The Ballet* begins with a rousing of the ‘Passions’ by Satan. These Passions are representative of the three systems of human thought: the animistic or mythological is represented by ‘Sin, whom the Wise Gods call Disease, and her classic crew, Rapine, Lust and Murder, with their bull-roarers and rattles’; the religious mode is depicted by ‘Widow Fear with her nimble children, Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, fog-horns and that mediaeval tocsin-bell’; and the scientific by ‘Science and Organization’ whose ‘gramophone and pianola brayed and strummed away unflaggingly’. While these Passions are organized into the Orchestra of Patriotism, the Press and the Pulpit stoke the fire of nationalism. ‘Ballet-Master Death’ instructs the ‘Dancing Nations’, and the boy ‘Heroism’ leads the macabre dance of ‘The Nations’ to the play’s finale.

Armfield’s illustrations border Lee’s text with proscenium arches boldly zigzagged with geometric designs in a lurid red on cream pages. His heavily stylized Hellenic figures — seemingly unconcerned with pictorially representing the narrative — linger and hang below Lee’s powerful critique of warfare.

### The concept

The theatrical performance at the Villa Il Palmerino began life as a conversation between the custodian of the villa, Federica Parretti, and actor and director Angeliki Papoulia in August 2017. Their shared interest in the text was developed through what Papoulia calls co-creation, and Parretti (and myself) would call *Vernon Lee serendipity* — a bringing together of the ‘right’ people together at the ‘right’ time. These people included a pan-European collaboration of literary scholars, dramatists, and historians (Sally Blackburn-Daniels, Patrick Wright, Richard Cave, Stefano Vincieri, and Patricia Pulham), actors (Alessio Montagnani and Elisa Barucchieri), dancers (ResExtensa), a sound designer (Mauro Casappa), film-makers (Pierantonio Gottardo and Leonardo Settimelli), and a musician (Giulio Bevilacqua), alongside volunteers from the artistic and ex-pat community in Florence. The performance was scheduled to coincide with ‘Vernon Lee 2019: An Anniversary Conference’ that celebrated the centenary of Lee’s return to Florence after her stay in England during the First World War. The performance was financially supported through crowdfunding site Indiegogo where an international network of Lee admirers and friends of Il Palmerino generously offered their support.

The decision to perform at the villa was in part due to the historical use of the garden as the ‘Teatro Rustico Del Palmerino’ during Lee’s residence. The performance of Carlo Gozzi’s *L’Augellino Belvedere* on 17 May 1900 was set to ‘music by the maestro Mozart’ and the scripts were

hand-copied by Lee and her sister-in-law, Annie Hamilton.<sup>4</sup> Like Gozzi's play, *The Ballet* utilized the landscapes surrounding the villa, rather than the house. From its earliest incarnation the 2019 performance was visualized as a site-specific promenade: the audience was expected to move through the gates off Via del Palmerino into the courtyard, into the paved area at the side of the main house, towards the enclosed garden with the stone table, and through a final set of gates into an abundant field at the back of the property. Papoulia — and the actors and dancers themselves — were to provide no cues to the audience to move forward on the promenade, and the time varied considerably between scenes.

### The performance

'It is time', said Satan, the Lessee of the World, to 'reopen the Theatre of the West.'

Satan stands at the top-most window of the villa (*Fig. 2*), looking out onto the courtyard below, which is filled with his expectant yet unsuspecting audience. He is, of course, charming and hospitable, yet the staging of



*Fig. 2:* Villa Il Palmerino. Image courtesy of Collezione Associazione Culturale Il Palmerino Firenze.

<sup>4</sup> Poster for the production of *L'Augellino Belvedere* at Villa Il Palmerino (1900), Archivio Dazzi-Cini, San Marcello Pistoiese.



his opening speech is reminiscent of that of a dictatorial address. In this adaptation Satan (and the rest of the cast) is bilingual and the performance shifts between Italian and English with ease. The audience cannot place him as either, his language is not fixed, a significant decision made early on in the process to avoid aligning Lee's 'Lessee' with a particular nationality. Similarly, with Satan's costume of a simple white shirt and utilitarian overcoat, he looks like a worker, rather than the grand master of evil. From his vantage point at the window Satan commands an Orchestra of Passions into being: Fear, Suspicion, and Panic are drawn out from the lower levels of the villa, while other members are plucked from the audience and doused by a baptismal misting from Satan's agricultural pressure sprayer. Death's appearance as a jittery, yet dutiful figure perched above the gate allows for a conversation in which Death's self-importance and testy nature are noted by her diabolic manager. There are two key directorial differences from the original work at this early stage: firstly, Death provides instruments to the Orchestra, as any fetching of instruments would immediately allow the audience to discover them in their midst; secondly, Lee's wish that no music be heard is circumvented by the absurdity of its composition and rendition: parmesan graters grind, while toy ray guns clatter and sheet metal shakes. Lee's interest in primitive instruments, which stems from her reading in late nineteenth-century anthropology and ethnology, has been replaced by ubiquitous contemporary objects that could be found in every home (thus emphasizing the ubiquitous possibility of a turn to nationalism), which fail to provide even a steady rhythm, let alone a melody. Once the Orchestra has performed its ridiculous serenade to Satan, it leaves through the gate and the audience is left with uncertainty — should they follow or remain?

In the second act of *The Ballet* the dancers appear — at Death's command — at the windows of the side facade of the villa and descend. The four Nations are clothed in agricultural workwear made from red silk (the colour an echo of the red from Armfield's illustrations) and are attached by ropes fastened to the walls of Lee's villa — itself, a violent and physical mark on the house. The Nations' occupation of the vertical plane is disorientating, at points the dancers are at a ninety-degree angle to the wall (*Fig. 3*). The movement between the vertical and horizontal planes of the villa and courtyard area highlights the theatrical quality of the performance.

Once the Nations are in position, a drumming is heard, which rises from below the feet of the audience. It is the blind boy Heroism, who emerges from a covered well. To rapturous applause and cheers from the Orchestra, Heroism is doused by his master Satan's agricultural spray. The ritual is repeated, with shades of Christianity, while simultaneously drawing on pagan ideas of harvest. Death, who defies Newton's law by hanging out of the upper window and lowering Heroism his drum, shouts instructions to the dancing Nations, who swing back and forth along the



*Fig. 3:* Dancers from ResExtensa rehearsing Act 2. Photograph by Sally Blackburn-Daniels.

wall, becoming more and more violent in their vacillations as they attempt to come into contact with one another.

As the Nations swing back and forth, the Orchestra circles in and out of the doors of the villa itself, its uncanny movements reminiscent of the figures on a Black Forest clock, each marking Heroism's beat with a unique physical tic or glitch. The members of the orchestra do not speak but communicate through individual and isolated staccato movements: unlike Satan and Death who meander through Italian and English, the Orchestra has no particular nation or language, and so is able to represent all. The Orchestra's movements, driven on by Heroism's drum, is set to keep the Nations dancing, and it does so with a universal gusto, narrowly missing the suspended dancing Nations as they battle. All at once, on Heroism's hit to the drum rim, the Orchestra walks towards the garden. The dancing Nations continue until, exhausted, they hang and twist, inverted on their ropes. As they slowly lower themselves towards the courtyard floor, the audience and the warring spectacle inhabit the same spatial plane for the first time.

By the third act in the garden (a wilder space, yet still cultivated), the aesthetic is that of a decadent party. A recording of Richard Cave reading Lee's text plays while the Orchestra moves freely through the audience, some handing out flutes of blood-red liquid, others marking out audience members with coloured stickers. It is not clear which individuals

are part of the mass of emotions, driving the warring Nations, or who is there to bear witness. While Satan and Death charm their audience into toasting the Nations, the audience members sink their drinks and cheer to *The Ballet*.

The move from witness to participants is completed by the final shift into the field at the back of the villa, observers becoming actors in the final act. The audience is separated into groups selected arbitrarily by the Orchestra in the earlier act. This splitting of the whole into sections produces a sense of unease in the audience: its members were often separated from those they arrived with. Pulham has astutely noted:

For Lee, one of the essential characteristics of patriotism is that it 'depends upon *segregation*, not to say antagonism: upon a *railing*, upon something separating those who feel it from everyone else'. For Lee, 'patriotism', like the 'nation', is based on the principle of exclusion. (p. 54, emphases in original)

Creating a sense of disunification at this stage in the performance is critical: the witnesses to the warring Nations become part of the observed. Some of the audience members are moved into a position in which they are surrounded and taunted by dancers with heavy petrol mowers — contemporary scything machines — which they spin and lunge dangerously (*Fig. 4*). Some of the audience stand outside this, many of whom revel in the discomfort or fear of those ex-compatriots who are now surrounded by the noise and fumes of machinery. The sense of the watcher becoming the watched resonates for a short while as people film and take photographs on their phones. Reason is subsumed by crowd action, mob rule. It is only when Satan and Death appear and circle the final act on a tractor, that the audience recognizes that it is part of the performance. This use of this machine — a symbol of the fertility of the earth and a provision of sustenance for the nation — becomes a harvest of bodies, mechanized for the contemporary age.

This disintegration of the audience into smaller (opposing) groups during the final act was choreographed and directed as a form of violence that represented symbolically the corporeal violence of Lee's text. There was a significant difficulty in portraying the psychological descent into atavism during the performance; likewise any attempt to render Lee's descriptive term 'pellets of flesh' with special effects would have looked ridiculous. The violent and visceral nature of Lee's *Ballet* is a particular focus of Pulham who likened it to an auto-da-fé: 'a spectacle of suffering which has both a didactic and a symbolic purpose' (pp. 49–50). In this way, the direction and production team wanted the suffering, particularly that of the select audience members, to prompt further thinking about the arbitrary nature of persecution, and discrimination based on nationality.



*Fig. 4:* Act 4 rehearsal with ResExtensa and director and dramaturg Angeliki Papoulia. Photograph by Sally Blackburn-Daniels.

Furthermore, Pulham's claiming of the *Ballet* as a work of 'abject literature' which 'disturbs identity, system, order' had particular resonances with the performance (p. 58). The way in which this adaptation served this aim was to denigrate the audience, through a physical, spatial, and psychological journey into segregation and suggestion of violence and harm.