

Dance History Facts

The Ballets Russes

Had The Ballets Russes not existed the history of twentieth century ballet would have been very different.

A short but glamorous life was lived by The Ballets Russes (French for Russian Ballet). This Russian entourage that never performed in Russia itself, embraced a vast theatrical enterprise, delighting and titillating as it introduced the 'new ballet' to the world. A remarkable company of private enterprise who had an emphasis on extensive collaborations and performed opera and ballet alike to keep financially afloat, exploded onto the Parisian and indeed the world stage, touring three continents and establishing a cachet unique in Paris in a mere twenty years. From 1909 until 1929 upon the death of its infamous director extraordinaire, Serge Pavlovich de Diaghilev, The Ballets Russes revived excitement for ballet goers, proposing ballets markedly different to those being performed in Russia under Petipa.

Under the direction of Diaghilev, himself a non dancer, The Ballets Russes embraced choreographers such as Fokine, Nijinsky, Bronislava, Nijinska and George Balanchine. It took into its fold artists of such regard as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Andre Derain as well as composers Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Serge Prokofiev and scenic designers such as Georges Braque and poet – designer Jean Cocteau. Anna Pavlova, Vaclav Nijinsky and Tamar Karsavina remain among the most infamous ballerinas in ballet's history. Born as a reaction to the artistic revolution in its homeland in 1905, The Ballet Russes surged the aesthetic of ballet forward as "Paris saw something especially created for her, something that could have existed nowhere else".

Diaghilev was originally sent to study law in St Petersburg but soon turned his attention toward composing and later to visual arts, collecting and critical writing. He is most famed for the establishment in St Petersburg of Mir iskusstva (The World of Art) in 1898 – a journal that came to stand at the centre of a push for artistic change on almost every front. This publication saw Diaghilev working with many artists who would later collaborate in Ballets Russes productions. The journal fell into demise in 1904 and the revolution of 1905 in Russia so dashed any hopes for a reform of the country's artistic bureaucracy that Diaghilev began to look abroad. His clever exportation of Russian art and music from 1906 to 1908 saw the beginning of a transition to a Parisian life.

For the duration of its life, The Ballets Russes choreographers aimed to cover every subject matter, artistic style, scene design, music composition, choreographic style and even the dancer's appearance, with "all feeling the imprint of the quest for new forms". This experiment with 'new dance' was begun by Mikhail Fokine. Fokine studied at the Imperial Ballet School and entered the famous Maryinsky Theatre. He quickly began to develop a method of reform in reaction to the stagnant and 'unreal' nature of ballet of the time.

Fokine did away with ranks in ballet companies, embraced the importance of the individual's contribution, searched for a new and dramatic full bodied expression and a type of realism in the portrayal of narratives. Art and politics emerging from a Russian background became entwined as he created 'democratic' ballets, and dealt with topics such as entrapment and struggle, fairy tales of tyranny and punishment and freedom versus authority. Often at the heart of his ballets are heroes that confront ideas concerned with freedom and the powerlessness and temporality of the human condition. 'Petrouchka', possibly Fokine's most famous ballet, tells the story of a clown whose human soul cannot escape his puppet body. It is a story of the "tragedy of his unfreedom". In his time with The Ballet Russes Fokine created countless ballets; 'Le Pavillio d'Armide', 'Les Sylphides', 'Cleopatre', 'Le Carnival', 'The Firebird', 'Le Spectre de la Rose' and 'The Dying Swan' among others. His contribution was humane, intelligent, and forward thinking, exciting audiences and laying fertile ground for those who would follow. Fokine broke with Diaghilev in 1914 and returned to Russia, he then moved to New York City where he died in 1942.

In its twenty years The Ballets Russes "seemed engaged in an ongoing experiment, the result of which was to extend the expressive possibilities of ballet". An institution rose and fell but left in its path audiences eager for more, touring ensembles, dancers and choreographers scattered across the globe who would continue to build on the ground laid by this historically vital, energized and brilliantly conceived company.