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# Moving Bodies, Displaying Nations

National Cultures,  
Race and Gender  
in World Expositions  
Nineteenth to  
Twenty-first Century

edited by  
Guido Abbattista

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Sergia Adamo

DANCING FOR THE WORLD:  
ARTICULATING THE NATIONAL AND THE GLOBAL  
IN THE *BALLO EXCELSIOR*'S KITSCH IMAGINATION

A FOREWORD: THE EXHIBITIONARY PARADIGM OF SPECTACULARIZATION

Obscurantism defeated by Light and succumbing to the triumph of Civilization; a gallery of heroes of progress and modernity, from Alessandro Volta to Papin - inventor of the steamboat; the celebration of the glories of Italian work embodied in the Mont Cenis Tunnel and in the Isthmus of Suez; and yet again another triumph of Western civilization weaving a dance with a slave freed from the shackles of backward Orient; just to end with a big “dance of nations”, with dancers evoking little soldiers lined up in a march toward universal peace, a “pax romana” made of uniforms, flags, national anthems and conciliatory rhetoric dripping from every step and each note. All this was the *Ballo Excelsior*, originally choreographed by Luigi Manzotti to music by Romualdo Marengo, a grandiose phantasmagoric *mise en scène*, one of the most popular Italian nineteenth-century cultural artifacts, which premiered at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on January, 11<sup>th</sup> 1881.

In that same 1881, just a few months later, Milan audiences would witness the opening of the National Exhibition, the first big national exposition, celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the political unification of the Italian state. In a sense, the *Ballo Excelsior* envisaged the mode of perception and reception the exhibition would require from its visitors, instructing them on the very key-concepts that lie at its core.<sup>1</sup> In other words,

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1 For a general overview of these concepts, I am referring here, among others, to the perspective proposed by Alexander C. T. Geppert in his *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) that conceptualizes “exhibitions as ‘meta-media’, as specific means of communication that encompass and incorporate other communicative technologies” with a particular attention “to questions of medialization, visualization and virtualization” (3). On the 1881 Milan Exhibition see I. M. Barzaghi, *Milano 1881: tanto lusso e tanta folla. Rappresentazione della modernità e modernizzazione popolare* (Milan: Silvana Editore, 2009). For a general orientation among the burgeoning number of studies on exhibitions, see *Expositions universelles, internationales et nationales (1844-1921). Répertoire méthodique provisoire*, établi par C. Demeulenaere-Douyère (Paris: Ar-

it was not only, as Cristina Della Coletta writes, “a spectacular synthesis of the fairs’ mentality, capturing what was popularly defined the age of ‘exhibition mania’”;<sup>2</sup> it was first and foremost a construction and reproduction of a particular kind of discursivity that lies at the core of the whole world exhibitions “phantasmagoria” of capitalist culture,<sup>3</sup> to use once again Walter Benjamin’s often quoted definition.

Indeed, the *Ballo Excelsior*, taking up and developing the Italian nineteenth-century tradition of the “ballo grande”, depicts the celebration of progress and technological domination of the world through a structure made of different frames that faithfully reproduce the itineraries of the great exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> It juxtaposes, one frame after the other, spectacular elements and grandiose *mises en scène* of ephemeral display of human diversity. It can really be seen as a reproduction, in the microcosm of a mass cultural artifact, of the many tensions and drives that characterized world exhibitions in general: the construction of a national identity founded on a showing off of the dictates of progress, the unavoidable confrontation with otherness (interesting to this regard the insertion of “exotic dances” and orientalist scenes), the configuration of a ‘world’ or ‘global’ dimension seen as an articulation of single national spaces, the definition of gender identities, the intertwining of different cultural discourses in a space of spectacularization, and, last but not least, the blurring of boundaries between living bodies of human beings and fetishized objects to be put on show.

I would like to look at the *Ballo Excelsior* as part of a wider apparatus (what Michel Foucault would call a “dispositif”)<sup>5</sup> for the production of a particular kind of discursivity that identifies a sort of exhibitionary paradigm of spectacularization. This notion derives from Tony Bennett’s influential formulation of the “exhibitionary complex”, defined as a set of “cultural technologies concerned to organize a voluntary self-regulating

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chives Nationales, 2008) and A. C. T. Geppert, J. Coffey and T. Lau, *International Exhibitions, Expositions Universelles and World’s Fairs, 1851-2005: A Bibliography* (Fresno, CA: Freie Universität Berlin-California State University, 2006), last accessed 1 June 2014, [http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/efmi/astrofuturismus/publikationen/Geppert\\_-\\_Expo\\_bibliography\\_3ed.pdf?1407585449](http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/efmi/astrofuturismus/publikationen/Geppert_-_Expo_bibliography_3ed.pdf?1407585449).

2 C. Della Coletta, *World’s Fairs Italian Style: The Great Expositions in Turin and Their Narratives 1860-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 10.

3 W. Benjamin, “Exposé 1939. Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V-i, hrs. von R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 45-59. For the English transl. see “Exposé of 1939: Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth century”, *Arcades Project*, ed. R. Tiedeman, transl. H. Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14-26.

4 For the idea of the exhibitions as a *mise en scène* of progress, see L. Aimone e C. Olmo, *Le esposizioni universali, 1851-1900. Il progresso in scena* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1990).

5 I am referring here to Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the notion of “dispositif” in Foucault; see G. Agamben, *Che cos’è un dispositivo* (Rome: nottetempo, 2006).

citizenry”.<sup>6</sup> Yet it tries to amend and partially modify it, by referring to the above mentioned Foucauldian notion of “dispositif”, understood as a heterogeneous set of discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, security measures, philosophical statements, so on so forth, with a specific strategic function and always inscribed inside relations of power and knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Talking about a “paradigm”, instead than a “complex”, can help to highlight the heterogeneous nature of the different discourses variously linked to the exhibitions, avoiding a totalizing, non dynamic, view of exhibitions as regulatory institutions strictly aimed at constructing passive and monolithic audiences.

It might seem banal and superfluous to point out this, but I find it important to bring back the exhibitionary discourse to a general proliferation of meanings that is pervasive in late nineteenth-century culture. Actually, the case of the *Ballo Excelsior* allows us to see how the textuality, the narratives and the representations that revolve around the great exhibitions do not stem only directly from them. It is rather necessary, in my opinion, to reconsider a widespread discursive production disseminated through different medias and representations that is not only a direct derivation from the visit of the exhibitions. We have, of course, reports, diaries, descriptions, all the different kinds of writings that more or less faithfully report data and information on the exhibitions. Yet, at the same time, there are forms of narration and representation that precede and accompany the exhibitions themselves and are part of a bigger cultural imagery of the time, that produce and reproduce it.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the *Ballo Excelsior* both anticipated and was part of a variety of novel forms of spectacularization that, almost paradoxically in a society that was becoming, according to Foucault, a collection of separated individualities,<sup>9</sup> aimed at constructing a sense of shared experiences. This led to a sense of subjectivization as modern individuals, who had to feel

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6 See T. Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”, *New Formations*, 4 (Spring 1988): 73-102 and *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995) esp. the Introduction.

7 Agamben, *Che cos'è un dispositivo*, 6-7.

8 Indeed, the 1881 Milan Exhibition gave rise to an incredible proliferation of textuality, describing the city of Milan, mainly, and preparing the ideological setting for possible visitors. Among the vast array of guidebooks, anthologies, collections that were published in that same 1881, I can only mention here *Milano 1881* (Milan: Mediolanum editore, 1881) and *Mediolanum* (Milan: Vallardi, 1881) both in the form of a journalistic report; *Milano e i suoi dintorni* (Milan, Civelli: 1881); *Milano e l'Esposizione italiana del 1881. Cronaca illustrata della Esposizione nazionale-industriale ed artistica del 1881* (Milan, Treves, 1881); *Milano 1881*, a c. di C. Riccardi (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991; with texts by Capuana, Neera, Sacchetti, Torelli Viollier, Verga, among others; originally: Milan: Ottino, 1881); *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1881, also known as “Giornale dell'esposizione”); *Ricordo dell'esposizione di Milano 1881* (Milan: Garbini, 1881).

9 See, in particular, M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris : Gallimard, 1975); *Les Anormaux. Cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); “Il faut défendre la société”. *Cours au Collège de France (1975-1976)* (Paris: Gallimard-Seuil, 1997).

part of a nation, but also part of a much wider dimension made of international spaces, mass production and mass consumption, global leisure, widespread spectacularization. According to Martin Jay's reading of Guy Debord's *La Société du spectacle*,<sup>10</sup> starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, shows and exhibitions, and the whole dimension of spectacle, became a social relation. Spectacular images and representations constituted the world of modernity rather than merely characterized it.

This complex process has been widely investigated with regard to single cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup> As Vanessa Schwartz highlighted, drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities", it was certainly in late nineteenth-century Paris that for the first time "the visual representation of reality as a spectacle [...] created a common culture and a sense of shared experiences through which people might imagine themselves as participating in a metropolitan culture because they had visual evidence that such a shared world, of which they were part, existed".<sup>12</sup>

However, the specific case of the *Ballo Excelsior* can shed light on how this process must be seen also through a particular articulation between a local and national dimension and a world or global one. Indeed, the ballet was first and foremost a great global success aimed at spreading the world's fairs' ideology of "progress and civilization" first to the Italian newly born nation, but then all over the world. In this sense, an investigation of this global process is very much needed and will certainly not be exhausted within the limits of this article.

But there is more: the *Ballo Excelsior* managed to do that, significantly, by staging, through a phantasmagoric kitsch imagination, "moving bodies". In the multifarious complexity of discourses opened up by nineteenth-century world exhibitions in the context of this more general process of spectacularization, the role of the moving body has a relevance that still deserves to be investigated. In this realm, dance performances of different types stand out as significant moments that not only often accompanied the success and marked the memory of specific exhibitions (such as, for instance "belly dances" in Paris 1878 and then 1889 or Chicago 1893 or the fact that forty years later, in the same city, the famous dancer and choreographer Ruth St. Denis was directly involved in the organization of a "Ballet of the States");<sup>13</sup> they also constructed and

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10 See G. Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) [1967] and M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 427.

11 See for instance, V. R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de siècle Paris* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1999) or R. D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978).

12 Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 6. For the formulation of the notion of imagined communities, in relation to a national dimension, B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991<sup>2</sup>).

13 J. Sherman, "Ruth St. Denise: the Lost Ballet", *Dance Chronicle*, 20, 1 (1997): 49-62.

reproduced a particular kind of discursivity that lies at the core of the whole world's exhibitions phantasmagoria and represent a constitutive part of the primordial form of global spectacularization they imposed.

Not by chance, the *Ballo Excelsior* has been widely investigated in the last few years. There is a whole documentation that forms the basis for the study of the ballet and its many – Italian and international – variants;<sup>14</sup> there are studies which fall within the history of dance, thought of as an autonomous discipline, and others that look at the ballet in relation to the history of Italian exhibitions from the point of view of cultural history.<sup>15</sup> What seems to be still missing, however, in my opinion, is an attempt to intertwine these different approaches in order to take into account the role of dance as a cultural discourse both in specific cultural contexts and in an increasingly global dimension. The *Ballo Excelsior* was actually a complex cultural artifact, only apparently trivial. It managed to exploit and develop the specificity of the language of dance in all its different forms of 'recycling' of diverse cultural discourses.

Moreover, as the *Ballo Excelsior* carved its success beyond the boundaries of the city of Milan (and this happened very soon), the artifact was modified, it fit other contexts, it became a pliable tool for the dissemination of an ideology that was no longer only that of the 1881 Milan Exhibition and not solely Italian, but came to be identified as an emblem of late nineteenth-century internationalism and technical progress. Therefore, it is worth investigating the long-term global success of *Excelsior*, that is always linked to world's fairs paradigms, in order to trace the dynamics of adaptation to different contexts in a global dimension as a kind of model or prefiguration of today's global spectacles.

Underlying all this, we can find an ideological substratum, which accompanies and reinforces this spread: the acritical celebration of progress supports a complex layering and an ideological stratification made of delimitation and questioning of non-Western otherness. It creates hierarchies of identity and stereotypes that construct a hierarchy of values under which it becomes possible to exert different types of epistemic violence. And I am referring here in particular to the so-called exotic "quadri", the ones of Simoon and the Suez Canal, seemingly marginal, but in fact crucial in establishing this relationship so constitutive for *Excelsior* and for the wider exhibitionary paradigm itself.

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14 Most notably, *Excelsior. Documenti e saggi/Documents and essays*, a c. di F. Pappacena (Rome: Di Giacomo-Scuola nazionale di cinema-Cineteca nazionale, 1998); ...e guarnizioni spiccantissime. *Figurini e schemi coreografici per la rappresentazione del Ballo Excelsior all'Eden di Parigi – 1883*, a c. di G. Tamborelli (Milan: Amici della Scala, 1993); J. Pritchard, Review of F. Pappacena, *Excelsior. Documents and Essays*, *Dance Research*, XXI (2001): 108-115; see also more recent theater programs such as L. Manzotti, *Excelsior: azione coreografica, storica, allegorica e fantastica in sei parti e undici quadri* (Turin: Edizioni del Teatro Regio, 2000) and *Excelsior*, programma di sala del Teatro alla Scala, season 1999-2000.

15 See for instance the already mentioned Della Coletta, *World's Fairs Italian Style*.

It is from this perspective that it becomes possible to ask some questions about the mode of representation of otherness in the articulation between national and global in relation to the exhibitionary discursive paradigm of spectacularization.

In all this, finally, the focus remains on the role of the body in motion, of the “moving bodies” the ballet puts on display. The *Excelsior* depicts trajectories, dynamics and movements of bodies. Not only and not simply because dance is a discourse in which the moving body is precisely what constitutes the position of utterance. But also for the way in which the spectacle is grounded on a scale of grandeur of body movement and alludes to and anticipates what will happen in a few months on the stage of the city of Milan with the “Esposizione nazionale”: crowds of bodies, transported, handled, addressed, directed into fixed itineraries. If, then, the universal expositions, as Walter Benjamin notes in the incipit of his *Passegenwerk*, are places of pilgrimage to the fetish of commodity, they also create a kind of transfer through which the human being enters into a phantasmagoria to be distracted and to become a sort of reified object. Bodies are also and above all put on display in the exhibition, they acquire an identity imposed by the framework of the exhibition itself, they are subjected to a movement that marks their continuous flow of life into the proverbial “sex appeal of the inorganic”.<sup>16</sup> It is a suggestion that Benjamin often repeats, when for example he quotes Julius Lessing’s *Das halbe Jahrhundert der Weltausstellungen Berlin*, pointing out that the participation in the exhibition becomes a kind of representation.<sup>17</sup> The moving bodies are involved in the representation, they are human beings and commodities at the same time, they are subjects and objects, living bodies and inorganic fetishes.

This link is never so evident as in the spectacles and performances that are present in all the exhibitions, from the universal ones, to national or local ones. But this becomes particularly evident in the *Ballo Excelsior* that establishes a sort of paradigm, a kind of model, which will be continually repeated.

In analyzing the *Ballo Excelsior*, the following pages will try to take into account all this complex nexus of issues. They will trace, first of all, the link with the 1881 Milan exhibition, reconstructing the circumstances of the first staging of the ballet and its national reception. After that, the article looks at the global success the ballet had in the years to follow, highlighting the changes it underwent, both at an ideological and formal level, in order to meet the expectations of this new dimension through an articulation of the national and the global. Then, the nexus between the ballet’s aesthetic and ideological features will be analyzed, both from the specific point of view

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, “Exposé of 1939”, 79.

<sup>17</sup> “participation in the exhibition becomes [...] a sort of representation [...]”, 183 (“die Beschickung der Ausstellung wird [...] eine Art Representation [...]”), W. Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk, Aufzeichnungen und Materialien”, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 247.

of dance history and from the broader perspective of cultural studies, also discussing the definition of “kitsch” aesthetics, often mentioned in relation to this work. Finally, it will propose some reflections on how these articulations are also an imagination of a framed diversity, an artifact whose structure frames otherness into a phantasmagoric construction, something which deeply characterizes the kind of nineteenth-century Western discursivity world exhibitions are a part of.

### I. THE *BALLO EXCELSIOR* AND THE 1881 EXHIBITION IN MILAN

The *Ballo Excelsior* was undoubtedly a product of what I have defined as an exhibitionary paradigm of spectacularization and as such it goes hand in hand, or rather anticipates the Milan Exhibition of 1881. It seems to foreshadow the way the exhibition would be organized and its modes of perception, together with the ideology that emanates from it. All this will become particularly evident when the ballet will be performed on the occasion of other exhibitions at a national and international level (especially in Paris in 1895, although the first real international success of the *Ballo Excelsior* was in Paris in 1883), but, indeed, it is already eloquently evoked in the first reactions to the premiere.

In Milan, the success of the *Excelsior* was immediately, from the very first performance, striking. The theater journal *L'Asmodeo* on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1881 wrote that “the present generation does not remember a success equal to that achieved by the new ballet by Manzotti, Ballo Excelsior, performed on the evening of Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup>, in front of a packed theater”.<sup>18</sup>

It has become customary, especially after Gramsci, to think of melodrama as the national-popular narrative, the true collective narrative of nineteenth-century Italian national identity.<sup>19</sup> It is nevertheless much less frequent to acknowledge how, in the last decades of the century, the so called “ballo grande” represented a new extremely popular spectacle, more varied and certainly more open toward a certain kind of modern

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<sup>18</sup> Review of *Ballo Excelsior*, *L'Asmodeo*, 15 January 1881. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

<sup>19</sup> Gramsci writes about the “popularity” of melodrama at the beginning of his Quaderno 21 on “Letteratura popolare” - A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, a c. di V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), III, 2017-2135. See also M. Mila, “L’opera come forma popolare della comunicazione artistica”, *I costumi della Traviata* (Pordenone: Studio Tesi, 1992), 135-151, and then F. Savoia, “Il melodramma italiano dell’Ottocento come prodotto nazionale-popolare”, *Carte italiane*, I, 3 (1982): 39-49. On the need to historicize, however, the relationship between nineteenth-century Italian society and opera beyond stereotypes and anachronisms that often characterize perspectives taken for granted on this topic, see C. Sorba, *Teatri. L’Italia del melodramma nell’età del Risorgimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

performance that will develop in the years to follow. The popularity of Manzotti's ballet at the time was openly perceived as equal to that of Verdi, for example; not surprisingly, the review established an explicit comparison:

The theater had the appearance of a great artistic solemnity as if it was the premiere of an opera by Verdi. Yet it was not the prince of music who presented his new work, it was the prince of choreography, the great innovator who submitted for evaluation by the Milanese public the latest creation of his powerful talent whose triumph was truly complete, so that it proclaims him, without exception, the first among living choreographers.<sup>20</sup>

The review explains the reasons for such a success, finding them in a rhetoric of rapid narrative presentation that points toward a paratactical structure of juxtaposition, together with grandeur, wonder, surprise.<sup>21</sup> All this could fall under the category of the phantasmagoric,<sup>22</sup> a word which recurs with significant insistence in the first reviews and descriptions. It is interesting to notice how this success, which grew with the performances to follow,<sup>23</sup> remains linked in the perception of contemporary reviewers, to these characteristics.

Not by chance, after the first series of performances, *Excelsior* was staged again in the following season, the Primavera (Spring) season, which was explicitly defined as the "Exhibition season" (the grand "esposizione nazionale" opened on May, 5<sup>th</sup> 1881).

The attitude that characterized this exhibition was well outlined in the introductory pages of the first issue of the periodical paper *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata* (also known as *Il giornale dell'esposizione* "Journal of the exhibition"), published in installments to accompany the Exhibition itself and launched before the opening. It was clearly stated there that, after the stage in which different regions and peoples felt the need to meet and come to know each other, giving rise to a large number of small exhibitions in the twenty years following political unification, it was high time there was a truly unified and significant manifestation that the Italians could go beyond "a certain softness of fiber and character that leads them to prefer theatrical

20 Review of *Ballo Excelsior, L'Asmodeo*, 15 January 1881.

21 "There are twelve 'quadri' that in one hour and fifteen minutes will pass quickly before your eyes without ever tiring and always dazzling for the novelty of the groups of lines, figures, surprising for the importance of the concept always staged with the most rational criterion", and: "With a quick run through the centuries he [Manzotti] depicts the triumph of progress over obscurantism which results in the greatest discoveries and creations of human genius. The second 'quadro' is even marvellous, fascinating and the 'ballabile del Risorgimento' is new, dazzling, gorgeous".

22 On January 15<sup>th</sup> 1881 *L'Asmodeo* wrote explicitly about the *Excelsior* as a "magic phantasmagory of colours and scenes" with always "new effects" and "surprising figurations".

23 On January 29<sup>th</sup> 1881 *L'Asmodeo* announced that "*Excelsior's* triumph is marching on".

performances and outward forms of Catholicism to the austere and dark processes of labor and solitary meditation”.<sup>24</sup> An idea that was repeated in the editorial that provided the report of the inauguration, which was to represent “the solemn rehabilitation of the country that rejects the accusations, coming from Britain, of being a Carnival nation and the traditional reputation of ‘dolce far niente’ [idling]”).<sup>25</sup> Hence all this was first and foremost an attempt to escape a certain tendency to represent Italy as a farcical and burlesque country in order to build an image of national identity on completely different grounds: hard work, practicality, utilitarianism. After the exhibition held in Florence in 1861 and after Italy’s presence in Paris in 1867, in Vienna in 1873 and again Paris in 1878, the “glorious” task of the Milan Exhibition was that of “preparing new advances and opportunities for new victories to the nation’s industries” and “show to the Government and to legislators the new path, even among many difficulties [...]”.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, on the one hand a sober attitude of devotion to labor and productivity, on the other the proverbial, spectacular and lazy “Carnival nation”. But of course, beyond well-intentioned declarations, things were not so simple, as the organizers and promoters of the event knew very well: pedagogical intentions, spectacles and amusements would have to skillfully blend to give rise to a complex machine for shaping and molding a new world view. In the second issue of the *Giornale dell’esposizione* after a general history of world’s fairs, Michele Lessona explicitly reaffirmed the link between exhibitions and various forms of spectacles that were their antecedents, having to admit that “looking back in history [...] large gatherings of people for public shows are a kind of necessity, and the rulers, understanding this necessity, have tried to exploit it.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, it was necessary, according to Lessona, to carefully identify the Milan exhibition with the glorification of the work that could lead Italy to gain a place among civilized nations. Therefore, it was essential to instill and infuse in the Italian public this awareness of a shared national identity, by displaying, exhibiting, teaching by all available means, carefully avoiding social contrasts and conflicts. Shows, spectacles and amusements seemed to be the right means to reach this aim. The final words of Lessona’s article are eloquent to this regard:

The industrial exhibitions are thus preaching to us, even unbeknownst to us, around the need for social reforms to improve the conditions of workers, reforms

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24 L. Luzzatti, “Che cosa dovrebbe essere la II Esposizione Italiana a Milano?”, *L’esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881: 1-3, see 1.

25 “Il 5 maggio. Editoriale”, *L’esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881: 82-86, see 82.

26 Luzzatti, “Che cosa dovrebbe essere la II Esposizione Italiana a Milano?”, 2.

27 M. Lessona, “Le Esposizioni mondiali e le regionali”, in *L’esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881: 9-11, see 9.

that should be desired and as far as we can, effectively promoted, not just with empty words and false promises; everyone must desire and work that this will become true possibly without violent shocks and disastrous disturbances.<sup>28</sup>

Here, therefore, Lessona traced the conceptual framework of a “dispositif” aimed at social control, almost obsessively invoking harmony and peace, as the only possibility of avoiding social contrasts. Not surprisingly, the Milan Exhibition ended with choruses of children from local schools singing a hymn entitled “Alla pace” (To Peace)<sup>29</sup> just as the *Ballo Excelsior* ends with children sitting and holding flags composing the word “PAX”.

During the 1881 Exhibition in Milan there were actually many shows, spectacles and amusements. As Ilaria Barzaghi has highlighted, they were meant to be breaks, pauses in the exhibitionary narrative.<sup>30</sup> Apart from a special season at the Teatro alla Scala with the *Ballo Excelsior* as the central event, inside the exhibitionary space there was a circus, a theater, musical performances, target shooting, hot-air balloons, special illuminations, not to mention the events of the opening and closing ceremonies. The main attraction was the circus, “il circo Renz”, a wooden construction where the equestrian spectacles were held that could host 5,000 people and was to be destroyed at the end of the exhibition.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, an amphitheater called Arena was built, whose tiered rows were meant to be transformed into a so called “fera fantastica” (a fair “phantastique”) representing the four parts of the world (namely Africa, Asia, Europe and America) each with its “local flavor” (“colore locale”).<sup>32</sup> On its grand stage (“grandioso palcoscenico”) different spectacles, described as “phantastic and choreographic” were meant to be performed by dancers, acrobats, jugglers, extras, men riding horses and so on so forth. Again: the project closely resembled what actually went on on stage for the *Ballo Excelsior*, confirming, once more, that *Excelsior* was actually the model for all this variety of spectacular entertainment.

However the didactic, assertive and ideological component of the *Ballo Excelsior* probably played a key role in its enduring success, which distinguished it from other forms of spectacles. The Renz circus (which proposed mainly equestrian spectacles), for example, was not very well received,<sup>33</sup> and the theater Arena, inaugurated on June the 8<sup>th</sup> with an illumination show by Giuseppe Ottino and a mimed performance (“azione

28 Lessona, “Le Esposizioni mondiali e le regionali”, 11.

29 “La festa di chiusura”, *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 315.

30 Barzaghi, *Milano 1881*, 191-209, who defines the *Ballo Excelsior* as the most significant event linked to the exhibition from an ideological point of view, 201.

31 “Il circo Renz”, *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881, 87.

32 “Cronaca dell'esposizione nazionale”, *L'Asmodeo*, 2 May 1881, 2.

33 “Cronaca dell'esposizione nazionale”, *L'Asmodeo*, 23 May 1881, 2.

mimica”) by Manzotti himself, on June 18<sup>th</sup> was already defined as a failure. Even the target shooting did not meet the favor of the visitors.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, in general, spectacles and entertainments inside the Exhibition were not successful, whereas the *Ballo Excelsior* at the theater Alla Scala continued to be highly appreciated by large audiences, as if it constituted the necessary complement and somehow the instructions for use of the exhibition itself. The theatrical journal *L'Asmodeo* ironically wrote that this lack of success was due to the fact that visitors, after having been overawed (“strabiliati”) by the different pavilions of the Exhibition were not keen on spending more money for theatrical entertainments, which were definitely not very well planned and financed.<sup>35</sup> For instance, at the Arena there was also a ballet by Manzotti, *Pietro Micca*, here called *Vittorio Amedeo II*, a huge and grandiose *mise en scène* with more than a thousand people on stage, a third of which, though, were not professionals,<sup>36</sup> while the whole production gave the idea of not being properly sustained economically. And the same happened with the closing ceremony, considered not very well planned.<sup>37</sup> At the same time *Excelsior* went on increasingly more successfully: on the very day of the closing of the Exhibition it will count its 103<sup>rd</sup> performance.

Although a specific commission was created in order to supervise their organization (“Commissione per i divertimenti”), spectacles and amusements do not seem to have been a core part of the project. There were many projects in this domain, but very few were actually realized, apart from horse races, a lottery and, on a quite different note, the external season at the Teatro alla Scala, where the *Ballo Excelsior* was alternating with the opera *Mefistofele* by Arrigo Boito (a different genre, indeed, but still a work by the most significant Italian composer of the time). However, as a booklet commented,

a mere exhibition alone [un'esposizione nuda e cruda] is not possible. Industry is worth every attention, every sympathy, every admiration, but we need to put around it those enticements that its strict character does not offer, on the contrary, it disdains them. And nothing can offer these enticements better than spectacles and shows.<sup>38</sup>

A few years later, writing about another exhibition (Turin 1911), Edmondo De Amicis would even wonder how many people actually visited the exhibition only in order to enjoy “carnavalesque amusements” “that nowadays stick to all exhibitions like

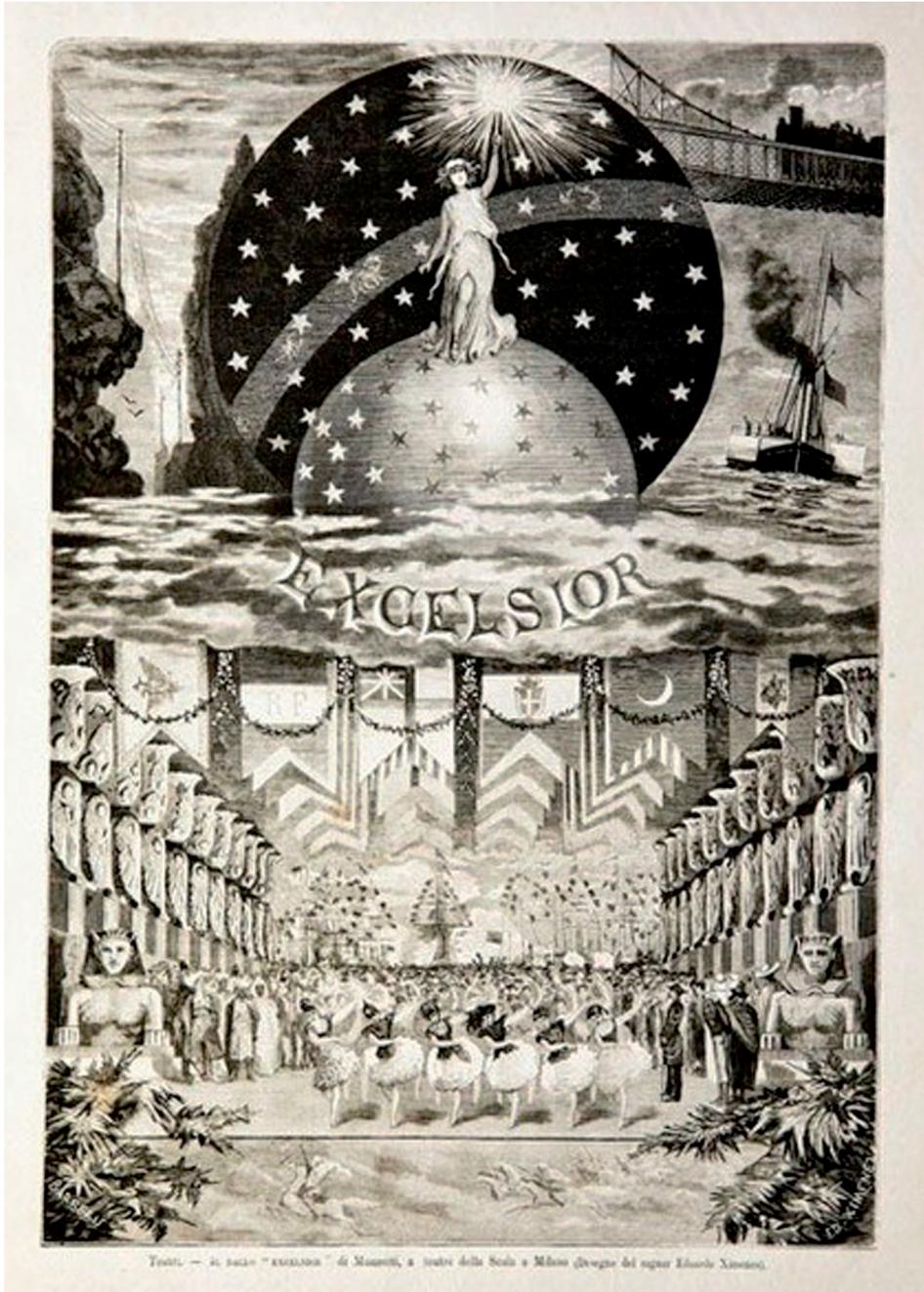
34 “Cronaca dell'esposizione nazionale”, *L'Asmodeo*, 18 June 1881.

35 “Cronaca dell'esposizione nazionale”, *L'Asmodeo*, 28 June 1881.

36 Review of *Vittorio Amedeo II*, *L'Asmodeo*, 30 July 1881, 1

37 “Cronaca dell'esposizione nazionale”, *L'Asmodeo*, 10 November 1881, 2.

38 “Storia dell'esposizione. VIII Corse, divertimenti, lotteria”, *Milano e l'Esposizione italiana del 1881*, 15.



Tutti — al ballo "EXCELSIOR" di MARIANI, al teatro della Scala a Milano giovedì del regno Edoardo XI.

*The Ballo Excelsior* at the Teatro alla Scala during the 1881 Milan Exhibition. Drawing by E. Ximenes. From *Milano e l'Esposizione italiana del 1881* (Milan: Treves, 1881).

stands of sweets and toys do to churches in country fairs".<sup>39</sup> De Amicis painted an ironic picture of the visitors: mature men impatiently visiting the serious pavilions of industry and art and thinking about the moment when they could go on the helter-skelter, find their way through mazes, look on at tobacco stands or admire the machine that takes coins and puts the net inside goldfish bowl. According to De Amicis, thus, the majority of visitors were attracted to the exhibitions by illumination spectacles, fireworks and concerts. And this contributed to making them not only observers but also objects to be observed: most visitors could therefore be described as those who go to see the exhibition with the only aim of exhibiting themselves.<sup>40</sup>

It is in this intertwining of didacticism and paradigms of spectacularization that the human "moving" body acquired its double status of subject and object of the exhibition. De Amicis wrote from the viewpoint of someone who already had a certain familiarity with exhibitionary habits and acquired practices. In Milan, all this was still under negotiation and was experienced not without tensions and contradictions between the main didactic and ideological purposes on the one hand and, on the other, the carnivalesque aspect inherent in all that, notwithstanding the well-intentioned declarations of the organizers.

The already mentioned installments by Sonzogno, for instance, did not pay too much attention to these aspects. Apart from a report about show-like ethnographic parades and displays of traditional costumes from every Italian region,<sup>41</sup> the only event the booklet took notice of was the illumination spectacle that took place on the night of May the 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>42</sup> Yet this is interesting to notice and to put in relation to the *Ballo Excelsior*: the only show considered worthy of mention had, again, significantly much to do with the ballet. The descriptions speak explicitly of "spokes" which spread to every corner of the city, transformed for the occasion into a sort of exotic and amazing, overawed and marvelous place.<sup>43</sup> Again, a kind of concretization, a sort of an appendix, of the whole idea of the *Excelsior*: technical progress, and one of his most celebrated achievements, such as electricity, transformed into an instrument of spectacle. Indeed in graphic reproductions that were distributed throughout the city on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition, all Milan itself seems transformed into a grand stage for the *Ballo Excelsior*, whose scenography and costumes, designed by Edel, had already made a permanent breach into the collective imagination.

39 E. De Amicis, "Le esposizioni e il pubblico", *Pagine allegre* (Milan: Treves, 1921), 59-73.

40 De Amicis, "Le esposizioni e il pubblico", 59-60.

41 "L'Etnografia all'Esposizione", *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881, 210.

42 Technical problems prevented the event to take place on the very day of the opening. It was anyway repeated one week later.

43 "Il 5 maggio. Editoriale", 83, 86.

The idea that the *Ballo Excelsior* was the spectacle of the exhibition *par excellence* was even stated more openly by the booklet published by Treves *Milano e l'Esposizione italiana del 1881*. In an article entitled *Il ballo Excelsior alla Scala (Feste e spettacoli)*, Manzotti's work was defined as "the best amusement that foreigners can enjoy in Milan on the occasion of the National Exhibition", remarking that everyday a crowd "taps on the door of the theater, eager to find the best places to enjoy the great creation of the genial choreographer".<sup>44</sup> And this, according to the anonymous reviewer, because "the idea of showing the progress of humanity through dance is extremely daring and novel. A great genius was needed in order to realize it with grandiosity and splendor, avoiding the baroque and the ridiculous". So that, from the darkness of the Spanish inquisition up to the Mont Cenis Tunnel and the Suez Canal, audiences could see "all the triumphs of modern invention". And then, again, all inside a frame of marvelous and powerful phantasy (a recurring word), grandiosity and enthusiasm, in a picture that "dazzles" and "fascinates" for the wonders of the scene. Manzotti, considered, as a choreographer, a better artist than a writer or a painter in order to show the triumph of progress, is here defined as a "leader of the masses" ("un condottiero delle masse"), someone who could spread his message not only to the Italian nation but also to the masses all over the world.

The *Ballo Excelsior* was thus seen as a token of the exhibitionary paradigm also for its aspiration to an articulation of the national and the global. The very internationalist idea of universality, interdependence and peace, instrumental in this vision of world conquest, is definitely inherent in Manzotti's ballet and was often underlined by contemporary reviewers. And this was yet another element that characterized the whole project of the Milan Exhibition. These are the emblematic words with which Carlo Romussi ended the last installment of *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*:

Among all nations a phenomenon of exosmoses and endosmoses occurs: each nation gives to the others the products of its soil and its industry and receives a share swap, and this need is the demonstration and proof of universal brotherhood, whose duties nature has imposed, and that the people, driven by self-interest masked by patriotism, sometimes insanelly forget.<sup>45</sup>

Paradoxical assertion that combines nationalist identitarianism with the need, increasingly more urgent, for a broader perspective: the newly born nation that already confronts his negation and tries to subsume it dialectically. All this finds in the *Ballo Excelsior* a very effective dramatic presentation, with the same paradox embedded in an

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<sup>44</sup> "Il ballo Excelsior alla Scala (Feste e spettacoli)", *Milano e l'Esposizione italiana del 1881*, 271.

<sup>45</sup> C. Romussi, "Conclusion", *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, 1881, 322.

insistent evocation of universal peace and brotherhood, on the one hand, and strong nationalist and openly militaristic celebrations on the other. The already mentioned article is very eloquent to this regard when the author writes:

If only Rome could fulfill the wish of its citizens: to affirm a brotherhood that does not know divisions of races among humans, with a World's Fair held on the venerable hills where once reigned force, afterwards superstition, and where today we invoke love and the light of truthfulness.<sup>46</sup>

The 1881 Exhibition in Milan explicitly affirmed this link: it was considered as a first step toward an opening of the Italian nation to the world. The *Ballo Excelsior* anticipated this ideological stance and became perhaps an unexpected instrument of it. I will now try to briefly outline some steps of this process.

## II. ARTICULATING THE NATIONAL AND THE GLOBAL

Thus, the *Ballo Excelsior* can be really considered a token or a successful emblem of the whole 1881 National Exhibition project. The Exhibition had a national dimension, yet, at the same time, could not avoid the stance that lay behind the more general exhibitionary paradigm, that of a world and global dimension to be constructed as a powerful representation.<sup>47</sup> Alexander Geppert has recently underlined the transnational and transcultural character of imperial exhibitions, considered as a specific “medium” whose “self implemented rhetoric”<sup>48</sup> (to use Geppert’s words) implies perceptual interdependencies and transnational interrelations despite local specificities. However, this openness toward a world dimension is “gained through historical displaying and staging of cultural differences”.<sup>49</sup> And indeed the *Ballo Excelsior* represents this problematic articulation in a variety of ways.

There is of course the glorification of Italian achievements (Volta, the Mont Cenis Tunnel, the Suez Canal). Yet at the same time the space represented goes from Italy to Spain, from North Africa, to New York, with echoes of characters coming from other parts of the world (China, India, Turkey, Britain, France etc.) and, most of all, the finale, with a proverbial “ballabile delle nazioni” (“dance of nations”) that clearly states this articulation. Indeed, the world is here represented from a perspective of internationalism:

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<sup>46</sup> Romussi, “Conclusioni”.

<sup>47</sup> Geppert, “Introduction: How to Read an Exposition”, *Fleeting Cities*, 1-15.

<sup>48</sup> Geppert, “Introduction”, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Geppert, “Introduction”, 13.

an intertwining of nations, each with its flag, clearly identified as elements that compose a picture of universal peace, maintained by an underlying militaristic configuration of power. This might seem quite puzzling if read only in relation to a national exposition. Yet it offers an insight into the reason why *Excelsior* became so emblematic and had an afterlife beyond the 1881 event.

The enormous success the ballet encountered in its staging at the Teatro alla Scala urged Manzotti to export his creation outside Milan, and very soon also outside Italy. In 1882 the ballet was staged in Naples (Teatro San Carlo), in Turin (Teatro Regio), in Florence (Politeama Vittorio Emanuele II) and in Trieste (Politeama Rossetti). In 1883 it reached Rome, Palermo and Bologna, in 1884 Padua and Genoa, always with dozens of performances. In the successive year it was again on stage in Milan and in Trieste, but in different theaters (respectively Dal Verme and Comunale). Its success spread through Italy. Between 1881 and 1905 (when Manzotti died) it was proposed over fifty times in different cities and theaters, to great acclaim.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, and just two years after the Milan premiere, in 1883 the ballet inaugurated the Eden theater in Paris, and was staged also in Madrid, Valencia, New York, Warsaw, Berlin, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. The impressive list of cities where the *Ballo Excelsior* was performed in the five following years only includes San Francisco, London, Vienna, Antwerp, Prague, Montevideo, Budapest, St. Petersburg, Brussels, Barcelona, Moscow, among other places.<sup>51</sup>

The figures tell the tale: Flavia Pappacena observes that in every theater, both in Italy and elsewhere, where it was staged, the ballet outnumbered replicas of any play performed up to that time. To this regard Pappacena recalls its 100 replicas at the Niblo Garden in New York, 300 at the Victoria Theater in Berlin and at the Eden Theater in Paris (here with box office takings of more than 2 million 100,000 francs) and the fact that it was on the bill for two whole years in Vienna (1885-1887).<sup>52</sup> In his autobiography the show business entrepreneur Kiralfy describes his 1883 New York production of *Excelsior* as being “too great a success, [...] tremendously expensive to produce” and with box office receipts that “while excellent did not reflect that success”.<sup>53</sup> And explains how they had

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50 See C. Celi, “Manzotti e il teatro della memoria del XIX secolo”, *Excelsior*, a c. di Pappacena, 15-40, see 36-40.

51 According to a survey by C. Meregalli, F. Pappacena and V. Zagari published in an appendix to F. Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior* e i manoscritti del Museo Teatrale alla Scala”, *Excelsior*, a c. di Pappacena, 55-74, see 73-74.

52 Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 56.

53 B. Kiralfy, *Bolosy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles: An Autobiography*, ed. by B. M. Barker (Ann Arbor, MI-London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988), 116-119, see 117-118. I am grateful to Guido Abbattista for pointing out to me this autobiography, not to mention the many other suggestions and hints I received from him that inspired my whole work on the *Ballo Excelsior*.

to find a bigger theater in order to meet all the requests they had, first in Buffalo, then in all major cities of the East Coast and finally in San Francisco Grand Opera, followed by Denver and Chicago. This great acclaim prompted Kiralfy to consider *Excelsior* as the very show that assured the reputation of his company as, according to his words, “the kings of ballet spectacle and of musicals strong in dance.”<sup>54</sup>

There is no doubt that in the author’s intentions the *Ballo Excelsior* was considered a model to be reproduced.<sup>55</sup> And this becomes quite evident if one looks at the ways that were chosen for its world diffusion. Manzotti could not, of course, supervise personally each and every staging. So he nominated some “ripetitori autorizzati” (authorized rehearsers), choreographers, dancers, mimic performers (such as Carlo Coppi or the Coppini brothers) who had already collaborated with him, knew the ballet and could guarantee that there would be an acceptable re-staging of the ballet.<sup>56</sup> As its success spread worldwide, Manzotti also ceded the rights to reproduce the ballet to specialized companies, such as Kiralfy for North America or Angelo Ferrari for South America, for example. Given the scale of worldwide success, Manzotti at a certain point decided to trust local choreographers as it happened in Kiev and Odessa in 1887 and 1888<sup>57</sup> and in North America with Imre Kiralfy,<sup>58</sup> who nevertheless had the collaboration of the already mentioned Ettore Coppini in 1883 and 1884.

It was not only a matter of copyrights, although the issue came up quite often and was even publicly debated.<sup>59</sup> There was also the need to share a particular conception of what the ballet was: a kind of ductile and pliable model that could be reproduced with the introduction of the necessary variants depending on local specificities and requirements. Thus, it becomes even more evident that in Manzotti’s view *Excelsior* was a mass cultural artifact designed to be reproduced and adapted to different contexts and very far from any desire to maintain an aura of aesthetic uniqueness.

Already in 1881 between the first series of performances of the Winter season (Carnevale-Quaresima) and the second series of the Spring season at the Teatro alla Scala

<sup>54</sup> Kiralfy, *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles*, 119.

<sup>55</sup> It must also be noticed that every work by Manzotti was “inspired” by the model of previous works by other choreographers, see J. Sasportes, “Virtuosismo e spettacolarità: le risposte italiane alla decadenza del balletto romantico”, *Tornando a Stiffelio. Popolarità, rifacimenti, messinscena. Effettismo e altre “cure” nella drammaturgia del Verdi romantico*, a c. di G. Morelli (Florence: Olschki, 1987), 305-315, see 310.

<sup>56</sup> Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 55-56.

<sup>57</sup> Wircoff, “L’*Excelsior* a Kiev”, *L’Asmodeo*, 22 December 1887, 8 (quoted in Pappacena “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 65 n. 22).

<sup>58</sup> Kiralfy, *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles*, 116-119.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, the whole dispute between Manzotti and Enrico Cecchetti (a great name in the history of Italian dance), for the staging of *Excelsior* in St. Petersburg in 1887, reconstructed in detail by Concetta Lo Iacono in “Manzotti & Marengo. Il diritto di due autori”, *Nuova rivista musicale italiana*, 3 (July-September 1987): 421-446.

Manzotti inserted minor changes. Then, when the ballet was staged in Naples, the appeal to the reader that in the first libretto was directed to “the intelligent audience of Milan” (“l’intelligente pubblico Milanese”)<sup>60</sup> was transformed into an appeal to “this intelligent audience” (“questo intelligente pubblico”)<sup>61</sup> and the reference to the “judgment of the educated public of Milan” (“giudizio del colto Pubblico Milanese”, with capital letters, unusual in Italian)<sup>62</sup> became “the judgment of this educated public” (“giudizio di questo colto pubblico”)<sup>63</sup>. It might seem only an obvious detail, but when the ballet was staged again in Milan the reference to any Milanese feature had disappeared<sup>64</sup> to never reappear.<sup>65</sup> The most significant changes, though, came later, in 1883, when *Excelsior* was chosen to inaugurate the Eden theater in Paris:<sup>66</sup> any reference to Prussia (anthem, flag, dances) was replaced with Hungarian elements;<sup>67</sup> the so called Square of the Telegraph (piazza del Telegrafo) became a courtyard and locomotives on the iron bridge in New York were doubled in number; sound effects were added in the “quadro del Simun”, and in the Suez Canal scene rugs, decorations and plants abounded. In general, as Pappacena observes, all this created effects of “heaviness” for the sake of novelty and high-impact, which were perfectly in line with the artistic policy of the Eden theater but were afterwards maintained in other editions in Italy and worldwide. There were other changes in 1888 and in 1894 Italian stagings, but the most interesting interventions were introduced for different international productions. Some of them had the purpose of adapting the ballet to different contexts: for example, the final “ballabile delle Nazioni” was set in front of a scenographic reproduction of the newly built Tour Eiffel in Paris in 1889 and on the river Thames with a view on the Houses of Parliament in London in 1905.

One very significant element was introduced in the North-American production in 1883 when Kiralfy, with the collaboration of Thomas Alva Edison, managed to develop new theater lights and special effects made possible by the use of electricity on stage.<sup>68</sup> Kiralfy was struck by the fact that the *Ballo Excelsior* had “played to great crowds” in

60 L. Manzotti, *Excelsior*, libretto del Teatro alla Scala, season 1880-1881, 3 (not numbered pages).

61 L. Manzotti, *Excelsior*, libretto del Teatro San Carlo di Napoli, season Carnevale-Quaresima 1881-1882.

62 Manzotti, *Excelsior*, libretto del Teatro alla Scala.

63 Manzotti, *Excelsior*, libretto del Teatro San Carlo di Napoli.

64 See, for instance, the libretto of the Teatro Apollo di Roma for the Carnevale-Quaresima season 1882-1883.

65 See the libretto of the Teatro alla Scala for the Carnevale-Quaresima season 1882-1883 and then, for instance, that of the Teatro Dal Verme in Milano for the Carnevale-Quaresima season 1884-1885 (for the company Cesare Steffenoni).

66 On the costumes of the Eden version see ... *e guarnizioni spiccantissime*.

67 E. Noel and E. Stoulling, *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, 1883-1890 (Paris: Charpentier, 1884-1891), 391 (quoted in Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 67, n. 45). For this information see also Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 66, n. 42.

68 Kiralfy, *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles*, 115.



Frontcover of the notebook by Giovanni Cammarano with the transcriptions of the *Ballo Excelsior*. From *Souvenir. Excelsior, del Cav. Luigi Manzotti, musica di Romualdo Marenco, rappresentato per la prima volta al teatro alla Scala in Milano, l'11 gennaio 1881, trascrizione manoscritta di Giovanni Cammarano*. Credit: "Archivio e Biblioteca Livia Simoni del Museo Teatrale alla Scala".

Paris in 1883 and immediately sailed for Europe to purchase the ballet, because he saw in it an exceptional potential for developing his burgeoning show business enterprise. As he explained:

It was a most unusual pantomime, presenting the technical progress of mankind through the ages into modern times. The production was filled with firsts for the stage, for example the first steam engine, the first great tunnel (Mount Cenis), the first great canal (Suez).

Thus, to the list of these “firsts” he decided to add in his production in the scene devoted to the development of electricity “the most significant show business first of the entire presentation, [...] real electric light”.<sup>69</sup> According to Kiralfy himself, this way *Excelsior* “made theatrical history by bringing electric light to the stage”, so that “the American theater would never again be the same.”<sup>70</sup>

Other interventions, though, had more openly political connotations. The Mont Cenis Tunnel was replaced with the Arlberg Tunnel in Vienna in 1885 and any reference to the Italian anthem or flag disappeared. In general, during the final “ballabile” the flag of the hosting country was always present on stage.<sup>71</sup> This created some problems when, for instance the ballet was staged in Trieste in 1885: an Italian flag was expected to be unfurled but the three dancers holding the flag on scene were required by the Habsburgian authorities not to show it in order to avoid Italian nationalist demonstrations.<sup>72</sup>

Trieste is an interesting case in point. It is no coincidence that the *Ballo Excelsior* was staged in Trieste already in 1882, although the city at the time was not Italian,<sup>73</sup> to

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<sup>69</sup> Kiralfy, *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles*, 115.

<sup>70</sup> Kiralfy, *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles*, 119. When the *Ballo Excelsior* premiered in Milan, electric illumination was not yet used in theaters (it was introduced only in 1883 at the Teatro alla Scala, see Sorba, *Teatri*, 148-153).

<sup>71</sup> Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 56-58.

<sup>72</sup> Pappacena, “La trascrizione del ballo *Excelsior*”, 57.

<sup>73</sup> The ballet was staged for the first time in Trieste in 1882 at the Politeama Rossetti. It premiered on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1882 and saw 20 performances until October 11<sup>th</sup> and 52 until November 5<sup>th</sup> (see *L'Indipendente*, 5 November 1882). Later the ballet was staged again in Trieste at the Teatro Comunale in 1885 (from March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1885 to April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1885) with 22 replicas, instead of the 21 that were planned, see Civico Museo teatrale “Carlo Schmidl”, Trieste, Archivio Teatro Verdi, Scritture teatrali 1884-1885, n. 155; A. Dugulin, *Silfidi sulla scena. Quarant'anni di balletto al Teatro Verdi di Trieste 1845-1885*. Catalogo. Introduction by L. Ruaro Loseri (s.p.: Acelum, 1981) and “Gazzettino di Trieste. Teatro Comunale”, *L'Arte*, 16 March 1885, 2), in 1892 at the Politeama Rossetti (from April 12<sup>th</sup> to June 6<sup>th</sup>) with 36 replicas and in 1920 at the Teatro Comunale (from March 14<sup>th</sup> to April 5<sup>th</sup> with 10 performances). I wish to thank the staff of the Civico Museo teatrale “Carlo Schmidl” in Trieste, and especially Franca Tissi, for their aid in facilitating the consultation of the museum's fonds and records.

great acclaim.<sup>74</sup> And that only three years later it was staged again in a different theater, the Teatro Comunale, the most important in the city at that time, usually devoted to performances of melodrama. The Teatro Comunale was so interested in the ballet that it had invited Manzotti in person to supervise the staging (but the choreographer kindly answered that he was not available and sent one of his best “ripetitori autorizzati”, Achille Coppini).<sup>75</sup> Even this time *Excelsior* was, as always, a grand success (“un vero e grandioso successo”, an anonymous reviewer wrote)<sup>76</sup> especially when compared with the average of the box office takings of any performance of an opera with a ballet (which was around 600-700 forints). The premiere in Trieste, on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1885, of *Excelsior* alone grossed 1,227 forints, while the following performances never failed to take in less than 1,000 forints and takings increased daily.<sup>77</sup>

The memory of this success remained for many years to come. Even when the city of Trieste was annexed to the Italian State, after World War I, in 1919, in a difficult moment when the Teatro Comunale could not get funding for their season, the management wrote to the city government to emphasize the importance of its theatrical activity for the enhancement of the Italian identity of Trieste. And in order to confirm this, they proposed to stage, once again, the *Ballo Excelsior* in a version that included an “apotheosis of Italian victory and the redemption of Trento and Trieste”.<sup>78</sup> Yet times had changed: *Excelsior* did not meet the same acclaim it had before the war<sup>79</sup> and was never again proposed. Anyway, there had been even stronger manipulations in the war years. A new version of *Excelsior* was released in 1916 where the main characters were (instead of Light, Civilization and Obscurantism) Beauty, Justice, Violence and the League of

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74 See M. Buono, “*Excelsior* di Luigi Manzotti, musica di Leonardo Marengo al Politeama Rossetti”, *L'Arte. Rassegna di teatri, belle arti e letteratura*, 16 September 1882, 1. Here the reason for this success is identified in “the very idea of the ballet, in the beautiful outward expressions, in the handling of colors, in their harmonious fusion, streams of light, design and originality and group dances, in the rapidity of the changes, that surprise you, fascinate you, dazzle you, ceaselessly without boredom, constantly alternating excitement and enthusiasm”.

75 Civico Museo teatrale “Carlo Schmidl”, Trieste, Archivio Teatro Verdi, Lettere 1885, letters n. 45, 55, 88, 91; Scritture teatrali 1884-1885, n. 155.

76 “Gazzettino di Trieste. Teatro Comunale”, 2.

77 Civico Museo teatrale “Carlo Schmidl”, Trieste, Archivio Teatro Verdi, Scritture teatrali 1884-1885, n. 156.

78 The new title was: *Excelsior. Grandioso ballo in 11 quadri del cav. Luigi Manzotti, musica del maestro Romualdo Marengo con le ultime modifiche apportate da R. Simoni e con l'Apotheosi della Vittoria e della Redenzione di TRENTO E TRIESTE*. The letter, dd. August 18<sup>th</sup> 1919, is kept by the Civico Museo teatrale “Carlo Schmidl”, Trieste.

79 At the end of the season, the local newspaper *Il Piccolo* commented: “Deliberately up until now we did not mention *Excelsior* – that had eighteen replicas – , because, although it absorbed a major expense, it nevertheless did not offer a corresponding artistic contribution to the season” (28 April 1920).

Nations (“La Lega dei Popoli”) and where the confrontation was between Latin beauty and justice and Germanic barbaric violence, all surrounded by flames of war.<sup>80</sup>

Apparently, this looks like an ironic reversal of Manzotti’s idealized “pax romana”. And yet, perhaps, it was nothing but the unavoidable result of what the ideology of the *Ballo Excelsior* had helped spread during the years of its worldwide acclaim.

### III. DANCING FOR THE WORLD: FRAMING OTHERNESS

The effects the *Ballo Excelsior* had on forms of mainstream culture designed first of all for the broader audience of the exhibition visitors cannot be fully understood if not considered in relation to the specificity of the cultural discourse it refers to: dance.

Indeed, on the one hand the *Ballo Excelsior* belongs to the Italian tradition of the so called “ballo grande” and has its specific place in the history of dance. On the other, it became so powerfully identified with the Milan Exhibition that it worked to highlight the link between dance, which is after all the art of the moving body, and the exhibitionary paradigm itself.

As regards the first point, Roberto Alonge, among others, highlighted the fact that the second half of the nineteenth century saw in Italy a development of a widespread theatricality, a variety of forms, genres, levels of theatrical performances that coexisted and sometimes intertwined.<sup>81</sup> The “ballo grande” was a particular kind of spectacle which took over, in a sense, the popularity of melodrama after the political unification of Italy. It consisted of grandiose scenes, very simple narrative patterns, quite evident didactic intentions. From the point of view of dance techniques it mixed together academic dance (which had just undergone a process of strict codification thanks to the Italian tradition, with manuals such as Carlo Blasis’s<sup>82</sup> and schools such as the one of the Teatro alla Scala, first of all) with other forms of movement such as mimicry and so called “character dances” (popular and traditional patterns of movement), with acrobats, several extras and sometimes even animals on stage. Indeed, to the grandiosity of scenography the “ballo grande” added an increasingly high number of performers.

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80 Caramba and R. Simoni, *Excelsior. Azione coreografica di Luigi Manzotti. Nuova interpretazione e messa in scena del coreografo Romeo Francioli. Musica di Romualdo Marenco* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1916). On the 1908 new version by Caramba see F. Pappacena, “Il nuovo *Excelsior* di Caramba”, *Excelsior*, 119-132. This version was also filmed in 1913 (see M. A. Calò, “Il film *Excelsior* di Luca Comerio”, *Excelsior*, 133-144). Many versions of the ballet were also proposed by puppet theater, starting from the Milanese Colla company’s *Civiltà e progresso*, 1895.

81 R. Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1988).

82 C. Blasis, *Traité de l’art de la danse*, texte établi par F. Pappacena (Rome: Gremese, 2007).

For his contribution to the “ballo grande”, Manzotti definitely has his place in the history of European choreography: in the classic *The Choreographic Art*,<sup>83</sup> Peggy van Praagh and Peter Brinson recognize in Manzotti the greatest representative of that school of choreography that brought this particular kind of spectacularity to all European stages. With their striking costumes, sets of transformations, grandiose *coups de théâtre*, in one word phantasmagories that included even storms or earthquakes, this kind of spectacles started to be extremely popular in the 1860s, in particular at the Alhambra Theater in London,<sup>84</sup> moving then to the Eden theater in Paris in the 1880s (thanks to the *Ballo Excelsior*) and then reaching its apex in Russia in the years to follow, also opening the ground for classical ballet as we know it today. The Eden theater in Paris, inaugurated by the *Ballo Excelsior*, was the place of choice of these spectacles, thanks to them it became what Stéfán Mallarmé defined as “significatif de l'état d'aujourd'hui, avec son apothéotique resurrection italienne des danses offertes a notre vulgaire plaisir”.<sup>85</sup> These spectacles should nevertheless be categorized under the label of academic dance: indeed Manzotti opens the pages regarding “classical choreography” in van Praagh and Brinson’s previously mentioned volume, although they note how academic technique and steps were only one of the many aspects of these ballets.

An analysis of the transcripts of the ballet (“disposizioni sceniche”), kept by the Museo del Teatro alla Scala, can confirm this impression.<sup>86</sup> As van Praagh and Brinson already noticed, the transcriptions closely resemble mathematical formulas, displayed in a graphic form, where every main character is represented by a circle of a specific color, with a description of the lights and the mimic of conversations, and with significant textual inserts. Great care is taken in the drawings not only of scenographies, reproduced in detail, but also in drawings of scenic effects, groups of dancers or theatrical poses. The

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83 P. van Praagh and P. Brinson, *The Choreographic Art: An Outline of Its Principles and Craft*, with a foreword by C. Beuamont (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963), 44-45.

84 I. Guest, *Ballet in Leicester Square: The Alhambra and the Empire 1860-1915* (London: Dance Books, 1992).

85 S. Mallarmé, “Note sur le théâtre”, *Revue indépendante*, April-June 1887, 62.

86 The Museum of the Teatro alla Scala has three notebooks with transcriptions (disposizioni sceniche) of the *Ballo Excelsior: Souvenir. Excelsior, del Cav. Luigi Manzotti, musica di Romualdo Marengo, rappresentato per la prima volta al teatro alla Scala in Milano, l'11 gennaio 1881 trascrizione manoscritta di Giovanni Cammarano* (c. 1881-1888) (32 x 24 cm, 338 pp.); *Excelsior. Azione coreografica in 6 parti e 11 quadri, Luigi G Manzotti, riproduzione di Eugenio Casati, musica di Romualdo Marengo* (which mainly reproduces the manuscript by Cammarano, although often with less detail and with the use of French-like terms for dance technical movements and positions instead of Italian terminology, 34 x 22.25 cm, 274 pp.); *Excelsior. Ballo del coreografo Luigi Cavalier Manzotti per uso della riproduzione di Enrico Giuseppe Cecchetti* (a much smaller notebook with less illustrations and more detailed indications of dance movements). I wish to thank Matteo Sartorio, curator of the Museum of the Teatro alla Scala, for facilitating my access to the records and documents kept by the museum.



with the heterogeneous complexity of a Victorian glasswork,<sup>88</sup> participating in a modern “triumph”<sup>89</sup> of the sex appeal of the inorganic fetish,<sup>90</sup> whose model can perhaps be found in the tradition of the “grande féerie”.<sup>91</sup>

But still, a “ballo grande”, as *Excelsior*, was a ballet and not a circus or a pageant or a different form of popular spectacle. And ballets, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy developed a particular form of allegorical and non-narrative construction. In order to explain this development, José Sasportes emphasizes the need to re-read the history of ballet as closely linked with the history of opera.<sup>92</sup> Ballet and melodrama alternated the one with the other on Italian stages as they prevailed in different periods. Yet since ballets were often staged as an interval between the acts of the opera or an appendix to the theme of the melodrama, so tightly closed in itself, they had to lose any narrative thread to make room for allegorical representations and a different structure. In this structure, the presence of a widespread textuality must also be noticed as something that guides, channels and verbally instructs the audience. The initial appeal of the libretto of *Excelsior*, for instance, was (and still is) usually read as a voiceover at the beginning of every performance as a kind of instructions for use. Here Manzotti appeals “to the reader” and explains that he first “saw” “the monument erected in Turin to the glory of the mighty Mont Cenis Tunnel”<sup>93</sup> and then “imagined” his choreographic composition. And in this articulation of seeing and imagination, one can easily recognize the kind of perception imposed by the exhibitions, where visitors were supposed to see with their own eyes and then let the imagination fly; an imagination driven and controlled in some way, directed through a contemplation of reality or a staging of reality that hides its character of discursive construction.

However, at the same time ballet acquired a kind of autonomy, where the development of technique (often into virtuosismo) became a sort of a survival mode, a means of abstraction, proposing the dancing body as an aim in itself. This becomes particularly

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88 I am referring here to the influential book by Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworks: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

89 The hypothesis that the triumphal model was very present to Manzotti can be confirmed by the later ballet *Amor* (1886) where both parts end with a scenic action explicitly defined as “triumph”, respectively *Il trionfo di Cesare* and *Il Trionfo di Amor* – L. Manzotti, *Amor. Poema coreografico in due parti e sedici quadri. Musicato da R. Marengo* (Milan: Ricordi, 1886).

90 On fetish objects my reference is M. Fusillo, *Feticci. Letteratura, cinema, arti visive* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

91 R. Piana, “‘Pièces à spectacle’ et ‘pièces à femmes’: féeries, revues et ‘délassements comiques’”, *Les Spectacles sous le Second Empire*, sous la direction de J.-C. Yon (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 328-338.

92 J. Sasportes, “Virtuosismo e spettacolarità”. On the Italian “ballo” at the end of the nineteenth century, see C. Lo Iacono, “Minima choreutica. Fasti e dissesti del ballo italiano sul declino dell’Ottocento”, *Musica senza aggettivi. Studi per Fedele d’Amico*, a c. di A. Ziino (Florence: Olschki, 1991), vol. 1, 391-421.

93 “The Libretto”, *Excelsior*, a c. di Pappacena, 235-248, see 235.

evident and emblematic in Manzotti's ballet, where human moving bodies are nothing but abstract allegories, elements of pure movement that, for Sasportes, are already prefiguring what dance will be like during the twentieth century: not classic narrative ballet, as developed in Russia as a timeless form of story telling, but dance for dance, as an aim in itself and as design of the trajectories of human bodies in space. On the one hand, this developed through the Ballets Russes in the highest form of artistic and aesthetic valorization of dance, during the twentieth century; on the other Manzotti put on stage what Sasportes called "Hollywood inventions ahead of its time",<sup>94</sup> grandiose en masse musical spectacles that the film industry, with its choreographer Bussy Berkeley, would exploit at large in the first half of the twentieth century (and it is maybe still exploiting, not only in cinema). In this sense, Giovanni Morelli, in the 2000 Teatro alla Scala program of the *Ballo Excelsior* appropriately and hyperbolically defined the ballet as the "archetype of a *monstre* spectacularization and the most colossal factory of stage tests of every *immani corporis magnitudine spectaculum* for the incomparable future memory of Italian theater"; and then as an "admirable monster, the summa-masterpiece of special effects at the beginning of the end of the nineteenth century", a kind of "super-opera".<sup>95</sup> A kitsch and trivial *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in other words, that in its phantasmagoric<sup>96</sup> aspiration to put totality, synchrony and simultaneity on stage constitutively recalls the fusion of discourses, perceptions and temporalities of the great exhibitions. Furthermore, in its kitsch aesthetics, the *Ballo Excelsior* depicts – to use Tomas Kulka's definition – "objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions",<sup>97</sup> avoiding any ambiguity, so that everything must be "instantly and effortlessly identifiable".<sup>98</sup> The audience must never have to strain to recognize what is depicted nor to appreciate formal and artistic features of the ballet, entering into what Jonathan Crary has defined as a "suspension of perception".<sup>99</sup> According to the implicit rules of kitsch and to the exhibitionary paradigm of spectacularization, the audience has to look only to the subject-matter in order to gain a sort of collective, universal sense of itself, a particular self-image, already inscribed in the ballet's theme, enjoying a feeling of self-congratulation and universality.<sup>100</sup>

94 Sasportes, "Virtuosismo e spettacolarità", 310.

95 G. Morelli, "Entre la poire et le fromage: l'arca di Manzotti", *Excelsior*. Programma di sala del Teatro alla Scala, season 1999-2000, 43-70, see 43.

96 Manzotti himself would use this word explicitly in the libretto of the much later *Sport, Ballo in otto quadri di Luigi Manzotti, musica di Romualdo Marenco, figurini di Alfredo Edel* (Milan: Ricordi, 1896).

97 T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 28.

98 Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 33.

99 See J. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

100 As in Milan Kundera's notorious definition of kitsch: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass. The second tear says: How nice

Thus, on the other hand, in its link with this paradigm, the *Ballo Excelsior* in a sense made it strikingly evident that a close link would be formed between dance performances and world's fairs. In the years to follow 1881 this link would become quite clear and striking, since dances, of different types, accompanied and often marked the success and the memory of individual exhibitions. *Excelsior* was staged again at the Eden theater in Paris during the 1889 World's Fair to enormous acclaim: it had 300 replicas on that occasion.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, it was in the space of the great world exhibitions that the so called "exotic dances" were introduced and became popular in the West for the first time. Indeed, Anne Décoret-Ahiha, with regard to this popularity and impact, traces a sort of "tour du monde en dansant" between Paris 1889 (the first world's exhibition to introduce non Western dance as an attraction and as a paradigm of representation of otherness) and 1931 (the exhibition that marked the apotheosis of colonial and imperialistic ideology).<sup>102</sup> The case of belly dance, introduced in Paris 1889, and then again in Chicago in 1893, has been investigated as a key moment in the history of exoticism and orientalism.<sup>103</sup> But there was much more: already in Paris in 1889, linked to what has been defined as "human zoos", human beings put on show as living objects to be observed for entertainment,<sup>104</sup> gipsy dances, and then Javanese, Martinican, South-Eastern Asian and other kind of

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to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! The second tear makes kitsch kitsch", M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 1984] (New York: Harper and Row, 1984, tr. M. N. Heim), 251.

101 C. Lombardi, *La ballerina immaginaria. Una donna nella letteratura e sulla scena nell'età dell'industrialismo 1832-1908* (Naples: Liguori, 2007), 12.

102 A. Décoret-Ahiha, *Les danses exotiques en France. 1880-1940* (Pantin: Centre nationale de la danse, 2004), 19-61.

103 J. Busman, "Eastern Dance before the Western Gaze: Danse du ventre and the World's Fair in Nineteenth-Century France", 2010, last accessed 1 June 2014, [https://www.academia.edu/388301/Eastern\\_Dance\\_before\\_the\\_Western\\_Gaze\\_Danse\\_du\\_ventre\\_and\\_the\\_Worlds\\_Fair\\_in\\_Nineteenth-Century\\_France](https://www.academia.edu/388301/Eastern_Dance_before_the_Western_Gaze_Danse_du_ventre_and_the_Worlds_Fair_in_Nineteenth-Century_France) Academia.edu; V. Keft-Kennedy, "Representing the Belly-Dancing Body: Feminism, Orientalism, and the Grotesque" (University of Wollongong, Dissertation, 2005); C. A. Kennedy, "When Cairo Met Main Street: Little Egypt, Salome Dancers, and the World's Fairs of 1893 and 1904", *Music and Culture in America, 1861-1918*, ed. M. Saffle (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 271-298; more generally on orientalism and exhibitions: Ç. Zeynep and L. Kinney, "Ethnography and Exhibitionism at the Expositions Universelles", *Assemblage*, 13 (1990): 34-59; T. Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order", *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. N. B. Dirks (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 289-318; R. Andreassen, "The 'Exotic' as Mass Entertainment: Denmark 1878-1909", *Race & Class*, 45 (2003): 21-38; Ç. Zeynep, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

104 *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, eds. P. Blanchard et. al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, tr. T. Bridgeman); *Exhibitions. L'invention du sauvage*, sous la direction de P. Blanchard, G. Boëtsch et N. Jacomijn Snoep (Paris: Actes Sud-Musée du Quay Branly, 2012), on exotic dances see 342. On human zoos in the specific context of Italian exhibitions see now G. Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)* (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2013).

dances were performed. This became a model to be repeated in many other exhibitions to follow. The exhibition functioned as a frame for a multifarious otherness, inside which dance had an ambiguous and double status. On the one hand it was the most stereotypical mark of exotic otherness put on show through moving bodies that responded to Western canons and expectations; on the other, it represented the only way those bodies had to speak for themselves, in a paradoxical and highly problematic way. Anne Décoret-Ahiha highlights how the moving body dancing in this framework was a site of exacerbation of colonial hierarchies of power.<sup>105</sup> Yet at the same time the paradoxical agency of the body of the non-Western other dancing carries the enigma of a difference that does not present itself as evidence but, as Sally Ann Ness writes, “document the limits of cross cultural comprehension and/or cultural translation”.<sup>106</sup> The confrontation becomes dramatic, in a sense. At the time when dance in Europe was undergoing a process of strict regulation and fixation of codes of movements and positions (that found in the previously mentioned Blasis’s manual its first reference), so called “exotic dances” were the token of an absence of rules, of a non decipherable code, of a radical otherness, which at the same time attracted and frightened Western audiences.

In this light, the *Ballo Excelsior* can be considered as something more than an ideological celebration of technological progress and *fine de siècle* internationalism. The explicit intentions of paternalistic indoctrination that the ballet obsessively and didactically repeats can also be seen as a frame for the representation of non-Western otherness, which is a constitutive part of the ballet. At the very center (part III and IV of the sixth “quadro”) of the *Ballo Excelsior*, just after the celebration of progress and just before the final apotheosis (Mont Cenis and the triumph of civilization, progress and harmony) we find the “quadri” entitled “Il Simun” (VII) and “Il canale di Suez” (VIII). The first one is set in an indefinite African desert where the natural force of the Simoon wind, together with the lack of law and order of the Oriental world, disseminates desperation and destruction among human beings (an Arab merchant and an Arab woman, a “mora”, with her child, attacked by a horde of Arab horse bandits). At the end of the scene, Obscurantism triumphs over Light. But the following scene represents the reaction and the victory of Light and Civilization embodied in the Suez Canal, the site of celebration of cosmopolitanism, with travelers coming from all parts of the world (China, Turkey, Mexico, Britain, so on so forth) performing their ‘characteristic’ identitarian dances and games. All this culminates in the representation of the “Abolition of slavery”, followed by a complex choreography of seemingly ‘exotic’ dances.

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105 Décoret-Ahiha, *Les danses exotiques en France*, 15-17.

106 S. A. Ness, “Observing the Evidence Fail”, *Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*, ed. G. Morris (London: Routledge, 2005<sup>2</sup>), 215-235, see 216.

The dichotomy is, as always, quite explicit and didactic: on the one hand a “horrible scene of desolation and death”, on the other “a lovely panorama”, the solemn triumph of progress and civilization in “a clear Oriental day in which we can see far-off at the horizon the mountainous chains of the Attaha on the Red Sea and the great waves of the desert, and the hills and mountains of Arabia”.<sup>107</sup> A kind of ‘before and after’ the arrival of Western civilization, in structure of juxtaposition whose link with the exhibition I have already tried to emphasize. The message is clearly stated: before Western intervention there is only the violence of nature reflected in human beings’ wild behavior, source of fear and extermination; after it, the horizon becomes visible, human beings have an enlightened future in front of them and at the Suez Isthmus, “which had earlier been entirely desert”, “all European civilization is gathered”.<sup>108</sup>

If in the *Ballo Excelsior* all this is indirectly alluded, Manzotti’s ideology was made explicit in his later production, *Amor* (1886). In the preface “to the audience” (*Al pubblico*)<sup>109</sup> of the libretto, after having defined *Excelsior* as a “ballo storico-scientifico” (“historical and scientific ‘ballo’”), Manzotti evokes the dimension of allegory and fantasy, explaining it as a sort of revelation and attributing it to primordial force that would be able to solve the question of the birth of the Universe (“risolvere il problema della Genesi universale”). Trying to put aside any temptation of irony, one must notice here how this “revelation” is grounded on a series of stereotypes that might be easily referred to the complex nexus Edward Said taught us to identify as late nineteenth-century orientalism.<sup>110</sup> This primordial force identified by Manzotti with a Dantesque form of love (“Amor”, with a capital A) was born in the lands of vaguely identified ‘Orient’ (nelle “pianure sabbiose, infocate dell’Asia e dalle spaventevoli solitudini delle foreste africane”)<sup>111</sup> to settle in Egypt, later in Greece and then in Rome, in an itinerary toward a civilized place where the struggle for life could start.<sup>112</sup> Here Oriental people are described as “wild”, compared to monkeys; and not surprisingly all this description finds its precise reference in Figuier’s study of “human races” quoted in a footnote.<sup>113</sup>

Therefore, it becomes quite clear here what in *Excelsior* remains implicit, i.e. that the triumph of Civilization and Light is part of a design of racialization and Westernization aimed at establishing cultural hierarchies between different parts of the world. Even those

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107 “The Libretto”, *Excelsior*, 245.

108 “The Libretto”, *Excelsior*, 245.

109 Manzotti, *Amor*, 3.

110 The obvious reference here goes to E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

111 Manzotti, *Amor*, 4.

112 Manzotti, *Amor*, 12.

113 L. Figuier, *Les Races humaines* (Paris: Hachette, 1872). The Italian translation, *Le razze umane*, was published only two years later (Milan: Treves, 1874).

that seem, therefore, harmless, good-natured and nicely kitsch forms of entertainment reveal powerful “dispositifs” of diffusion of racism and power hierarchies. Non-European otherness in the *Ballo Excelsior* seems nothing more than one of the many “quadri” of the ballet. Yet its crucial position shows that it must be circumscribed and limited, neutralized, thanks to an overall paratactical structure that perfectly fulfills this function. Never in the ballet does the triumph of obscurantism seem so close as in the Simoon scene, with the destabilization provoked by non-Western instincts and a complete lack of social ties and structures able to ensure the overcoming of a primitive violence. Thus, the confrontation with the Suez Canal, a typical instance of Western intervention over the wilderness of Eastern nature, is striking, even in its dimension of internationalism: it is not only the Suez Canal and the abolition of slavery that *Excelsior* will show us, but also the way in which the whole world admires Western achievements and its superiority (with Chinese, Turkish, Mexican travelers, among others, each one performing their typical “character dance” emphasizing its features, as Cammarano suggests in his notebooks).<sup>114</sup>

This dichotomic structure that serves the purpose of circumscribing and framing otherness in order to construct hierarchies of power is nothing but part of a more general exhibitionary paradigm of spectacularization. Through this complex and heterogeneous apparatus, the *Ballo Excelsior* managed to create a sense of shared experiences at a global level, providing the audience with a collective self-image able to accommodate also national identity in its kitsch, phantasmagoric imagination of a circumscribed and neutralized other.

It is here that, in a sense, all aspects hitherto investigated intertwine: the link with the exhibitionary paradigm of spectacularization, seen also as a means for framing otherness; the consideration of the scale of global success as a result of a continuous process of recycling and remodeling that leads to ideological distinctions; the specificity of the discourse of dance and the potentialities of its investigation for the history of world's fairs and more generally for any attempt to grasp the problematic presence of moving bodies on the stage of cultural history.

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114 “Dal quaderno di Giovanni Cammarano”, 110-111.