





# S K E N È

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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS \*

## A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*

Abstract

Vernon Lee's short narrative piece *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915a) was written after the sudden and shocking collapse of a long period of peace that had prevailed in Europe for forty-four years. In the text, Lee studies the developing war not as it is fought on the battlefields, but as it penetrates, occupies and dominates the civilian mind. How, she asks, does the slaughter become filled with idealism? How does a war that is so obviously catastrophic engage the best in people, and reduce it to partisan savagery? A site-specific and bilingual adaptation of *The Ballet of the Nations* was performed at the Villa il Palmerino – Lee's home for forty years – in May 2019. The international cast was directed by Greek actor and director Angeliki Papoulia (*The Lobster, The Miracle of the Sargasso Sea*), and by dancer and choreographer Federica Parretti. My paper will consider the genesis of this project, the relationship to its original text, and the political implications of its performance.

KEYWORDS: site-specific; promenade performance; pacifism; dance and ritual; political performance

SATAN/SATANA: Welcome! Benvenuti! It is time, to re-open the Theatre of the West. Adesso, è arrivato il tempo di riaprire il teatro dell'Occidente.

In August 2017, actor and director Angeliki Papoulia arrived at the Villa il Palmerino, Florence, for a holiday. Papoulia felt an immediate connection to the house, and to her hosts Federica Parretti and Stefano Vincieri. Parretti and Vincieri shared the origins of the house with Papoulia, describing how Parretti's grandmother had bought the villa in 1936, from the estate of author Vernon Lee. Lee was born Violet Paget, in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, France on October 14, 1856 to British ex-pat parents. Her formative years were spent between Italy and Germany, only visiting England in the summer of 1862. Lee's fluency in four languages (Italian, French, German and English) equipped her with an international perspective. She was also politically engaged, an ardent antivivisectionist, a supporter of the women's movement, and a staunch pacifist. Lee took a *nom de plume* in order to be taken seriously as a writer, at first the gender-neutral H. P. Vernon Lee, which soon changed to Vernon Lee. After travelling extensively throughout Europe, the peripatetic lifestyle of Lee's family ended when they settled in Florence in 1873, and in the Villa il Palmerino, in April

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1889 – when Lee was thirty-three – which would continue to be Lee’s home for the rest of her life. Papoulia felt an interconnectedness with Lee through Palmerino, finding the spirit of the place – or, as Lee terms it, the *genius loci* – inspiration for a potential project. Parretti and Vincieri introduced Papoulia to Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915a) which had special significance for Parretti, as this brought together her own dance training and choreographic talents with her admiration and passion for Lee. From this serendipitous meeting, the project to stage the first theatrical performance of Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations* began, ending with the production at the Villa two years later in May 2019. This paper will briefly discuss the origin of the project, the choices made in the production of the piece, and the relevance to a local Florentine contemporary audience..

### 1. *The Ballet of the Nations to Satan the Waster*

The inception of Lee’s piece is rooted in the onslaught of the First World War. She was visiting friends on her annual summer break to England when war broke out, forcing her to remain in England until 1919. This extended stay in her birth nation took a tremendous toll on Lee, both personally and publicly. It was during this period, at Whitsuntide in the first year of the war, and whilst staying with the Quaker Ford family at Adel Grange in Leeds, that Lee wrote the allegorical satire *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (Lee 1920, vii).

Originally, *The Ballet* was written as a polemical prose piece to be read aloud at a meeting of the *Union of Democratic Control* at a small theatre in Chelsea.<sup>1</sup> It was such a success with the members, that Constance Smedley Armfield arranged for a second reading to be performed by Lee at the Margaret Morris theatre on King’s Road, London (Brockington). Smedley Armfield discusses Lee’s recital of the piece in her 1929 memoir *Crusaders*:

Vernon Lee read [*The Ballet*] with extraordinary dramatic skill: her great desire was to have this illustrated and published, but she felt there was no chance of a specific publication at this time. We however, invited several publishers to the Margaret Morris Theatre, and they were so carried away by Vernon Lee’s rendering and the audience’s enthusiasm that the next morning three offers came, my husband was commissioned to illustrate it, and Chatto and Windus published a most beautiful volume (233).

Smedley Armfield’s husband, Maxwell Armfield, created a series of stylised illustrations depicting Lee’s allegory. *The Nation* described it as a “grim presentation of the horrors of war”, yet this was not depicted in Armfield’s Hellenic style images, but in Lee’s prose (An. 1915, 724). She vehemently believed the war to be “all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel”, “needless and senseless”, and an act that could only have been staged by “the legendary Power of Evil” (Lee 1920, vii). *The Ballet* provided

<sup>1</sup> The Union of Democratic Control was a group formed in 1914, who were opposed to military influence in government. Lee continued to be active in the UDC, penning ‘The Democratic Principle and International Relations’ for inclusion in member Charles Roden Buxton’s collection *Towards a Lasting Settlement* (See Lee 1915b).

a public critique of the war from her standpoint, arguing against the growth of patriotism, and the terrifying violence of all sides. Most importantly, Lee presented pacifism as a worthy position in the face of this.

After the end of the war, Lee reworked *The Ballet of the Nations* into dramatic form and it was published as the centrepiece of *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy* (1920), which was subsequently re-issued in 1930 with a new preface. *The Ballet* and its subsequent iterations were dedicated to Nobel Prize winning author and lifelong pacifist Romain Rolland (1866-1944). Lee stated this was in *fraternellment*, suggesting a brotherhood of thought that was both personal, and, rather courageously in the first years of the Great War, public. The *Theatre Arts Magazine* reviewed both authors' works in 1921 and contended that Lee's *Satan* and Rolland's *Liuli* were "the most impressive comment on the war to date" (An. 1921, 85-6). *Satan* was, as *The New Statesman* noted, a "classic of pacifist literature" (An. 1925, 718). Also integral to the text's history is the translation of *The Ballet* into French by the pacifist journal *Les Tablettes*, which serialised the work in 1917, with bold, monochrome woodcut illustrations by Frans Masereel. The dramaturgical script for Papoulia and Parretti's *The Ballet of the Nations* was developed as a response to the many iterations of Lee's war allegory. The transition of Lee's text from public performance and short prose piece during the first years of the war, to a script in 1920, suggested to the team that further modifications to the narrative were justified, in order to situate the work in the current period.

Following Papoulia and Parretti's research, and that of their team on the current critical works on the text, the decision was made that a classical staging would be inappropriate. Although throughout each iteration of the work Lee refers to *The Theatre of the West*, it is clarified in her notes to *Satan the Waster* that it is her wish that the Dancing of the Nations must not be viewed by the audience:

*Author's Note for Stage Managers (other than Satan)*

*(In the event of this play being performed, it is the author's imperative wish that no attempt be made at showing the Dancing of the Nations. The stage upon the stage must be turned in a manner that nothing beyond the footlights, the orchestra and the auditorium shall be visible to the real spectators, only changing illumination which accompanies the Ballet making its performance apparent. Similarly, in accordance with Satan's remarks . . . none of the music must be audible, except the voice and the drum of Heroism. Anything beyond this would necessarily be hideous, besides drowning or interrupting the dialogue.) (57).*

Furthermore, she stipulates that the "stage upon the stage" on which the Nations dance, must not be visible. The dancing Nations, as narrated in Lee's *Ballet*, is violent and bloody:

Yet dance they did, lopping each other's limbs and blinding one another with spirits of blood and pellets of human flesh. And as they appeared and disappeared in the moving wreaths of fiery smoke, they lost more of their original shape (12).

The combination of the Lee's stage directions with the complexity of portraying the violence provided a conundrum for *The Ballet's* production team. The horrific vio-

lence and gore must not be portrayed, but suggested, and this difficulty was avoided in part by the location of the performance.

## 2. Staging / *La villa*

For the production team the villa was an integral space for the performance; not only as a venue, but due to the house's connection with the text. Lee's anti-nationalistic narrative cannot be disconnected from her forced stay in Great Britain, her *home* nation, her inability to return to Florence, and to her home proper. The performance and the site-specific dramaturgy was created with the possibilities of Palmerino in mind, and despite the changes made to the structure of the work and the adaptation of *The Ballet of the Nation* into a new bi-lingual script, the connection of Lee to the villa ensured her spirit was still present.

Parretti and Vincieri had discovered that the villa and its gardens had already been used by Lee as a theatrical space – the Teatro Rustico del Palmerino – for the performance of Carlo Gozzi's *Augelin Belverde* on May 17, 1900.<sup>2</sup> The production of *The Ballet* at Lee's home then felt entirely fitting. The decision to enact *The Ballet* in the gardens of Palmerino ensured that the audience was significantly bigger than if it had been performed inside the house. The text was split into four scenes, with the audience moving around the villa in promenade theatre fashion in four stages: the courtyard, the wall, the stone altar and the field. The plan was to take the audience on both an emotional and physical journey, through a succession of well-defined external rooms.

The viewers enter the villa's courtyard through a large gate: the private space is now made public. Standing in an area of the property which must have welcomed Lee more times than can be counted, the audience waits patiently for the first scene to unfold. Two actors – playing Satan and Death – appear, and from the crowd they draw out the company of *The Orchestra of the Passions*, who will accompany the dance. Satan – from his privileged position inside the villa – looks down onto the courtyard and begins to orate to those below, like a dictator to his subjects. Both Papoulia and Parretti had envisaged an androgynous Satan, a divine being who was masculine and feminine in equal measure. Alessio Montagnani was cast in the role, due to his ability to embody a fluid sexuality. With Montagnani's seductiveness, Satan was universally attractive and thus, able to corrupt his audience on their theatrical journey around the villa. Death, played by Elisa Barucchieri, verged on the tragi-comic, and moved with reckless unpredictability. Both characters needed to be ahistorical, so production chose costumes that were utilitarian and timeless, which did not situate the performance in any particular historical period.

The Orchestra, formed by thirteen members of the artistic community involved with Associazione Culturale il Palmerino (and one beautiful dog named Tilly), are the driving force behind Lee's *Ballet*. They are the allegorical representation of the

<sup>2</sup> An invitation to the performance, currently at the Archivio Dazzi-Cini, San Marcello, was included in the exhibition accompanying the performance: *Vernon Lee e il Teatro delle Passioni: Firenze, Arte e Politica* at Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, May 29 – June 5, 2019.

emotions that drive war and violence. The three systems of human thought as defined by Freud in "Totem and Taboo" (Freud 2001, 77) are in evidence here: 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" (Lee 1915, 3), the religious mode by "Widow Fear with her nimble children, Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, fog-horns and that mediaeval tocsin-bell" (2), and the scientific with "Science and Organization" whose "gramophone and pianola brayed and strummed away unflaggingly" (5).

Each Passion was provided with an instrument (in the loosest sense of the word) by Death: sound designer Mauro Casappa created a soundscape from everyday items, a parmesan grater, a toy gun, wood blocks and an aluminium sheet. For the brief time the Orchestra play in the opening act they are discordant, the music is jarring and without any sense of rhythm, which is a source of delight for Satan and Death. Once the Orchestra have performed their symphony they leave via a gate in the wall of the courtyard. Satan welcomes the audience to the Theatre of the West with a flourish and waits. Papoulia's aim at this point was to allow the viewers autonomy to decide for themselves to follow the Orchestra or to remain and wait. And then, interestingly, to see which members of the audience led the way up the garden steps, and through the gate into the second scene, and which members followed.

### 3. The Wall / *Il muro*

Once the audience moves through the gate into a smaller outdoor courtyard space, they are able to take a seat. The external villa wall completely fills the field of their vision, and it is on this wall that the dance will take place, and the action shifts from the horizontal plane to the vertical. The wall of the production has metaphorical significance: it is a liminal space, creating a border around the *home* (both personal space and the homeland) and offering security and protection. It is these borders that are violated in the dance and also in war. The wall is also representative of the structures that have been built since the First World War (such as the Berlin Wall, and Donald Trump's USA-Mexico border wall) which aim to segregate and halt immigration.

In considering the staging of the Dance of the Nations, both Papoulia and Parretti had visualised the movement on the wall with the dancers both supported and limited by ropes, suspended from the walls of the Villa. The germ of this idea is the illustrations for the 1915 edition of *The Ballet*, in which Maxwell Armfield's Hellenic figures are entangled in fibres and wool (fig. 1) representing the threads of destiny cut by the Fates. Not only did Armfield's designs inspire the shift onto the wall, they also became a prominent feature in the production's design, including on the marketing materials in which superimposed red threads hang across the wall of Palmerino (fig. 2).

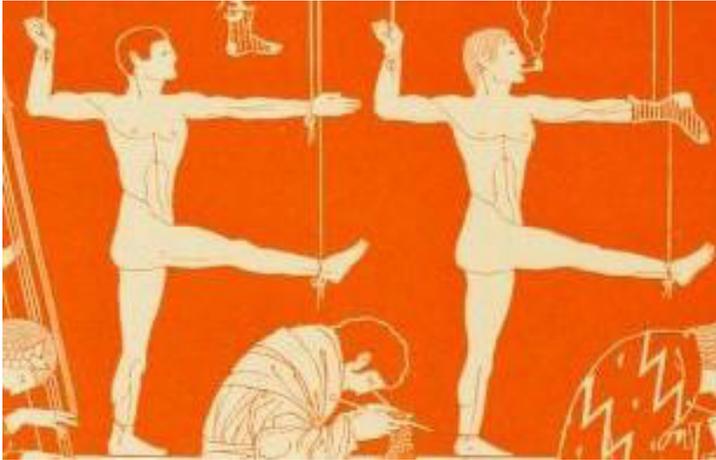


Figure 1. Small aspect of Armfield's illustrations for *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915)

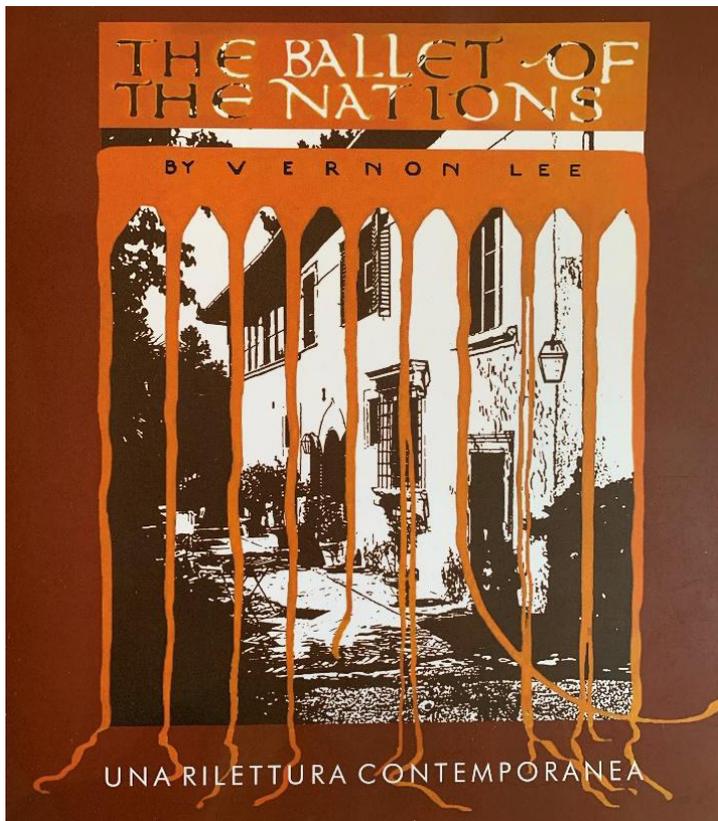


Figure 2. Cover illustration for the publication to accompany *The Ballet of the Nations* at il Palmerino. Design produced by Laura Manneschi and Paolo Zanasi.

Parretti's dance training was rooted in ballet, but she became interested in a contemporary methodology which embraced the ennoblement of primordial and natural movement: resulting in the emanation of a collective dance beyond technique and form, one linked to a harmony between body, movement and environment. Parretti's visualisation of Lee's *Dancing Nations*, built around the tenets of her own movement practice, found its echo in research produced by Blackburn-Daniels on Lee's influences: particularly, her interest in anthropological ritual and dance (87-125). Blackburn-Daniels suggests the possibility that Lee was influenced by Igor Stravinsky's and the *Ballets Russes'* infamous ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* or *The Rite of Spring* first performed in Paris on May 29, 1913. It is also possible that Lee knew *The Rite's* choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky, as Lee's close friend John Singer Sargent had sketched the dancer in 1911. There are resonances between *The Rite of Spring* and *The Ballet*, in particular *Le Sacrifice* in which 'The Chosen One', in this instance a young girl dances herself to death in the *Danse sacrale*. *The Rite of Spring* was, according to Pieter C. van den Toorn, inspired by primitivism, a "loosely aligned succession of imagined prehistoric rites . . . to depict a series of primitive ceremonies" (1987, 3). These thematic similarities – which align *The Rite* with *The Ballet* – suggest that Lee may have been influenced by news of the infamous performance, but, like the Audience of Nations in *The Ballet*, Lee was not privy to the shocking movements of the dancers or musical score of *The Rite*. Lee was almost certainly in Italy during the period of *The Rite's* performance.<sup>3</sup> Yet *The Rite's* director and impresario Diaghilev lived in Florence, and moved in the same circles as Lee (Buckle 1979, 233, 475).<sup>4</sup>

For Papoulia, the *avant garde* style of *The Rite* was influential in choreographing the movement of the Orchestra. Whilst the *Dancing Nations* moved across the wall, the Orchestra silently, and in strict formation, travelled between and through the open doors in the wall: each member producing an individual gesture (a grab of the chin, a twitch of the head) which identified them, yet connected them to the rest of the group. The Orchestra became a silent chorus, interjecting themselves physically between the spoken dialogue of Satan and Death, and the *Dancing of the Nations* mere feet above their heads. Once the scene has ended, the Orchestra and Nations leave the second space silently. Once more, the audience must decide whether to follow, or to wait.

During the third (and penultimate) scene, Satan continues to seduce his audience at a 'garden party'. The Orchestra hand out flutes of blood-red *aperitivo* and arbitrarily divide the audience into four groups using coloured stickers. Once the scene is finished, the actors and performers make their way to an overgrown field at the back of the property, where the destruction takes place.

#### 4. Agriculture

One fundamentally important aspect of *The Ballet's* scene setting was Lee's teleolo-

<sup>3</sup> Lee's letter dated May 25 – four days prior to the performance of *The Rite of Spring* – to Carlo Placci was sent from Palmerino.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Buckle discusses the friends Lee shared with, such as Maurice Baring and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

gy of the battlefield: the transformation from late-summer ‘half-harvested field’ to bomb-pocked warzone:

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. Until, little by little, the heavens, painted such a peaceful blue were blotted out by volumes of flame-lit smoke and poisonous vapours, rising and sinking, coming forward and receding like a stifling fog, but ever growing denser and more blinding, and swaying obedient to Death’s baton no less than did the bleeding Nations of his Corps-de-Ballet (n.n.).

The production used Lee’s narrative of the fertile agricultural land becoming the site of violence and destruction as a motif throughout the performance. Satan, Death, and the Orchestra utilise agricultural objects throughout, and the promenade of the audience during the play is a shift from the court-yarded villa, to the farmland at the rear of the property. The action was timed so that the Florentine sun would set behind the hills at the back of the field, and as the battle played out, day shifted into early evening. Papoulia and Parretti decided that, instead of the Nations wreaking havoc upon one another, they would destroy the field with petrol-powered hand-held strimming machines. The choreographed routine was loud and disorientating, and the audience members who were guided into the field by the Orchestra were surrounded by machine wielding dancers, the engines spewing petrol smoke, echoing Lee’s ‘stifling fog’ of the battlefield. Unlike the audience who were left ‘unprotected’, the Nations wore the correct safety clothing, including a face mask – a nod to Lee’s Nations who were “very properly helmeted” to protect the heads of state (Lee 1915, 16).

Parretti noted that at the end of the show there is a moment of great silence, and a feeling of bewilderment, which is, of course, tremendously important. Whilst the destruction of humankind is not represented physically, the fear, despair and violence are felt. Simultaneously, the sense of the ecological damage caused by warfare also resonates with contemporary audiences.

## 5. Final/e

Satan’s final line, “and thus the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing”, is apt both in respect of the continuing iterations of Lee’s text, and in the social and cultural contexts that make *The Ballet* resonate with contemporary audiences. Whilst we are not imminently facing warfare, the ongoing move to the political right in Western governments and the closing of borders means that Lee’s text and its message is still ongoing.

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