

OSKAR SCHLEMMER

FROM *New Stage Forms* (1928)

- A: Can you tell me what the lines on the stage mean?¹
- B: They are the axes of the stage, then the diagonals, and inside the resulting square, a circle is drawn. Apart from the centre-point marked by the lines on the floor, the central point of the space has also been fixed by stretching light-coloured strings from the corners of the stage; a surprising effect which somehow brings the space to life.
- A: But what for? Are the actors so stupid they need such aids to orient themselves?
- B: No. But because the geometry and stereometry of the stage space are in this way 'revealed', and the the notion of the dimensions awakened, the space acquires a specific character it did not have before. Its accordance with laws becomes perceptible, the actor, performer or dancer is 'bewitched' by this spatial system which otherwise he would be unaware of, and he moves within it differently than he would in the indeterminate fluidity of space.
- A: But doesn't such an exaggerated principle kill off what is best in a dancer: the unconscious, the self-surrender, the exaltation? Doesn't it rob him of his soul? After all, the dancer isn't a gym teacher or a traffic warden. It is just this quality of soul and ecstasy we demand of the artist.
- B: Certainly, and I would be the last to want to see that stifled. Let me remind you of Goethe's phrase 'freedom within law', and remind you further that in all art, and particularly in the highest art, there reigns an operation of laws that we experience as form and style. Let me remind you of the music of J. S. Bach, which is a wondrous work of adherence to contrapuntal laws, and equally of course a wonder of sensibility. Or to take an example from the pictorial arts: the book of proportions of Albrecht Durer, that exceptional work on measure, of the human form in particular, where the secrets of number are sought with a fanatical zeal. Law and number have hindered either of these two great artists from revealing a spiritual content, indeed, they attained this only through consummated form. To return to our stage: why should measure and law be banned here, where they

advance upon us in the proportions of the space, the proportions of man, and in every form, just as they do in colour, in light and in the passage of time, etc.?

Translated by Richard Drain and Anna Millan

NOTE

- 1 Photos show four strings rising from the stage corners and crossing diagonally at a single point, centre stage, apparently some eight foot in the air. This device may have inspired the use of strings in Richard Foreman's work some forty years later.

Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), German painter, designer and creator of performance pieces, first engaged in theatre work in 1912. His geometrical *Triadic Ballet* was performed in full in 1922, but the conception dated back to 1916, when he staged an initial section of it. Design of scenery and costumes for various productions followed. He taught at the Bauhaus from 1920, and in 1925 turned down the offer of a permanent job at the Volksbühne with Piscator to create a Bauhaus experimental theatre. A series of experimental creations followed. In 1929, following political criticism of his work, he left the Bauhaus to work at the Breslau Academy. In 1930, the Nazis destroyed a series of mural paintings he had done at Weimar. They shut down the Breslau Academy two years later, and then an exhibition of his work in Stuttgart. In 1937, he figured in the Nazi exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' in Munich. Along with some other involuntary exhibitors, he ended up in a factory doing lacquer work.