



## Diaghilev, Sergei (1872-1929)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The Russian nobleman Sergei (or Serge) Pavlovitch Diaghilev revolutionized music, the visual arts, theater, and dance, and he set the course of the arts for the twentieth century. He discovered talent and nurtured it to fulfillment in breathtaking productions of art exhibitions, concerts, operas, and, especially, ballets.

Diaghilev brought together the talents of his discoveries--artists such as Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Michel Fokine, Léonide Massine, and George Balanchine, to name only a few--to assemble an unsurpassed "total theater."

The ultimate vehicle for his protean genius was the Ballets Russes, the company he created and first presented in Paris in 1909. Although especially noted for superb male dancers, Ballets Russes featured startlingly modern music, innovative choreography, erotic scenarios, and strikingly original scene designs.

Diaghilev's genius and his extraordinary knowledge of all the arts, from painting to music, led him to discover and inspire genius in others and to facilitate the collaboration of his discoveries. Perhaps most important of all, he had an appreciation of the new and distinctly modern and was thus able to help shape a new art for a new century.

Unabashedly homosexual, Diaghilev was a passionate man in all his endeavors. "It is absolutely necessary for me to make love three times a day," he told his friend the composer Lord Berners. Although his homosexuality was frequently noticed unfavorably by officials and rivals, he made no apologies.

Homophobic critics had their revenge after his death in biographies that, while praising him as a creative genius, stressed this "deep flaw" in his character, without recognizing that his homosexuality may have been integral to his creativity.

Most malicious and dishonest of all was a biography of Nijinsky by his wife Romola. From 1909 until 1913, Diaghilev and the dancer had been the most famous gay couple in Europe; although their union could produce no children, it gave birth to masterpieces.

Estranged from Diaghilev after his marriage, Nijinsky became depressed and delusional and was committed to a mental hospital by his wife. To vindicate herself, Romola Nijinsky portrayed Diaghilev as a homosexual Svengali whose unwanted sexual advances drove Nijinsky insane and herself as a virtuous wife caring for his victim. This scenario titillated a fascinated public and both fed on and contributed to the pervasive prejudices against homosexuals and homosexuality at the time, but it was far from the truth.

Diaghilev's love affairs have sometimes been characterized as exploitative, but a more accurate account would stress the element of pedagogic love that infused them. He was attracted to a series of beautiful



**Top:** A portrait of Sergei Diaghilev by Valentin Aleksandrovich Serov (1909).

**Above:** A photograph of Diaghilev.

young men in whom he saw qualities of genius and with whom he could merge in creative collaboration.

At the age of eighteen, he fell in love with his cousin Dmitri (Dima) Filosofov, also eighteen, with whom he published an influential art journal, *Mir Iskusstva (The World of Art)*. The relationship lasted fifteen years, when Filosofov left Diaghilev for another man.

Soon after this break, Diaghilev saw the dazzling young Nijinsky dance. He created the Ballets Russes as a showcase for his new lover, and in so doing he brought to fruition both his and Nijinsky's genius. Their affair lasted from 1909 until Nijinsky married in 1913.

Diaghilev's next discovery was an unknown young actor, Léonide Massine, whom he developed into a great dancer and one of the seminal choreographers of the twentieth century. They were together until 1920, when Massine married.

Diaghilev successively fell in love with Boris Kochno, a precocious young poet who eventually became associate director of Ballets Russes; Anton Dolin, a vivacious British dancer; Serge Lifar, a young Russian who traveled to Paris in 1924 determined to seduce Diaghilev and who became the *premier danseur* of Ballets Russes and, later, the director of the Paris Opera Ballet; and Igor Markevitch, a musical prodigy.

Although known for his possessiveness and controlling nature, Diaghilev inspired love and admiration in his partners, as their autobiographies attest. Moreover, Diaghilev's sexual relationships were integrally related to his artistic achievements. As Markevitch observed, "I would say that the greatest works created by the Ballets Russes were a direct result of love affairs."

With Lifar and Kochno--along with his women friends Misia Sert, Coco Chanel, and Baroness Catherine d'Erlanger--at his bedside, Sergei Diaghilev, "the Tsar of the Arts," died of complications from diabetes in Venice in 1929.

## **Bibliography**

Buckle, Richard. *Diaghilev*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979.

Garafola, Lynn. *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Grigoriev, S. L. *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909-1929*. London: Constable, 1953.

Lifar, Serge. *Diaghilev: His Life, His Work, His Legend. An Intimate Biography*. London: Putnam, 1940.

## **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.