**Léonide Massine, original name Leonid Fyodorovich Miassin (b. 9 August [Old Style 28 July] 1896, Moscow; d. 15, March 1979, Cologne, Germany)**

**Summary**

Russian-born Léonide Massine’s career flourished in the cities of Western Europe, where he made his name as a lead dancer and choreographer for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (1909-29). Massine’s choreographic development coincided with and helped to define the Ballets Russes’ modernist period. As Diaghilev’s protégé, Massine absorbed principles of cubism and futurism, consequently developing an angular, distorted movement style, heralded for its intensity and polyrhythmic complexity, along with its satiric and cinematic elements. Massine’s *Parade* (1917), in collaboration with Pablo Picasso (décor and costumes), Eric Satie (music) and Jean Cocteau (libretto), is recognised as a landmark of ballet modernism. Like other modernists, Massine incorporated national and folk material (*commedia dell’arte* to flamenco) and popular theatre forms (including film) as tools for creative innovation. Following his departure from the Ballets Russes, Massine became interested in formalism and abstraction, which he expressed in a series of symphonic ballets. The most recognized dance artist of the 1920s and 1930s, Massine’s magnificent presence as a performer, even an aging one, can be seen in the film *The Red Shoes* (1947).

**Background and Training**

Born to musicians employed by the Bolshoi Theatre, Massine successfully auditioned for the Bolshoi Theatre School, which he attended from 1904 to 1912. As a student and young professional dancer, Massine performed at the Bolshoi and Maly Theatres in operas, ballets and plays, harbouring a desire to become an actor. When the impresario Serge Diaghilev saw Massine perform the tarantella in *Swan Lake* in 1913, he invited the eighteen-year-old to join the Ballets Russes. After leaving Russia to work with Diaghilev, Massine dedicated his life to dance.

Before making his Ballets Russes debut in the title role of Michel Fokine’s *Legend of Joseph* (Paris, 1914), Massine underwent intensive training with the company’s ballet master Enrico Cecchetti. Critics wrote admiringly of Massine’s interpretation of Joseph, but also noted his technique was not that of Vaslav Nijinsky, the virtuoso dancer who had recently left the company. With the outbreak of the First World War, Diaghilev took Massine, now his lover, to Italy, introducing him to ancient and contemporary art.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

In Rome, Diaghilev and Massine took part in Filippo Marinetti’s Futurist salon. Marinetti’s 1909 ‘futurist manifesto’ denounced naturalism and sentimentalism in art, while his 1914 ‘variety theatre’ manifesto pronounced mechanisation and music-hall entertainment as pointing the way to new modes of artistic expression. Both of Marinetti’s writings would influence Massine’s choreography.

Massine’s choreographic debut, *Le Soleil de Nuit* (*The Midnight Sun*, 1915), was created under the supervision of Russian Futurist-influenced artist Mikhail Larionov. His padded, anthropomorphic costumes and Neo-Primitivist scenery corresponded to Massine two-dimensional poses and gestures. Here was a vision of Russian peasant life disassociated from previous naturalistic expressions.

In 1917, Massine created Ballets Russes works that launched his reputation as a choreographer in the vanguard of modernism. In *Parade* (1917), Massine became part of Paris’ avant-garde inner circle through his intensive collaboration with Picasso, Cocteau and Satie. *Parade* concerns a travelling theatrical group composed of a Chinese magician (performed by Massine), a child performer, a pair of acrobats and two managers (costumed in Picasso’s giant cardboard cubist constructions). In ‘takes’ resembling filmmaking, the dancers emerge from Picasso’s askew cityscape to perform variety acts. Satie’s typewriter, foghorn, and siren sounds compete for attention with ragtime music. The work’s collage of cacophonous urban sounds, film references and vernacular dancing (such as ragtime) scandalized conservatives. *Parade* is recognized as the first multi-media ballet.

During the First World War, Diaghilev and Massine travelled extensively through Italy and Spain, researching local cultures with fellow artists as material for future dances. Massine’s *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1919) transformed the material of Spanish solo and small-group dances into a full-scale narrative ballet. With the help of a flamenco artist Félix Fernández Garcia, Massine garnered critical praise for his reinterpretations of the farruca, fandango and jota. With Picasso’s colorful costumes and Manuel de Falla’s orchestral collage of Andalusian, Catalonian and Castilian folk melodies, *Tricorne* became one of the most popular Ballets Russes works of the 1920s. Instead of an authentic reflection of folk culture, Spain’s regional songs and dances became a conduit for aesthetic reinvention and individual creativity.

In Massine’s Italian-inspired *Pulcinella* (1920), the past and the present collided. Massine married the loose-limbed quality of the *commedia dell’arte* puppets with classical ballet steps. Picasso juxtaposed traditional *commedia* costuming with a semi-cubist décor. Meanwhile, Stravinsky modernised Pergolesi’s early eighteenth-century melodic music, giving it greater stridency and a modern instrumentation. Like a collage of cultural artefacts, *Pulcinella* created a historical house of mirrors.

In *La Boutique Fantastique* (*The Magic Toyshop*, 1919), Massine’s characters hailed from England, America and Russia. The dolls represented all walks of life: a snob, melon dealer, group of Cossacks, pair of poodles, can-can dancers and King and Queen playing cards. Massine mingled these high bourgeois and working-class representations with comedic zeal. Based on an older Austrian ballet, *Die Puppenfee* (*The Fairy Doll*, 1888), the ballet culminated in a rousing can-can.

In the 1920s, Massine pursued a successful career on the West End stage, both as a performer and choreographer for C. B. Cochran’s London revues. While Diaghilev disdained the commercial stage, Massine wrote fondly of the experience and of the mixture of opera and jazz music, ballet and vernacular dance, drama and comedy, which were routinely presented. Massine’s choreography suited the revue aesthetic. His character-driven, ironic performance style blossomed; T. S. Eliot pronounced him London’s greatest actor. In 1925, Massine choreographed and danced in Cochran’s production *On With the Dance* (1925). To Noël Coward’s songs, Massine evoked, in the number called *Crescendo,* the hurly-burly of urban life through the cinematic device of the quick montage. Massine’s work shared affinities with the Charlie Chaplin films he revered.

In the mid-1920s, Massine worked on an occasional basis for the Ballets Russes, where the young George Balanchine was making successful ballets. Massine, unused to sharing choreographic limelight, set his sights on America. In 1928, with his second wife, the dancer Eugenia Delarova, Massine relocated to New York City to work for S. L. Rothafel’s Roxy Theater. Here he choreographed a ballet a week and performed daily; it was an exhausting experience. The 1929 death of Diaghilev further dampened Massine’s career outlook. But in 1930, when Massine was invited to restage his 1920 *Sacre de Printemps* for the League of Composers, first in Philadelphia, then in New York at the Metropolitan Opera House, he returned to the concert stage with alacrity. Massine cast the young modern dancer Martha Graham as the Chosen Maiden and hired ballet as well as modern dancers from the Graham and Humphrey-Weidman groups. Unlike many Russian émigrés, Massine did not perceive the differing aesthetic ideologies of American modern dancers as a threat.

Massine’s next major work, *Les Présages* (*The Omens*, 1933), was ambitiously set to Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. While Isadora Duncan had danced to major symphonies, Massine did so regularly during the 1930s. Made for Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo, *Presages* signalled a new artistic phase in which he choreographed largely plotless, allegorical works. *Presages* is structured into allegorical sections in which the dancers represented humanity confronting its destiny. Working alongside Massine was the painter André Masson, who designed the Surrealist-influenced scenery and costumes. With *Présages*, Massine returned to the spirit of Diaghilev, particularly his interest in creating an experimental laboratory for collaborative artists. Massine went on to create ballets with painters such as Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí and Marc Chagall, as well as an emerging generation of young American designers.

Massine’s most ground-breaking symphonic work was *Choreartium* (1933). Set to Brahms' Symphony no 4 in E minor, it is recognized as among the very first fully abstract ballets. Referencing no distinctive theme, character, milieu or period, Massine choreographed his ensemble to reflect Brahms’ impassioned and structurally complex composition. While the higher pitched instrumentation echoed the movement of the women, the lower echoed the men’s. Massine’s symphonic ballets, with their kaleidoscopic formations of dancers and their reflection of the music’s structure, influenced the neoclassicism of Frederick Ashton.

In *Rouge et Noir* (*Red and Black*, 1939), created just before the outbreak of the Second World War for Sergei Denham’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Massine sought to express the conflict between the spiritual and material worlds. The painter Henri Matisse suggested that Shostakovich’s First Symphony could be visually conveyed through costumes and scenery dominated by white, black, blue, yellow and red, the palette which figured in Matisse’s *Dance II* (1932). This triptych mural commissioned by the Barnes Foundation is considered a pivotal work in Matisse’s evolution toward abstract figuration. Massine’s interest in abstraction was certainly abetted by Matisse’s.

Throughout Massine’s symphonic period he continued to create character-driven one-act ballet comedies. In *Le Beau Danube* (1933), first made for Count Etienne de Beaumont's Les Soirées de Paris in 1924, a love triangle develops alongside Johann Strauss’s lighthearted evocation of 1870s Vienna. Massine’s comic wit also came to the fore in *Gaîté Parisienne* (1938) to the music of Jacques Offenbach. Premiering a month after Massine’s somber *Seventh Symphony*, *Gaîté* depicted a world of high spirits, where a wide strata of nineteenth-century society – from waiters and soldiers to society people and a wealthy foreigner – dance and flirt in a fashionable Paris café.

Massine’s interest in film techniques, which influenced his early choreography and also led him to film rehearsals of many of his own works, eventually extended to his working in the film industry. In the early 1940s, Warner Brothers Studio invited Massine to have his *Gaîté* *Parisienne* (1938) and *Capriccio Espagnol* (1939), created in collaboration with Argentinita, filmed in Technicolor. They were released as short films with the titles *The Gay Parisian* (1941) and *Spanish Fiesta* (1942). In 1948, Massine reluctantly agreed to appear in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *The Red Shoes.*  Adapted from the Hans Christian Anderson tale about a girl whose shoes nearly danced her to death, the film featured thinly veiled portrayals of Diaghilev and his inner circle. To Massine’s surprise, *The* *Red Shoes* made him an overnight celebrity. In 1951, Massine starred in a second Powell-Pressburger vehicle, *The Tales of Hoffman*, adapted from Offenbach’s opera. In 1953 Massine choreographed *Carosello napoletano* (*Neopolitan Carousel*), the first major Italian musical of the postwar era, and appeared once again as Pulcinella in a long surrealist-infused *commedia dell’arte* ballet.

In the last two decades of Massine’s life, he crisscrossed the globe, mostly setting his older ballets on dance companies. At the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires and the Joffrey Ballet in New York, he worked closely with a new generation of dancers, few of whom understood the gestural eccentricities, rhythmic complexity and ironic detachment of Massine’s style. When he was not travelling, Massine took refuge at the island he owned off the Amalfi coast, which he hoped to transform into an international arts center, inspired by Diaghilev’s total artwork aesthetic.

**Legacy**

Massine’s hybrid choreographies, with their unconventional syntheses of dance, music and decorative art, modernised twentieth-century ballet. Massine collaborated with Henri Matisse, Henri Masson, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dalí, Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith, among other notable modernists. Besides his work for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (1914-20, 1924-8), he danced and choreographed for the revue stage as well as for major ballet companies (both the de Basil and Denham Ballet Russe companies, (American) Ballet Theatre, Sadler’s Wells Ballet, among others. His symphonic works of the 1930s were early examples of plotlessness and semi-abstraction in ballet. His *Parade*, *Three-Cornered Hat*, and *Le Gaîté Parisienne* are, respectively, in the Joffrey Ballet, Ballet Nacional de España and American Ballet Theatre repertories. Massine’s inimitable dancing is immortalized in several films.

**Selected List of Works**

*Le Soleil de Nuit* (*Midnight Sun*) (1915)

*Las Meninas* (1916)

*Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur* (*The Good-Humoured Ladies*) (1917)

*Parade* (1917)

*Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*) (1919)

*La Boutique Fantastique* (*The Magic Toyshop*) (1919)

*Pulcinella* (1920)

*Cuadro Flamenco* (1921)

*Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) (1920)

*Le Beau Danube* (1924)

*Pas d’Acier* (*The Steel Step*) (1926)

*Ode* (1928)

*Les Présages* (*The Omens*) (1933)

*Choreartium* (1933)

*Symphonie Fantastique* (1936)

*Le Gaîté Parisienne* (1938)

*Seventh Symphony* (1938)

*Saint Francis or Nobilissima Visione* (1938)

*Rouge et Noir* (*Red and Black*) (1939)

*Capriccio Espagnol* (1939)

*Bacchanale* (1939)

*Aleko* (1941)

*Laudes Evangelii* (1952)

*Childe Harold* (1954)

**References and Further Reading**

Fusillo, L. (2005) “Massine, Léonide”, *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press (e-reference edition). (An essay on Massine’s background, career and choreographic legacy)

Garafola, L. (2005) “Staging the Past”, *Legacies of Twentieth Century Dance*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. (An essay on the issues of memory, reconstruction and historical neglect that relate to Massine’s legacy)

Garafola, L. (1989) *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes,* New York: Oxford University Press. (A cultural, political and economic contextualisation of the history of Diaghilev’s company)

García-Márquez, V. (1995) *Massine, A Biography*, New York: Alfred A Knopf. (A comprehensive biography of the choreographer)

Massine, L. (1968) *My Life in Ballet*, Ed. Phyllis Hartnoll and Robert Rubens. New York: MacMillan and Co. (Massine’s autobiography)

**Archives**

National Library of Australia Léonide Massine holdings: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/result?q=leonide+massine>

New York Public Library Léonide Massine holdings:

[http://nypl.bibliocommons.com/search?t=smart&search\_category=keyword&q=leonide+massine+collection&commit=Search&searchOpt=catalogue](http://nypl.bibliocommons.com/search?t=smart&search_category=keyword&q=leonide+ma)

**Moving Image Material**

‘Alicia Markova in *Rouge et Noir* Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo 1930s’, (late 1930s), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxUJcSeREVc>.

*Carosello Napoletano* (*Neapolitan Carousel*) (1954) Lux Films.

‘Gaîté Parisienne-Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo’ (1954), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pH_H-_j888M&feature=relmfu>.

“Léonide Massine-Part 1”, You Tube, c. 1971. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hh_Trtv-zg>.

‘*Les Presages* Original Ballet Russe Australian tour 1936-7', You Tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVXl1ZHuBSw>.

‘Spanish Fiesta’ (1942), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPEo_ocBLxM>.

*The Red Shoes* (1948) Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Eagle-Lion Films.

*Tales of Hoffman* (1951) Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, British Lion Film Corporation.

**Massine Images**

1. B&W photo of Massine in “Legend of Joseph”/1914:

<http://www.dancemuseum.org/hall_of_fame/MassineLeonideLaleggendadiGiuseppe1914.jpg>

2. B&W photo of Massine in “Parade”/circa 1917:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/dalbera/4564734593/>

3. B&W photo of Massine in “Le Tricorne”/1938 (requires copyright permission)

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-vn3427574>

4. B&W photo of Massine in “Good Humored Ladies”/circa 1948 (requires copyright permission):

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=181168&imageID=98f1477&word=Leonide%20Massine&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&sort=&total=26&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=13>

or

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?strucID=181165&imageID=98f1473&k=0&print=small>

5. B&W photo of Massine in “The Red Shoes”/circa 1948:

<http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_kzx8xpCVuH1qbubsbo1_500.jpg>

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