Stage Crafts and The Art of Performing Byzantium in Fin-de-Siècle Paris and London

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STAGE CRAFTS AND THE ART OF PERFORMING BYZANTIUM
IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE THEATRE, PARIS & LONDON

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Prestige, excessiveness, decorative abundance: striking visions seem to occur when the word 'Byzantium' is pronounced. In the world of theatre of the second half of the 19th century, 'Byzantine' seemed to be aesthetical adjective applicable to all performances fitting this description, historical or contemporary, as long as their scenery mesmerised and dazzled the audience. Oscar Wilde used it himself to describe Ellen Terry's costume as Lady Macbeth at the Lyceum theatre in 1888, even if the Shakespearean drama was set in medieval Scotland. Ironically raising the contrast between the actress's dress and the rest of the costumes, he remarked:

> 'Judging from the banquet Lady Macbeth seems an economical housekeeper, and evidently patronises local industries for her husband's clothes and servants' liveries; but she takes care to do all her own shopping in Byzantium.'[1]

The idea of 'Byzantium shopping' aroused similar emotions on the other side of the Channel: two years later, prolific writer Guy de Maupassant used the same association of ideas. According to him, Byzantium was a word naturally able to summon up 'otherworldly and mysterious visions'[2]. During the 18th century, perceived as a tyrannical regime of obscurantism, the Byzantine era was rejected, but its image changed in the following century towards an infatuation that can be branded 'Byzantomania'. Its romanticised aesthetics based itself on a proliferation of scholar publications on Byzantine culture and art, and inspired writers and visual artists, to eventually place itself on top of the representations of Aestheticism or Decadence.

Considering what the idea of Byzantium triggered in the collective imagination, it implicitly had kinship with fin-de-siècle theatre where the search for exactitude, the sense of details, the copious ornaments and the audience bedazzlement all ruled the process of stage production. Representing the Byzantine world on stage thus was the ideal opportunity for theatre craftspeople to reveal the full breadth of their skills. As for the audience, it was a chance to dive into the mysterious atmosphere of an empire exciting all curiosities.

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[1] Quoted in Roger Manvell (1973), *Ellen Terry*, London: Heinemann, p.198.
[2] 'visions féeriques et mystérieuses', Le Figaro, 2/07/1890.

There are some permanent features in the representation of Byzantium in fin-de-siècle literary works, and consequently in their spectacularisation[3]. These fictions took place in a specific environment: a large capital city, either at its culmination or on the verge of collapsing, or just in between. The cosmopolitan aspect of such cities – Constantinople, Athens, Alexandria, Nicaea... – emphasised the idea of unstable, unsettled and puzzling places, merging and adding different cultures and aesthetics. Furthermore, Byzantium gave a tangible form to the crossing of all extremes and contrasts: between past and present, religiosity and heterodoxy, materialist and symbolic. On stage, similar scenes repeatedly occurred: crowds, ceremonial gatherings with choir singing, hippodromes spectacles, palaces secrets and drama, normalised violence, deviant behaviours – feeding the idea that Byzantium was the realisation of the literary decadent imaginary world. It came with the idea of a stage bowed down by gold, precious gems, and overloading ornaments. This profusion could actually be found in many of the spectacular aspects of the 19th century urban life: world fairs, museums, department stores, modern architecture, interior decoration, visual arts, and so on. To impress the audience but also to convince it, stage craftspeople had to work hand in hand with playwrights, helped by specialised literature. Research was crucial as faithful depictions of the past were commonly successful on stage. The practice of *tableaux vivants* was incorporated to usual performances: the play slowly stopped on some key scenes for the audience to admire composition and the visual effects on stage[4]. In *tableaux vivants* or historical spectacular performances, not only details signify reality, they also show an 'archeologised spectacle'[5]. Material depictions of Byzantium, though adapted, exaggerated and fantasised, contributed to blur the lines between the real and the representational.

The first successful plays to stage Byzantium revealed a strong attachment to historical accuracy, in spite of performing a drama set in quite an unknown era: the reign of Justinian I in the 6th century, and more specifically the life of Theodora. This character, courtesan, actress then empress, was a particularly good fit for stage representation and as it embodied all features of the

[3] Sophie Basch (2004), « Du byzantinisme à Byzance et de l'histoire au théâtre. Autour de *Théodora* (1884) de Victorien Sardou », *in La Métamorphose des ruines, Influence des découvertes archéologiques sur les arts et les lettres*, 1870-1914, Ecole française d'Athènes.
[4] Rosemary Barrow (2010). Toga Plays and Tableaux Vivants: Theatre and Painting on London's Late-Victorian and Edwardian Popular Stage. *Theatre Journal, 62*(2), 209-226.
[5] Michael R. Booth (1981), *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*. Theatre Production Series. Londres : Routledge and Kegan Paul, p.16.

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stereotyped Byzantine woman: mystical and religious, ambitious and violent, depraved and saint. In 1866, the impressive production *Theodora: empress and actress*, written by Watts Philips from a thorough study of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1781) opened at the Surrey Theatre in London. This spectacular play left a mark on the audience with its elaborate costumes and scenery, 'in a style of glittering splendour' according to the press[6]. It was an opportunity for the audience still unfamiliar with Constantinople to discover what this mysterious place looked like. Mr Gates painted precise scenery from historical representations of the Byzantine empire, while Mr Coombes elaborated dazzling costumes inspired from dresses from all over the world, presenting 'one of the most striking spectacles that have been witnessed for some time'[7]. Almost two decades later, in Paris, Victorien Sardou's *Théodora* (1884) similarly enchanted spectators, and became a cornerstone for the taste for Byzantium and its aesthetics. Théodora's costume, crafted by Théophile Thomas, was embroidered with hundreds of gems, as an exact replica of the real empress's coat (*fig.1*). Philippe Chaperon and Auguste Rubé executed landscapes following the thorough instructions of the playwright. Despite their meticulous care to create a faithful depiction of Byzantium, the play was criticised for its anachronism, from architectural approximations to the doubt on the use of certain accessories, as shown in the infamous 'fork debate' between Victorien Sardou and journalists[8]. Ten years later, Anatole France's novel *Thaïs* was adapted on the stage of the Opéra Garnier (1894), putting another Byzantine heroine in the spotlight: a dancer and courtesan from 3rd century Alexandria becoming a saint. Charles Bianchini's costumes seem to be in line with Théophile Thomas', adorning bodies with precious stones and golden jewellery and emphasising the stereotypical Byzantine sensuality and temptation (*fig.2*). Later that year, as he was about to produce another new play set in Byzantine era, Victorien Sardou redoubled his prudence to avoid gibes. For *Gismonda*'s material aspect, Théophile Thomas was commissioned again to create the costumes, and he worked directly from ancient textiles to reconstitute velvet and silk cloth embroidered with gold and silver threads (*fig.3*). Some books such as Auguste Racinet's *Le costume historique* (1888) were used as references (*fig.4*). The date of the plot, 1451, adds dramatic potential as well as stylistic

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[6] 'Surrey theatre', The Sun, 10/04/1866, p.7.

[7] Especially as the play depicts 'Asiatic and Greek mobs' in the fourth acts.

[8] Dans la troisième scène du deuxième tableau du premier acte, Théodora mange en utilisant une fourchette. Ce simple geste outre certains intellectuels présents à la première : ces derniers affirment que la fourchette n'avait pas encore été inventée dans la Byzance du VIe siècle. Dans le numéro de L'Illustration théâtre consacré à la première de Théodora, Victorien Sardou se défend alors de ses détracteurs en se lançant dans une description exhaustive de l'histoire de la fourchette à travers le temps. See Victorien Sardou, « Interview pour la première de *Théodora*», *L'Illustration théâtre*, 3 janvier 1885, p.I-IV.

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motley look. The decorators, Amable and Eugène Carpézat, created several scenes depicting the peculiar atmosphere of 15th century Athens: a city merging ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance and the heritage of the Byzantine empire about to collapse. The blend of all these different aesthetics shaped a 'spectacle for the eyes' of the audience[9]. Interestingly, for *Gismonda*, a new generation of craftspeople was also involved: René Lalique for the jewellery and Alfons Mucha for the illustrated poster and playbill, bringing a sense of modernity to the performance (*fig.5*). The play had remarkable success both in Paris and London where it toured with all costumes and scenery for the English audience to admire.

Byzantium triumphed in fin-de-siècle aesthetics as a scenery, but also as a costume itself. In 1899, the Art Workers' Guild of London performed an Elizabethan masque titled *Beauty's Awakening, a masque of winter and of spring*. The performance blended the tale of Sleeping Beauty with a plot describing the path of London to become a fair-city amongst the fair-cities, and it pictured Byzantium as one of them. Unlike previous plays recreating Byzantium as an environment, the masque materialised the fallen empire as a person. In the fourth scene, as all cities introduce themselves, the embodied city of Byzantium's song concentrates in one character all attributes of the mental landscape and incarnation of the mysterious Empire:

> *I was the daughter of imperial Rome,*
> *Crowned by her Empress of the Mystic East:*
> *The Most Holy Wisdom chose me for her home,*
> *Sealed me Truth's regent, and high Beauty's priest.*
> *Lo! when Fate struck with hideous flame and sword,*
> *Far o'er the new world's life my grace outpoured.*[10]

Such derivatives of the original historical representation of Byzantium continued in the following years. Theatre and fashions being intrinsically bonded, the achievements of costume makers led fashionable socialites to adopt Byzantine-inspired outfits off stage, like the Comtesse Greffulhe and her *robe byzantine* crafted by the Maison Worth (1904) (*fig.6*), an English firm based in Paris working for both theatres and high society. The taste for Byzantium then also adapted to modernist experiments. In 1912, painter and costume designer Duncan Grant drew costumes inspired by Byzantine dresses. It was part of a larger interest for Byzantium shown by the Bloomsbury group (*fig.7*): in a letter to Grant, Vanessa Bell, wandering in Italy, wrote about the 'paper-mosaic' she had been practicing. She mentioned the commission Duncan Grant had to

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[9] Gaston Deschamps, « Gismonda », *La Revue de Paris*, 1894. BnF Arts du spectacle 8-RF-47805.

[10] *Beauty's Awakening, a masque of winter and of spring, performed in the Guildhall, London, June 1899*, Special issue of *The Studio*, summer 1899, p.31.

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design *Macbeth*'s costumes for Harley Granville-Barker[11]. Oscar Wilde's comment in 1888 associating *Macbeth*'s characters with Byzantium was quite clear-sighted: the shape and patterns sketched on the design for a lord in Grant's sketchbook clearly resemble traditional Byzantine clothing (*fig.8*)[12]. Granville-Barker's *Macbeth* never saw the light of day, but it seems that Duncan Grant used a similar style in some of his sets and costumes designs for Jacques Copeau's version of *Twelfth Night* at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris in 1914.

Avant-garde and modernism drastically changed stage scenery tradition, turning materially realistic sets into artistic symbolic installations, however the persistent fascination for Byzantium shows that the attachment of the audience to the lost era lived through the disruptive innovations brought by the turn of the century. It could be explained by the still-growing power of images in the 20th century. As a matter of fact, the imagined Byzantium was a world overcrowded with images, as contemporary Byzantinist Charles Dielh wrote in 1910:

> « There were pictures everywhere, not only in churches, but in private houses, on furniture, on costumes, not only images were venerated but also openly worshipped.[13]

Much like Byzantine obsession for pictures, 19th and 20th centuries' audiences were immersed in a world with more and more images to consume. Scenery, costume and accessories crafts were fully dedicated to the eye of spectators, supporting the dramatic effects with a sense of reality or a sense of amazement. Fantasised Byzantium easily satisfied the thirst for mesmerising spectacle and allowed audiences to plunge into another world without being separated from their contemporary pleasures and fashions.

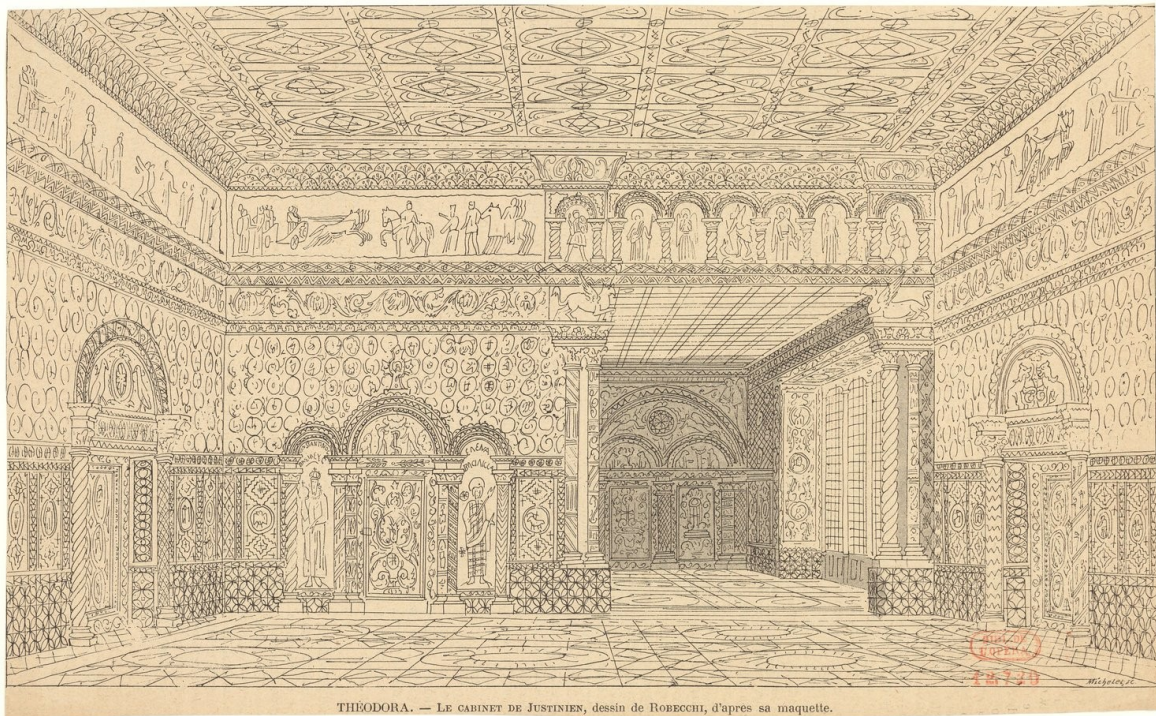[11] Letter from Vanessa Bell to Duncan Grant, 10 may 1912, Tate archive, TGA 20078/1/44/8.
[12] CHA/ P/2484/50. Duncan Grant, Macbeth Sketchbook, costume design for a Lord, pencil on paper. Photograph © The Charleston Trust
[13] « On mettait des images partout, non pas seulement dans les églises, mais aussi dans les maisons particulières, sur les meubles, dans les costumes, on ne se contentait pas de les vénérer, on les adorait ouvertement. » Charles Dielh (1910), *Manuel d'art byzantin*, Paris, Alphonse Picard et Fils, pp.335-336.

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Figure 1: Théodora (1884) – Dessins de presse/Cabinet de Justinien/Manteau de Théodora

ENFIN NOUS AVONS VU THÉODORA !

THÉODORA. — LE CABINET DE JUSTINIEN, dessin de ROBECCHI, d'après sa maquette.

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Figure 2: Charles Bianchini, costumes pour Thaïs (non-exécutés), 1894 (BnF Bibliothèque musée Opéra)

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12 ou 16 figurantes

(non ex.)
3

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Figure 3: Théophile Thomas, Costumes pour *Gismonda*, V&A S.608:1 to 41-1983

Figure 4: Auguste Racinet, *Le Costume historique*, vol.3, GH, p.411

Figure 5: Alphonse Mucha, Livret illustré pour Gismonda, IVe acte (Bnf)

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Figure 6: Byzantine Dress, Worth © L. Degrâces et Ph. Joffre / Paris Musées, Palais Galliera

Figure 7: Vanessa Bell, Byzantine lady, Government Art Collection 13349

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Figure 8: Duncan Grant, *Macbeth Sketchbook, costume design for a Lord,* © The Charleston Trust