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Guest Editor's Introduction: The Ballets Russes in North America

In January of 1916, amid a flurry of publicity, Serge Diaghilev's famous Ballets Russes company arrived in the United States to begin the first of two back-to-back American tours sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera Company. "Never before," the Metropolitan Opera Company's preliminary prospectus announced, "has such a diversity of ballet, mimo-drama, and 'choreographic episode' from such eminent hands been outspread on our stage. Never before have so many ballets moved to such music or been clothed in such settings and costumes. Never before have such performances wrought an equal magic, magnificence, and vitality of illusion. In them the new arts of the dance and many a new art of the theatre touch their present climax."[1] The Ballets Russes, American audiences were promised, would offer Americans a new art, a multimedia spectacle of dancing, music, color, and stage design: "something vital, spontaneous, and distinct, with a rare and poignant beauty, something which evoked within the beholders a spirit at once emotional and intellectual."[2] From January until April 1916, the troupe trekked across much of the Northeast and upper Midwest before a month-long run at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. A second round of American performances commenced in October 1916 with a two-week run at the Manhattan Opera House, followed by stops in more than twenty-five cities around the country—New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Memphis, and Birmingham, among them.

The Ballets Russes company originated in a broader series of Russian collaborative artistic ventures. As a young man, impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929) was invited to join a "Society for Self-Improvement" aimed at discussing and formulating a set of aesthetic principles that turned away from the utilitarianism and realism dominating much of Russian art and music in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Art,

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members of the group quickly decided, was "a unity, and a holy one, to be adored in all its manifestations, and not for any purpose that it might serve but solely for the joy that its beauty yielded."[3] Though Diaghilev had been admitted primarily because his cousin Dimitry Filosofov was already a member and not for his own personal achievements, he quickly began spearheading projects. First was an art journal that promoted the group's aesthetic and the Russian artists who supported it. *Mir iskusstva*, as the magazine was titled, not only instructed the art establishment as a whole but also attempted to generate a Russian art tradition that valued "a new, less political, and more 'aesthetic' art" that was closer in line with larger European art trends.[4] Next came the highly successful production of a Russian opera, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, at the Paris Opera in 1908. And the following season, Diaghilev decided to bring to Paris a set of Russian ballets and operas. Not only did this endeavor allow him to promote Russian visual art, music, and dance in a form reportedly cheaper and easier than opera, but it offered a second level of patriotism: to "demonstrate to the vainglorious Parisians what Russia had made of that French art that France had allowed to degenerate."[5]

Diaghilev quickly assembled a team of collaborators: Alexandre Benois and Léon Bakst would work as set and costume designers, and composers including Glazunov and Stravinsky would be commissioned to create and arrange scores. Who, though, to choreograph? Bakst suggested Michel Fokine, a dancer trained in Russia's Imperial Theater. Frustrated with the virtuosic display and autotelic nature of Russian Ballet and eager to create dances that replaced audience pandering with "multiform expression of the entire self," Fokine jumped at the chance to join the venture.[6] Art, the Ballets Russes artists agreed, was an activity unto itself, separate from reality and real life, yet suggestive of it, "a picture caught halfway between reality and dream" that called upon audience members to "linger in a state of charmed dislocation, receptive to the remote glimmerings of the Idea."[7] Crucial to this concept was artistic synthesis. Aligning Platonism with trends in poetry and Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, proponents of synthesis argued that art not only transcended media, but promised to mend the "'dissociation of sensibility,' a notion of divided or lost self" that was said to plague many at the turn of the century.[8] Diaghilev's team agreed: in their ballets, every element—dance, costuming, sets, and music—would relate as closely as possible to the dramatic narrative.[9] For Fokine and Diaghilev alike, this quest for synthesis prompted an exploration of the relationships (particularly structural relationships) between music and dance. They, like modern dance and movement specialists Isadora Duncan, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, and Ruth St. Denis, began advocating new musical repertoires; in their case, this included both new (primarily Russian) pieces specifically commissioned by the group, and pre-existing scores that had been

transcribed and arranged. They also prompted the development of a new dance aesthetic. The Ballets Russes discarded the standard choreographic formula of "a ballerina basking in her stardom as, backed up by a corps that was more decoration than dancing, she executed a new combination of the beautiful but standard *danse d'école* steps, usually ending in multiple pirouettes."[10] Instead, the company tended to foreground athletic male dancers and privileged choreography that actively conveyed each ballet's characters, mood, setting, and narrative.

Almost immediately, American impresario Otto Kahn (1867–1934) began attempting to arrange a US tour for the company. Kahn was sure that the company would excite American audiences, yielding profitable returns and acclaim for himself and for the sponsoring American organization.[11] Though his initial attempts were fruitless, his intuitions were correct. The US press caught wind of the company and began reporting on the Ballets Russes's European performances, and wealthy Americans who were able to see performances on the Continent also reported back with enthusiasm. Stateside audiences were also treated to versions of the company's signature works: as the Ballets Russes gained cultural cache, dancers of all nationalities capitalized on the trend. In the summer of 1911, for example, American dancer Gertrude Hoffmann, who had seen the company in Paris, gathered a company of Russian (or Russ-ified) dancers including former Diaghilev dancers Lydia Lopokova, Maria Baldina, and Theodore Kosloff, and, working from their memories, staged adaptations of *Les Sylphides*, *Schéhérazade*, and *Cléopâtre*, with Hoffmann imitating Diaghilev's star dancer-actress Ida Rubenstein in the latter two. The company, which spent part of October 1911 on the West Coast, appearing at San Francisco's Cort Theater and the Majestic Theater in Los Angeles, among others, whipped the press to near frenzy in excitement. Hoffmann's *Saison Russe* was hardly the only attempt to offer Americans a stand-in for Diaghilev's organization. After Kahn was unable to convince Diaghilev to tour the United States in 1910, Kahn instead imported Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova for a cross-country tour with partner Mikhail Mordkin, during which they staged works including *Giselle, Coppélia*, and Pavlova's famous *Dying Swan*. In fact, the two acts developed a tense, mutually beneficial relationship: when Hoffmann's company began performing, Pavlova and Mordkin's management team launched a publicity campaign criticizing Hoffmann as a sham and lauding the Russian duo as "authentic," sparking the media debates about artistic "theft" and "piracy," which in turn drove audiences to the performances of both organizations.[12]

Pavlova returned with a larger troupe, "Pavlova's Ballets Russes" in 1914 under the management of impresario Max Rabinoff, and by 1915 she had embarked upon an ambitious national joint tour with the Boston Opera Company, which she financed by making a silent film version of

Auber's *La Muette de Portici* for Universal. This opera and ballet extravaganza appeared up and down the west coast in the spring of 1916, offering programs that included Puccini's *La Bohème* and Pavlova's Spanish Ballet, single acts of Bizet's *Carmen* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Gluck's *Orfeo et Euridice* in "mimo-choreographic form," and more.[13] Pavlova's film project *The Dumb Girl of Portici* also opened in West Coast theaters throughout that spring, often hitting cities just days before or after Pavlova's live performances (this prompted the film to be marketed as a bargain—just cents to see same artist who days before had commanded $5 a ticket). And even before Pavlova headed back east, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that Theodore Kosloff was soon to arrive with "twelve artists from the Serge Diaghileff Ballet," "Emil Coleman's Russian orchestra," and scenery and costumes from the Imperial Theater in Moscow, all direct from a successful month at the Palace Theater in New York.[14]

Finally, in the summer of 1915, Kahn got lucky. Diaghilev, struggling to keep his company intact as the Russian Revolution and World War I limited both finances and contacts, was now more than willing to explore new opportunities in America.[15] After some discussion, the two men struck a deal: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was engaged for an initial fifteen-week run that began at New York's Century Theater then would tour the country before returning for a month-long run at the Metropolitan Opera House in April. Kahn also agreed to pay for three months of rehearsals and to split the net profits from performances with Diaghilev.

By the time the Ballets Russes arrived in New York the following January, then, audiences were waiting with bated breath. As dance historian Lynn Garafola has noted, however, the company was hardly an immediate hit: New York audiences and critics received them with "enthusiasm but little love."[16] The reaction was not entirely surprising: the touring company that graced the stage on opening night was small. Many members had scattered throughout Europe when the war broke out and were not able to reassemble, and two of the company's stars, Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina, did not arrive with the troupe; Nijinsky eventually rejoined the company in March. Nor was the company particularly well rehearsed: they had not performed in nearly a year. Garafola writes, "[T]he ensemble that crossed the Atlantic in 1915–16 was but a shadow of its former self, a version in miniature of the huge Slavic cavalcades Diaghilev had earlier led to the West. . . . [T]he sheer scale of production changed."[17] For wealthy audiences and critics in major East Coast cities like New York and Boston, many of whom had either followed the troupe's performances in Europe or actually *seen* them perform during visits to the Continent, the company's American appearances were underwhelming. Moreover, controversy swirled around several of the company's works, which Catholic and other organizations decried as indecent. The ballet *Schéhérazade* sent Boston into fits because it featured

a harem orgy in which white women, including the protagonist Zobéide, were fondled by male dancers masquerading in blackface onstage; one critic described it as "barbarity set to music."[18] *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* was found similarly indecent due to its overt sexuality. Ultimately, the police were called, and the finales of both ballets were tamed before the works toured the rest of the United States.[19]

Scholars have also cited a number of practical problems that plagued the company. Critics were frustrated by long intermissions and delays within programs, which dance historian Hanna Järvinen has suggested were likely caused by the company's sets, which were too large and difficult to install easily on many American stages. Many critics were also nonplussed by what they perceived as Diaghilev's condescension, including his refusal to speak English. As Järvinen writes, the impresario presented his company and Russian nationalist art as a model for American art, "claiming Americans knew not what was truly original about America and, worse, that they could not have real American art until they did."[20] It is hardly a surprise that many American audiences and members of the press viewed the Ballets Russes as foreign, European, and decadent.[21]

Scholarly accounts of the company's more extensive second tour, which visited fifty-five cities between October 1916 and February 1917, tend to be equally negative. The company dwindled to forty dancers when Diaghilev was dismissed by the tour's management and Nijinsky was left in charge. Though Nijinsky was an appealing public face for the company, he had difficulty managing his dual role as dancer and director, often changing programs at the last minute and replacing himself with other dancers, disappointing audiences that expected to see *him* dance. Further chaos ensued when theaters along the tour route were invited to request specific ballets without regard for logistics, personnel, or what was actually in the diminished company's repertory. Ticket prices remained high, and the advance team frequently failed to generate the necessary local press to draw sold-out crowds; this translated into significantly less pay for the company's dancers, stagehands, and orchestra musicians, despite the tour's incredibly grueling schedule. All told, the Met lost as much as a quarter of a million dollars on the venture. Perhaps, scholars have argued, these tours are best understood as an unfortunate result of World War I: desperate, stopgap engagements that were doomed from the start and only got worse.

The essays in this issue, however, counter this prevailing narrative of tours defined by missteps, mixed press, financial woes, and disappointment. Such quick dismissals of the tours, we argue, overlook the extent to which the company's reception in 1916 and 1917 varied based on geographic locations, the agendas and activities of local arts organizations, and the familiarity of various audiences with contemporary

dance, music, and visual arts.[22] Instead, existing scholarship tends to extrapolate conclusions about "American" reception and experiences of the company from that in New York and Boston—two cities in which audiences and critics who tended to be wealthier and had more access to the arts (at home and abroad) than those in many of the other fifty-four American and Canadian cities the Ballets Russes visited. This stems from the difficulty of accessing local records, reviews, and critics' accounts, certainly; but it also reflects a general privileging of urban, East Coast geographies in much American music and dance scholarship.

Looking beyond the most visible venues and locales, we have realized, reveals nuanced, diverse, and even contradictory experiences of and reactions to the troupe. While the New York press and audiences shuddered at the racial depictions and sexuality in the company's signature ballets, for example, West Coast critics embraced them. There, the Ballets Russes was deemed "exquisitely beautiful and sensational," and *Schéhérazade* the pinnacle of their achievements.[23] In it, one San Francisco critic wrote, "Bakst, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Michel Fokine and the hosts of the Ballet Russe effect an ensemble of gorgeous unreality and fabulous Oriental splendor which excites, thrills, and moves one with emotions as new and strange as their inspiration; quite as though hasheesh [*sic*] were the basis of the evocation."[24] West Coast press even dismissed the tour's shaky finances and other problems as acceptable side effects of artistic experimentation. As a writer for *Pacific Coast Musical Review* argued, "[T]he magnitude of this enterprise prevents any possibility of profit. None is expected. . . .The ballet brings a message from the old world to the new, and . . . the only way to present this message, the birth of a new art in dance, or properly speaking, a correlation of arts, is to subsidize the company, thereby insuring perfect presentations, irrespective of financial return."[25]

Even within regions, reactions to the company varied widely. As Samuel Dorf describes in "Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in the American Midwest," while critics in Cincinnati were fascinated by the troupe's performances, and particularly by the music of their ballets, those in Chicago and Dayton often derided the troupe's works. Yet as Dorf notes, the tepid reviews from these cities often belied insecurities about audience taste—and at times even a perverse pride in their prevailing *lack* of taste. It was not that the Ballets Russes performances were lacking, but rather, that they were simply more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan than these cities and their people imagined themselves to be. Reception could also be shaped by local arts entrepreneurs and organizations. In "A 'Brilliant Talk' and a 'Stirring Appeal': How Women in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Built an Audience for the Ballets Russes in 1917," Julia Randel delves into the surprisingly warm response to the Ballets Russes in culturally conservative Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, Randel details, two local

women (a theater manager and a well-known community leader) facilitated the company's appearance and galvanized the city's effusive reception by mobilizing networks of club women, musicians, dance teachers, and members of the press. Their campaign on behalf of the Ballets Russes was not an isolated effort but built on years spent cultivating audiences of "high art," particularly through women's clubs. As the articles in this issue remind us, geographically attuned reception histories tell us much about the North American performances of the Ballets Russes but even more about the music, dance, and art scenes in cities and towns across the continent.

Focusing attention on these tours also foregrounds the Ballets Russes's influence on North American artistic and entertainment culture throughout the country, both during and immediately after the tour and for decades to come. For instance, the company had a profound impact on the repertoire of American symphony orchestras. As Dorf describes, midwestern cities like Cincinnati saw an explosion of Russian and French music in the repertoires of local ensembles because of the tours. Dancers boasting of Ballets Russes connections real and invented found homes on high-art and popular stages, started their own companies, and founded dance schools across the country. As Carolyn Watts details in "'It Must Be Preserved': Adolph Bolm's Revival of *Le coq d'or*," Adolph Bolm, one of the company's premier male dancers, remained in the United States at the end of the second tour. For years, he offered a steady stream of reprises and adaptations of Ballets Russes works for American audiences, including the piece at the center of Watts's study, the company's opera-ballet version of Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Le coq d'or*. Yet as Watts describes, he also founded or laid the groundwork for important U.S. ballet companies and created innovative new ballets that spoke to American cultural phenomena from jazz to comics to baseball. In doing so, Bolm was integral to the creation of an American ballet scene.

The colors, patterns, and other visual aesthetics associated with the Ballets Russes were also replicated and approximated throughout North American popular and commercial culture. As Mary Simonson describes in "Touring the Screen: Cinematic Resonances of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," these visual markers, along with the company's choreographic aesthetics, music, and mythologies, quickly made their way into the American silent film industry. Not only did a number of the company's dancers dance on movie-house stages and appear in films, but filmmakers in the late 1910s and 1920s also generated a spate of films about Russian ballerinas and ballet companies that implicitly and explicitly invoked Diaghilev's company. The influence of the Ballets Russes only continued to grow in the decades following the tours: both the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, founded in 1932 under the direction of Colonel W. de Basil, and the Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo founded in 1938 by

Sergei Denham (which Léonide Massine left the former company to join), toured the United States and Canada extensively for the next decade and a half. In "Imported Sophistication: The Ballets Russes Tours and Toronto's Quest for Cultural Significance," Sarah Gutsche-Miller and Carolyne Sumner describe the extent to which "second-generation" tours significantly broadened public interest and engagement with both ballet and musical performance in Toronto, invigorating that city's performing arts and entertainment scenes at precisely the moment the city sought to establish itself as a cosmopolitan center. Indeed, the performances of both the Denham and de Basil companies not only inspired a new generation of Torontonian dancers, musicians, and choreographers but inculcated audiences large and enthusiastic enough to sustain a number of new, homegrown Canadian ballet companies and other arts organizations.

What happens, we ask, when we look beyond privileged locations and populations and think about critics and audiences in cities and towns across the nation, including those who sat in the "cheap seats" or perhaps even those who just read about the company in the newspaper or women's magazines because they could not afford tickets or did not live close enough to a performance venue to attend? What happens, moreover, when we look beyond the company's own performances, audiences, and reception and acknowledge other venues in which their music and choreography were reprised? What happens when we seek out less prestigious performances inspired by the company's works? How did the Ballets Russes—its aesthetics, mythology, and performers—manifest and resonate throughout North American art and culture in 1916 and 1917, throughout the 1920s, and well into the mid-twentieth-century?

All this, of course, is not to argue that the tours were unqualified successes. There were certainly financial losses, controversy, empty seats, and logistical snafus across the country. However, the aura of utter disappointment and disapproval that are so often attributed to North American audiences and critics does not cast quite such a long shadow in the particular local contexts discussed in these articles. Portrayals of these tours as failures also overlook the company's influence on the musical and choreographic aesthetics, the visual and artistic sensibilities, the popular entertainment scenes, and the broader cultural milieus of cities and towns throughout North America, as well as their reach into future generations of performers, patrons, audiences, and makers. In these cities and towns, the Ballets Russes was received—and then repurposed—with nuance, its flaws, meanings, and inspirations weighed and evaluated. As Ernest Hopkins wrote from San Francisco, under the headline "The Greatest Show on Earth," "Other ballet productions have surpassed this, in one aspect or another. Others have had truer tragic art, or a finer quality of classic humor, or a purer and higher mastery of the dance. But none

has remotely approached this in lurid glory of stage mounting; none has had a more spirited ensemble or richer costumes or more gorgeous scenery or more miraculous lights."[26]

NOTES

Many of the ideas in this collection of essays originated in presentations and conversations at a study day on the Ballets Russes in the United States and Canada hosted by Sarah Gutsche-Miller at the University of Toronto, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

1. Metropolitan Opera Company, *Preliminary Prospectus*, 1916. Les Ballets Russes (Diaghilev)—American Tours (clippings) 1915–17. New York Public Library of the Performing Arts—Dance Division.

2. Grenville Vernon, "Russian Ballet a Dream World," *New York Tribune*, January 18, 1916. As the *New York Times* reported, the company's "effects are obtained now by dancing, now by the imaginative effects in the scenery and stage business, now by flashing or bewildering color combinations in the costuming, now by the music. The interrelation of all these is active, and its product is an artistic whole, quite different from anything our public has previously known." "De Diaghileff's Ballet Impressive," *New York Times*, January 18, 1916, 12.

3. Joan Ross Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes by Artists and Intellectuals in Paris and London, 1909–1914," PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1984, 125.

4. Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," 140.

5. Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," 179.

6. Michel Fokine, *Fokine: Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, ed. Anatole Chujoy (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1961), 123–24.

7. Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," 64, 67.

8. Stephanie Jordan, *Moving Music: Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet* (London: Dance Books, 2000), 16.

9. As Acocella has argued, this interest in synthesis is symptomatic of the influence of late nineteenth-century symbolism on Ballets Russes collaborators. Other elements of this symbolist aesthetic include integration of the exotic, the legendary, the artificial, and the dream world into their ballets. This connection to symbolism is important to recognize, as it contrasts sharply with the commonly held assumption that the aesthetics and works of the Ballets Russes were unprecedented and entirely revolutionary. Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," 23–86.

10. Acocella, "The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes," 22.

11. Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 294.

12. Suzanne Levy Carbonneau, "The Russians Are Coming: Russian Dancers in the United States, 1910–1933," PhD diss., New York University, 1990, 82.

13. "Musical: Crowning Art Event," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1916, 2.

14. Grace Kingsley, "Rialto: Russe Dancers Coming," *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1916, III4.

15. Garafola discusses in detail the extent to which the American tour turned the company into a market enterprise that, in the months prior to the company's departure for the United States, "launched the troupe along a path remote from the communitarian spirit of Diaghilev's creative studio." See Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 202.

16. Lynn Garafola, "The Ballets Russes in America," in *The Art of Enchantment: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes 1909–1929*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1988), 125

17. Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 205. Garafola goes on to quote a review of a New York performance of *Schéhérazade*, which calls it "but an interpretation, in a minor and reduced key of the amazing and bewildering orgy which we saw in Paris . . . a poor performance and, at times, far from enjoyable." Baron de Meyer (photographer), "The Ballets Russe—Then and Now," *Vanity Fair*, January 1917, 120.

18. Walter Anthony, "Ballet Russe Delights Both Eyes and Ears," [San Francisco], no date. Les Ballets Russes (Diaghilev), box 1, folder 1915–1919, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Also see Hanna Järvinen, "Ballets Russes and Blackface," *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 3 (December 2020): 76–96.

19. Hanna Järvinen, "Failed Impressions: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in America, 1916," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 84.

20. Järvinen, "Failed Impressions," 83.

21. Järvinen, "Failed Impressions," 84.

22. An exception to which the essays in this volume are indebted is Nesta Macdonald's book *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911–1929* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975), which quotes numerous reviews and other reporting from various cities along the tour route. Particularly notable in Macdonald's book is her recasting of the US reception of *Till Eulenspiegel* as largely positive, which counters other accounts and memoirs.

23. "Dancers Are Coming," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1916, III20; "Diaghileff Ballet," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1916, IIIA22.

24. Anthony, "Ballet Russe Delights Both Eyes and Ears."

25. "Russian Ballet for New Year's Week," *Pacific Coast Musical Review*, December 9, 1916), 8.

26. Ernest J. Hopkins, "Ballet Russe Dazzles and Glows: 'Greatest Show on Earth' at Valencia," *The San Francisco Bulletin*, January 3, 1917. In Les Ballets Russes (Diaghilev) clippings, box 2, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.