

The Legacies of the Ballets Russes

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Abstract

This essay traces the multiple legacies of the Ballets Russes during the 100 years following the company's first performances in 1909. Dividing the intervening century into four periods ("The Lifetime of the Ballets Russes," "1930-1954," "1954-1987: Glamor and Revival," and "1987 to the Present: Historicity and the End of the Cold War"), it analyzes the dispersal, migration, transformation, and assimilation of its repertory, choreographic methodologies, cultural narratives, aesthetics, and historiography.

Keywords

legacies of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; impact on post-Diaghilev emigré or international companies; influence of Ballets Russes on Sadler's Wells-Royal Ballet, New York City Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, and post-Diaghilev Ballet Russe companies; national identity, gender, and collaboration in dance; history of choreography in ballet; music and visual art commissioned by Ballets Russes; impact of Cold War on ballet and ballet historiography; books, films, exhibitions, and television programs inspired by the Ballets Russes; changing historiography of the Ballets Russes

On the evening of 17 May 1909, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, a company of dancers, singers, and musicians from the Theaters of St. Petersburg and Moscow enjoyed one of the great triumphs of theatrical history. It was the *répétition générale* of the 1909 Saison Russe, the latest season of artistic marvels that "Monsieur Serge de Diaghilew," as he styled himself in France, was pulling out of his familiar top hat. No stranger to Paris, Diaghilev had already staged an exhibition of Russian art, a series of Russian concerts, and the first *Boris Godunov* seen outside Russia. Now it was

the turn of ballet to bask in the international spotlight. Today, we know the company that descended on Paris in the spring of 1909 as the Ballets Russes (although this became its name only a few years later). We also know that by the time the curtain fell on that first performance of *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, the Polovtsian "scenes and dances" from *Prince Igor*, and *Le Festin*, the audience was in rapture. It was the start of a romance that would endure for twenty years, although there were times when the parties fell in or out of love, or found more dazzling partners elsewhere.

Those two decades transformed virtually every aspect of ballet practice in the West. Nothing was left untouched, save for the company's technical foundation, which remained the *danse d'école*. Diaghilev was a man of ferocious will and discerning taste, encyclopedic knowledge and passionate curiosity—a Napoleon of the arts and a Renaissance man, a *mafioso* unafraid of exercising power in the service of beauty. As the founder and director of the Ballets Russes throughout its twenty-year life, he had a profound and far-reaching influence on twentieth-century ballet. Under his aegis, the first of the century's classics came into being—works such as *Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, *Les Noces*, *Les Biches*, *Apollo*, and *The Prodigal Son*. He nurtured outstanding choreographers, including Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, and George Balanchine, and through them influenced ballet choreography until the 1970s. Unlike its nineteenth-century predecessors, the Ballets Russes was a choreographer's theater, a laboratory for experiment that explored new technologies of the body and defined the art of choreography as the quest for new forms, infused with a subjective vision. Diaghilev believed that classicism was not a static entity but something that evolved, and that continuity with the past was not a matter of replicating the late Imperial repertory, but of recreating in a modern way an older dance theater grounded in multiple art forms and the corporeal expressiveness of highly trained dancers. He plucked Stravinsky from obscurity, and through this first "son," as he called the composer of *The Rite of Spring*, altered the course of twentieth-century music. Many composers enjoyed Diaghilev's largesse, some already celebrated, others barely out of school. He conjured scores from baroque music, long before this was popular, and redefined—not once but on a continuing basis—the relationship between music and dance.

At the same time he brokered remarkable marriages between dance and the visual arts. He hired only "real" artists, who ranged from virtuoso

colorists of Russo-Orientalist fantasies to fauves, futurists, cubists, surrealists, and others whose art spanned a broad spectrum of international modernism. With Diaghilev the stage became a total visual environment, set off from everyday life even as it resonated with the forms and colors of contemporary art. He accomplished this in part because he viewed ballet as a preeminently collaborative art, in which choreographer, composer, and designer contributed equally to the whole. Yet fusion was not always his goal, and in later years, he often preferred the ironic juxtaposition of the parts of a ballet to their mystical melding or fusion. Finally, Diaghilev was a gay man, and to the extent that the Ballets Russes was an expression of his personal creative vision, his sexual orientation left a mark on the company's aesthetics. For Diaghilev, ballet was not a meditation on femininity performed by women for an audience of men, as it had been for much of the nineteenth century, but an art infused with queer sexuality and spotlighting men.

The influence of the Ballets Russes was far-reaching. Even today, a century later, it remains a touchstone of aesthetic trends and ideas, its authority invoked, its history and historiography offering a lens through which to read the march of twentieth-century dance. This essay tracks some of these echoes and reverberations during the hundred-year era that has just ended and speculates for a moment about the future. It divides this century into four periods. The first coincides with the lifetime of the Ballets Russes, 1909-1929. The second opens in 1930, with the collapse of the Ballets Russes, and concerns the initial dispersal, migration, transformation, and assimilation of its various legacies. The third runs from 1954, the year of Richard Buckle's hugely successful *Diaghilev Exhibition* at the Edinburgh Festival, to the mid-1980s, and focuses on the rediscovery of "original" Ballets Russes artifacts, choreographies, and narratives. The fourth opens in 1987, when Millicent Hodson staged her reconstruction of *The Rite of Spring* for the Joffrey Ballet, and ends today. It focuses on historicism and the implications of the end of the Cold War.

Opening Movement: The Lifetime of the Ballets Russes

The impact of the Ballets Russes was immediate. It rippled quickly through the world of fashion, leaving its mark on magazines, couturier styles, and the revels of the rich and famous. Feted, toasted, and imitated, Ballets

Russes dancers performed, for enormous fees, at private gatherings and soirées. Impresarios laid siege to them and within months of the first Diaghilev season the most ambitious began to find their way into the global marketplace, seduced by lucrative contracts and opportunities undreamt of at home. This first wave of Russian dancers who passed through the turnstile of the Ballets Russes to international careers was followed by many others. Indeed, throughout its twenty-year existence, the Ballets Russes incubated a host of dance professionals who transformed the era's dance world. Most parted ways with Diaghilev on artistic grounds, although, in some cases, the rupture was personal. Whatever the cause, these former Diaghilev artists were catalysts for the assimilation of Ballets Russes artistic practices and ideas well beyond the immediate reach of the company's activities.

This assimilation process was abetted, in no small part, by the new cultural and intellectual heft of ballet. Neither Paris nor London had lacked for dance, even during the years of so-called "decline." But until the advent of the Ballets Russes, only a handful of dance soloists such as Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller had fired the intellectual imagination. With Diaghilev ballet lost both the stigma of low cultural origins and the wages of artistic inconsequence. His works tapped into the dreams and anxieties of successive generations, the discourses of symbolism and decadence refracted through a Russian prism during the prewar years; those of modernism and neoclassicism charged by the experience of exile in later years. Some of the most respected critics of the age wrote about the company. Numerous books about it were published, many lavishly illustrated, as if to prolong the impressions of a ballet, the memory of a performer or the images of an eminent designer.

This new respect on the part of the era's elites acted as a catalyst for change throughout the dance world. Western European opera houses did not lack for works to dance, but the new Ballets Russes repertoire made ballets like *La Korrigane*, *La Maladetta*, *Phryné*, and *Les Deux Pigeons* seem as fusty and old-fashioned as the dancers who embodied them. In Monte Carlo the Ballets Russes actually displaced the Franco-Italian troupe that had danced for years in the season's operas and galas. More typical was the engagement of former Diaghilev dancers, designers, and choreographers to jumpstart the process of modernization. Thus, among Jacques Rouché's early actions, on taking up the reins of the Paris Opéra, was to

hire several prewar Diaghilev luminaries and even to revive *Giselle*, which had disappeared from the Opéra's boards in the late 1860s. Charles B. Cochran did much the same in London, employing Massine and later Balanchine to give his revues an up-to-date choreographic touch. The dancers, too, changed. With so many men in the Ballets Russes, the nineteenth-century tradition of the female travesty dancer finally came to an end. After seeing so many real men on stage, spectators had a hard time accepting women dressed as men partnering other women.

In addition to raising its status as an art form, the Ballets Russes "nationalized" the idea of ballet, as this was perceived in the West. Ballet had flourished for centuries throughout Europe, so that by 1900 it consisted of a multiplicity of elite, popular, and mainstream practices. These practices transcended national identities. With movement as their lingua franca, dancers and choreographers had long crossed national borders, creating as early as the eighteenth century something akin to an international repertory. This international circulation accelerated in the Romantic and post-Romantic eras, as French ballet-pantomimes and subsequently Italian spectacle ballets became the coin of global exchange. Although ballet continued to use French terminology, Italy was the nursery of its virtuoso practitioners. All the great ballerinas of the era seemed to hail from La Scala and they seemed to be everywhere—from the Paris Opéra and the Maryinsky to the Folies-Bergère, Niblo's Garden in New York, and London's Alhambra Theatre of Varieties. Ballet was definitely not Russian.

In fact, it is hard to say what was Russian about ballet even in Russia. To be sure the dancers were Russian, as were most of the production personnel, and the court system that supported it so lavishly. However, there was nothing specifically Russian about the subject matter of all but a tiny handful of ballets. Diaghilev's export campaign changed this. His enterprise traded on Russianness in almost every way—its name, the nationality of a majority of its artists, and much of its subject-matter. People talked about the company as a uniquely Russian phenomenon, even if its technique derived from the universal idiom of the ballet studio and the company itself never performed in Russia. Now companies as well as movements were likely to be identified by nationality. Thus, Rolf de Maré's "Ballets Suédois" (or Swedish Ballet), La Argentina's "Ballets Espagnols" (or Spanish Ballet), Lincoln Kirstein's "American Ballet," and the movement known as "British Ballet." In part, this was a reaction against the success

of the Ballets Russes; in part an attempt to capitalize on its model. But nobody challenged the notion that ballet in general had acquired a national identity, and that this identity was Russian.

Second Movement: 1930-1954

In 1929, Diaghilev died, and his company collapsed. His passing left a void. Where would ballet be without him? Yet even if Diaghilev himself was irreplaceable, ballet was far from dead. Within three years the first of the post-Diaghilev Ballets Russes companies would spring into existence. Various known as the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Covent Garden Russian Ballet, and Original Ballet Russe (among others), they toured everywhere, scattering the seeds of their art like Johnny Appleseed. They traded on the glamor of the Diaghilev name, even as they jettisoned most of his ballets, while holding aloft an increasingly spurious banner of Russianness. In fact, by the 1930s most "Russian" dancers were émigrés, trained (if not born) in the West. And many weren't even Russian at all, but Americans, Canadians, and Britons dancing under a variety of Russified names.

To be sure, the post-Diaghilev Ballets Russes companies carried on certain aspects of their Diaghilev predecessor. One was the emphasis on collaborations, especially in the area of the visual arts. Massine, the leading choreographic figure of the 1930s, commissioned many eminent painters, including Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, André Masson, and Salvador Dalí, as well as up-and-coming American designers such as Irene Sharaff, Stewart Chaney, and Oliver Smith and an eclectic group of composers that included Paul Hindemith and Richard Rodgers. Because of this emphasis on new work and collaborations with living artists, these post-Diaghilev enterprises—at least in the initial decade of their existence—were genuinely contemporary companies. They took an essentially contemporary approach to revivals as well, tailoring them to the needs at hand rather than aiming for scrupulous historical accuracy—not unlike Diaghilev's approach when he revived *The Sleeping Beauty*.

However, a number of differences also existed between the Diaghilev company and its "international" successors. Unlike Diaghilev, neither Colonel Wassily de Basil or Sergei Denham, the long-time directors of the major post-Diaghilev Ballet Russe enterprises, had any interest in experi-

ment. They pitched their art to the mainstream, to audiences on the endless, innumerable tours that kept their companies solvent. Thus, apart from a handful of Massine ballets, all but the most innocuous works were dropped from the repertoire. In this group were Nijinska's ballets (after a few performances in the 1930s), all of Balanchine's Diaghilev-era works, and most of Massine's. Thus, the Diaghilev repertoire that emerged from this process consisted of a handful of Fokine ballets (*Les Sylphides*, *Firebird*, *Schéhérazade*, *Petrouchka*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*), Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Massine's *La Boutique Fantasque* and *Le Tricorne* (although the latter tended to come and go), and the Petipa-Nijinska *Aurora's Wedding*. Everything else was shelved. Also shelved was Diaghilev's erotic revolution. His successors had little interest in extending what Peter Stoneley has called Diaghilev's "queer iconography."¹⁾ Men might be spotlighted (and were, especially in Massine's ballets), but new works were more likely to center on the ballerina than her consort. Although these post-Diaghilev companies included gay dancers, heteronormativity became the order of the day.

The post-Diaghilev Ballets Russes companies were not alone in carrying on Diaghilev's legacy. However, because of the multiple, sometimes contradictory facets of that legacy, a process of "splitting" seemed to occur, with different heirs laying claim to different legacies. Thus, if the Ballet Russe companies ultimately "contained" Diaghilev experimentalism within a mainstream, multi-purpose repertoire, the Vic-Wells/Saddler's Wells enterprise headed by Ninette de Valois, took heart from Diaghilev's revival of late Imperial works, especially *The Sleeping Beauty*. During the 1930s she produced the three Tchaikovsky masterworks from that repertoire (*Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Nutcracker*), in addition to *Coppélia* and *Giselle*. Like Diaghilev, she took music as a litmus test of artistic worth: hence the absence of *La Bayadère* (Ludwig Minkus) and *Don Quixote* (Cesare Pugni) from her list. But she went considerably further than Diaghilev not only in the quest for authenticity, defined by her as fidelity to the Maryinsky version, but also, as Beth Genné has shown, in claiming

¹⁾ Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 69.

canonical—indeed, classical—status for her choices. “I wanted a tradition,” she later wrote, “and I set out to establish one.”²⁾

Experiment was a cornerstone of Diaghilev’s practice. However, with the partial exception of Massine’s symphonic ballets of the 1930s, semi-plotless, allegorical works to masterpieces of the Western musical canon, the quest for new forms did not fit easily with the goals of the era’s ballet companies. Rather, it was Balanchine, working until 1948 with short-lived, transitory groups in the United States, who extended the reach of Diaghilev’s experimentalism into the 1960s. Balanchine’s ballets of the 1940s were critical in this regard, not only because the greatest of them jettisoned narrative, but also—and more importantly—because they melded ideas of modernism and neoclassicism circulating since Diaghilev’s time. Balanchine continued Diaghilev’s passionate engagement with modern music. He choreographed numerous ballets to Stravinsky and commissioned scores from any number of European and American composers. Although music was central to Balanchine’s vision, by the early 1950s, when he “undressed” several ballets, he regarded the Diaghilev collaborative model—and the visual arts in general—as disposable. A far more radical challenge to the idea of artistic synthesis came from John Cage and Merce Cunningham, who argued that duration was all that collaboration need entail. Fusion and synthesis were irrelevant.

No sooner had Diaghilev died than the process of historical recuperation began. Beginning in 1930 with Tamara Karsavina’s *Theatre Street*, the first wave of Ballets Russes memoirs and biographies began to roll off the presses. Thus began the process of reconstructing a usable history from the fragments and contradictory messages of the recent past. Two major biographies of Diaghilev appeared: Arnold Haskell’s *Diaghileff: His Artistic and Private Life*, in collaboration with Walter Nouvel, in 1935, and Serge Lifar’s *Serge Diaghilev: His Life, His Work, His Legend: An Intimate Biography*, published in English translation in 1940. Lifar’s biography was followed a year later by another foundational text, Alexandre Benois’ *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, also in English translation. The other focus of this early publishing activity was Nijinsky. In 1934 Romola Nijinsky published a controversial biography of her husband, followed three

²⁾ Ninette de Valois, *Step by Step: The Formation of an Establishment* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 189.

years later by her equally controversial edition of his diaries. Anatole Bourman's *The Tragedy of Nijinsky* came out in 1937 as well. The vast majority of these volumes were published in London, followed by publication across the Atlantic. With Soviet archives inaccessible, human memory and personal recall—those infinitely fallible resources—were left to document the Russian lives of their subjects.

During the 1930s and 1940s the first Ballets Russes-inspired feature films appeared. Fictions, they turned—not unlike the published volumes—on the Diaghilev-Nijinsky relationship, emphasizing the former's Svengali-like powers and his all-consuming passion for art. In *The Mad Genius*, a 1931 Warner Brothers potboiler, John Barrymore, the crippled son of a ballerina, discovers a boy with a genius for dance and after guiding him to stardom, brings about his downfall because he has fallen in love with a dancer and wants to marry her. In Ben Hecht's 1946 *Specter of the Rose*, Michael Chekhov played an aggressive but impecunious impresario ("suspiciously rose-watered," in the words of a critic),³⁾ while "a magnificent but murderously maniacal ballet star" (in the words of another critic)⁴⁾ plots to kill his ballerina wife while dancing *Le Spectre de la Rose*. Finally, in 1948 came *The Red Shoes*, that most beloved film classic, in which the radiant young ballerina, Victoria Page, forced to choose between love and dance, gives a heteronormative twist to the mentor-protégé relationship.

By the 1950s, the Ballets Russes companies had fallen on hard times. However, a core group of Diaghilev works had passed into the repertory of newly energized "national" companies, such as the Sadler's Wells Ballet, (American) Ballet Theatre, and New York City Ballet. This group included Fokine's *Firebird*, *Les Sylphides*, and *Petrouchka*, Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Massine's *La Boutique Fantasque* and *Le Tricorne*, and Balanchine's *Apollo*, now stripped of its decor, and *Prodigal Son*, which he revived, ironically, for Jerome Robbins, Fokine's last *Petrouchka*. Although the Diaghilev repertory had been dramatically reduced, these works continued to be performed on a regular basis, and they were considered vital to the canon of modern ballet.

³⁾ T.M.P., "The Screen: Ben Hecht's Revolt," *The New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1946, p. 12.

⁴⁾ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: For Adults," *The New York Times*, 15 Sept. 1946, p. 21.

1954-1987: Glamor and Revival

In 1954 Richard Buckle's *Diaghilev Exhibition* opened at the Edinburgh Festival. With hundreds of designs, caricatures, costumes, portraits, unrealized projects, and even fashion installations, the exhibition was a huge success, and soon reopened in London. It was the first major Diaghilev show since Lifar's 1939 Paris exhibition, a splendid tribute overshadowed by the gathering clouds of war, and sparked widespread interest in the Ballets Russes. After languishing unseen for years in private collections and artists' studios, the works gathered by Buckle told the story of a company whose influence had rippled far beyond the realm of ballet. They spoke of adventure and artistic daring, glamor, celebrity, and high style, of an art that pleased the senses even as it sought new forms. "The glory of Diaghilev and interest in his period and his achievement is on the increase," Buckle would subsequently write.⁵⁾

The years that followed *The Diaghilev Exhibition* witnessed a wave of books about the Ballets Russes, including Buckle's own, lavishly illustrated catalogue of the show, *In Search of Diaghilev*. In the early 1960s Fokine, Massine, Lydia Sokolova (alias Hilda Munnings), Ninette de Valois, and Mathilde Kschessinska joined the list of major Ballets Russes memoirists. Recordings of Diaghilev ballets appeared on British television, many in versions staged by Diaghilev's long-time régisseur Serge Grigoriev and his wife, Lubov Tchernicheva, and coached, in some instances, by members of the original cast. Directed by Antony Asquith (whose mother had been one of Diaghilev's society enthusiasts), Paul Czinner, Margaret Dale, and Edmée Wood, these recordings, some of which were later released on home video, constitute the single most important repository of Fokine's early works. Although the choreographer himself had passed away, other members of Diaghilev's London-based "family" were alive and well, happy to share their memories of Diaghilev with John Drummond, whose splendid BBC documentary aired in 1968.

Buckle's exhibition had revealed the enormous stock of art works generated by the Ballets Russes. In the late 1960s caches of Ballets Russes costumes began to emerge—first, from Serge Grigoriev's collection, and

⁵⁾ Richard Buckle, "Introduction," *Diaghilev Ballet Material: Costumes, Costume Designs and Portraits*, Sotheby's (London), 13 June 1967, p. IV.

subsequently from a Paris warehouse where virtually the entire stock of Diaghilev costumes as well as drops and curtains had come to rest. They soon found their way to Sotheby's, where a series of highly publicized sales in 1967 and 1968 demonstrated that there was indeed a market for Diaghilev memorabilia and that this market was rapidly growing. Celebrities, fans, and even flower children crowded those first Diaghilev sales where Nijinsky's costumes for *Le Dieu Bleu* and *Giselle*, virtually all of Matisse's costumes for *Le Chant du Rossignol*, and costumes for numerous other productions could be had for a song. Institutions such as the Theatre Museum (London) came away with major purchases, and individuals with glamorous "retro" or exotic party wear. In 1978-79, when the Metropolitan Museum marked the fiftieth anniversary of Diaghilev's death with an exhibition of costumes and designs curated by Diana Vreeland, the Ballets Russes—like ballet itself during those boom years—had become high chic. At the opening night party socialites mingled with former Diaghilev stars, as Mitsuko perfume, which Guerlain had created for Diaghilev, wafted through the atmosphere.⁶⁾

The hoopla carried over to the stage. In 1969, Robert Joffrey, who had fallen passionately in love with the Ballets Russes as a Seattle teenager, produced the first of the more than half-dozen ballets that came to constitute his company's highly regarded Diaghilev repertoire. His goal as a producer was fidelity to the original, a work that in some cases he knew only by reputation and from books in his fabled library. With one exception (of which more later), these stagings were not reconstructions, but rather revivals of memory-based versions carefully and lovingly set either by the choreographer or someone with an intimate knowledge of the original work. His initial projects all involved Massine, who staged not only *Le Tricorne*, *Parade*, and *Pulcinella*—works unknown in the United States or unseen for decades—but also Fokine's *Petrouchka*, in what many consider its most authoritative version. (*Petrouchka*, with Massine in the title role, was the first ballet in which Joffrey himself had performed.) In 1979 he added *Le Spectre de la Rose* and *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, thus shifting the focus from Massine to Nijinsky.

⁶⁾ Manuela Hoelterhoff, "A Potpourri of (Non-Tut) Met Exhibits," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 Jan. 1979, p. 12.

Although Joffrey was hardly alone in reviving classics of the Diaghilev repertory, he was one of the very few to add to it. Indeed, without him, *Parade* would have become another lost ballet. Another hero was the choreographer Frederick Ashton, on whose watch as artistic director of the Royal Ballet in the 1960s, Nijinska's *Les Biches* and *Les Noces* returned to active repertory. Ashton (who had danced for her in the Ida Rubinstein company while in his early twenties) not only brought the choreographer to London to stage those ballets but also made sure they were notated. The scores made it possible to revive them after Nijinska's death in 1972 and above all after the publication nine years later of the choreographer's *Early Memoirs*, the last major volume of reminiscence by a Diaghilev-era figure.

Originally titled *My Brother Vaslav Nijinsky*, Nijinska's memoir added to a growing wave of interest in Nijinsky. This was reflected in numerous ways: in books such as Richard Buckle's new biography of the legendary dancer and Lincoln Kirstein's *Nijinsky Dancing*, in theatrical works such as Maurice Béjart's *Nijinsky, Clown of God* and films like *Nijinsky*, which brought the dancer's life to the silver screen. The gay movement hailed him as a hero, while the Russian superstar defectors Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, graduates of the school that Nijinsky had attended, added the luster of his celebrity to their own, by dancing or producing his works. Although Buckle followed his biography of Nijinsky with one of Diaghilev, the latter failed to recapture the spotlight from Nijinsky. Diaghilev had always shied from public attention; he had been the man behind the scenes, everywhere but nowhere. Now, he seemed to disappear into his proverbial top hat.

The publication of Nijinska's memoirs, which coincided with the second wave of feminism, stirred enormous interest in arguably ballet's greatest female choreographer. Thanks to Ashton's foresight, *Les Noces* and *Les Biches* enjoyed a renaissance, briefly acquiring something akin to repertory status. A major exhibition by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco further revealed the breadth of Nijinska's achievement, her embrace of abstraction in Kiev during the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, her pioneering collaborations with Alexandra Exter and members of her studio, and her early experiments in neoclassicism with Diaghilev. All this prompted a shift in thinking about the genesis of neoclassicism, suggesting that it began to crystallize well before the premiere of *Apollo* in the

late 1920s. Equally eye-opening was the publication a few years earlier of Yuri Slonimsky's reminiscence of Balanchine during the years just after the Revolution until he sailed for Western Europe in 1924. Written by the Soviet Union's leading ballet historian, Slonimsky's essay revealed the enthusiasms of the budding choreographer—his passion for Fokine and the influence of Kasian Goleizovsky and Fedor Lopukhov, leading avant-garde choreographers working in the ballet medium during the 1920s. These new sources underscored the long-term epistemological consequences of the political divide.

In 1987 a catalogue raisonné of productions of *The Rite of Spring* for a Dance Critics Association conference documented forty-four versions of the ballet. Since then the number has quintupled—and the numbers keep growing. Rechoreographing old ballets is hardly a new practice. However, since 1953 when Jerome Robbins reconceived *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (which he renamed *Afternoon of a Faun*) by setting it in a ballet studio rather than a sylvan grove, the stories have changed along with the choreography. Thus, in 1959, on the very eve of the 1960s, Maurice Béjart reconceived *The Rite of Spring* as a communal fertility rite shorn of ethnographic trimmings, while in 1975, at the height of the women's liberation movement, Pina Bausch shifted the ballet's focus to emphasize sexual violence and female pain. Increasingly, these new versions bore only a tenuous connection to Nijinsky's original; many were by modern or post-modern choreographers appropriating the aura of the ballet's long and controversial history as an icon of modernity. By the end of the decade, too, even the idea of collaboration was being appropriated, as one-time minimalists like Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs began a series of large-scale theatrical productions that enlisted prominent visual artists, composers, and musicians. With the Ballets Russes now an elite commodity on the ballet stage and auction block, Diaghilev's artistic ideas took root among the moderns.

1987 to the Present: Historicity and the End of the Cold War

In 1987 Millicent Hodson produced the first of her Diaghilev-era reconstructions, *The Rite of Spring*. This event signaled the arrival of a new kind of historicism in the field of Diaghilev studies. This was evident in the

rigor of the books that began to appear with increasing frequency in the years that followed. Written for the most part by scholars trained within the academy as opposed to the critic-fans of an earlier generation, they viewed the Ballets Russes through the lens of contemporary scholarship and within a broad range of cultural contexts. Among this new scholarship I would include my own book, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, published in 1989, Joan Acocella's unexpurgated edition of Nijinsky's diaries, Peter Ostwald's saga of Nijinsky's years in mental institutions, and Vicente García-Márquez's biography of Massine—all published in the 1990s. From the music field came Richard Taruskin's magisterial *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, published in 1996, followed by Stephen Walsh's biography of the composer, David Nice's biography of Prokofiev, and Prokofiev's journals—volumes that have transformed how we view the relationship of Diaghilev to his first and second “sons.” John Richardson's biography of Picasso and Hilary Spurling's of Matisse make clear the centrality of the Ballets Russes to the visual arts, while Stephanie Jordan has called on us to view the relationship of music and dance in a fresh light.

Many of these works are indebted to the opening of formerly closed Soviet archives. In 1982 Ilya Zil'bershtein published a pioneering two-volume collection, *Sergei Diaghilev i russkoe iskusstvo* (Sergei Diaghilev and Russian Art), that suggested the breadth of resources about Diaghilev and his early collaborators that had survived decades of anti-formalist attacks. Glasnost and the collapse of the Soviet Union opened these archives to foreigners and Russians alike, inspiring a new wave of dance publications that sought to heal the breach between the two Russias—Soviet and émigré. The memoirs of Mathilde Kschessinska and Bronislava Nijinska finally saw the light of day in their native language, while volumes such as Elizabeth Souritz's study of Mikhail Mordkin bridged for the first time both his Russian and his American careers, giving full value to both. A new generation of scholars has arisen, and in Perm, the Urals city where Diaghilev spent his childhood and teenage years, conferences, exhibitions, and publications have explored the man and his legacy. Sjeng Scheijen's new biography of Diaghilev not only utilizes sources from three continents, but also conceptualizes its subject in a fully international way.

The new historicity has also left its mark on performance. Since Hodson's reconstruction of *The Rite of Spring* in 1987, she and Kenneth Archer have recreated nearly a dozen Diaghilev-era works, including Nijinsky's

Jeux and Jean Borlin's *Skating Rink*, using sophisticated historical research to resurrect ballets that barely outlived the decade of their creation. Ann Hutchinson Guest's version of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, based on the score Nijinsky notated while under house arrest in Budapest in 1915, reveals a similar obsession with text-based sources. In Russia, where the anti-formalist campaigns of the 1930s expunged the modernist repertoire of the 1910s and 1920s, a reconstructionist impulse could also be discerned, above all in efforts to introduce works by once-proscribed artists of the modernist diaspora. Thus, long unseen ballets by Fokine and never seen works by Nijinska, Balanchine, and Massine were danced by former Soviet companies, in an avid search to see what had been missed during decades of cultural isolation.

In 1979, critic Alastair Macaulay reminisced in the *New York Times* not long ago, "you could point to a number of Ballets Russes works, either staged that year or in recent repertory."⁷⁾ Today, he continues, most of those ballets are all but unknown to dance audiences, and few of the pre-war ones have more than "mere keepsake status." Changing tastes are partly responsible for this precipitous decline. Who, after all, can take *Schéhérazade* seriously today? So, too, are declining budgets. To do *Les Noces* right one needs not only thirty-odd dancers, drilled to perfection, but also a full chorus, four solo singers, four concert pianists, and various percussionists—a huge investment of time and money. In *Petrouchka* there are dozens of dancers, each with a character that needs rehearsing and a costume that can cost hundreds of dollars, an investment that only generously funded ballet companies can afford. YouTube, iPods, and Wikipedia may have challenged ideas of cultural ownership, but we live in a post-Sonny Bono world policed by trusts and increasingly expansive notions of artistic property. Isabelle Fokine's decision to take the Fokine estate in hand, imposing very high license fees and appointing herself the sole guardian of her grandfather's artistic legacy, has had a disastrous effect on his ballets: they are now seldom danced. Profit-minded media conglomerates have made it prohibitively expensive—if the rights can be secured at all—to screen treasures produced decades ago for television, often with public monies. If works are not danced, they lapse from the

⁷⁾ Alastair Macaulay, "Century-Old Revolution in Ballet Still Dazzles," *The New York Times*, 8 Feb. 2009, AR1.

dancer's muscle memory; if works are not seen, they disappear from the public's viewing memory.

So what will be left of the Diaghilev repertoire twenty-five years from now? The composer William Schuman once observed, "It is not an exaggeration, I believe, to claim that the great patron of twentieth-century music has been the art of dance."⁸⁾ Although he wrote this about modern dance, it applies with even greater validity to Diaghilev's musical legacy. Even today when most of the dances that Diaghilev brought into the world have gone, a part of them survives through their music and the art works that both inspired and were inspired by them. This, then, is the tragedy of ballet's ephemerality: the dance can only be recaptured as an act of imagination. Yet the idea of artists collaborating and making work together, imagining new forms, contemporary images of beauty, and richly expressive ways of moving is the stuff, I believe, of a renewable legacy, one that will engender unknown wonders and keep the legacy of the Ballets Russes, if not its works, alive and well.

⁸⁾ William Schuman, "Foreword," *Dance Perspectives 16* (*Composer/Choreographer*), 1963, p. 3.

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