

Historical Bauhaus Stage Productions Actualized for Our Time

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Translated by Don MacDonald (Düsseldorf)

“One should be as impartial as possible; one should approach things as if the world had just been created; one should not reflect upon something to death, one should let it unfold – cautiously indeed, but freely. One should be simple, not needy (simplicity is a big word); one should rather be primitive than ornate or pompous; one should not be sentimental, but one should have spirit instead. Thus, all and nothing has been said!”

Oskar Schlemmer

Thus, All Has Been Said

There are only a few words in Oskar Schlemmer’s diary, words that nonetheless essentially say everything about the Bauhaus in the twenties, and everything that was important to the contributor and thinker Oskar Schlemmer regarding his “Bühnenspekulationen” (stage experiments). Lothar Schreyer – Expressionist and typical representative of the esoteric Itten school of thought of the early Bauhaus – separated from the Bauhaus in 1923, just as Johannes Itten did. His mystic, occultist approach to an Expressionist “Sturmbühne” ended with the succession of Oskar Schlemmer, who did bring his figurines (for the 1919 premiere of “The Triadic Ballet” in Stuttgart) with him in 1920 to Weimar, but could only first publically present them to colleagues and students within the framework of the “Bauhaus Week” in 1923 in Weimar. That same year he took over the direction of the stage workshop, not officially part of the studies at the Bauhaus – today one might regard it as a theatre workgroup. The advantage of this was that students with completely different directions of study could voluntarily attend this “class” and, with respect to developing performances, were free to experiment, build, try

out and compile. Oskar Schlemmer – himself not a trained performing artist – was able to instruct the students by drawing on his experience dealing with material and colours, the expertise of his brother Carl Schlemmer, who worked in the theatre as costume designer for armament costumes etc., as well as the experience in the development work of “The Triadic Ballet”.

In 1916, the professional Stuttgart dance couple Alfred Burger and Elsa Hötzel commissioned figurines for “The Triadic Ballet” by Oskar Schlemmer, to present a German counter-project to the then famous “Ballets Russes”. In the course of development of the partially unwieldy and rigid figurines in a family project with Oskar, Carl and Tut Schlemmer, it turned out, however, that Oskar Schlemmer could best dance his own figurines and also choreographically instruct on how best to dance them. As a result, he also suggested musical compositions, danced with and even choreographed for the trio of Hötzel, Burger and Schope. Thus, he used the name Walter Schope, since at that point in time, the “serious, visual artist” Oskar Schlemmer did not want to realise his “humorous side” under his own name, he wanted to use a pseudonym!

At the Bauhaus, however, he did use his name when teaching painting, sculpture and directing the stage class. So, it was therefore only logical that he also used his name from 1925 onwards at the Dessau Bauhaus when he appeared as a clown, as a figure and as a *compère*. He was so shameless on the occasion of one celebration that he publically parodied his colleagues and Walter Gropius on stage...

The Bauhaus itself was conceived from the idea to want to train new people for a new world – people that would not repeat the mistakes of fallen feudalism. Especially the generation of Gropius, Itten and Schlemmer, which had participated in the First World War as soldiers and officers, came back to their country after the traumas of the war with the firm intention: “Never again war!”

In order to make war and belligerency in a strongly militarily defined Germany impossible, one had to raise a new generation of young people which were internationally networked, not just nationally; a new generation which preferred to play rather than to fight, and which knew how to appreciate peace with all of the possibilities freedom has to offer. Since all representational forms of this self-portrayal were rejected by the militarism of the Wilhelminian era, it resulted in the rejection of any ornamental, adorning or decorative design or art. Which also explains the strict rejection of framed pictures (panel painting), figures on bases and ornamental facades (stucco, et cetera).

On the one hand, the human being was understood as being “inspired by the incomprehensible and infinite cosmos”, while on the other hand as being “a body whose intellectual capacity translates the inapprehensible in size and scale”¹. Oskar Schlemmer – a friend of Johannes Itten and a valued long-standing employee of Walter Gropius – agreed with this view. In another spot in his diary he writes:

“That is why we create
the abstract formal and coloured
the static, dynamic and tectonic
the mechanical, automatic and electrical
the gymnastic, acrobatic and equilibristic
the funny, grotesque and burlesque
the serious, pathetic and monumental
the political, philosophical and metaphysical theatre”

Under his guidance, his students – who in 1923 had already developed a complete programme with several numbers under the title “Das mechanische Kabarett” (The Mechanical Cabaret) for the Bauhaus Week – were for the most part in their mid-twenties, had experienced the war at most from afar as children or adolescents, had never been on the front but may have suffered some consequences of the “Great War”: inflation, hunger, shortage of supplies, unemployment, sometimes anarchic circumstances.

In spite of that – or especially because of it – they followed the pacifists Gropius, Itten and Schlemmer in their development of a new kind of peace and progress-oriented humankind. For the students Kurt Schmidt, Georg Teltcher and Friedrich Wilhelm Bogler, one of the things which arose from playing with forms in motion and colours was a “mechanical ballet”.

Oskar Schlemmer went further than simply directing the stage class he established – he pushed Gropius into constructing an experimental stage in the new Dessau Bauhaus, which Gropius delivered as a hybrid form between theatre, lecture hall and conference hall. Right up until he left the Bauhaus in 1928, Schlemmer also became the master of ceremonies of all Bauhaus celebrations; he not only automatically included himself as planner, supervisor and provider of themes and ideas, he also performed at all celebrations in alternating roles including musical clown and, in each case, also heavily celebrated into the early morning hours. Also here: “Primus inter pares” – first among equals, or as Gropius liked to see it: a close fellowship of masters with their apprentices!

Thus, Nothing Has Been Said?

What does this model offer our generation and social discourses of today? For a start, the sketches and reports as well as the texts continue to inspire. One can hardly escape the enthusiasm of the texts and reports, one senses a painful emptiness in the face of today's visionlessness and individual inner conflict of present-day society. One longs for community, for the affirmation of a vision, for the optimism that through one's own actions, one can work on a concept for a new humankind in a better, more peaceful society. And isn't it more reasonable and more satisfactory to work on optimistic, hopeful utopias rather than to design dystopias, to succumb to defeatism or even nihilism? At the moment in Germany, the current celebrations of "100 Years of Bauhaus" are also undergoing a strong dismantling regarding the "good image" of the Bauhaus of the twenties: "Women were discriminated against, Gropius was pretentious, after 12 years of existence the Bauhaus itself was a grand failure" etc. Who does this iconoclasm serve? Must the last positivist utopia of the "golden twenties" also be destroyed, only because we find ourselves once again in times of a despairing humankind?

The THEATER DER KLÄNGE, which I founded and still run today in Düsseldorf, did not do this and will not do this. On the contrary: In the foundation year of 1987, we seized the opportunity and took on both "The Mechanical Ballet" of 1923 by Kurt Schmidt's troop as well as the never-before realised sketch of "Mechanical Eccentricity" by the Bauhaus master Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.



Figure 1: Oskar Schlemmer, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*. Bd. 4, München 1925.

The Mechanical Ballet

In 1987, the only representation of "The Mechanical Ballet" (fig. 2) was two retouched black and white photos in the book (fig. 1) "Die Bühne im Bauhaus"², as well as a printed colour representation of the 4-colour figurines in the form of a colour tempera sketch in the exhibition catalogue of the exhibition "50 years of Bauhaus".³ In addition, there was a piece by Kurt Schmidt in the afore-mentioned book in which hardly any attention was paid, however, to the choreography and the music used. My wish to make and further develop a new adaptation of this ballet had to therefore come from these 3 pictures. After all, we were talking about "head-high" figurines and the tempera sketch displayed the colours which these figurines may have had.

The coloured forms were transferred in cardboard form to jointed dolls and stuck to the bodies of the dolls in the same way one would also imagine attaching to the human body. Using the tempera sketch and the two photos, one could not clearly recognize exactly how the parts were worn on which parts of the body. So, one had to just try it. The figurines so "dressed", now "three-dimensional", were photographed and these photographs were brought along to the visit with Kurt Schmidt in Gera, 1987. It was reassuring to see how Kurt Schmidt immediately used a felt-tipped pen and with decisive strokes corrected the proportions on the photos and said: "The figurines have to be tall and slim, not thick and stocky." The then 86-year-old no longer had any memories of the choreography. Likewise, regarding the music. How long had the whole thing lasted? "Hmm, about 15 minutes – or longer – because there were always parts falling down and we had to close the curtain in order to reattach them. And then the whole thing would start all over again."⁴

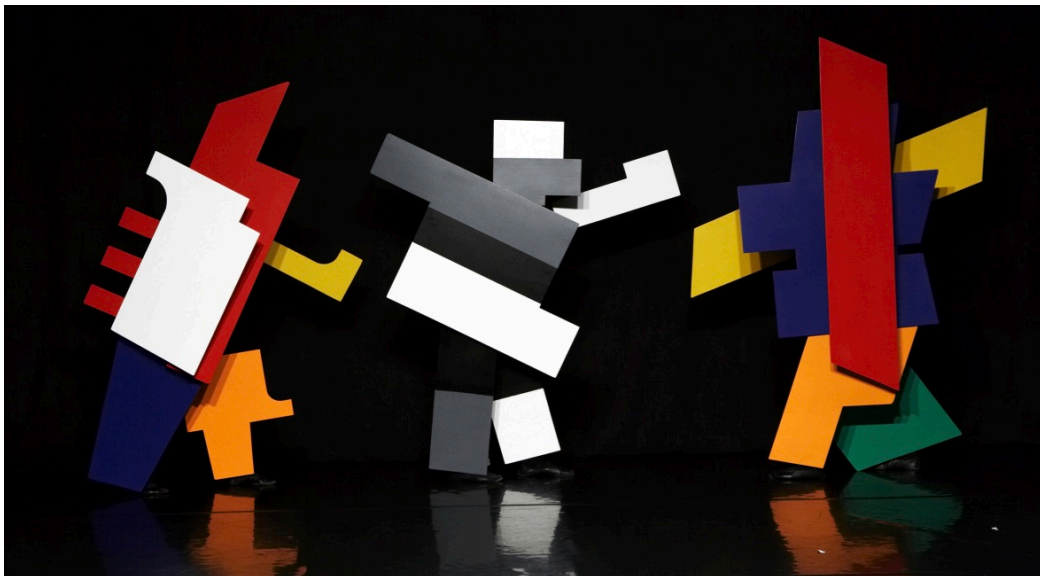


Figure 2: THEATER DER KLÄNGE's new adaptation of "The Mechanical Ballet" by Kurt Schmidt.
Dancers: Laura Wissing, Darwin Diaz, Jacqueline Fischer. Photo by Oliver Eltinger, 2009.
THEATER DER KLÄNGE's Production, Düsseldorf, 1987.

Transferring the slimmer forms “head-high” to plywood was one thing. The other thing was to now develop the ideal attachment points and a fastening system so that dancers of different heights could wear these figurines as well. The whole thing dances, but everything’s still *wooden* – in the truest sense of the word; however, one can immediately see when a figurine is standing and moving correctly and when the effect collapses immediately upon itself. Which music? We need a *répétiteur* as musician/composer who can improvise directly together with the dancers.

Every ensemble member is allowed to try any figurine that is painted in colour. Every idea is allowed on condition that the figurine parts are “correctly” allocated, so that the windmill, mechanical being, locomotive and also “the black-white-grey dancer” and “the small one” appear correctly as figurines. The “small one” can be danced only when squatting. Hanno Spelsberg as pianist/composer is the correct choice here and improvises – just like the dancers – back and forth between classical excerpts, jazz borrowings and freely atonal music. Some of our dancers have no idea where to start with this form of total masking of one’s own body. For this form of theatre, one needs a type of actor completely free of vanity. The figurines take everything from the actors that actually made them want to become actors: their face, their voice, their body. The figurines seem to degrade the actors into moving muscular skeletons of abstract surfaces which are vaguely reminiscent of people but have the shortcoming of no mimicry, no expressive eyes, no mouth. Envisioned by Heinrich von Kleist and Edward Gordon Craig, the “Übermarionette” (superpuppet) becomes reality with these more two- than three-dimensional figurines of “The Mechanical Ballet.”

But the “puppeteer” does not stand over, behind or under the figurine, he IS the embodiment of the figurine. In addition to that, according to our dancer Jacqueline Fischer,⁵ who later became choreographer for our productions of “The Triadic Ballet” and “The Lacquer Ballet”, dancers usually use coordinated, symmetrical, organic movements as a basis when improvising. The two dimensionalities of the figurines only allows for forward and backward physical movements, also sometimes with straightened arms or legs, as the individual parts of the figurine partially make knees and arm joints superfluous. In the case of the “dancer figurine”, the dancer wears the supposed upper body of the figurine strapped to that dancer’s bent right arm. Being strapped onto body parts and extremities, these surfaces furthermore isolate their own movements from each other and attain “logical” motions only as a result of successive movement sequences. This contradicts almost every existing type of dance training.

The dancers cannot see themselves in the figurines, a mirror-check is not possible. They are dependent on the direct feedback from the choreographer observing them and at most can also check themselves during subsequent watching of videos. Nevertheless, the dancers do have possibilities regarding physical means of expression. The basic rules of body language apply here: speed of movements, poses, a bent or upright walk, stride, run, dance. Bows, pronounced gestures, from soft or hard contact to kicks, and dismissive recoils and cautious approaches. Our version of "The Mechanical Ballet" (fig. 2) presents a complete catalogue of such forms of body language. Our adaptation in 1987 was a 40-minute ballet in five acts; from the first tender colour-form recognitions in the wings to figures which seemed at first mechanical then became more fluid and organic as the ballet progressed, concluding in the fifth act with all figurines uniting to almost a *ballet d'action* interrelating with each other. During the applause, a final, short staged moment of revealing the figurine parts which had been worn. Kurt Schmidt's mere 15-minute "The Mechanical Ballet" in the twenties enjoyed only four performances in Jena, Weimar and Berlin. Our continuing adaptation is still touring even today and has been seen and heard in almost 200 performances in more than 60 cities worldwide. Shortly before his death in 1989, Kurt Schmidt, then sitting in a wheelchair, was able to attend our adaptation, a performance at the Stadttheater Gera. After we informed the public who was sitting there in the back of the hall, everyone turned around and gave him a standing ovation!

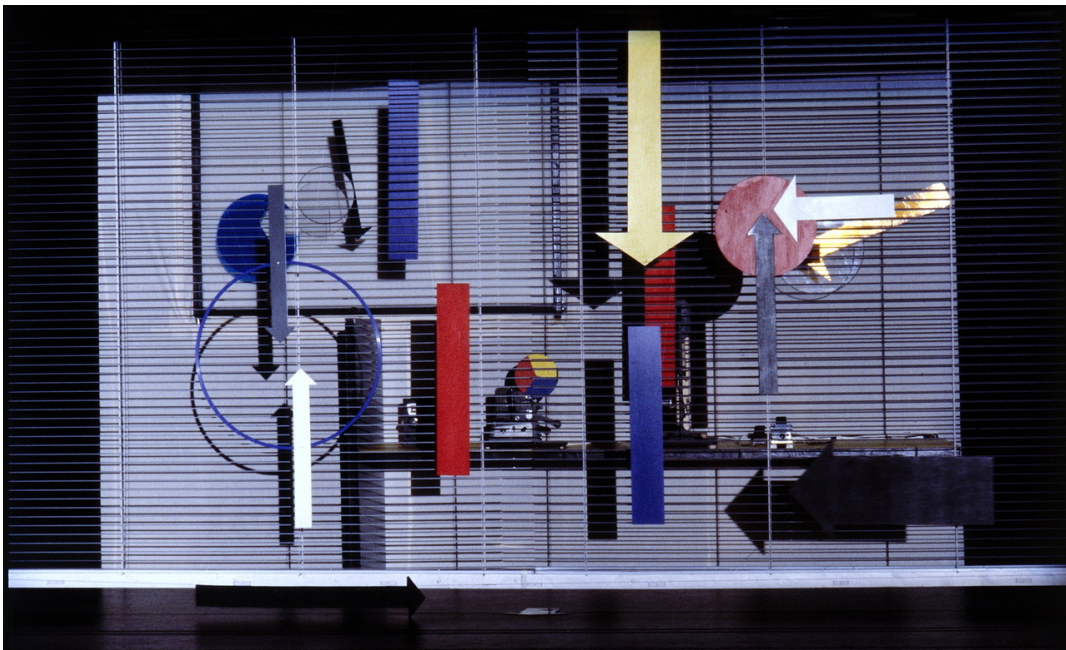


Figure 3: THEATER DER KLÄNGE's production of "The Mechanical Eccentricity" (1987) ⁶ based on the (up until 1987) Moholy-Nagy's unrealised sketch. Photo by Sascha Hardt.

The Mechanical Eccentricity

Directly after finishing one's studies, one feels free of all boundaries and takes on every type of challenge – even right up to the excessive self-overestimation of one's own abilities. As a newly formed ensemble, not only did we want to breathe new life into a dance piece with "The Mechanical Ballet" – which had previously been regarded as undanceable. No, a second part had to be developed to fill an evening programme, one based on the (up until 1987) unrealised sketch "Mechanical Eccentricity" (fig. 4-5), which the Bauhaus master László Moholy-Nagy had published in the book "Die Bühne im Bauhaus" in the twenties.

The intended actor in the piece is what Moholy-Nagy called a "Menschmechanik" (human being mechanism); a sketch of a dancer lying on the floor. Otherwise the instructions for action consists of such keywords as "falling arrows, lamellae opening, circles rotating, electro-apparatuses" as well as "movie on a screen turned backwards" or "Clownerie". The graphic sketch in the same book can be read from top to bottom like a musical score and sets the stage design as well as 4 layers of action in the form of "form and movement on the main stage", "form and movement on a second foldable stage that can be lifted up to become the screen" and "coloured light" as well as "sound/music". If one takes the score and the keyword catalogue as seriously as one does graphic notated scores by contemporary composers, a concrete enactment can be developed.

Of course, the graphic *crescendi* and fragmented notes are only tonal hints and material – the same as the sketches of the actual objects and materials. There is just as little staging instruction regarding the "clownery" in the original as any choreography for the "Menschmechanik". In Jürgen Steger⁷ we found a stage designer that was able to both design and make actual objects from the Moholy sketches inside of a scaffolding cage and to equip them with cords, pulleys and tackle blocks in such a way that they could be moved from the sides so that the players were invisible to the public. Our ensemble of musicians and dancers became puppeteers for this piece. But instead of puppets, it was the objects that were moved – brought to dance through oscillations and in part electro-mechanically driven. I did an electronical interpretation of Moholy's "Ton-Kolonne" in 1987 which culminated in a 33-minute audio tape composition. After approximately 20 minutes of pure "Aktionskonzentration" (concentrated action), a clown emerges in the midst of it all and "ousts" from the stage all objects still present, in order to make place for a "Menschmechanik" performed by a dancer.



Figure 4: Screenshots from the THEATER DER KLÄNGE video: "The Mechanical Eccentricity" (1987)⁸ based on the (up until 1987) Moholy-Nagy's unrealised sketch. "Menschmechanik": Rainer Behr.

Since in 1987 we did not think ourselves capable of being able to interpret such a piece choreographically, Malou Airaudó⁹ developed an approximately 5-minute long choreography for one of our dancers. Our visiting performance with "Die mechanische Bauhausbühne" (The Mechanical Bauhaus Stage) at the German National Theatre Weimar in June 1989 is interesting in this context. We heard a marvellous reaction – otherwise never before had with this piece – in this sold-out 700-seat theatre for the two performances on the 28th and 29th of June 1989. Shortly before the clown appears on the stage, one sees a total of three wheels moving in a floating fashion on nylon threads. One of these 3 wheels drives on the stage floor, 1–2m away from the front edge of it. To make this possible, Jürgen Steger built a small electrically driven "carriage" on the back of this "wheel-object"; it got its power from two low-voltage contact wires placed on the floor. After the wheels were ousted from the stage by the clown, the stage was clear and the "Menschmechanik" dancer enters the stage from the rear. The solo dance develops from movements which at first seem mechanical, then become increasingly more fluid, thus obviously freeing itself from the solidification, and becomes organic. That had been the explicit intention for the development of this choreography, as we wanted the dancing human at the end of this piece to appear as the crowning glory of the "Aktionskonzentration" and not – as Moholy had intended – in order to show how little this "dance" can keep pace with an "Aktionskonzentration" with electro-mechanical means on a "modern stage." After the dancer frees himself as it were from the "Menschmechanik" in a virtuous dance, he sinks onto the floor and caresses it, gets up and then very slowly approaches the audience. While he walks, changes in lighting turn him into a shadow figure in front of the still illuminated stage, which also slowly becomes darker, thus explaining the final effect of the piece. In this closing image of the human being walking towards the public, the dancer has to walk across the two electric wires on the floor. Exactly at this moment, the GDR audience was completely silent, captivated, and softly began to applaud as the dancer crossed the wires and moved on to the forestage.

TRIAS – The Triadic Ballet

Already in 1988 we wanted to directly continue with “The Triadic Ballet” but had to wait until 2014, for the rights of Oskar Schlemmer’s works to become public domain. In the meantime, activity with Schlemmer was only possible with interpretations of his texts. In “Figur und Klang im Raum” (Figure and Sound in Space) (1993), as well as when later continuing in our productions “HOEReographien” (HEAReographics) (2005) and “SUITE intermediale” (2010) we worked from the texts of Oskar Schlemmer’s “Mensch und Kunstfigur” (Man and Art Figure) and “Figur und Raum” (Figure and Space) in order to develop our own forms (fig. 5-6) of the continuation of this stage philosophy.

“The human being is the focus of the stage action.” This basic principle determined the appearance of music and scenography of moving images in the progression of our work. The stage was empty save for a projection area and sensors installed in the stage in the form of cameras and microphones. If the stage remained empty, this experimental spatial setup remained dead and thus also mute. If a human being entered this special space, which was also the allocated observed stage for the audience, this space livened up with sound and image.



Figure 5: TRIAS – “The Triadic Ballet” by Oskar Schlemmer.
Dancers: Blue (Darwin Diaz), Yellow (Elisa Marschall), Red (Phaedra Pisimisi).
Photo by Kai Pohler. THEATER DER KLÄNGE’s Production, Düsseldorf, 2015.



Figure 6: "Figur und Klang im Raum" (Figure and Sound in Space) by J.U. Lensing.
Trio: Yellow (Kerstin Hörner), Red (Jacqueline Fischer), Blue (Heiko Seidel).
Photo by Sascha Hardt. THEATER DER KLÄNGE's Production, Düsseldorf, 1993.

The images in this case were obviously increasingly transformed real-time representations of the people moving on the stage. The sound to be heard was obviously created directly by the movement of the dancers and modulated. We were able to refine this form, the light-space modulation, through the motion of the dancers – so much so that we could definitively bring together figurine dance and its resulting light-space modulation in “The Lacquer Ballet” (2018/19).

Even in 2014, when the Bavarian State Ballet came before us with a revival of “The Triadic Ballet” (the Berlin 1977 version by Gerhard Bohner with the music of Hans-Joachim Hespos), this was all the more reason to finally risk our own interpretation. The “state” Berlin/Munich adaptation breathes the spirit of the classical ballet, combined with a concept of modern dance and “Avant-Garde music” as was typical for the seventies. Seeing this version in 2014 again, a double anachronism was revealed: One sees and hears the seventies interpretation of a ballet idea from the twenties. It is risky to offer an independent alternative of this “state-supported” commission being performed by a state ballet. One readily forgets that the Bauhaus ensemble in the twenties – but also independent dancers Schlemmer sometimes worked with at the Bauhaus – were by no means academically trained nor were state ballet dancers. On the contrary: It was Bauhaus art students or interested guest dancers and the professional Stuttgart dancer pair of Burger and Hötzel from which Schlemmer got the order for the development of the figurines; as initiating artists, they were so dependent on fees and credit that already after the premiere of “The Triadic Ballet”, a quarrel ensued which resulted in the dancer pair immediately confiscating the figurines that they had danced. Schlemmer then reproduced these in a second version for later shows, which explains the partially different appearances of the very same figurine on various photos.

And especially Schlemmer’s Rhenish roots played an important role in his struggle with his personal definition as an artist. In one of his diary entries,¹⁰ Schlemmer spoke of having two souls living in his breast: the one consisted of a melancholic side, which he explained came from his Swabian mother and that drove him over and over into secluded work in his studio, and the other a joyous, expressive side which he explained came from his Rhenish father, a man who was also active as a dialect and song poet. Especially the “stage hog” Oskar Schlemmer – a planner of celebrations, a stage class director, a dancer in “The Triadic Ballet” and completely open as a musical clown on the Bauhaus stage – can only be explained if one knows how suddenly businessmen, doctors, priests and even teachers shamelessly (but also humorously) can turn themselves into carnival orators, clowns, fools and laughing stocks during the celebrated days of the Rhenish Carnival. Being a native Rhinelander, this is a side not foreign to me, although I

myself would if at all possible refrain from acting as a clown in front of my university colleagues and students... It requires safe surroundings or being within the framework of carnival festivities and the confidence that one would not be considered a joke beyond this stage performance, for example when teaching. Both were obviously present with Schlemmer and in the Bauhaus of the twenties.



Figure 7: "The Cello-Clown" (Kai Bettermann) by Oskar Schlemmer.
Photo by Kai Pohler. THEATER DER KLÄNGE, 2015.

Our approach to "The Triadic Ballet" was first of all the graphic sketch that was printed multiple times in different colour versions. The research on the figurines that were actually realised was more difficult. The first address was Stuttgart, where the original figurines are exhibited; however, museum visitors can only view them from a distance. So, one can only see very little of the detail with which they were manufactured, what material mix they have, and especially what systems they are equipped with on the inside for wearing. Furthermore, it is the rigid figurines that are usually exhibited in Stuttgart, not the light and more flexible ones.

The historical photos reveal a surprising discrepancy regarding the supposed rigidity of the figurines. This is further reinforced in the TV version by the Bayrische Rundfunk from 1969/70, as almost all of the moving figurines in this film are masked and have broken movements. Both versions – the TV version by Margarete Hasting and the stage version by Gerhard Bohner – stress this perception of “The Triadic Ballet”. The historical photos – and also, by the way, a preserved “comical” film sequence with Oskar Schlemmer as a dancer from the twenties – show something different. There is a dancer wearing a rigid sweeping skirt, an almost transparent silk upper top (no bra), tights and pointe shoes, similar to the dancer pair of Burger and Hötzel as the two figurines “Zylindermann” (cylinder man) and “Glockenpuppe” (bell puppet). The trunk of the man and the hips of the woman are restricted in movement by the rigid projecting forms; the rest of the body is, however, in light quilted costumes, and so is therefore much more flexible indeed. Likewise, the powerful cylindrical skirt at the beginning of the first act as well as for the white dancer, and also for the figurines for the “Turks”, one of which Schlemmer himself danced – whilst making music with cymbals. Only rudimentary sources can be found for the music as well. A table with composer names for every scene, sometimes complete with references to the form of musical pieces – never as to precise pieces. If one knows that Schlemmer himself was able to play piano and could access some musicians amongst the students, one gets an idea as to why he stayed open concerning music selection. Small ensembles, when necessary only piano with musical notation that was not highly difficult and thus could be played at any time.

If “The Triadic Ballet” can be associated with contemporary composers of the twenties, then at most with Paul Hindemith, who in this regard worked on some notation from “The Triadic Ballet” in a version for the mechanical organ, composed especially for the Donaueschingen Festival. Schlemmer was just as enthusiastic about this possibility of working with a contemporary composer as he was disappointed about the resulting music – because he found it often seemed too undancelike. It was for this reason that we chose the development of new music in 2014 for our version of “The Triadic Ballet”, just as for “The Mechanical Ballet”, again a trio ensemble. This time in the form of piano, cello and drums – in 1987 we had decided on piano, trombone and drums for “The Mechanical Ballet” ensemble. Thomas Wansing, who had been our pianist for “The Mechanical Ballet” since the early nineties, was a pianist/composer that was able to work with Schlemmer’s composer notes, was knowledgeable in the jazz and ballet music of the twenties, knew rhythm composition techniques and was a master at directly improvising on the piano.

As a practising ballet *répétiteur*, he was also perfect for our rehearsal work and little by little, he composed new ideas from initial improvisational ideas – again spontaneously from improvisation suggestions by the dancers. Contemporary dance is also partially acrobatic, very much incorporating the floor as a body surface, and it does not stop at press lifts, it uses lifts in the form of contact improvisation, which can sometimes appear weightless. All of these qualities are extremely difficult to realise in rigid, unwieldy costumes. And exactly that was the challenge for our dancers – who were more contemporary than classically-trained – and the choreographer Jacqueline Fischer. How does one outsmart the figurines, how does one make them do things one hardly believes possible, how are acrobatics possible in spite of the bulkiness, how do the lifts work, how does one use the partially postulated genderlessness of some of the figurines to play on the androgyny? And – how does one perform with the breakable expectation that these figurines, for all intents and purposes, have the grace of a puppet, robot or mechanism?



Figure 8: "The Triadic Ballet" by Oskar Schlemmer.

Dancers: Danilo Cardoso and Phaedra Pisimisi.

Photo by Kai Pohler. THEATER DER KLÄNGE's Production, Düsseldorf, 2017.

Schlemmer closed his "The Triadic Ballet" with the figure of the so-called "Der Abstrakte" (the abstract figure), after he presented the cheerful-burlesque yellow, the festive pink and the sublime-heroic black act¹¹. Both seventies interpretations did not negate the figure "Der Abstrakte" but constructed it as the climax of their interpretations.

In our version, we noted that our performance of the escape from the figurines, the dancing against the puppet-like rigidity, and the music – which also increasingly released itself from the dance – had to lead to a different consequence. Three of our four interpreters of our version, stuck in alternating figurines for over 80 minutes, show up at the end in conic figurines reduced to the primary colours blue, red and yellow and, in the course of this final dance, they free themselves from even these last surrounding wrappers of colour and form to emerge, as it were, naked. Here they give their faces, their mimics, their bodies back to the audience after 80 minutes of pupation. As "naked" bodies, they repeat different instances of movement and lifts from our "The Triadic Ballet", casting a very different effect without the enveloping figurines, however. At the end, while Schlemmer's, Hasting's, and Bohner's "Der Abstrakte" strides, twists while hopping, waves and swings a club, our dancers rid themselves of every extension and deformation from their bodies and are actually abstract in their physicality – but also graceful in their beauty. A conciliatory moment felt by the audiences of the 21st century and pointed out in the reviews.

In 2014/15, for lack of money, we were still having to work with figurines that only partially achieved the quality of the originals. Support from the NRW fund "bauhaus100 im Westen" in 2017/18 facilitated a further qualitative new construction of the figurines for our production "TRIAS – The Triadic Ballet", this time strongly orientated at the realised originals. We performed this renewed figurine version in 2017 within the framework of the double programme "bauhaus ballette" (bauhaus ballets) in Düsseldorf. This version resulted in the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation ordering 8 replicas of these figurines from us as exhibition figurines for their new Bauhaus Museum in Dessau.

The Lacquer Ballet

This ballet is the wallflower of Schlemmer's stage works: Not realised in the Bauhaus, danced by 6 ladies of a company sports group, created in 1941 during the "artistic exile" within the *Farbwerke Herberts* in Wuppertal and, according to tradition, just more than 4 minutes long: A striding dance to a sarabande by G. F. Händel. After interpretations from Gerhard Bohner, Cesc Gelabert and Debra McCall, should one on the occasion of "100 Years of Bauhaus" once again re-examine Schlemmer's "Bauhaus Dances"? Or is the Wuppertal "The Lacquer Ballet" in specific worth looking at? Wuppertal is closer to us than Dessau, and when one finds out that Schlemmer had experimented, practiced material research, taught young people and created pictures for them (completely atypical for him) in the Wuppertal colour laboratory, then this engagement with the then new synthetic lacquer becomes interesting to us. Even more interesting is the fact that Kurt Herberts had engaged Karl (Cara) Schlemmer – the brother – for some weeks in Wuppertal, so that he could make the figurines together with Oskar. Cara – who had already together with Tut Schlemmer (and also Oskar) built the figurines for "The Triadic Ballet"! As always there were graphic sketches in colour and some black & white photos, as well as sparse references to choreography and music.

Reviving a barely 4-minute dance is no justification for an evening-filling programme. Dealing with material experimentation in forms and colours is. And then there was a note in his diaries that became our guiding principle for our creation: "I believe that a painter with few colours and some corresponding forms would have to be able to demonstrate his most personal work – unequivocal, one-of-a-kind, unique. I would like an effervescent painting, born of colour, of shadow and light, of structures and laws which contain the secret and realise again and again the inner story."¹²

Through our engagement with electronic interaction possibilities of video and music, we were able to use the "Schlemmerian" colours and forms as "paintbrush and colour palette" for light paintings to be generated in real time on a canvas/screen. This takes place in our "The Lacquer Ballet", literally: A white canvas positioned on a painter's easel serves as a projection screen for the colour and form painting, projected by a video beamer, but "painted" by dancers – filmed live – with their intensely coloured and clearly shaped figurines in motion. Since the electronic music can sometimes be modulated by actions in the stage area, this is also a live-interaction-action painting in which the borders of genres

between dance, music, video and art performance become fluid. Furthermore, contemporary dance is no stranger to the investigative, playful handling of materials, forms and colours; it will here become an essential component of the most different dance-action scenes with focus on the exploration of the material, out of which only gradually figurines are then formed. Reports about Schlemmer's lacquer experiments in the *Herberts-Farblabor* inspired the dancers and the choreographer to transfers in scenic and dance realisations. The first complete figurine, the "Segelmädchen" (sail girl), one not realised by Schlemmer, appears with us only after approx. half of the time the piece has been running. It takes a further 10 minutes for the second figurine, the "Fächerfigurine" (fan figurine) and then a third, "Scheibenfigurine" (disc figurine), to join, thus forming the first figurine duet. Schmidt's concept of "The Mechanical Ballet" gradually presents the 5 figurines that, however, are also to be seen quickly in duo and trio constellations, before becoming a quintet in the final fifth act.

The order of the in total 18 figurines in "The Triadic Ballet" – as soloists, duets and trios in the two interpretations from the sixties and seventies – follows Schlemmer's graphic plan in 3 acts and 12 scenes. In our version there are only 17 figurines, plus the 3 reduced in the final scene, in the aforementioned 12 scenes in 3 acts. But even this change for the final scene, as well as our addition of the two musical clowns, points out the possibility of an extension. The programme in "The Lacquer Ballet" is as follows: The 5 acts are identified by caesuras which one of our interpreters fills with 4 texts from Schlemmer's "Briefe und Tagebücher" (letters and diaries) with small playful actions. It is only through the set design of the canvas/screen on the easel that the public is both in the theatre as well as in the imaginary artist studio. Schlemmer speaks to the audience, paints and experiments with colours and forms, consciously allowing them to run and mix, paints that over again and shapes his figurines from small balls, beer coasters, spheres. In reality, he and his brother had just a month available to them in 1941 in which to condense over 25 year of professional experience as a painter, sculptor, thespian, dancer, compere, clown and author.

This artist, whose texts show to be a thoughtful and melancholic human being, while in other phases a carefree, sometimes naive, saucy, shameless bigshot, seems so very different than his successors and present-day estate administrators. He is the type of artist that is so often invoked in politics and science: childlike nature, uncomfortable, incorrect, solely committed to his own work, a thorn in society's side – even though it doesn't really hurt, it only itches. The price for this invocation incarnate, which Schlemmer had to pay in his day.

Banned from teaching, exhibiting – earning a living as house-painter and also as a camouflage painter... Oskar Schlemmer earned his requiem and we have attempted to compose it as showing a kindred spirit. Our trademark and at the same time our shortcoming as an ensemble difficult to classify into genres, is our strength here: If you stand between all chairs, you have the ability to move freely since no one has committed you to sit down on one chair only!



Figure 9: "The Lacquer Ballet" by Oskar Schlemmer.
Dancer: Tuan Ly. Photo by Oliver Eltinger.
THEATER DER KLÄNGE's Production, Düsseldorf, 2019.

Author Biography

Jörg U. Lensing, composer and director.
Artistic Director at the THEATER DER KLÄNGE (D) & Professor for
"Sound Design" at the Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

Prof. J. U. Lensing (*1960) studied composition at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen from 1981–1987. During this time he founded the series of concerts "Neue Töne" and the ensemble "KUNST-STOFF". First music theatre composition "Ich will zu Dir – Ach komm doch" for two dancers. In 1986 he won the "Hochschulpreis" at the Folkwang University of the Arts. 1987: exams in composition. From 1987–1989 he studied (post-graduate) "New Music-Theatre" with Mauricio Kagel at the University of Music and Dance in Cologne. In 1987 he founded the THEATER DER KLÄNGE in Düsseldorf. Since 1987 he has continued to work as a director, choreographer and composer for theatre music for until now 27 productions of this theatre; several compositions of incidental music for theatres and movies. Since 1990: film compositions and sound design for nearly all the films of German film director Lutz Dammbeck. 1992: guest lecturer in drama direction at the Bauhaus Dessau. Since 1996: Professor for "Sound Design" at the Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts. www.theater-der-klaenge.de

Notes

1. Walter Gropius in his speech "Art and Technology – A New Unity".
2. Facsimile reprint of the edition from 1925 (Verlag Florian Kupferberg, 1965).
3. Württembergischer Kunstverein, 05 May – 28 July 1968.
4. As recalled by the author, 1987.
5. Jacqueline Fischer is founding member of the THEATER DER KLÄNGE. She worked from 1987 to 2003 as a dancer and actress in numerous productions, and works as a choreographer since 2003. In addition to other Theater der Klänge pieces and her own works, she has choreographed "TRIAS – The Triadic Ballet", "The Lacquer Ballet", "HOREographien" "CODA" and "SUITE intermediale".
6. THEATER DER KLÄNGE: „Die mechanische Exzentrik“ (The Mechanical Eccentricity)
See the video at <https://theaterderklaenge.de/project/die-mechanische-bauhausbuehne/>
7. Jürgen Steger was our first stage designer at the THEATER DER KLÄNGE in the years 1987 to 1993 and created the sets for "Die mechanische Bauhausbühne", "Die barocke Maskenbühne", "Die Küche", "November 1918*1989" and "Figur und Klang im Raum". See the video at <https://theaterderklaenge.de/project/die-mechanische-bauhausbuehne/>
8. THEATER DER KLÄNGE: „Die mechanische Exzentrik“ (The Mechanical Eccentricity)
See the video at <https://theaterderklaenge.de/project/die-mechanische-bauhausbuehne/>
9. Malou Airaud was a dancer for many years in the core ensemble of the Tanztheater Wuppertal – Pina Bausch. In 1987 she also temporarily worked as a dance university lecturer for the dance department at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, where she later became professor and then head of the dance department. The solo choreography on behalf of the THEATER DER KLÄNGE was her premiere attempt as a choreographer after her long career as a dancer.
10. Oskar Schlemmer, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (München: Verlag Langen/Müller 1958).
11. From Thomas Betzwieser, "Zwischen Skizze und Derivat. Annäherung an Hindemiths Musik zu Oskar Schlemmers Triadischem Ballett (1926)", in *Hindemith-Jahrbuch* 37, 2009, pp. 48–82, here p. 50.
12. Oskar Schlemmer, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (München: Verlag Langen/Müller 1958).



"The Lacquer Ballet" by Oskar Schlemmer. Dancer: Cheng Cheng Hu.
Photo by Thomas von der Heiden. THEATER DER KLÄNGE's Production, Düsseldorf, 2019.