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Abstract

In the introductory part of the article, the author highlights some elements of the performing arts that are often connected in Futurist manifestos and performances and interact as building blocks of their discursive-visual events: the deconstruction of dramatic character, the mechanisation of the performer, and the staging space. The author pays special attention to Enrico Prampolini, one of the most penetrating visual artists of Italian Futurism, who often created set designs in the theatre, occasionally also directed and, in the 1920s and 1930s, collaborated with numerous prominent representatives of the avant-garde movements of the time throughout Europe. The core of the author's research interest in this article is the Futurist Pantomime Theatre (Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste), which, despite all the difficulties and compromises, was an exceptional achievement in the creative oeuvre of Enrico Prampolini and his collaborators. Among them were the pioneers of Slovenian dance art, Václav Vlček and Lidija Wisiak, who performed in the leading roles at the Futurist Pantomime Theatre in Paris in 1927 and the following year in some Italian cities. This brief but important collaboration between the Czech-Slovenian artistic tandem and two other ballet soloists from Ljubljana (Erna Mohar and Vali Smerkolj) with Enrico Prampolini has been almost completely ignored in Slovenian theatre historiography. Therefore, the author has attempted to shed light on the achievements of this collaboration between Italian, Slovenian and other theatre artists in the period of the historical avant-garde.

Keywords: Václav Vlček, Lidija Wisiak, Enrico Prampolini, Futurism, avant-garde theatre, Futurist Pantomime Theatre

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The Futurist Pantomime Theatre and Prampolini's Collaboration with the Dance Tandem Vlček and Wisiak

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In the introductory part of the article, the author highlights some elements of the performing arts that are often connected in Futurist manifestos and performances and interact as building blocks of their discursive-visual events: the deconstruction of the dramatic character, the mechanisation of the performer, and the staging space. The author pays special attention to Enrico Prampolini, one of the most penetrating visual artists of Italian Futurism, who often created set designs in the theatre, occasionally also directed and, in the 1920s and 1930s, collaborated with numerous prominent representatives of the avant-garde movements of the time throughout Europe. The core of the author's research interest in this article is the Futurist Pantomime Theatre (Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste), which, despite all the difficulties and compromises, was an exceptional achievement in the creative oeuvre of Enrico Prampolini and his collaborators. Among them were the pioneers of Slovenian dance art, Václav Vlček and Lidija Wisiak, who performed in the leading roles at the Futurist Pantomime Theatre in Paris in 1927 and the following year in some Italian cities. This brief but important collaboration between the Czech–Slovenian artistic tandem and two other ballet soloists from Ljubljana (Erna Mohar and Vali Smerkollj) with Enrico Prampolini has been almost completely ignored in Slovenian theatre historiography. Therefore, the author has attempted to shed light on the achievements of this collaboration between Italian, Slovenian and other theatre artists in the period of the historical avant-garde.

In 1925, Prampolini went to Paris with an ambitious plan to establish a Futurist theatre. He was helped in this by the dancer Maria Ricotti, who convinced her wealthy partner to contribute a handsome sum of money, with which they rented the Théâtre de la Madeleine, engaged the conductor Vladimir Golschmann and assembled an international group of dancers so that they could begin rehearsals in December 1926. At first, they took the name Campagne de Pantomime Italienne and, later, the

Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste, a name that was supposedly suggested, or even imposed on Prampolini, by none other than the “commander-in-chief” of the Futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (cf. Lista, *Lo spettacolo* 23). Under this name, ten short pantomimes premiered on 12 May 1927. The production apparently met with great interest from the Parisian audience, as it was performed thirty-one times, making it one of the most prominent performances of Futurist theatre ever (cf. Berghaus, *Italian Futurist* 450).

In the continuation of the article, the author presents all ten pantomimes performed at the Futuristic Pantomime Theatre, with an emphasis on some of the most distinctly Futurist ones, in which Vlček and Wisiak played a significant part, such as *Les Trois Moments*, *Le Marchand de cœurs* and *Cocktail*. Prampolini was not entirely satisfied with the heterogeneous mixture of his Futurist ideas and the apparently somewhat too “passatist” approaches of Maria Ricotti, so he announced that the next production of the Futurist Pantomime Theatre, to be prepared in 1928, would be more coordinated and entirely imbued with a Futurist mindset. The programme of the second production, in which he announced seven new pantomimes, would be somewhat “familial” in nature, since he and his brother Alessandro (Vittorio) would be the authors of four scenarios. In addition, he was also planning numerous tours in England, the United States, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, but these far-reaching plans failed. In March 1928, however, he managed to organise tours in three Italian cities: Turin (6 and 7 March), Bergamo (13 March) and Milan (16–22 March). For this Italian tour, he partially changed the programme of the pantomime evening. From the original Parisian version, he kept the three most Futurist ones (already mentioned) and the one that managed to win the sympathy of the Parisian audience (*Popolaresca*) and added as many as six new ones.

As the author outlines in his analysis of its structure, Prampolini’s production consisted of shorter, thematically unrelated pantomime scenes. In this sense, it is similar to the performances of Futurist syntheses, but on the other hand, it differs significantly from Futurist synthetic theatre; the pantomimes were stylistically heterogeneous, and it was a weak point that many critics pointed out. Prampolini was also aware of this shortcoming, so he partially adapted a version with which they went on tour in three Italian cities. Still, he was unable to eliminate all the problems. The production thus remained caught in the gap between his conceptual ambitions and the stage realisation, which could not fully follow them. Despite all the mechanical and marionette nature of the movement in the Futurist Pantomime Theatre, Prampolini had already essentially made a significant compromise because he was much more radical at the beginning of his Futurist path. As the author points out in the first part of the text, in the manifesto “Futurist Scenography” (1915), Prampolini proposed changing the actor into gas. With the end of the Italian tour, the short life of the Futurist Pantomime Theatre also

ended. Prampolini gradually focused on creating sets for large, mainstream theatres (he had created around 130 by the time of his death in 1956). Lidija Wisiak and two other Slovenian dancers (Erna Mohar and Vali Smerkolj), who also performed at the Futurist Pantomime Theatre, returned to classical ballet, and their Futurist episode thus ended. Although Václav Vlček's restless, exploratory spirit did not leave him even after 1928, he never returned to the Futurist theatre either.

Despite the fact that Wisiak's and Vlček's collaboration in Prampolini's Futurist Pantomime Theatre was only a brief avant-garde episode in their dance and choreographic creation, critical observers highly valued their contribution to Futurist theatre. Therefore, it seems, at least from our present-day perspective, that their avant-garde-dance potential was by no means exhausted by this collaboration in 1927/1928. We can imagine that they would have contributed much more to the treasury of the theatrical avant-garde if Prampolini's project had not finally come to an end after the Italian tour.

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