

Susan Compton, ed.. *Chagall: Love and the Stage, 1914-1922*. London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1998. 104 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85894-058-8.



Reviewed by Robyn Sassen

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Marc Chagall is one of very few visual artists who have earned the capacity to straddle both the Jewish and the secular worlds with integrity and popularity. For this reason, a cohesive view of his life is daunting as it is problematic, which is where some of the success of this book lies. A compact publication, it serves as both an exhibition catalogue for a collection of Chagall's theatre works displayed at the RAA in London, and a magnificent reference book on a "slice" of Chagall's life. This "slice" is the seven prolific years which Chagall spent in Russia. The works discussed in this publication are those which Chagall made for and about the socio-cultural thrust of the theatrical in general and Jewish theatre in Moscow in particular. It should be of value to the art history student, the reader with an interest in the perambulations of Russian social history, and the theatre buff. It should also serve the novice to Chagall as an extremely potent introduction to the idiosyncrasies of his work and the monumentality of his genius, within the socio-cultural milieu in which he was making art.

Overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, its focus is Jewish. This gives the reader an inroad into the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe from the early twentieth century. Still imbued in some respects with its folklorish roots, it was embracing an Enlightenment mentality which enabled children of its traditions to see both worlds from a vantage point.

Chagall's approach to his art is represented by Compton in a manner directly appropriate to the whimsical but not sentimental, surrealist but deeply Jewish way of the work itself. In so many respects, she demonstrates how Chagall's works within the auspices of theatre were natural to his personality, his philosophies on life, and his passions. Her essay and the way in which she has sensitively edited this volume gives the reader an insight into how Chagall was able to marry the two worlds of international creative success and village culture, while dealing with the inherent contradictions in two lifestyles totally removed from one another and in diverse geographies.

From the Jewish readership's perspective, Chagall's difficulties and his pride in his own cul-

ture is tabled. This resulted in his need to explore the culture of his roots and give it a space in contemporary Russia, through folklorish tradition and creative possibilities.

The works in this book were executed during the period between the World Wars and a consideration of the playfulness in the visual and narrative elements begs comparison with other artists working in the same time frame such as Beckmann and Grosz. This formal inquiry is, however, not addressed in the text. But the presence of the works and the documented enthusiasm which surrounds their production raises the sobering realities of how ruthless the destruction of a whole culture of Jewish awareness and celebration was destroyed, through the preamble to the Holocaust and during the height of this terrible period. Contextually, the works are subjected to stylistic comparisons, considering possible visual and textual influences to Chagall's means of representing realities. This is accompanied by a relatively formal analysis of a selection of his works. The period between the wars was intensely prolific for creative practitioners across the board, almost as a universal premonition of the misery that was to befall Europe within the next war.

Over and above the academic content, in a sense more valuably, this book gives the reader the opportunity to see reproductions of a body of works seldom represented in art historical books of a more general nature. Through the essays, the reader is given insight into the damaging circumstances which punctuated the creative existence of so many people who were labelled as degenerate by the powers that were coming into force at the time in Western Europe. This unfortunately is one of the circumstances responsible for gaps in the history and realities of the works and the machinations of the theatre productions for which they were made. The retelling of the "cloak-and-dagger" realities to which the works themselves under hostile rule were heir, allows one to

understand Chagall's importance as a representative Jewish voice in the arts.

The book is divided into four chapters, each written by different experts. While Susan Comp-ton edited the book and wrote the introduction, she also wrote the title essay, "Marc Chagall: Love and the Stage". Didier Schulmann from the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris examines the relationship between the different arts in "Painting as Theatre or Theatre as Painting?". Dr Aleksandra Shatskikh lends her professional curating knowledge to "Marc Chagall and the Theatre" and Monica Bohm-Duchen, who enjoys a special interest in Jewish identity in contemporary art, and who has just published a monograph on Chagall, has contributed with "The Quest for a Jewish Art in Revolutionary Russia".

These essays cover a wide range of scholarship on Chagall, from an awareness of his passions and his depth of involvement in both the theatre and the Fine Arts spheres : not only did he design the backdrops, but he also contributed to the uniformity of visual elements in a theatrical performance, handled costume and stage design. Not only was he a significant artist, but he was significant as a Jew, too, resting strongly on Jewish mentors in both spheres. Not only was he a sensual lover, but he was also a devoted husband and father. All of these apparent contradictions serve to flesh out the character of Chagall and give his genius through his work resonance.

While in certain respects the book does feel open-ended, in the brevity of the essays and the many issues they present, its initial purpose as an exhibition catalogue must not be overlooked. In this, as an academic research document, it contains superb full colour reproductions of monochrome and colour work in tempera, gouache and watercolour on paper; many scenes of lovers and images of the backdrops themselves. The highlight of the images are those produced in 1920 for the Yiddish State Theatre, reproduced here on double page spreads.

A work highly affirmative of Jewish culture with all its idiosyncrasies, this is a book about constructing a reality around one's existence, and making sense of the diversity that constitutes even a contemporary existence, and the ways in which pride in one's own culture may be seen as a starting point for a creative life, rather than something to be averted in the face of avant-gardism and contemporary theory.

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