

NICHOLAS GEORGIADIS; *Paintings, Stage Designs (1955-2001)*
Evgenia Georgiadis; Edited by Robert Oresko. Published by Olkos, Athens,
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Reviewed by David Cockayne

This is a welcome and serious examination of the work of a theatre designer and painter whose work was central to the development of ballet from the late 50s onwards and who, in his parallel teaching of theatre design, influenced a generation of designers. He was unusual in that whilst the model became the prime creative tool for the theatre designer he continued to draw settings as an essential part of his design process, often exploring variations on the design in a strong, clear painterly manner in part related to his early training in architecture and painting.

The book is helpfully divided into four periods of his work described as The Painting Period (1955-1962), The Architectural Period (1962-971), Symbolism (1972-80) and Postmodernism (1981-2001). Whilst these were probably not so clearly articulated by Georgiadis they form a very useful basis on which to consider his work, especially when this is based, as it is here, on the relationship between his fine art and theatre design, a key element in the book's content and structure.

What is refreshing, and what makes this book an important step forward in writing about theatre design generally, is that it views its subject as that of a serious and committed visual artist rather than seeing design as simply a style based or craft focused part of the theatre making process. The more negative side of this is that whilst the main text, by his niece, Evgenia Georgiadis, is based on obvious affection and respect, it is unfortunate that its concentrated focus on Georgiadis tends to remove him from other influences, both those on him and his on others. It also records little of his process of work with his collaborators, such as Kenneth Macmillan and Rudolf Nureyev. It is known that the work with Macmillan was based on a position of mutual respect and complementary personal enthusiasms. It was not always an easy relationship, they could disagree strongly. Macmillan claimed that he had to ensure that Georgiadis showed him all his work, implying that he may not always have been the best editor or critic of his own designs. This is not unusual in creative designer/director relationships where the director will often explain and reveal the designer's work to the designer. Georgiadis clearly provided a strong element of psychology to the ballets which they created together, this must have been based both in his understanding of art and culture generally was probably also linked to the influence of his own fine art.

It is interesting that some early designs for drama (Bristol Old Vic, mid to late 50s) open up the potential for a relationship between a painterly approach and the more naturalistic demands of drama. Ballet design seems to be more receptive to the autographic trace of the painter in making the work in the drawings and in the model. Marks and traces may better inform and even impel the dance. In drama and opera the eye needs to dwell on detail and even sink into the set before returning to the performer more deeply informed than previously. This latter phenomenon may be less easy where the surface of the set is painted, it demands a set with more detail and texture. The designs for *Romeo and Juliet* (ROH 1965) were groundbreaking in that they placed ballet in a far more realistic and spatial world than previously. The production probably marked the first use of a ballet set with an extensive upper level. The design and the choreography grew from one another, though he continued to develop the design in future productions its essential core remained unchanged and probably unchangeable. He was informed by history and placed most of his designs in period but avoided any sense of pastiche by using costumes from a variety of period sources whilst still relating both to one another and the world of the ballet itself along with the time at which the work was first produced. *Romeo and Juliet* is a particular example of this.

Whilst it is probably rightly stated that the scenario is crucial in designing ballet, as opposed to the music, it is the music which must dominate in opera. Opera designs may be nearer to those used in drama than those used in ballet. In his work for *Aida* he employed a vision related to a 19th century view of the subject, the period of the music. This was no straightforward reconstruction of ancient Egypt. Along with *Les Troyens* two years later they probably constituted the largest opera productions ever mounted by Covent Garden.

Georgiadis was immensely knowledgeable in art and cultural history generally, in his working relationship with Kenneth Macmillan he seems to have provided the philosophy for their work as part of his overall work on their productions.

Early influences in costume design can be traced to Antoni Clave and to some extent, in his early set drawings, to Christian Berard. In his painting in the late 50s and 60s links can be made to the contemporary work of Robert Medley, who would have taught him at the Slade. Later work is linked to that of Ralph Kitaj and Giorgio de Chirico but whether this link was acknowledged by Georgiadis is not clear. He certainly made a strong decision to move his painting into a more figurative, narrative area later in his work. The relationship of his personal painting and drawing to his theatre design forms an important part of the latter sections of the text but given Georgiadis's reticence to discuss or even show his assistants his work as an artist from earlier in his career how strong this link was for him is still be a matter for some conjecture despite large sections of the text being focused on this issue. It is also regrettable that the consideration of his work, both as a painter and as a stage designer, seems too often almost sealed off from surrounding influences and currents. It is known that he often felt less at ease in Britain than one might have imagined and remained staunchly Greek throughout his life. Perhaps this sense of separateness is simply being appropriately reflected in his work. There are some points where more work on editing the text to make it more clearly explanatory would have enabled the author's thinking to have been more acutely expressed.

The influence of Georgiadis as teacher is felt more through the many reproductions of beautiful costume drawings than through any part of the text. He taught many designers, at the the Slade, who in turn taught others. His ability to create costumes which were both fully and recognisably 'period' costumes and which were also wholly usable in dance was outstanding. His use of the paper and the positive space of the figure set against the negative space surrounding it, clearly present in his work from very early in his career, has informed many designers since. His use of an almost 'dead' calligraphic line, drawn at times with bamboo or even just a piece of balsa wood, has sent countless other designers searching for their own solution to delineating the drawing whilst not adding a fully autographic line which over dominates the costume and is impossible to reproduce in the final garments. The result in Georgiadis's costumes is the constant use of black braids which were the final and necessary evocation of this graphic device. Whilst there are many superb illustrations of his costumes there is an acknowledgement of contributions from professional collaborators which were not included due to lack of space. Perhaps it would have been preferable to have included some of these even at the cost of some illustrations, they may have provided that more acute reflections of his design process and working methods which any designer or student of design needs to understand. The approach is rather to base arguments on the work itself and whilst this is laudable, given the amount of art biography which can often replace attention to the work in question with information about the artist's life which may not be relevant to the work, in the case of a theatre designer, even one working as an artist in his design practice, some greater documentation and reflection on the collaborative nature of work is ultimately essential.

He showed huge loyalty to the group of costume makers, dyers and painters with whom he preferred to work in the UK, and they in turn held him in esteem and affection, but their essential presence, regrettably, goes unremarked. The early costume designs are strong and powerful visual statements, the details are indicated but would need further discussion to support the making process. Over time his costume drawing became more and more precise to the point that details could almost be measured and scaled up from costume designs. This can be clearly seen in drawings for the original production of Romeo and Juliet in 1965 compared with ones he made in 1975. There is a significant change towards a more detailed and precise representation in the later work. His drawings leave one in no doubt that he knew what he wanted, and that he meant to get it. Whether some of the costumes reproduced from the height of his career could even be made under the strictures of today's' budgets is doubtful. The fact that they were made then, and that this is often recorded by accompanying photographs, will remain as irrefutable evidence that we no longer fund our theatre, opera and ballet to the extent that we should.

He drew regularly, both as designer and artist, and his set drawings were often both speculative and informative. They would be quicker to produce than a model and enabled him to extend his imagination in many directions freely and yet precisely. These often focus on space, form and colour, not always including the figure, as they move between fine art and design. It would be hoped that future generations of designers will be better equipped to use their graphic skills more powerfully than has been the case in the more recent past. The renewed interest in drawing in numerous colleges where theatre design, fine art and the graphic arts

are taught gives some hope in this direction.

The book is sumptuously illustrated with stunning reproductions of his work, excellent photographs of productions and some photographs of models. The models seem the least remarked part of the process and are often, in one sense, prosaic in their less than fine representation of the final design. Perhaps we have since brought model-making to too high an art? Does the level to which it is now so frequently practised provide too much information for directors? Have they become too lazy in imagining work under discussion, or this an inevitable result of the changing technologies and the financial constraints we now work with? It seems that Georgiadis often cared less than one might expect for the model and often failed to photograph them in any organised way. Kenneth Macmillan claimed that he frequently had to rescue discarded and often (he felt) superior pieces of model from under the work table. In all this it seems that Georgiadis was focusing on the work on stage as the essential outcome of the design process, however extraordinary the artworks were which made this possible. It would have been revealing to have had more information from the numerous designers who worked as his assistant. The recording of one production from initial inception through rough and finished models and costumes to the final work on stage would have revealed a great deal. It should have been possible to construct this for at least one production and would have powerfully informed the rest of the work contained in the book. Sometimes two productions seem to elide into one. Mayerling seems to have undergone a radical redesign between its premiere at Covent Garden and a production some years later in Sweden but this is not explained.

The lack of an index is a major disadvantage. Many of the drawings have been carefully researched to record the performers who wore the original costumes. Not to be able to access this, and much else, through a good index makes the book much less value as a research tool than it might have been. Perhaps we can hope that if it goes into a second printing this will be rectified. There are valuable footnotes and a good bibliography. However, this is a fine and beautiful book in recording the work of an extraordinary designer and will repay its price for anyone interested in the subject and still open to be inspired by an artist and designer who was a remarkable innovator and who would not rest until he had got exactly what he wanted in the drawing, the model and on stage.