



Ballets Russes (1909-1962)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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A scene from a performance of the Ballet Russes (ca 1928).

Although "Ballets russes" might sound like a generic term, meaning simply Russian ballets, it actually refers to the ballet company that is the hallmark of twentieth-century theatrical dance. However, the *Ballet Russes* not only represents a crucial turning point in dance history, but it is a milestone in gay history as well.

The brainchild of impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872-1929), a gay Russian nobleman who fell in love with the nineteen-year-old Vaslav Nijinsky, a rising star in the Imperial Russian Ballet, the *Ballets Russes* might be seen as one of the earliest gay-identified multinational enterprises.

Although the first *Ballets Russes* company was not officially organized until 1911, it dates from 1909, when Diaghilev assembled a group of dancers from the Imperial theaters and charged a brilliant young choreographer, Michel Fokine, to create a repertoire to spotlight Nijinsky's great talent.

Under the patronage of Tsar Nicholas II, Diaghilev brought his *Ballets Russes* to Paris in May 1909. Its success was immediate and sensational. The brilliant artistry of the dancers, including Tamara Karsavina as well as Nijinsky, combined with erotic choreography, startlingly modern music, and strikingly original scene designs, altered the course of dance history, making the *Ballets Russes* the vanguard of distinctly twentieth-century art.

For the next twenty years, Diaghilev never failed to discover fresh genius, featuring the work of then uncelebrated composers and artists such as Igor Stravinsky, Jean Cocteau, and Pablo Picasso. His company specialized in ballets of "total theater" in which all aspects of the productions were important, although the *Ballets Russes* was especially noted for its superb male dancers.

After he fired Nijinsky in 1913 (when the dancer married a Hungarian admirer, Romola Pulszky), Diaghilev took as his lover the eighteen-year-old Léonide Massine, who was to serve as the company's principal dancer and choreographer for the next seven years. In 1924 Diaghilev met the last of his protégés and lovers, seventeen-year-old Serge Lifar, who became the company's *premier danseur* and later became director of the Paris Opera Ballet.

After the Russian Revolution, the *Ballets Russes*, which had never performed in Russia, was permanently cut off from its homeland. Diaghilev featured many Russian émigré dancers, but turned increasingly to French composers and painters as collaborators for his choreographers.

In the *Ballets Russes* gay men, whatever their nationality, were highly visible and their influence extended outward from ballet into related art forms such as cinema, painting, music, and fashion.

At Diaghilev's untimely death in 1929, the original *Ballets Russes*, then based in Monte Carlo, dissolved. But in 1931 many of his dancers and choreographers were reunited in a company formed by Colonel Wassily de Basil, a former officer in the Russian army. The new company incorporated Diaghilev's repertoire, but also

developed new stars--notably the celebrated "baby ballerinas," Irina Baronova, Tamara Toumanova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska--and new ballets.

Among the new works commissioned by de Basil's *Ballets Russes* was David Lichine's *Cain and Abel* (1946), perhaps the first overtly homoerotic ballet in history. The work features the two title dancers nearly nude in a sensual *pas de deux*.

Colonel de Basil's *Ballets Russes* toured extensively in South America and Australia and survived the terrible vicissitudes of World War II, but disbanded in 1952 after the Colonel's death.

In 1937, an artistic schism occurred within de Basil's company and dissenters, led by Léonide Massine, formed a rival company in Monaco. Financed with American money and directed by Serge Denham, a Russian banker, the new company was called the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*. Massine strove to continue the great tradition of the original *Ballets Russes*.

With the outbreak of World War II, the new company relocated to the United States where, by virtue of its transcontinental annual tours, it became the national ballet company of America. For more than twenty years, until its demise in 1962, it visited as many as 100 towns and cities in a season, astonishing audiences with its glamour and awakening in many isolated gay men the dazzling reality of a gay-friendly artistic milieu.

Some of these men first exposed to dance in this way searched out ballet studios and eventually had dance careers of their own.

Among the most important legacies of the *Ballets Russes* is its function as a nursery to other companies. Many dancers and others associated with the various *Ballets Russes* companies opened schools throughout the world. They produced dancers trained in the great tradition, as well as an audience prepared to support civic ballet companies.

Nearly all of the most prestigious international ballet companies descend directly or indirectly from the *Ballets Russes*. And without the *Ballets Russes*, we would not have their saucy offspring, *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*, the all-male American troupe triumphantly touring the world, *en pointe* and *en travesti*.

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About the Author

Douglas Blair Turnbaugh is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev

medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.