When the young Christian Bérard answered a natural call to painting, he broke with a tradition which up to then had made the Bérards a dynasty of Parisian architects. Yet his architectural heredity was no doubt too strong for him to be solely a painter, and the knowledge he had acquired in his adolescence from his father and grandfather furnished him with solid qualifications for the theatre, to which Diaghilev was later to direct him. It was in 1928 that the master of the Russian ballet visited the artist in his atelier and asked him to undertake the décor for Coppélia. The project then came to nothing, but after Diaghilev’s death his collaborator, Boris Kochno, asked Bérard to design the scenic for one of his ballets, La Nuit, which was danced in London by Serge Lifar to music by Henri Sauguet. The painter was turning set designer.

In the same year (1939) Jean Cocteau commissioned him to design the décor of La Voix Humaine. The result attracted a great deal of attention and was in one way very original: being quite tiny in comparison with the huge hall of the Comédie Française, it offered a deceiving perspective which made Berthe Bovy, who is really small, appear very tall. As she was the only character in the piece, this was in good keeping with her importance.

Three years later, for his Machine Infernale, Jean Cocteau introduced Bérard to Louis Jouvet, at that time director of the Comédie des Champs-Élysées. It was the beginning of a fertile collaboration and friendship. Jouvet called on Bérard for the scenes to Cocteau’s L’Illusion Comique at the Théâtre Français, Mollière’s L’Ecole des Femmes, Marcel Achard’s Le Corsaire (with changes of scene on the open stage which revealed Bérard’s thorough knowledge of the classical machinery of the theatre and its resources), and Jean Giraudoux’s La Follie de Charlot at the Théâtre de l’Athénée.

Even while engaged on the décors for Cyrano de Bergerac and Renaud et Armide at the Comédie Française and Sodome et Gomorrhe at the Théâtre Régent, he continued to work for ballets, since, as he himself says, “Louis Jouvet and Boris Kochno are the two people I like working with most.”