



## **Western classical dance enters the modernity of the 20th century**

### **The Ballets russes and the Ballets suédois**

*Attempts to approach the major dance trends*

As from the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western society found itself at a social, cultural and political turning point: modernity was opening its doors. Technical inventions, factory work, easier mobility, and discoveries of cultures perceived at that time as “exotic” were transforming life and thought. The arts were no exception: the development of the artistic avant-gardes would revolutionise the approach to art. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dance also underwent radical upheavals with the birth of modern dance. The emergence of the American dancers Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller in Europe and in particular in Paris, gave new impetus to and a new perception of danced movement. Classical dance also discovered its modernity during that period even though it was only in the 1950s that it would be assigned, *a posteriori*, the name of “neo-classical”.

#### **A changing world, an art in the process of transformation**

The general public was attached to the classical ballet genre. It was at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a major ballet model developed in Russia, under the guidance of a French choreographer Marius Petipa. In 1869, he became the main ballet master of the Imperial Ballet and would remain so until he retired in 1904. He was to develop, through works that are famous today such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *the Nutcracker* and *La Bayadère*, what historians call post-romantic ballet or academic ballet. As from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Petipa’s students such as Alexander Gorsky and Mikhail Fokine considered their master’s ballets to be outdated. They were attracted to the new artistic trends that were already emerging with the avant-garde painters and the “modern” musicians. Moreover, Fokine would be fascinated by the dance of Isadora Duncan who performed in Saint Petersburg in 1904. In point of fact, on December 26<sup>th</sup> 1904, Isadora Duncan danced for the first time at the Théâtre du Hall des nobles: Anna Pavlova, Serge Diaghilev, Mikhail Fokine, Marius Petipa and Léon Bakst were present in the room.

#### ***The Dying Swan, sign of an emerging modernity.***

In 1907, Mikhail Fokine choreographed *The Dying Swan*. This solo is composed on the thirteenth movement of Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Carnaval des animaux* (Carnival of the Animals, in English), a musical suite for orchestra created in 1886. This dance, lasting only a few minutes, was written for an exceptional interpreter: Anna Pavlova. In this cello solo, sustained by the piano, Anna Pavlova embodies this injured bird who ceaselessly seeks to fly away only to collapse to the ground again ad infinitum. In the



extract presented here, from the late 1980s, Yvette Chauviré, Etoile with the Opéra de Paris and *Prima ballerina assoluta*, transmits her interpretation of this dance to Dominique Khalfouni. The danced vocabulary is limited to a few elements, and the choreographer uses repetition in the composition. Menées on pointes and rippling arm movements rub shoulders with more surprising elements such as falls to the ground and breaks in the back and nape that are missing from Chauviré's version, who preferred multiple inclinations and extensions of the bust together with a few deep pliés on pointes to embody the subject. Irrespective of the interpreter, what really mattered was the embodiment of the subject, an injured bird struggling against death. Fokine left ample freedom to Anna Pavlova who developed the interpretation of the role: the modern ballerina was born.

**Serge Diaghilev's dream:  
create an exceptional troupe and export Russian culture!**

It was in this Russian context of a choreographic art governed by imperial power that the *Ballets russes* came into being in 1909, a ballet company created by Serge Diaghilev. A learned man, curious about art, patron and producer, he brought together a group of dancers from the Mariinsky theatre. He had two aims: establish a close link between music, decorative design and choreography, and export the vitality of Russian culture. He had already started to fulfil the latter aim by programming concerts, painting exhibitions and operas, in particular in France. He would be surrounded by exceptional dancers, some of whom were to become choreographers: Ida Rubinstein, Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky, Alexei Boulgakov, Enrico Cecchetti and Anton Dolin, to name but a few.

While in Russia the initial creations appeared traditional and in keeping with Petipa's legacy, what was to come would radically change the classical landscape, particularly during the troupe's tours in France. From May 19<sup>th</sup> to June 19<sup>th</sup> 1909, the first Russian season took place at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris, a programme combining isolated opera acts and Fokine's ballets. Paris was captivated by these "combined" evenings, mixing relatively traditional ballets rejuvenating romanticism such as *Les Sylphides*, and new shows. The company rapidly cut all ties with the Imperial Ballet to become independent in 1911. It would even be banned from its homeland. Its main geographic points of anchorage became London, Paris, Monte Carlo and Rome. However, it was attached to no particular theatre and toured the whole of Europe, South America (as from 1913) and the United States of America (as from 1916).

**Exceptional collaborations, inspirations and a format: the dance evening.**

The first remarkable fact is that Diaghilev, although not himself an artist, surrounded himself by artistic collaborators: librettists, choreographers, composers and set designers. For each creation, he formed a team of artists and chose a theme that he imposed.



Four ballet masters would follow on from each other: Mikhail Fokine, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine. A few dancers would choreograph such as for example Vaslav Nijinsky and Serge Lifar. Diaghilev called on both famous composers and on names unknown at that time: Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Sergei Prokofiev, Georges Auric, David Milhaud and Henri Sauguet. The young Igor Stravinsky would be his special composer and perhaps the one who would most sustain the modernity of these ballets. Regarding the set designers, initially Diaghilev preferred his Russian friends, Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, before developing partnerships with other artists such as Nicholas Roërich, Natalia Gontcharova and Michel Larionov. After the First World War, he would also find new set designers in the Ecole de Paris: Matisse, Rouault, Laurecin, Braque and naturally Pablo Picasso, who breathed cubist life into a number of productions. Coco Chanel would also participate in the making of some costumes.

For the creation of ballets, the themes were varied. Obviously Diaghilev drew from the romantic legacy that preceded him, thus allowing Russian know-how to be shared with his Western audience. Mikhail Fokine's first ballets guaranteed a revitalised tradition in the creations *Le pavillon d'Armide* (1909) and *les Sylphides* (1909). However, the folklore aspect formed the major part of the productions' thematic source. Thus it was that Russian customs, legends and tales that offered to the imagination a wide variety of sources, highlighting the original roots of Russia. Inspiration was also sought in the East and the Far East, adding a touch of exoticism and oriental reverie to the various programmes. Spain and Italy, two countries whose cultures Diaghilev admired, were important sources in the creation of librettos as was also the use of subjects from the Bible and Antiquity. Showing a certain novelty, recourse to everyday life to develop ballet themes exposed a changing society.

One of the *Ballets russes'* strong points was structured round Diaghilev's idea to propose dance evenings: programmes made up of several short pieces (sometimes less than ten minutes) allowing a variety of themes to be combined in the course of one evening. This show format regenerated the tradition of three-or four-act ballets established by Marius Petipa and made it possible to work on varied choreographic formats, ranging from solos to group pieces. Diaghilev had understood that one of his hallmarks and factors of success was to surprise his audience.

### **Rejuvenating ballet and dance.**

In this way, Serge Diaghilev set in motion an artistic dynamics conducive to creativity, where each programming season offered new pieces each very different from the other. However, perhaps the most important element with respect to actual dance would be the choreographers' way of working within the company. The first choreographer, one of Petipa's students like many dancers at the troupe's beginnings, was Mikhail Fokine. Fokine favoured an expressive art and refused all needless virtuosity. He developed this idea even before the troupe was created, a fact evident in *The Dying Swan*. For each choreography, he defended a particular style, a language in connection with the subject



treated. The aim was to link body language, gestures to the subject treated and expressed. To do this, he carried out documentary research into the themes imposed by Diaghilev and incorporated new danced figures in the creations. He also refused to submit entirely to the musician or set designer, while yet leaving them complete freedom in the partnership. He was convinced of the importance of research around the music-dance-painting synthesis.

### ***Le Spectre de la Rose or how to become a man-flower...***

In 1911, *Le Spectre de la Rose (The Spirit of the Rose)* was created in Monte Carlo and presented a few weeks later at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris. This choreographic tableau is an adaptation of a poem by Théophile Gautier. Mikhail Fokine choreographed on an already existing musical score: *L'Invitation à la valse (Aufforderung zum Tanz)* by Carl-Maria von Weber, composed in 1819 and orchestrated by Hector Berlioz in 1841. The settings and costumes were commissioned from Léon Bakst. The theme is simple and romantic as the note in the programme explains: "When the curtain rises, a young girl back from her first ball, overcome by fatigue, falls asleep in an armchair. In her dream, the rose she holds in her hand becomes a genie who kisses her before vanishing at dawn". Tamara Karsavina was assigned the role of the young girl, while Vaslav Nijinsky embodied the genie, the spirit of the rose. For Mikhail Fokine the challenge was considerable: finding the right gestures for this man-flower who has the main role in the pas de deux, here yet again breaking with tradition! To do this, he chose to develop the masculine nature of the role in the lower body with astonishing technical feats: big leaps, leg work and batterie steps, interminable spins and large space occupancy. The evanescence of the rose was embodied in the bust with an airy upper body, conducive to multiple rippling arm movements bestowing a precious character, often linked in the spectators' imagination to feminine delicacy. The spirit was born from this choreographic alchemy that Nijinsky embodied to perfection. He was to become the French public's muse.

### **A dionysiac being, when Antiquity shocks the public!**

Faced with such success, it is easy to understand that Diaghilev, both as a producer and as a fervent admirer of the young dancer's charisma, saw in Nijinsky a valuable asset for the company's success. The following year, although the latter was not a choreographer, he commissioned from him a first piece on a theme from Antiquity: *L'Après-midi d'un Faune (Afternoon of a Faun)*. Here again, Diaghilev imposes the theme taken from a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as the music by Claude Debussy. Initially, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* had been composed to accompany the recital of the poem on a theatre stage. Although the project never materialised, it resulted in this masterpiece that the composer had played in 1894. Rumour has it that Diaghilev forced Debussy to authorise him to use his composition, which he then imposed on Nijinsky. Likewise, it seems that Nijinsky had not read the poem and that it was probably Jean Cocteau who



indicated to him the storyline. Moreover, the ballet does not illustrate the poem but, like the music, is a scene that precedes Mallarmé's verses.

Nijinsky, just like Fokine before him, researched the theme in order to provide a choreographic response: how to create the gestures of the faun, a mythological creature, half man, half goat, the lead character of the ballet that he himself would dance, as well as those of the nymphs, divinities of nature who had come to refresh themselves by a stream. The one-act ballet only lasts about ten minutes. Bakst's setting and costumes remain sufficiently impressionist and exotic so as not to upset the audience although we can note the lack of depth of the setting in favour of a wall of greenery, the transparency of the nymphs' costumes, and the apparent nudity of the faun clothed in an academic mottled brown skin, which are all elements far removed from classicism. To address the theme, one of Nijinsky's sources of inspiration was his visits to the Louvre and the study of the attitudes of characters painted and engraved on vases and friezes from Greek and Egyptian Antiquity. He thus invented a dance where bodies are twisted, a position that is not natural and is far removed from the alignment of classical dance. Moreover, he choreographed in corridors, from stage right to stage left, depicting a living bas-relief. With no big leaps but barefooted walks and no real link between musical rhythm and dance, Nijinsky relies on the melodic line as though he were deploying a timeless ancient landscape... The audience was disappointed, disoriented and even shocked: the end of the ballet appeared improper when the faun lay down on top of the veil that the Senior Nymph had abandoned. The female dancers were also outraged and disappointed by the choreography that, rather than allowing them to show what they could do, put pressure on them. In point of fact, Nijinsky painstakingly regulated the slightest gestures and expressions to the extent that the dancers had the impression they were stone statues: Ida Rubinstein even stopped the rehearsals and was replaced by Lydia Nelidova. The "Nijinsky scandal" was born!

***The Rite of Spring, hymn to sacrifice and primitive worship:  
one of the century's greatest choreographic scandals***

The eroticism and animality that the spectators read into *the Afternoon of a Faun* created such an uproar when it premiered that Diaghilev saw in it a type of unprecedented publicity. Naturally he commissioned two new pieces from Nijinsky the following year: *Jeux (Games)* and *The Rite of Spring*. It was Nicholas Roërich, a Russian painter and ethnologist who had travelled the world over, specialist and enthusiast of Slavic culture, who proposed the new theme: the pagan rite of a primitive Russian tribe who sacrifices a virgin to the god of nature Iarilo in order to ensure the rebirth of spring. The musical score created by Stravinsky is highly complex with overlapping rhythms and instruments played in unusual ways. Spring is here a pagan rite far removed from the spring-like pastoral vision of Vivaldi or Beethoven. Stravinsky addresses the theme thus: spring is seething and teeming. It emerges from the earth. Nijinsky also seeks to address the theme: to create primitive bodies. The postures and movements will thus be the exact opposites of harmony and beauty: rejection of the five



fundamental positions and of the en-dehors aspect of classical dance in favour of feet turned inwards, anchoring in the ground, stiff limbs, bent back, sternum leaning forward, and so on. The costumes would be baggy, and the closed circle composition would use Nicholas Roërich's ritual circle drawing on the ground. A large number of testimonies by dancers at that time talk of the work of creation and execution of this dance as being a real physical ordeal, not only due to the postural constraints but also because the bodies of these dancers, marked by post-romantic classical dance, found it extremely difficult to adapt to this new posture that went against everything they had previously learnt. Both the audience and the dancers were outraged: the dancers as they saw there a negation of their skills, and the audience as they did not understand what they were seeing and hearing. *The Rite of Spring* would be performed only a few times in May and June 1913 in programmes next to, in particular, works such as *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la Rose (the Spirit of the rose)*, *Shéhérazade* and *Thamar*, which merely reinforced the sacrilegious aspect of this creation.

### **The post-Nijinsky period, the First World War, tours and choreographies renewed up to 1929**

At the end of 1913, Nijinsky was ousted from the *Ballets russes* by Diaghilev further to a private disagreement and became progressively mentally ill. At the outbreak of the First World War, Diaghilev hired Léonide Massine and then Bronislava Nijinska, Nijinsky's sister, as the troupe's new choreographers. Less outrageous than their predecessor, they would also follow in Fokine's footsteps based on Diaghilev's proposals. This would not, however, prevent a certain number of avant-garde and even experimental works to emerge! The writer Jean Cocteau would be a catalyst of ideas for the company. Always on the look-out for something new, Diaghilev apparently said to him: "Surprise me!" Cocteau introduced him to various avant-garde circles: jazz, cubism, cinema and the circus. He brought with him painters such as Picasso and Matisse, and musicians such as Les Six.

### ***Parade (1917): Cocteau-Picasso-Massine-Satie, An avant-garde cast!***

Created during the First World War, this ballet fulfilled Diaghilev's desire to change his aesthetic universe. Jean Cocteau offered him a realistic universe: that of a fairground theatre. During the pre-show parade, acrobats, a Chinese magician, a little American girl, managers and a horse joined up to advertise their theatre! Massine developed for each one a form of realistic gestures according to the character personified in keeping with Picasso's proposals. Satie was not to be outdone regarding realism and used for the musical creation a certain number of noises emanating from lottery wheels, tap dance shoes, typewriters, not to mention rattles and other gun shots. Everything then appeared almost surreal, and every dancer was freed or constrained, according to their



costume, for their own movements. The managers had very few gestural possibilities, while two dancers made up the horse. Realism rubbed shoulders with a cubist spirit!

### **The post-Nijinsky period, the First World War, tours and choreographies renewed up to 1929 (continuation and conclusion).**

After the First World War, Diaghilev was inspired by the Roaring Twenties and Paris. In 1924, Bronislava Nijinska's *Le Train bleu* depicted the sporting fun to be had by the seaside, on the French Riviera. To a musical score by Milhaud, with settings and costumes by Laurens, Picasso and Coco Chanel, Jean Cocteau's libretto shows how part of society in the 1920s enjoyed itself!

In 1929, Diaghilev's death put an end to the *Ballets russes*, and the troupe members went their separate ways. The dancers and choreographers went on to have unusual careers: some remained in Monte Carlo, the base for a series of companies benefiting from the reputation of the *Ballets russes*, while others developed their own companies already created during the *Ballets russes* such as Anna Pavlova and Ida Rubinstein. George Balanchine left for the United States, while Serge Lifar settled at the Opéra de Paris. In Europe, just as in the USA and Latin America, the *Ballets russes* were to influence future generations of dancers and choreographers.

### **The *Ballets russes*, a troupe ideal that inspired others: The *Ballets suédois* (1920-1925)**

In 1920 in Paris, the *Ballets suédois* came into being under the initiative of Rolf de Maré, an industrialist from Stockholm and a patron and lover of dance. The *Ballets suédois* followed the same model as the *Ballets russes*: avant-garde collaborations that were continuously renewed. In the space of five years, twenty-five creations, seven hundred performances in Paris and on tour in the major European and American cities. A choreographer: Jean Börlin, in turn trained by Mikhail Fokine. Börlin's style combines pantomime and music-hall, as well as influences from the modern dancer Isadora Duncan. Jean Cocteau made contact with the troupe. Attracted by an avant-garde turmoil in the same way as with the *Ballets russes*, he proposed a ballet described as "falsely naïve": *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921). The company enjoyed a huge success with this work, while generating at the same time a scandal due to its violation of conventions, particularly linked to its fusion of the arts, as well as by the avant-garde artists that upheld it: composers such as Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre, Erik Satie and Cole Porter for example, poets and writers such as Blaise Cendrars, Paul Claudel and Jean Cocteau, and painters such as Fernand Léger, Giorgio De Chirico, Foujita and Francis Picabia to name but a few. Surrealism, Dadaism and other avant-garde courants ensured that renewal was always possible.



### **Few traces, few new versions, but always *Relâche!***

While the works of the *Ballets russes* have often been revived, the same is not true of those of the *Ballets suédois*. However, there are a few exceptions of which *Relâche* is one, although this ballet was only rarely performed compared with other pieces by the company. *Relâche* is presented as an “instantaneous ballet in 2 acts and a cinematographic intermission”. Francis Picabia, an artist close to surrealism and Dadaism, is key in the creation of this ballet, both for his libretto and for the creation of settings and costumes. Erik Satie composed the music, while Jean Börlin was the choreographer, playing on various levels of gestures: everyday gestures, danced patterns of cabarets, classical dance... Thus, in 1924, a disjointed piece was performed that made fun of everyone who saw it! Absence of dramatic continuity and presence of incongruities in two of Picabia’s settings that played with light. During the intermission, for the change in stage setting and perhaps afraid that the spectators would leave the room, René Clair’s film *Entr’acte* was shown. In this film, of Dadaist inspiration, scenes with no direct coherence follow on from and combine with each other, showing Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp playing chess, superimpositions of images, a funeral, a female dancer filmed from below, a bearded woman disguised as Satie... This work is symptomatic of the collaborations and sharing that were emerging at that time between the different artistic fields: dance, cinema, music, the visual arts.

As a result of the considerable financial problems that the company was unable to solve, 1925 saw the end of the *Ballets suédois*. They left no real direct descendants even though the company’s star, Carina Ari, was hired by the Opera de Paris. Jean Börlin died five years later from an illness in New York at the age of 37. However, the demise of the company did not mean the end of Rolf de Maré’s interest in dance. In 1925, he created the Opéra Music-Hall des Champs-Élysées and invited Josephine Baker to France, where she triumphed in *La Revue nègre*. In 1932, he created in Paris both a choreographic competition and the AID - Archives Internationales de la danse (International Dance Archives), which comprise an association and a review. The aim of these archives was to “centralise documents on choreography in different countries and at different times”. They would remain active up until the 1950s.

Thus, the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for modernity in classical dance. France would be one of the countries where the presence of this new classicism was important and decisive for the future of this aesthetics, just as it had been centuries earlier with Louis 14<sup>th</sup>’s commitment to this living and impermanent art of dance.





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Holder of a doctorate in the history of art, Céline Roux is an independent researcher. Specialising in the performative practices of the French choreographic field, she is in particular the author of *Danse(s) performative(s)* (L'Harmattan, 2007) and *Pratiques performatives / Corps critiques # 1-10 (2007-2016)* (L'Harmattan, 2016). A lecturer, trainer and teacher, she works in a variety of higher education contexts as well as coaching dancers. She also collaborates in the artistic projects of contemporary dancers-choreographers, whether for artist archives, the production of critical texts and editorial projects or dramaturgic coaching. She has contributed to a number of digital projects for the sharing of choreographic culture such as *30ansdanse.fr*. Alongside her activities in/for/around choreographic art, she has practiced hatha yoga in France and in India for several years.

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