**Ballets Suédois [Swedish Ballet], 1920-1925**

**Summary**

Rolf de Maré’s Ballets Suédois existed from 1920 to 1925. It was the chief artistic rival to Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, and de Maré was often referred to as the Swedish Serge Diaghilev. With Jean Börlin as its chief choreographer, the company created twenty-four ballets in collaboration with prominent modern artists and composers, including Fernand Léger, Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud and Cole Porter. When first launched, the troupe performed ballets in a style similar to the Ballets Russes, but de Maré’s interest in the visual arts and the vibrancy of modern, contemporary life soon led to a greater emphasis on abstraction and popular idioms in both the design and choreography of Ballets Suédois productions.

**Background**

Rolf de Maré (1888-1964) was born into an aristocratic family in Stockholm, Sweden. In 1920, he founded the Ballets Suédois, which grew out of his interest in painting. In the 1910s, after meeting the Swedish artist, Nils Dardel (1888-1943), de Maré began collecting modernist art (particularly the works of Georges Braque, Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso). Dardel introduced de Maré to modern artists and served as an intermediary in the purchase of their works; he also introduced de Maré to the future choreographer of the Ballets Suédois, Jean Börlin (1893-1930). After meeting Börlin, de Maré’s interest in the arts quickly expanded to include dance.

Börlin trained at the ballet school of Stockholm’s Royal Opera. Michel Fokine noticed him when he served as guest choreographer at the Royal Opera from 1913 to 1914. Trained in the repertoire of the Ballets Russes, Börlin studied with Fokine at the Royal Opera as well as privately in Copenhagen five years later before joining de Maré in Paris. Börlin and de Maré met in 1918 and soon thereafter became romantically involved. Börlin’s choreography formed the basis of the ensemble’s repertoire; he was the company’s principal dancer and ballet master, and recruited a majority of the corps dancers from the Stockholm Opera.

Paris was the ideal venue for de Maré to create a ballet company. He felt that Stockholm audiences were too conservative for the art he wished to present, while Paris was already the centre of the avant-garde art world. The city had a supportive atmosphere, a population of willing creative collaborators and a suitable venue in the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées.

In running his company, de Maré’s enjoyed the privilege of wealth and treated the Ballets Suédois like his personal art collection. Liberated from financial worries by his considerable family fortune, he invested in art for the sake of enjoyment and showed little interest in box office receipts. De Maré not only used his considerable wealth to pay for the productions, he also took ownership of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, bought out the newspapers and magazines which reviewed and promoted the company, and founded the monthly *La Danse*.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

The Ballets Suédois debuted on 25 October 1920. Parisian critics reviewed the dancers from the North favorably. The company blended dance, drama, painting, poetry and music with acrobatics, circus, film and pantomime to create what the dance curator Nancy Van Norman Baer has described as ‘three-dimensional stage pictures’.[[1]](#endnote-1) This first season included nine new works, all choreographed by Börlin, drawing upon successes of the Ballets Russes repertoire. Börlin capitalised on themes and techniques made popular by Diaghilev’s troupe. Spanish Renaissance paintings came alive in *Las Meninas* (1916) before *El Greco* (1920); Spanish customs took centre stage in *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1919) before *Iberia* (1920). The imitation became repetition when Börlin recreated *Jeux* (*Games*), which the Ballets Russes had originally premiered in 1913.

The similarities between the companies were compounded by the fact that they occasionally shared the same venue, the fashionable Théâtre de Champs-Elysées. However, the Ballets Suédois developed its own unique character. The company was, arguably, more experimental, and also granted more creative agency to its visual artists (i.e., Jean Cocteau, Fernand Léger and Francis Picabia, who were allowed to control aspects of staging and choreography). The early emphasis on French painting and Swedish (versus Russian) folk arts and de Maré’s interest in allowing painters greater control over staging set the company apart from its rivals.

Börlin was chosen as choreographer, ballet master and principal dancer both because of his talent as well as because of his personal relationship with de Maré. He also shared his mentor’s interest in painting. Concerning the influence of the visual arts on his choreography Börlin wrote: ‘Each painting that moves me is transformed in me into dance… [Although] rhythm will always remain the principal and most mysterious element of choreographic creation, painting can be the point of departure [for] the first impression’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Ballets Suédois created many notable works of modernism. Paul Claudel and Darius Milhaud first brought the idea for *L’Homme et son Désir* (*Man and His Desire,* 1921) to Diaghilev who rejected it. De Maré, by contrast, embraced the scenario. Claudel sought to create a ballet which would represent the life cycle and soul of man. Audrey Parr’s set consisted of a multi-level space with dancers on the top level representing the passing hours of life; below this dancers depicted the moon and its shadow, while the middle plane featured Börlin dressed only in briefs and shiny body make-up. The sides of the stage featured black cut-outs of jazz musicians carrying instruments. The emphasis on Parr’s mise-en-scene, Börlin’s near-nudity on stage and Milhaud’s long sections of Brazilian-inspired percussion music helped define the Ballets Suédois as a group dedicated to radical experimentation on stage.

In *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower*, 1921) de Maré enlisted the talents of the poet Jean Cocteau and a large team of collaborators including the artists Irène Lagut, Jean Hugo and Valentine Gross and the group of young French composers known as ‘Les Six’ – ‘The Six’ (disciples of Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie). The production, overseen by Cocteau, included spoken text amplified through giant megaphones hidden from the audience, and a spectacle of popular culture and modern technology involving pantomime, drama, acrobatics, a cubist rendering of the Eiffel Tower, photography, circus, music-hall and dance.

In 1922, the Ballets Suédois presented only one new work, *Skating Rink*. Like *Mariés, Skating Rink* also showcased modern life and featured music by a composer from ‘Les Six’ (Arthur Honegger), but is best known for its abstract backdrops and cubist-inspired costumes designed by Fernand Léger. Börlin played the madman (an homage to Charlie Chaplin’s character in *The Rink*, 1916), as the corps whirled around before the brightly coloured backdrop.

Léger and Milhaud teamed up for *La Création du monde* (*The Creation of the World*, 1923), a ballet with a scenario based on African creation myths by Blaise Cendars, a jazz-influenced score, and costume designs by Léger which transformed the dancers into African-inspired cubist sculptures. That same year de Maré commissioned an ‘American’ work for its upcoming United States tour. *Within the Quota* (1923), with music by Cole Porter, told the story of a young Swedish immigrant and his arrival in New York City. Börlin again choreographed and also played the role of the immigrant. The ballet, set against a backdrop of a giant mock-up of an American newspaper, consisted of the Swede dancing around various American archetypes (an Heiress, a Jazz-Baby, a Cowboy, etc.).

The Ballets Suédois’ offered *Relâche* (*Theatre Closed*, 1924) as their final new work. Appropriately, the ballet’s premiere was postponed because of illness (Börlin was sick), and patrons arrived on the night of 27 November to find signs indicating that the theatre really was closed. A week later, audiences experienced the Dadaist ballet conceived by Francis Picabia and Erik Satie with a cinematic *Entr’acte* (*Interval*) by filmmaker René Clair. Erik Satie’s music for the production consisted of unrelenting repetitive phrases (reminiscent of popular music). The ballet was devoid of dancing; instead Börlin had the dancers dress and undress on stage, chain-smoke and measure the floor. Börlin himself wheeled around in a tricycle wheelchair, and Picabia and Satie entered the stage in a five-horsepower Citroën. The backdrop for the performance consisted of 370 automobile headlights which dimmed and brightened in conjunction with the music and, subsequently, blinded the audience. The work was a direct assault on what Picabia called the ‘pretentious absurdities of the theatre’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Legacy**

During its short five-year existence the Ballets Suédois set a precedent for collaborative experimentation. It was less a ballet company than a theatrical space for innovative performance art. By giving artists and designers such a large role in the conception and realisation of its works, de Maré helped make it possible for new forms of theatre to emerge.

De Maré could only bankroll the company for so long, and after 2,766 performances in 157 cities the enterprise became financially untenable. An American tour in 1923 and 1924 drained resources, and by 1925, the Ballets Suédois had run its course. The *succès de scandale* of *Relâche* proved difficult to top creatively, Börlin was exhausted and the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées had been losing money for some time. De Maré announced the end of the company in March 1925, and with Börlin’s premature death in 1930, its innovative repertoire was lost, although the scores of particular ballets were sometimes used for unrelated productions. Reconstructions have been rare with the notable exception of Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer’s ‘recreations’ of *Derviches* (*Dervishes*, 1920), *Skating Rink*, *Within the Quota* and *La Création du Monde*.

**Works Created by the Ballet Suédois**

**1920**

*Jeux* (*Games*)

*Derviches* (*Dervishes*)

*Iberia*

*Nuit de Saint Jean* (*Midsummer Night’s Revel*)

*Maison de Fous* (*Madhouse*)

*Le Tombeau de Couperin* (*The Tomb of Couperin*)

*El Greco*

*Pas de Deux*

*Les Vierges Folles* (*The Foolish Virgins*)

**1921**

*La Boîte à Joujoux* (*The Toybox*)

*L’Homme et son Désir* (*Man and His Desire*)

*Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower*)

*Dansgille* (*Dance Feast*)

*Chopin*

**1922**

*Skating Rink*

**1923**

*Marchand d’Oiseaux* (*The Bird Seller*)

*Offerlunden* (*The Sacrificial Grove*)

*La Création du Monde* (*The Creation of the World*)

*Within the Quota*

**1924**

*Le Roseau* (*The Reed Player*)

*Le Porcher* (*The Swineherd*)

*Le Tournoi Singulier* (*The Singular Tournament*)

*La Jarre* (*The Jar*)

*Relâche* (*Theatre Closed*)

**Reference and Further Reading**

Baer, N. Van Norman (ed.) (1995) *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, San Francisco: The Fine Art Museum of San Francisco. (Exhibition catalogue with scholarly essays from a variety of disciplines)

*Les Ballets Suédois dans l’art contemporain* (1931) Paris: Editions du Trianon. (Compilation of articles by contemporary artists, dancers, and writers familiar with the ballet’s works)

Banes, S. (1978-79) ‘An Introduction to the Ballets Suédois’, *Ballet Review* 7 (2-3): 28-59. (A study of the company’s chief works emphasising their avant-garde aspects)

Batson, C. R. (2005) *Dance, Desire, and Anxiety in Early Twentieth-Century French Theater: Playing Identities*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate. (Uses critical theory in its approach to the Ballets Suédois)

De Groote, P. (2002) *Ballets Suédois*, Ghent: Academia Press. (An overview of the company and its works)

Dorris, G. (ed.) (1999) *The Royal Swedish Ballet, 1773-1998*, London: Dance Books. (Includes articles on the Les Ballets Suédois and reconstructions of the company’s ballets)

Häger, B. (1989) *Ballets Suédois*, Paris: Jacques Damase/Denoël. (A lushly illustrated chronicle of all the company’s productions)

McCarren, F. (2003) *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. (Includes a chapter exploring the Ballets Suédois’s modernism in the context of mechanisation of the body)

Näslund, E. (2007) ‘The Ballet Avant-Garde I: The Ballets Suédois and its Modernist Concept’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, Marion Kant (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 201-211. (An overview of the Ballets Suédois and the roots of its modernism)

Näslund, E. (2009) *Rolf de Maré: Art Collector, Ballet Director, Museum Creator*, translated by Roger Tanner, Alton: Dance Books. (A lavish 600-page biography with nearly 1000 images)

**Moving Image and Music Material**

*Entr’acte* (René Clair’s film *Interval* in *Relâche*)

https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DUnXdYxvBHf8&sa=U&ei=El\_xT8-YBcyj-gbP4PWuAw&ved=0CAcQFjABOAg&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNEfrA5gO1hmxGtMDImbryfLs28LPQ

*Skating Rink* (A brief video clip of Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer’s choreographic reconstruction of the 1922 ballet)

([http://vimeo.com/14390025).](file:///F:\REM\EAB_Garafola\Entries_LG\Ballets%20Suédois\(http:\vimeo.com\14390025))

*Relâche* (full score by Erik Satie)

https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DKvc6vIWQxT8&sa=U&ei=DVjxT9jnHoOxhAfS5pSXDQ&ved=0CA8QFjAF&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNFi5AHIZj0PzHFvgQ7Zor2HcC-mFA

**Other Links**

Dansmusset (Dance Museum, Stockholm). (Includes a brief biography and photographs of Rolf de Maré as well a history of the museum)

<http://www.dansmuseet.se/>

*The Life of Carina Ari*. (An essay by Bengt Hager about the Ballets Suédois ballerina published in several languages, including English, by the Carina Ari Foundations)

https://www.google.com/url?q=http://carina.se/about-carina-ari\_en.html&sa=U&ei=4mDxT5OOEMSYhQekwvGVDQ&ved=0CA0QFjAEOBg&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNF5kBRIDfYZ2AyIZCp7apujWZrLJA

**Photographs**

Please see the accompanying images, which have been sent in separate files and are accessible on the Dansmusset website.

**Notes**

1. N. Van Norman Baer, ‘The Ballets Suédois: A Synthesis of Modernist Trends in Art’, in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, edited by Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: The Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, 1995):10. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. P. Tugal, ‘L’Art de Jean Börlin’, *Les Ballets Suédois dans l’art contemporain* (Paris: Editions du Trianon, 1931): 159; cited in Nancy Van Norman Baer, ‘The Ballets Suédois: A Synthesis of Modernist Trends in Art’, in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, edited by Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: The Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, 1995): 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. R. de Maré, ‘A propos de *‘Relâche,’* ballet instantanéiste’, *Comœdia* (27 November 1924), quoting Picabia, cited in Nancy Van Norman, ‘The Ballets Suédois: A Synthesis of Modernist Trends in Art’, in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925*, edited by Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: The Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, 1995): 33.

   Samuel Dorf [↑](#endnote-ref-3)