

The theatre of Eugene Berman

Author

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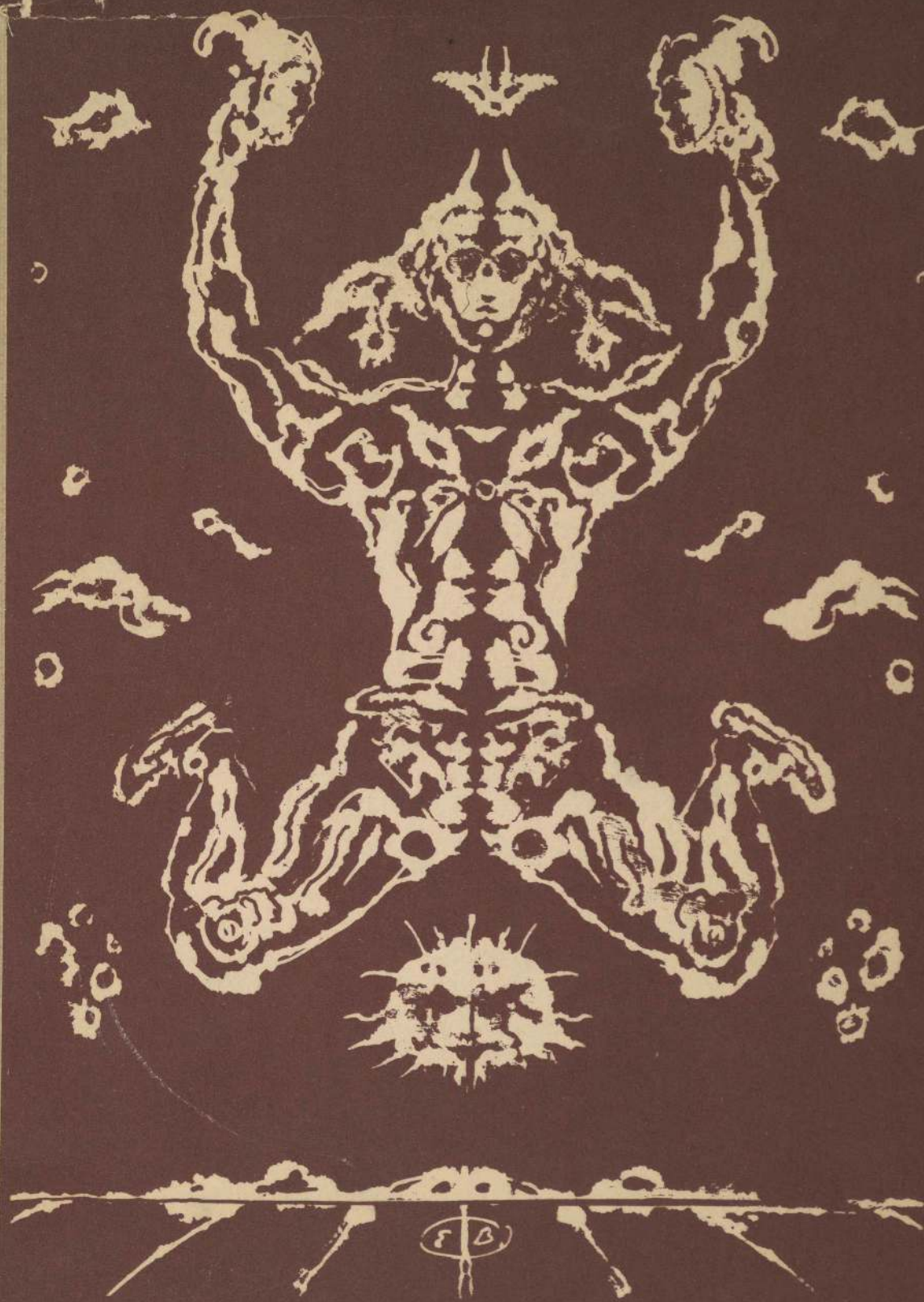
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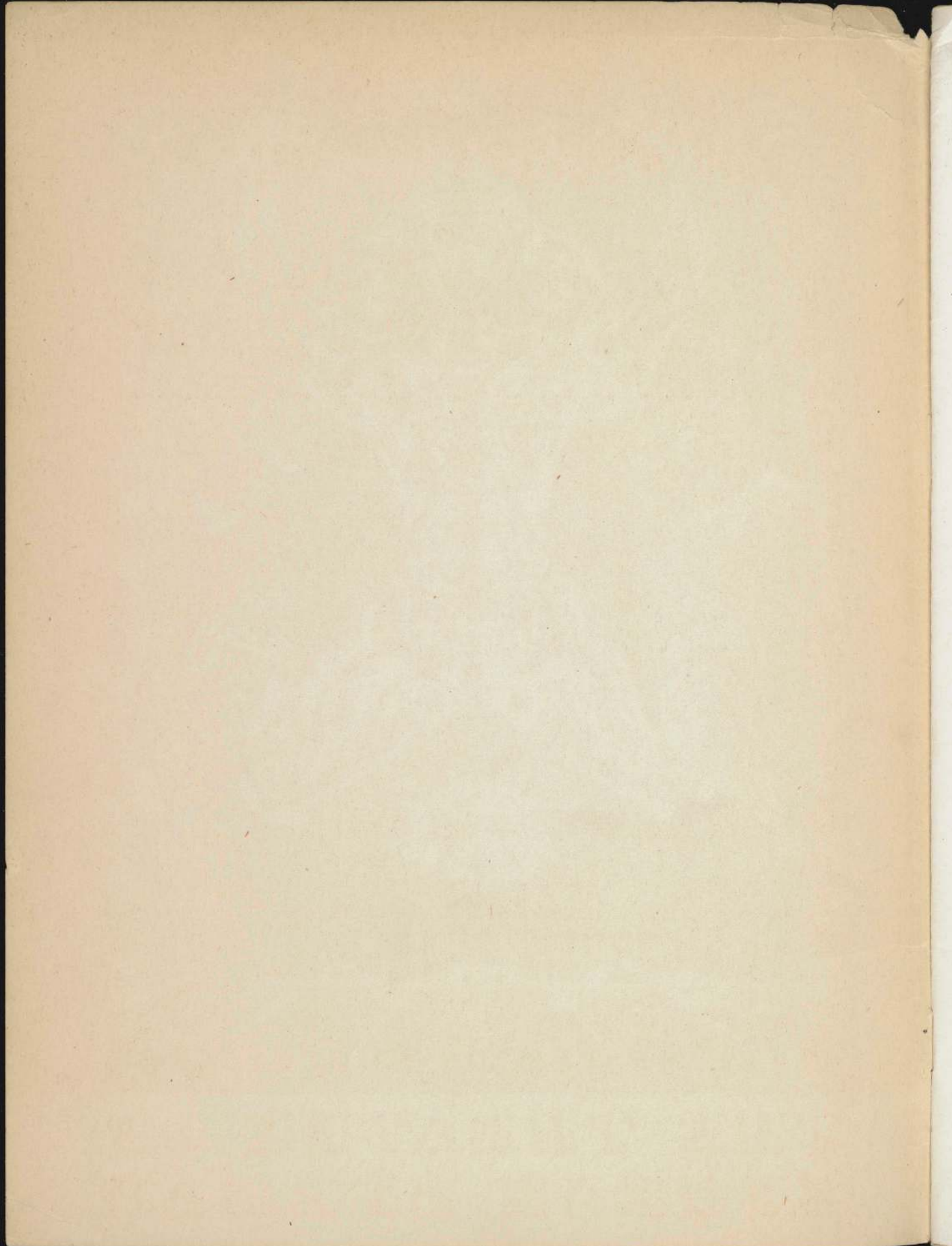
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**THE THEATRE OF
EUGENE BERMAN**



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EUGENE
BERMAN



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Giselle, drawing, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

THE THEATRE OF EUGENE BERMAN

by George Amberg

Ten years ago, at the Hartford Festival, Eugene Berman was presented to a limited audience for the first time as a stage designer. Today his theatrical work is known to countless spectators in this country and abroad, and one cannot imagine the American ballet stage without his brilliant contributions. The following pages present a brief survey of this distinguished record in order to define and illustrate the artist's relative position in the theatre. This essay is deliberately generalized and tentative. Berman is too young, versatile and active a designer to permit as yet any thorough analysis or conclusive evaluation of his scenic oeuvre. Meanwhile, however, with eight staged productions and several major unexecuted projects to his credit, he has established himself as one of the few modern painters who has an authentic professional standing on the stage. This accomplishment, important enough in itself to merit particular consideration, may also serve as an affirmative voice in the familiar argument about the legitimacy of easel painters as theatrical designers. Now, instead of agreement and fruitful cooperation between professional designers and painters, confusion reigns. The sooner it is realized by all concerned that an inquiry into the essential function of stage design is needed, the sooner we may expect to establish sound principles for a working interchange between the creative personalities in the opposed camps of art and theatre.

Since the first decade of our century the legendary figure of Diaghilev has dominated the ballet scene, directly and through his successors. In introducing distinguished easel painters as stage designers he set a precedent which proved to be both beneficial and detrimental, and which started an avalanche of controversies. Though the roster of modern ballet designers includes the names of practically

every painter of contemporary fame, few artists met the challenge and the opportunity with an equipment adequate to the particular task. Many fine works of art, originally commissioned and created for the ballet, survived in museums only, thereby proving the fallacy of the Diaghilev principle of theatrical production. Such masterpieces as Picasso's "Tricorne" and Bérard's setting for the ballroom in "Symphonie Fantastique" are rare examples of a genuine sense of the theatre. More often the artist's original, unrealized intentions brought magnificent results, but entirely in the wrong medium and quite by accident. The statement which is constantly made at this point, that paintings and drawings, even though created primarily as theatrical designs, may nevertheless be valid works of art, is precisely the deceptive evidence which has consistently confused the issue. Nobody would judge an architectural sketch on the merits of mere draftsmanship; yet exactly this method is applied in the appreciation of theatrical design. The question of why stage design is habitually treated as a minor form of applied art or a poor relation of painting still remains to be investigated.

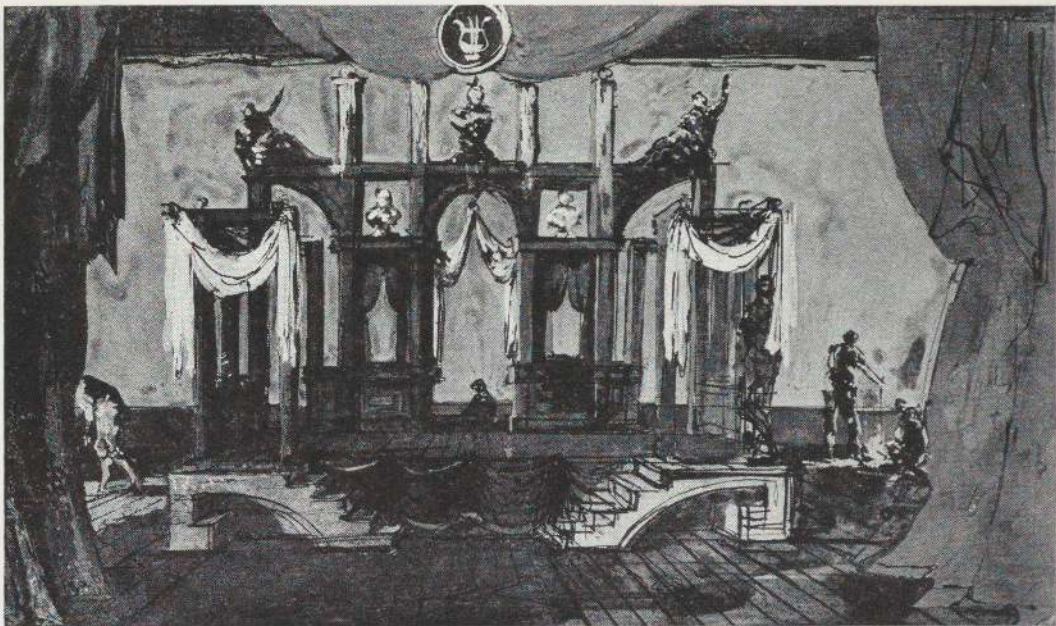
A painting or a drawing is not a stage design, as a simple comparison of scale clearly reveals. Scale cannot be determined or altered arbitrarily after a work of imagination is completed. Proportions and dimensions are minutely and delicately balanced for an ideal, preconceived effect. Any slight change, any subsequent reduction or enlargement is likely to destroy the image of perfection. If this consideration seems obvious, as indeed it is, one may well wonder why it is so consistently disregarded by the majority of non-professional designers. There are three answers to this question. One suggests the eternal Pygmalion complex: the irresistible temptation of a creator to make his work come

to life, assume volume, function in space and time—even at the risk of destroying its meaning and integrity. The second stems from the circumstance that the ballet requires fewer rational and technical adjustments than the dramatic stage. The third and decisive one is sheer lack of technical experience.

These remarks are intended as a caution against any possible misinterpretation of Berman's scenic work. For the very distinction and perfection of his theatrical designs account for the fact that they are habitually placed in the wrong category of the arts. In plain language: the exceptional qualities for which his drawings are so highly valued by the art collector, are theatrically irrelevant. Berman the painter prohibits, as it were, a just appreciation of Berman the master of theatre illusion. It is true that the infinite scenic potentialities contained in his fine sketches, drawings and gouaches are dormant, rather than obvious. The unfathomable, compelling quality, so strikingly manifest in all of Berman's theatrical work, is due to a large extent to suspended energy, a latent power waiting to be fully revealed in the eventual performance. Failing this test even the most beautiful stage designs miss their essential purpose. The actual performance is the final product and the ultimate test. Technically speaking, the manual achievement as such has no more, perhaps less, value than a sober scale drawing or an accurate blueprint. For here begins the complex process of execution, of transforming the artist's imagination into stage reality. The design passes through various workshops, is enlarged and transferred to canvas, rigged on the stage and properly lighted. Only then does it show conclusively to what extent it corresponds to the original plan and intention. And yet this revelation should not come as a surprise. The final, three-dimensional, full-size execution is supposed to have been visualized and planned in the artist's mind to the very last detail of scale and proportion, color and texture, spatial relationship and movement, and that indefinable quality which may best be termed as atmosphere.

For Eugene Berman, though he is primarily an easel painter, stage design is not a minor or incidental occupation, to be taken up as opportunity offers, but a major creative field having its own validity. Keenly aware of the specific scenic requirements, he approaches each task with a deliberation and a clarity of purpose which convey to his drawings the incisive neatness of technical tracings. His sure, easy transition, from one medium to the other, is significant. Many of his easel paintings suggest, in structure and composition, in light effects and atmosphere, idealized images of illusionistic scenery. This characteristic is not casually or candidly borrowed from the theatrical stock of the historical past; it is carefully studied, deliberately evoked and masterfully applied. There is an essential and congenial relation between Berman and the theatrical magicians and technicians of the High Renaissance and Baroque. The association, however, derives from analagous processes of reasoning and visualization, rather than from the proverbial persistence of theatrical traditions.

In the theatre, the power to create an illusion so that it will become reality is not the exclusive property of Renaissance artists, but they supplied intricate formulas which combined humanistic demands for mathematical accuracy, with royal requests for sumptuous scenic display. The formula survives because it appeals to both the rational mind and the imaginative spirit, and because the theatre requires both the useful and the beautiful. The supreme quality of Berman's theatrical work is its balance of intellectual discipline and creative imagination. Once in possession of the primal conception, he leaves nothing to chance. The innumerable sketches which he creates in the course of a long germinating process are not indications of a lack of decision or precision; indeed there is nothing haphazard, equivocal or hesitant in these brilliant studies. The finished work reveals the ultimate, comprehensive integration of all component factors into one unified whole: a perfect synthesis of function and effect, reason and vision.

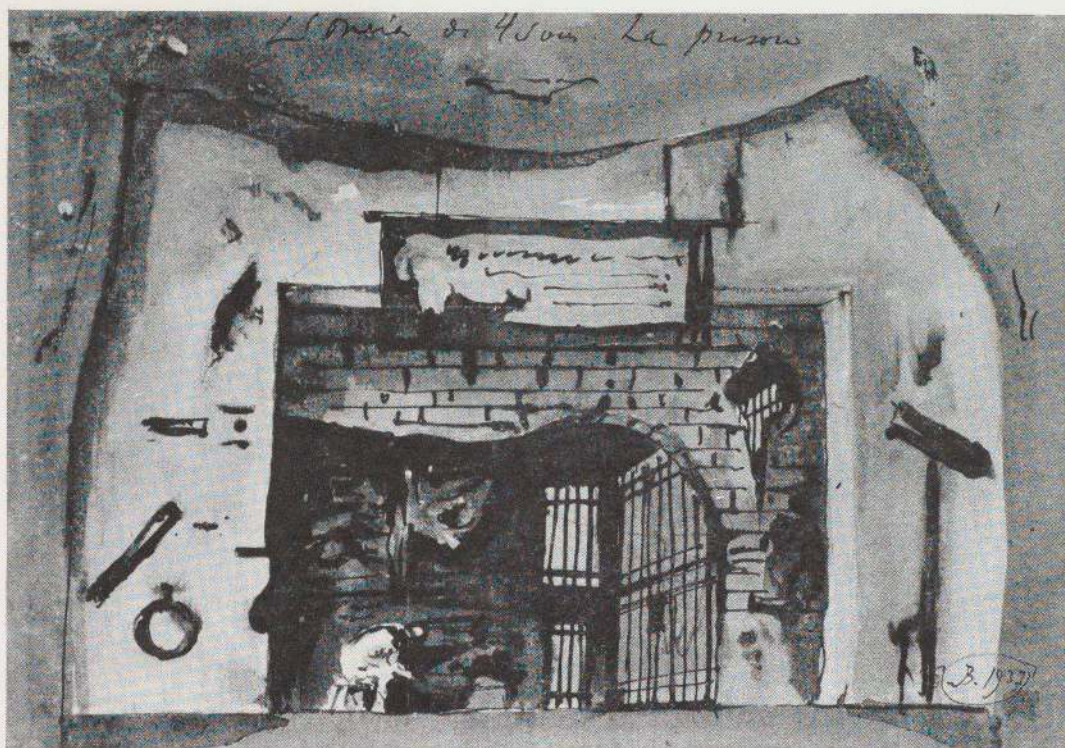


above: *Hartford Festival*, sketch for setting, 1936. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.

below: *Venetian Décor*, model of stage setting, 1932. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.



L'OPERA DE QUAT' SOUS



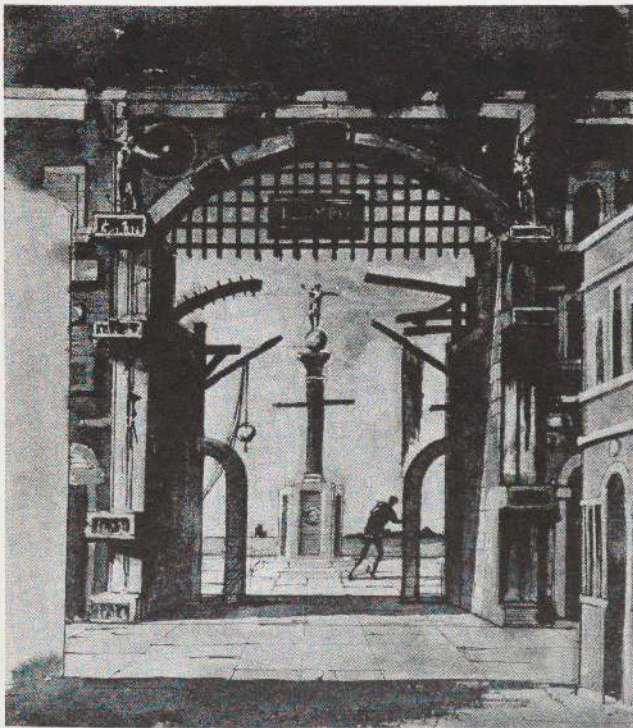
L'Opéra de Quat' Sous, sketch for the prison, 1937. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.



L'Opéra de Quat' Sous, sketch for curtain, 1937. Theatre Arts Collection, Museum of Modern Art.

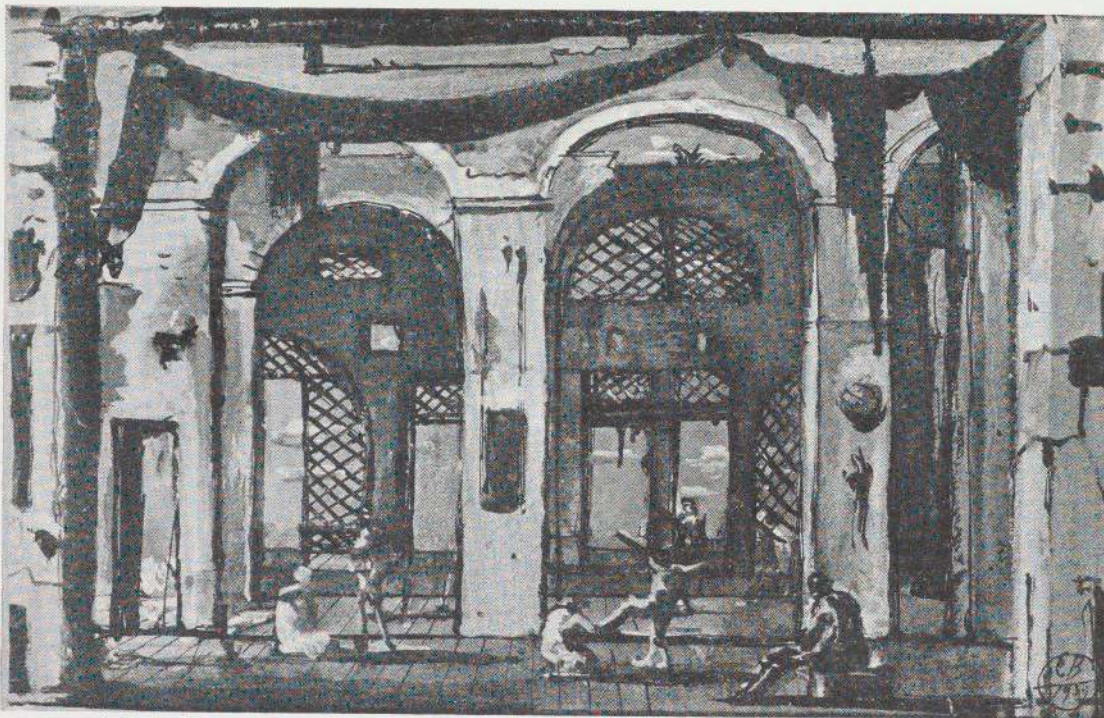
ICARE—TWELFTH NIGHT

Icare, costume for *Icare*, 1938. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.



Twelfth Night, a port in Illyria, 1938.
Collection Thomas F. Howard, New York.

DEVIL'S HOLIDAY



top: Devil's Holiday, project for scene, 1939. Private collection.

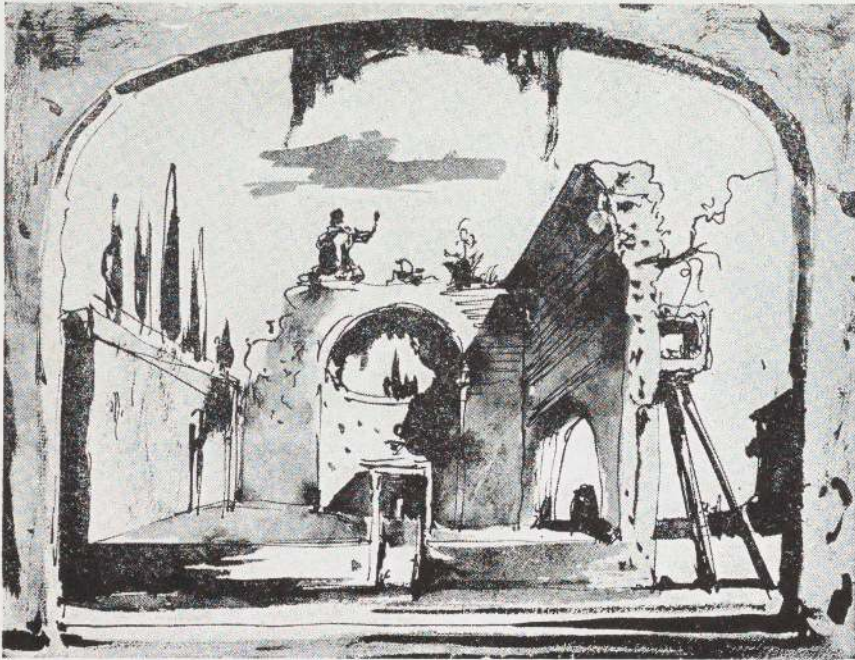
bottom: Devil's Holiday, sketch for Venetian setting, 1939. Collection Edward James, Hollywood, Calif.



right: *Devil's Holiday*, Prologue, costume for hat vendor, 1939. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.

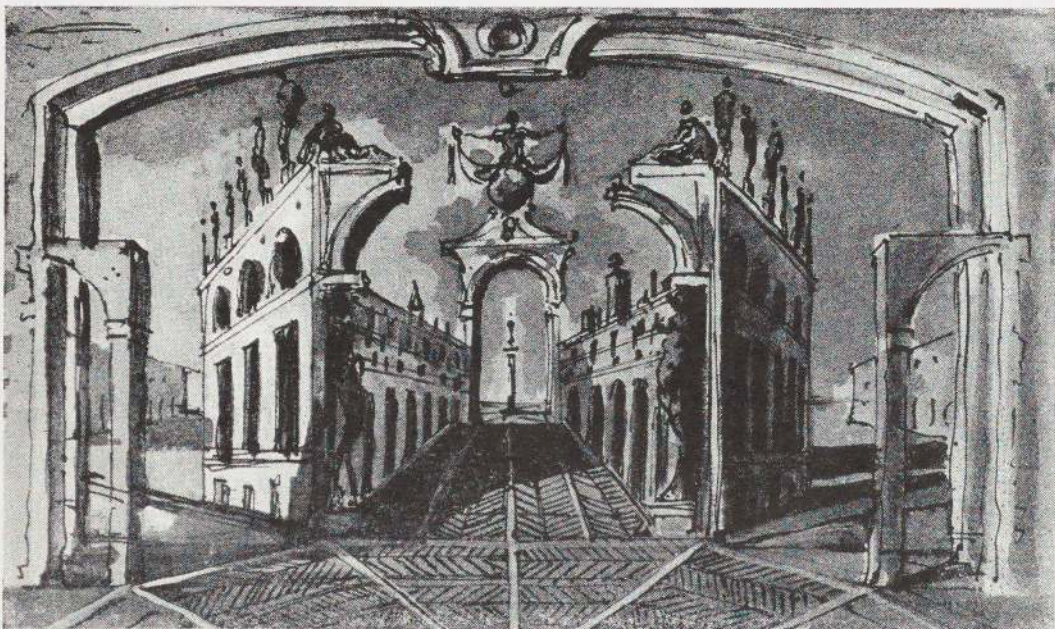
left: *Devil's Holiday*, sketch for costume, 1939. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

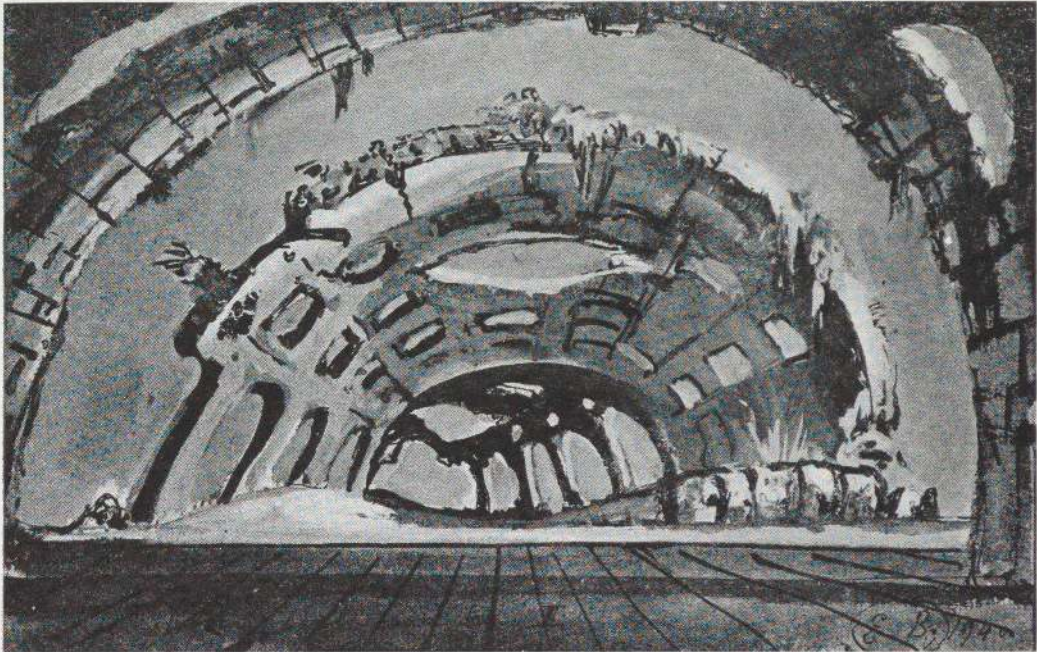
ITALIAN SYMPHONY



above: *Italian Symphony*, sketch for setting, 1940. Theatre Arts Collection, Museum of Modern Art.

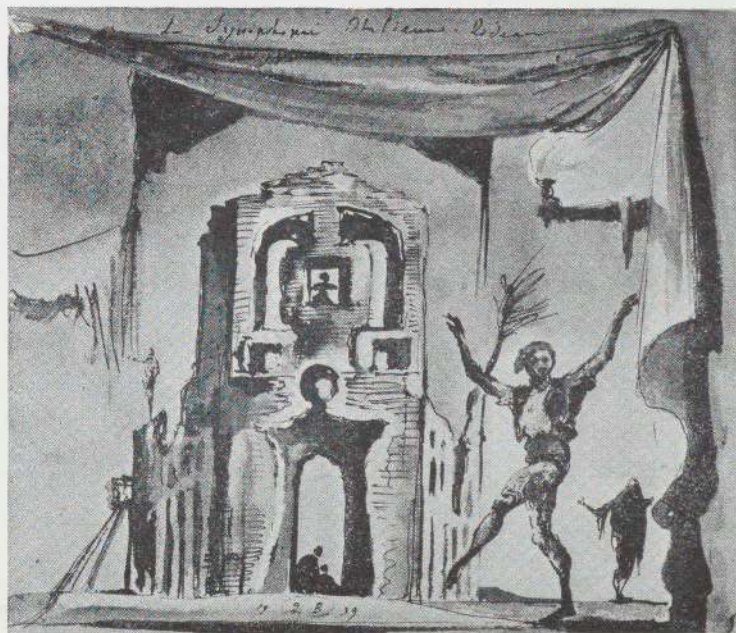
below: *Italian Symphony*, sketch for setting, 1940. Private collection.



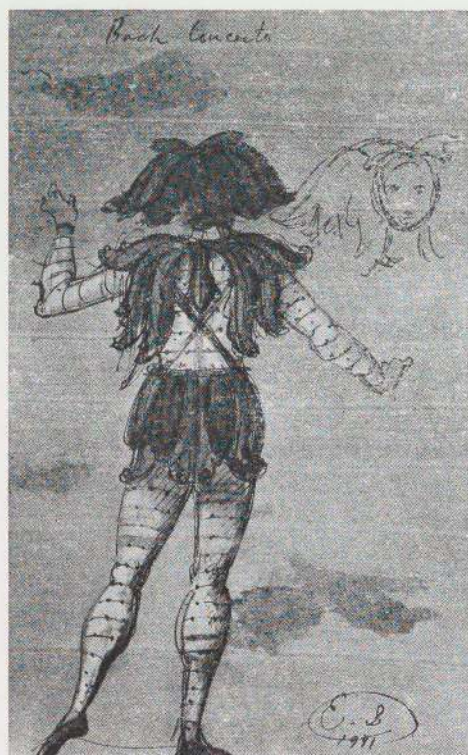


above: *Italian Symphony*, sketch for Scene III, 1940. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

below: *Italian Symphony*, sketch for curtain, 1939. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

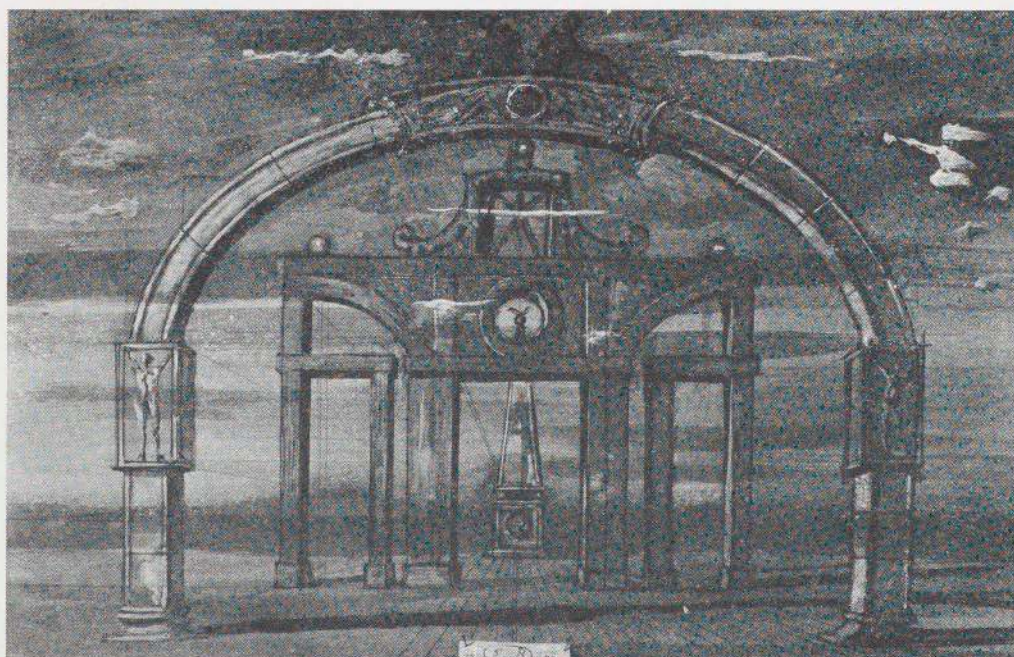


CONCERTO BAROCCO



left: *Concerto Barocco*, sketch for costume, 1941.
Julien Levy Gallery, New York

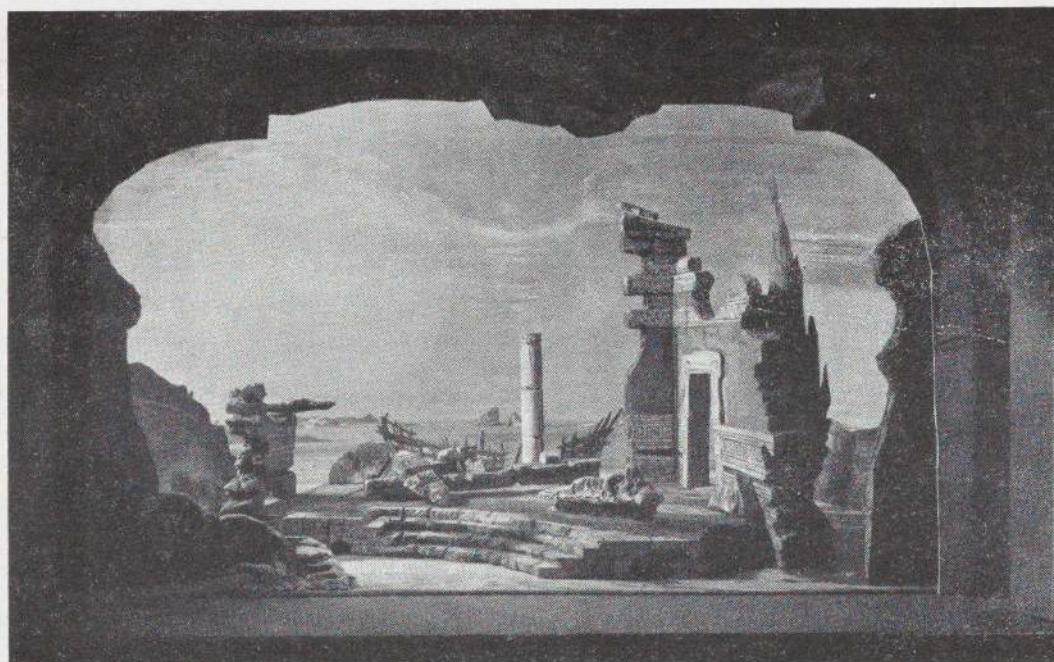
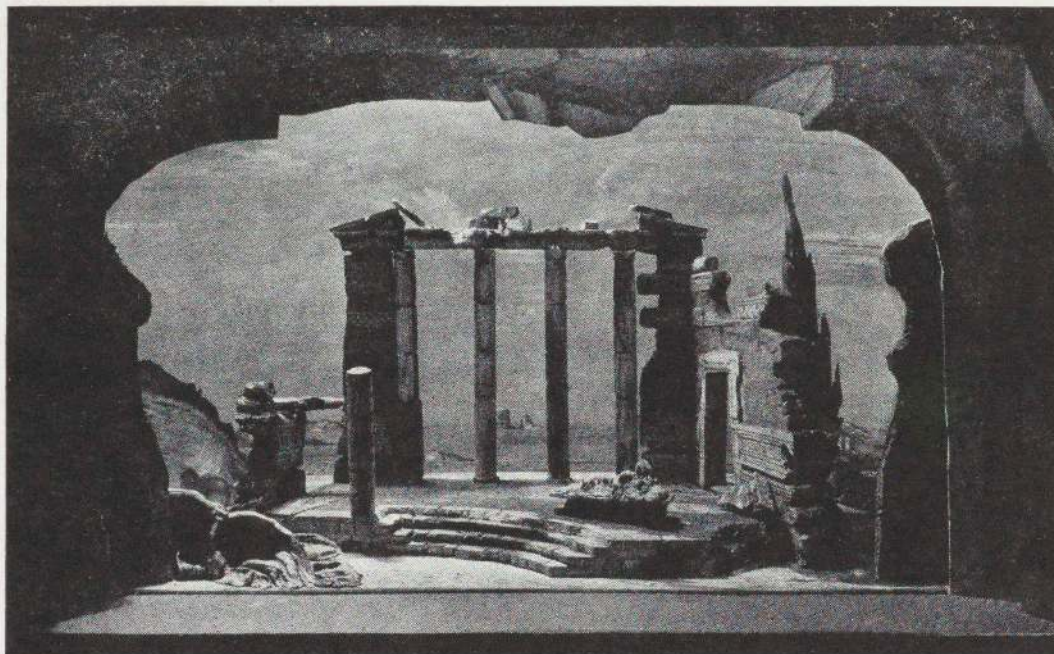
below: *Concerto Barocco*, drawing for setting, 1941.
Julien Levy Gallery, New York.





Romantic Ballet, sketches for settings, 1942. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

THE ISLAND GOD



The Island God, models of settings, 1942. Theatre Arts Collection, Museum of Modern Art.

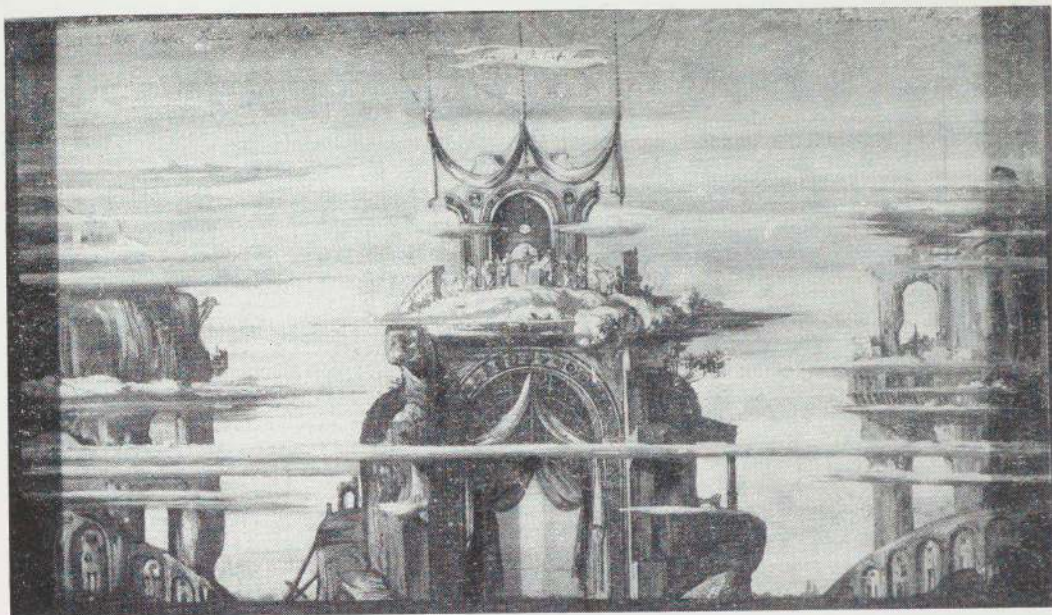


Mirages, sketch for setting, 1942. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

QUO VADIS

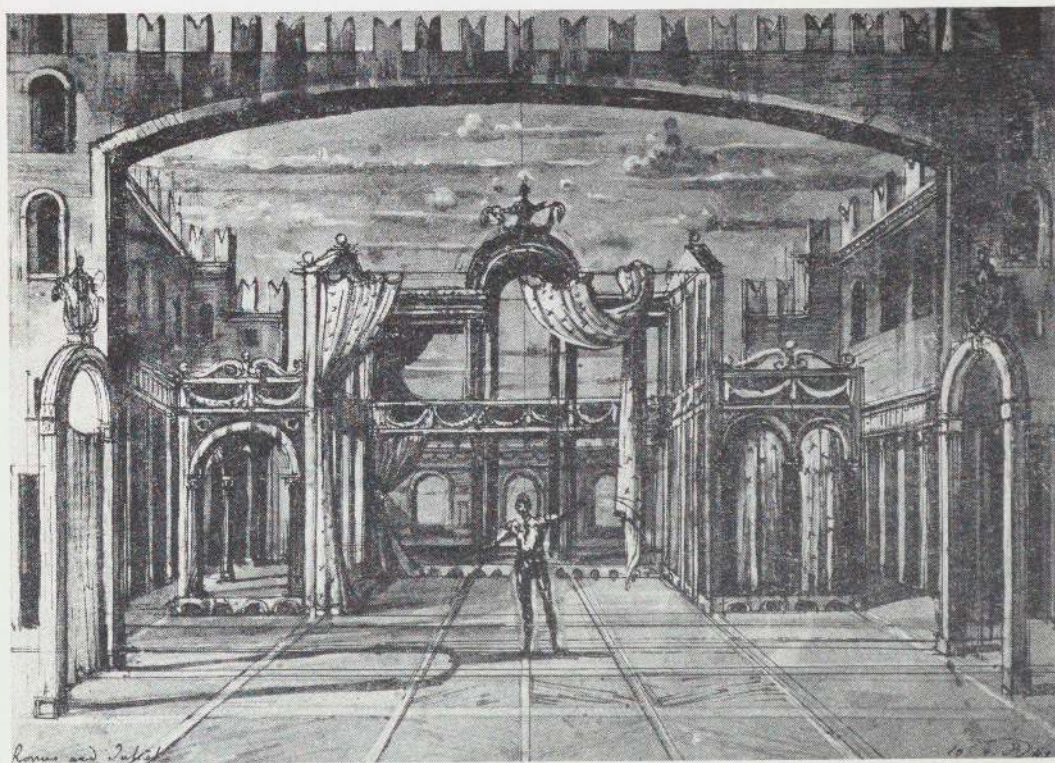


left: *Quo Vadis*, sketch for costume, 1943. Collection Mrs. Tamara Toumanova-Robinson, Beverly Hills, Calif.
 right: *Quo Vadis*, sketch for costume, 1943. Collection Richard Day, Los Angeles, Calif.



above: *Romeo and Juliet*, drawing for Prologue curtain, 1943. Collection Hugh Chisholm, Woodbury, Conn.

below: *Romeo and Juliet*, drawing for main setting, 1943. Collection John Yeon, Portland, Ore.



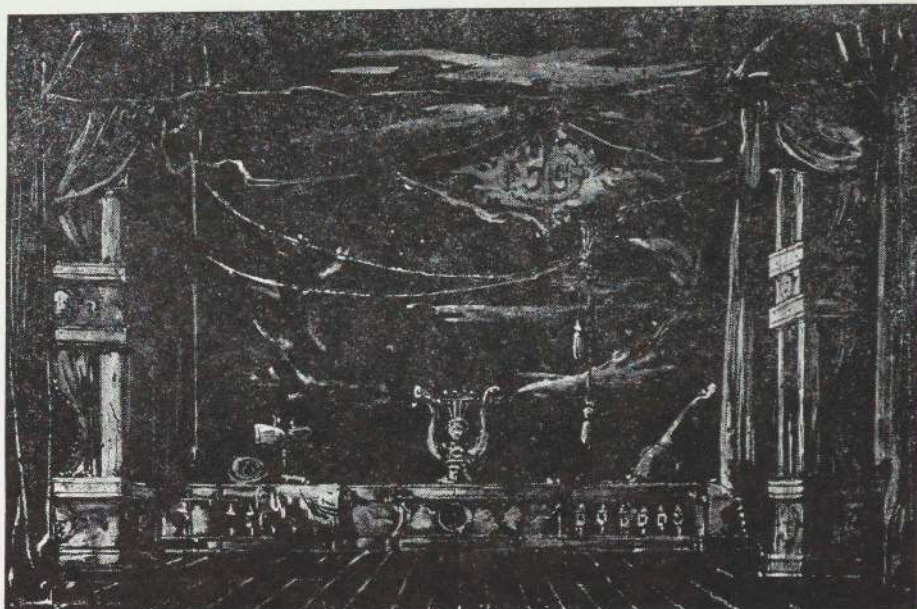
ROMEO AND JULIET



above: *Romeo and Juliet*, sketches for costumes, 1943. Collection Hugh Chisholm, Woodbury, Conn.

below: *Romeo and Juliet*, studies for costumes, 1942. Collection Miss Ona Munson, Hollywood, Calif.



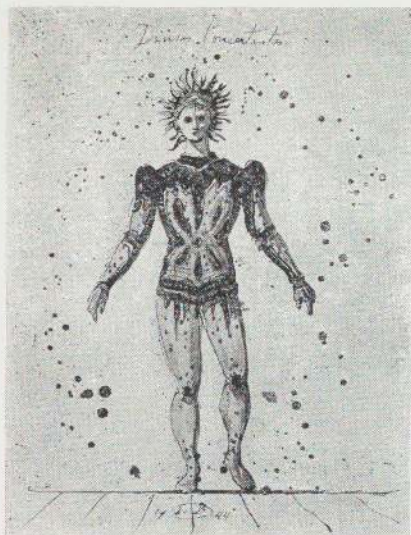


above: *Danses Concertantes*, preliminary sketch for curtain, 1944. Collection Allison Delarue, New York.

below: *Danses Concertantes*, drawing for backdrop, 1944. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

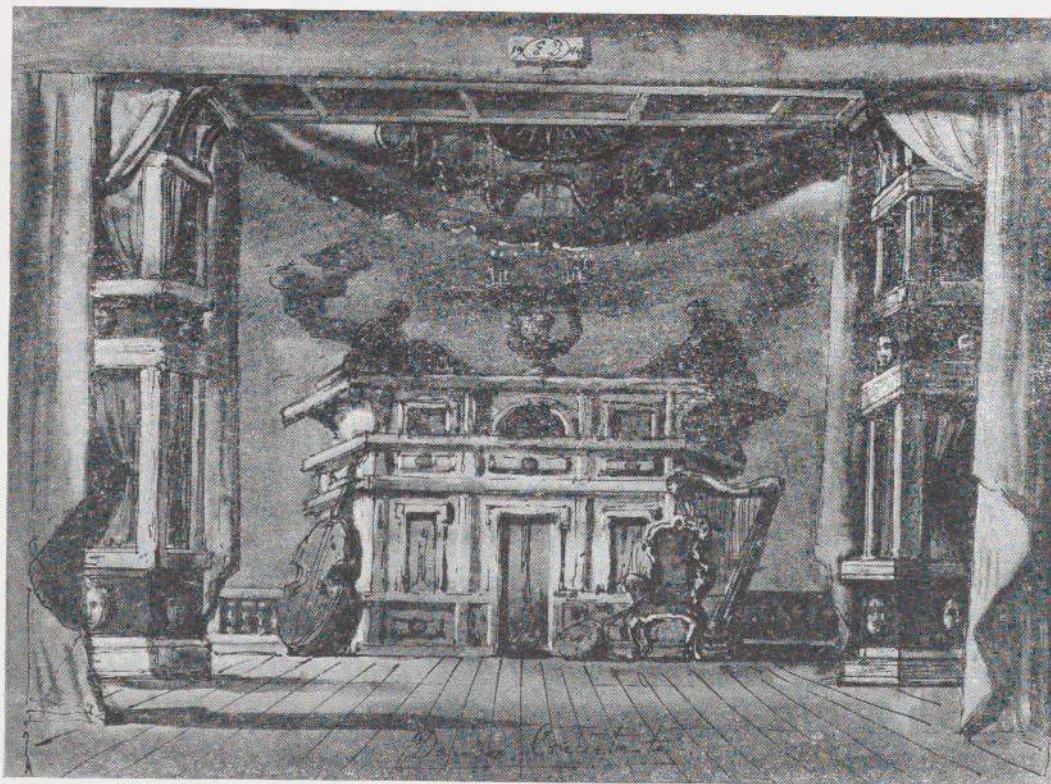


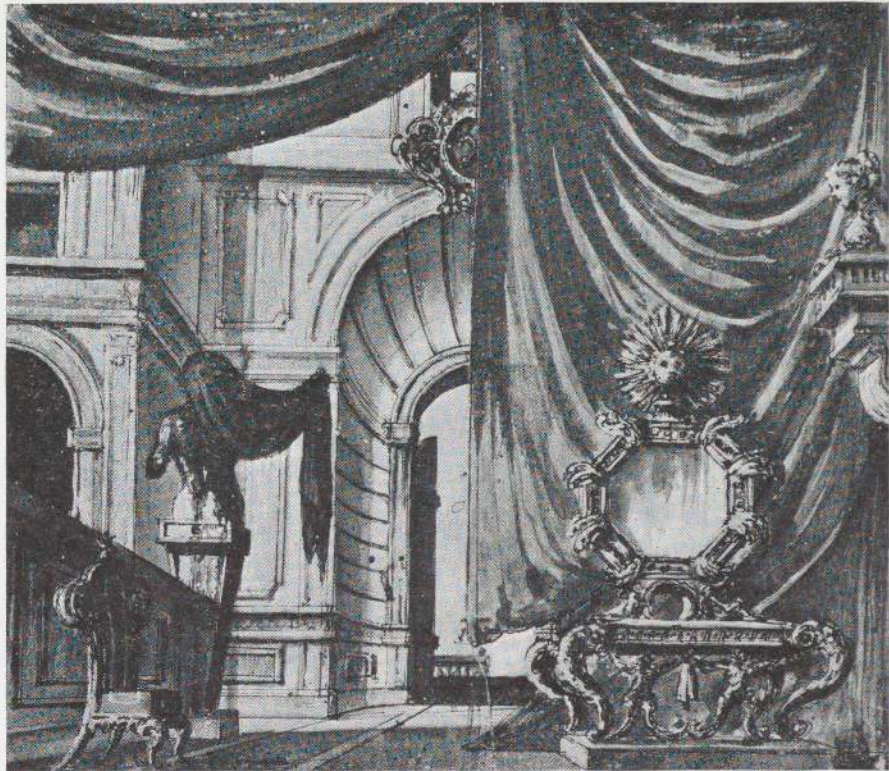
DANSES CONCERTANTES



above: *Dances Concertantes*, sketches for costumes, 1944. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

below: *Dances Concertantes*, project for setting, 1944. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.





above: *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, drawing for curtain, 1944. Collection Richard Hammond, Beverly Hills, Calif.

below: *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, sketches for costumes, 1944. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

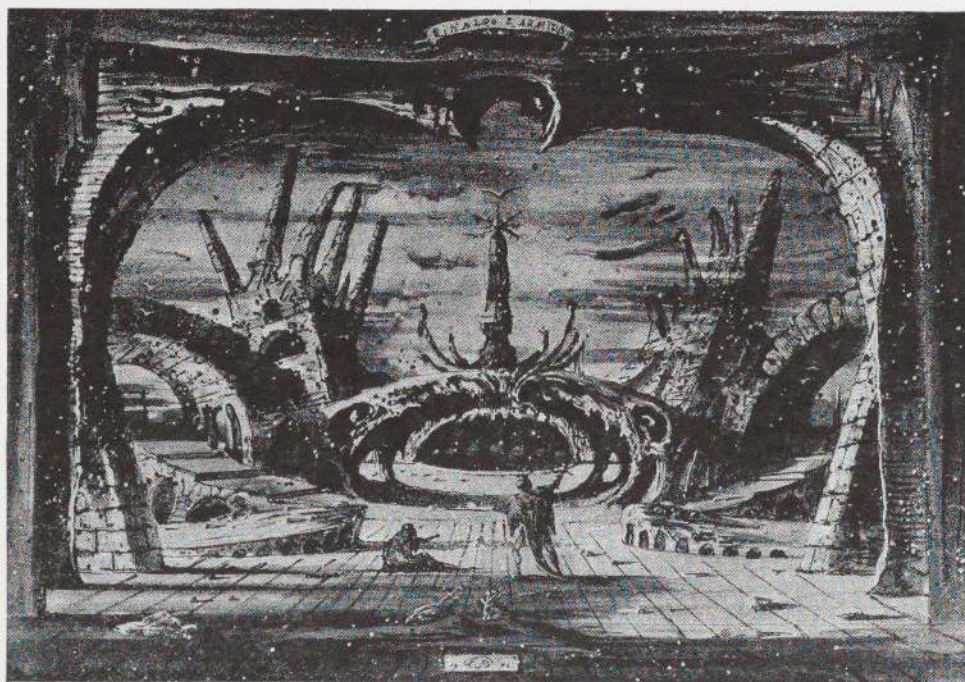


ARMIDA



above: *Armida*, sketches for costumes, 1946. Victor Hugo Gallery, New York.

below: *Armida*, sketch for setting, 1946. Victor Hugo Gallery, New York.





above: *Giselle*, sketch for setting, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

below: *Giselle*, sketch for Act II, 1940. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.



following two pages: *Giselle*, backdrop for Act II, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.





GISELLE

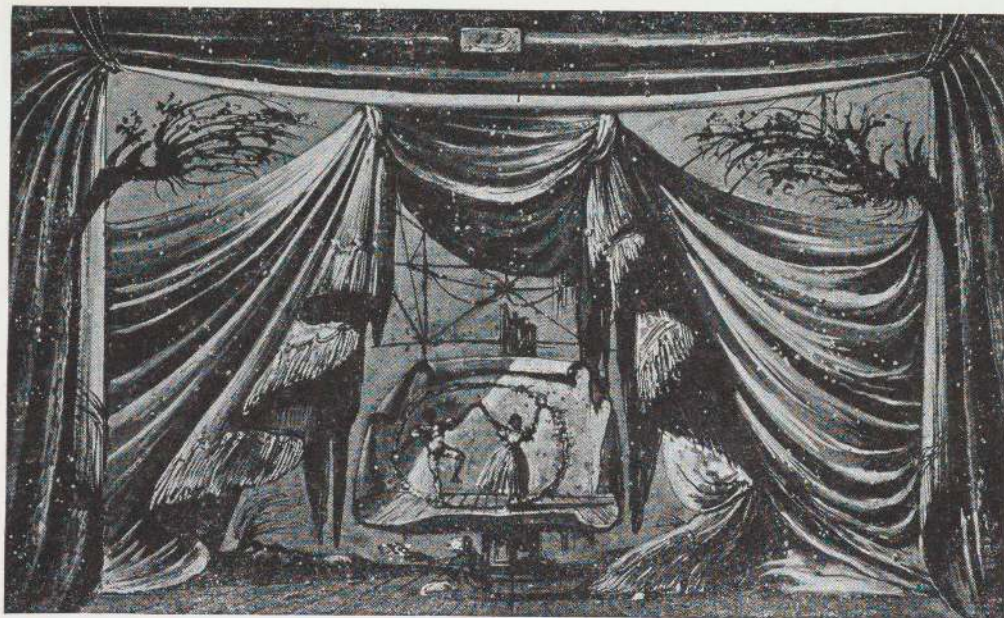


Giselle, costume sketches, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.



Giselle, costume sketches, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

GISELLE



above: *Giselle*, sketch for curtain, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

below: *Giselle*, sketch for Act I, 1946. Julien Levy Gallery, New York.



STAGE PROJECTS AND PRODUCTIONS

Hartford Festival. Sketch for setting. Presented by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. 1936

L'Opéra de Quat'Sous. Musical play in 8 scenes by Bert Brecht after John Gay. Music by Kurt Weill. Théâtre de L'Etoile, Paris. 1937

Icare. Ballet in 2 scenes by Serge Lifar. Percussion by J. E. Szyfer. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Drury Lane Theatre, London. 1938

Twelfth Night. Project for a play. Jouvet's Théâtre de L'Athénée, Paris. Not produced. 1938

Devil's Holiday. Ballet in a prologue, 3 scenes and entr'actes by Frederick Ashton. Music by Vincenzo Tommasini on Paganini themes. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Metropolitan Opera House, New York. 1939

The Italian Symphony. Project for a ballet in 4 scenes by David Lichine. Music by Mendelssohn. For Col. W. de Basil. Not produced. 1940

Concerto Barocco. Ballet in 1 scene by George Balanchine. Music by Bach. Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan. Hunter College, New York. 1941

Romantic Ballet. Project for a ballet by Boris Romanoff for the Metropolitan Opera Association. Music by Schubert. Not produced. 1942

Transformation Project. Maisonette into theatre auditorium. For St. Regis Hotel, New York. Not executed. 1942

Nuages. Project for costumes for ballet by Nina Theilade. Music by Debussy. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Not produced with Berman costumes. 1942

Giselle. Project for a ballet in 2 scenes by Coralli-Perrot. Music by Adolphe Adam. For Col. W. deBasil. Not produced. 1942

Mirages. Project for a ballet by David Lichine. Music by Debussy. For Col. W. de Basil. Not produced. 1942

The Island God. Opera in 3 scenes by Gian-Carlo Menotti. For the Metropolitan Opera Association. Not produced with Berman décor. 1942

Quo Vadis. Project for costumes for MGM production. Not produced. 1943

Romeo and Juliet. Ballet in a prologue, 1 act and epilogue by Antony Tudor, based on Shakespeare's play. Music by Delius, arranged by Antal Dorati. Presented by Ballet Theatre. Metropolitan Opera House, New York. 1943



Concerto Barocco, project for new version, 1945. Owned by the artist.

Danses Concertantes. Ballet in 2 scenes by George Balanchine. Music by Igor Stravinsky. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. City Center, New York. 1944

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, after Molière's Comedy. Ballet in 2 scenes by George Balanchine. Music by Richard Strauss. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. City Center, New York. 1944

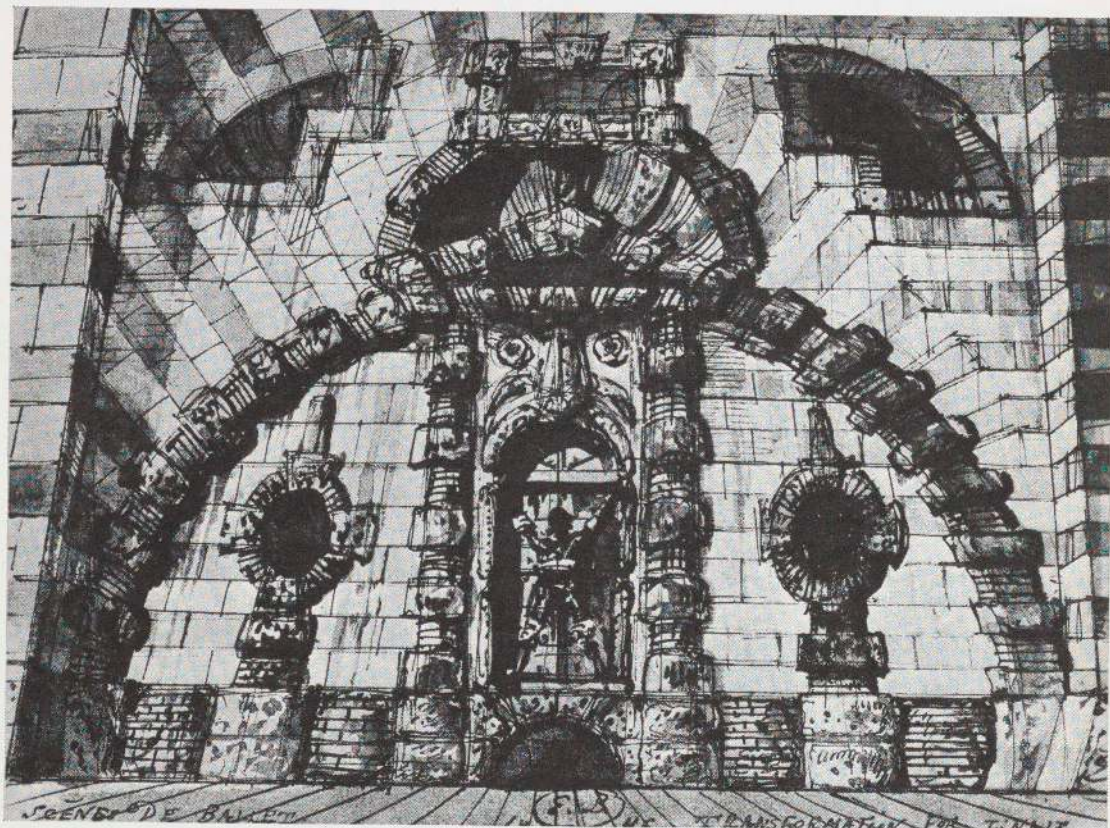
Concerto Barocco. Project for new version. 1945

Armida. Project. 1946

Scènes de Ballet. Project. 1946

Giselle. Various versions from 1940-1946. Final production presented by Ballet Theatre. Broadway Theatre, New York. 1946

Theatrical Projects and Fantasies. 1946



Scènes de Ballet, project for setting, 1946. Owned by the artist.

