



A TASTE FOR THE EXOTIC

Like Madonna a century later, the Ballets Russes' Sergei Diaghilev was always one step ahead of the zeitgeist, writes Valerie Lawson, marketing an imagined idea of Russia for Parisian audiences hungry for the exotic.

"I need a *ballet* and a *Russian* one", wrote Serge Diaghilev. "The first Russian ballet. Since there is no such thing. There is Russian opera, Russian symphony, Russian song, Russian dance, Russian rhythm – but no Russian ballet".

Writing to Anatoly Lyadov, Diaghilev assured the composer that the definitive Russian ballet scenario was ready, having been "dreamed up" by a remarkable assembly of collaborators, including the choreographer Mikhail Fokine.

Their creation – *The Firebird* – was conceived by Diaghilev's circle, men who understood the marketing possibilities of exporting to Paris an exotic work sprinkled with the essence of old Russia. The 'essence', because *The Firebird* represented an illusion of mother Russia, offering a kaleidoscopic landscape of colours, motifs, symbols and myths that looked back with nostalgia to a folkloric past. Over time *The Firebird* – and Diaghilev's other Slavic and oriental ballets, such as *Petrouchka* and *Schéhérazade* – developed a patina of ethnic realism. They seemed to be deeply rooted in mythology and history, yet the ballets were as much an invented concept as the Babushka toy, the Russian doll within a doll, that was created in 1891 and shown at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900.

The doll, which came to be seen as an ancient Russian artefact, represents more than the sum of its nesting parts. It is a symbol of the kind of craft produced at the Russian artists' colonies Abramtsevo and Talashkino late in the 19th century. The craftsmen who worked there looked back affectionately at medieval Russian art and naïve peasant art, much like the artists who produced beautifully crafted goods during the arts and crafts movement of England in the second half of the 19th century. Diaghilev's *World of Art* magazine was subsidised by Savva Mamantov, the railway magnate who owned Abramtsevo and by Princess Maria Tenisheva, who owned Talashkino. The output of the Russian art colonies influenced Diaghilev in the early years when he was showing art works in Paris and editing *The World of Art* magazine. And that influence continued in the early repertoire of his Ballets Russes.

Léonide Massine was once asked whether Diaghilev followed fashion or created it. He replied that Diaghilev was "extremely flexible, and sensible to any evolution in the art world ... he was always following the ideas of the day as long as they were the valuable ones". Much like Madonna a century later, the impresario could read the zeitgeist. Highly intelligent, he adapted with chameleon-like speed and surrounded

himself with artistic heavyweights. And, in true Madonna-like fashion, he effortlessly appropriated other cultures for his own ends.

To a Western audience of 1909, the ballets he presented represented "exotic otherness", in the words of Orlando Figes, author of *Natasha's Dance*, a cultural history of Russia. At the Ballets Russes' first season in Paris in 1909, audiences lapped up the exoticism of *Cleopatra* and the Polovtsian songs and dances from *Prince Igor*. Diaghilev's collaborator, artist Alexandre Benois, recalled how "the French loved our 'primitive wildness'".

And so more exoticism, more sensuality, was needed to feed the fin de siècle Western appetite. "Diaghilev could see that there was money to be made from the export of more Russian ballets in this vein", wrote Figes. "Always keen to spot a new market opportunity, the impresario was impressed by the growing popularity of the neo-nationalists' folk-like art. And so it was, as he wrote to tell Lyadov, that they cooked up the libretto of *The Firebird*. Benois called the ballet 'a fairy tale for grown-ups'".

Its aim was to create what Benois called a "mysterium of Russia" for "export to the West". "The real export", Figes noted, "was the myth

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of peasant innocence and youthful energy. Each ingredient of the ballet was a stylised abstraction of folklore ... The scenario was a patchwork compilation of two entirely separate peasant tales ... the production for the Paris season was a self-conscious package of exotic Russian props – from Golovine’s colourful peasant costumes to those weird mythic beasts”.

Binding together this exotic fabric was one extraordinary thread, the music of the man who ultimately composed *The Firebird*, Igor Stravinsky, whose brilliant score made extensive use of Russian folk music, especially peasant wedding songs.

In the recent history of classical music, *The Rest is Noise*, author Alex Ross described *The Firebird* as “a magical concoction: Russian musical sorcery, overlaid with French effects. Lit up by the X-factor of Stravinsky’s talent”. The composer went on to create another huge success with *Petrouchka* in 1911. He used the sounds of Russian life “to overturn the entire musical establishment with its European rules of beauty and technique”, wrote Figs.

“Here was another Russian revolution – a musical uprising by the low life of St Petersburg. Everything about the ballet was conceived in ethnographic terms. Benois’ scenario conjured up in detail the vanished fairground world of the Shrovetide carnival of his beloved childhood in St Petersburg. Fokine’s mechanistic choreography echoed the jerky ostinato rhythms Stravinsky heard in vendors cries and chants, organ grinder tunes, accordion melodies, factory songs, coarse peasant speech and the syncopated music of village bands”.

In the five years after the first Paris season, the Ballets Russes presented a host of ballets based on Russian or oriental myths and fairytales, including *Schéhérazade* and *Les Orientales* in 1910; *Sadko* in 1911, *Thamar and Le Dieu Bleu* in 1912, *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913 and *Le Coq d’Or* in 1914. In 1916, Diaghilev was asked where the Ballets Russes had its intellectual origins. “In the Russian peasantry”, he replied. “In objects of utility ... in the paintings on sleighs, in the design and colours of peasant dresses or the carving around a window frame we found our motifs and on this foundation we built”.

Diaghilev’s enterprise arrived in Paris during the belle époque, a time when audiences

were yearning for the exotic, the new, the revolutionary. Those Parisian audiences – educated, sophisticated and cultivated – included the diplomatic corps, the aristocracy, rich American expatriates, and even richer Jewish bankers who financially backed the Ballets Russes. For its part, the Ballets Russes enhanced the bohemian mood of Paris, its ripple-like influence reaching out into wider world. The designer Paul Poiret created evening dresses, kimono coats and fans, all inspired by Bakst’s designs for *Schéhérazade*, while Cartier designed *Schéhérazade*-like jewellery incorporating emeralds and sapphires, and perfumiers created scents called Nirvana, Kismet, Maharajah and Shalimar. The ballerina Tamara Karsavina recalled how the ladies in the Ballets Russes’ audience appeared in turbans and interior decorators recommended what they called “Bakst Blue”.

Long after the death of Diaghilev in 1929, the vogue for ‘Russian ballet’ lingered on, with the words ‘Russia’ and ‘ballet’ intertwined as if one did not exist without the other. Western dancers recruited into the Ballets Russes took Russian names, as did their successors who joined the ballet companies that followed in its wake. When Russian dancers from the Ballets Russes troupe of 1910 were lured to the United States and to England, Diaghilev recruited from the West. By 1918 the Ballets Russes was an international troupe of 39 dancers, with fewer than half born in Russia. Twelve dancers were from Poland while others were Italian, Spanish, English and Belgian. When the English dancer Algernon Harcourt Essex joined Anna Pavlova’s touring company, the Russian ballerina insisted he change his name to H Algeranoff.

The name-change tradition continued with the Ballets Russes’ offshoot companies established in Monte Carlo in the 1930s. The dancers all took Russian names with Australian dancer Valrene Tweedie, for example, becoming Irina Lavrova and Madeleine Parker transformed into Mira Dimina. In the first three decades of the 20th century, ballet troupes assembled in London and, destined for long Australasian tours, were given the names the Imperial Russian Ballet, the Dandre Levitoff Russian Ballet, the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, the Covent Garden Russian Ballet and the Original Ballet Russe.

Diaghilev, the man who began the faux Russian ballet craze, never returned to Russia after the success of his company in the early 20th

century. He cut his ties with the Russian Imperial Theatres and his company became a purely commercial enterprise. One of his biographers Arnold Haskell believed that after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, “to go to Russia would be easy [for Diaghilev], to come back impossible”. Diaghilev feared a loss of creative freedom and “he did not believe he could reconcile his art with both privation and political stress”.

Yet, two years before he died, the impresario yearned for his motherland. He planned to return briefly to Russia in the 1920s, hoping to keep up with Soviet artistic developments. In 1927, from his base in Monte Carlo, he asked Prokofiev for news, after the composer had spent three months in Russia. Choreographer Léonide Massine suggested that Diaghilev “flirted with communist ideas”, resulting in a machine-age Soviet ballet *Le Par d’Acier*, composed by Prokofiev and designed by the Soviet artist Georgi Yakoulov. It is fascinating to speculate whether Diaghilev could have reinvented himself once more, had he lived into the 1930s and beyond.

Instead, the marketing wizard and master of reinvention died in Venice in 1929. He was buried on the funeral island of St Michele, as was Stravinsky. The remains of the Russians lie close together, forever expatriates, yet forever representing the genius of Russian cultural life.

Valerie Lawson is an author and dance historian

Previous page from left:
 Costume sketch of Russian theatre performer by Léon Bakst 1911
 Dimitri Rostoff as the Shah in *Schéhérazade*. 1938/39 Melbourne · Photography Spencer Shier
 Costume sketch for *The Firebird* by Léon Bakst 1910
 Lubov Tchernicheva in *Thamar*, Ballets Russes, 1930s nla.ms-ms9803-1-113

Above from left:
 Portrait of Serge Lifar in *The Firebird*, Original Ballet Russe Australian tour · Photography Max Dupain nla.pic-an12114755-
 Madonna poses in a sari backstage at the 1998 VH1 Vogue Fashion Awards in New York City (Photo by Frank Micelotta/Getty Images)
 Portrait of Tamara Grigovieva as a princess in *The Firebird*, Ballets Russes, 1930s.nla.ms-ms8495-23-1-s50

THE BALLETS RUSSES CENTENARY PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

2009 is a year to remember in many ways. Not only does it mark the centenary of the first performance in Paris of Sergei Diaghilev’s inaugural Ballets Russes, but it is also the 70th anniversary of the final tour to Australia by the ultimate successor to his company, led by the redoubtable Wassily de Basil. How fitting, then, that 2009 also brings the remarkable Ballets Russes project to a close. To celebrate these events, The Australian Ballet’s entire 2009 season is dedicated to channeling the creative energy of the Diaghilev and de Basil companies. The season sees the restaging and recreation of Ballets Russes repertoire, and the presentation of new and old works which are in various ways linked to the legacy of the Ballets Russes. The 2009 celebrations are capped off by a series of Ballets Russes exhibitions mounted by some of Australia’s major national cultural institutions.

MELBOURNE
 The Australian Ballet’s education season includes a range of Ballets Russes’ related programmes this year.

Informative talks ‘Saturdays at five’ series:
 Clara’s Story (*Nutcracker*) and Artistic Directions (*Concord*) hosted by Education Manager Colin Peasley during Melbourne and Sydney seasons. Musical Masterpieces, presented by Music Director Nicolette Fraillon and Principal Pianist Stuart Macklin, will take an in-depth look at Stravinsky’s *Firebird* and *Petrouchka*. To be presented in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

Introduction to the Ballet
 The dancers in practice and performance, hosted by Colin Peasley in Melbourne and Sydney. The event will highlight *Nutcracker* and its Ballets Russes connections.

Q&A sessions given by Artistic Director David McAllister, Music Director Nicolette Fraillon and leading dancers at the conclusion of selected Ballets Russes related performances in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.
Further details & bookings australianballet.com.au/education 03 9669 2794

Creative Australia & the Ballets Russes Gallery 1, the Arts Centre
6 June to 20 September
 This exhibition celebrates the profound cultural effect of the Ballets Russes tours upon modern Australian visual, dance and design arts from the 1930s to the present.

PUBLIC EVENTS*
JUNE
Steps of a Russian dancer
 Discover the story behind Graeme Murphy’s *Nutcracker* and the exotic origins of Australia’s vibrant dance culture as we re-trace Clara’s steps from pre-revolutionary Russia to Australia and the Borovansky Ballet in the 1940s.

Graeme Murphy and the Ballets Russes
 Follow Graeme Murphy’s unique and ongoing response to the Ballets Russes as we re-visit some of his groundbreaking works and examine the creative process behind his most recent commission for The Australian Ballet, *Firebird*.

JULY
Spotlight talk: the Ballets Russes behind the lens
 This lunchtime lecture presents the work of Australians who captured the spirit and excitement of the Ballets Russes tours through action and studio photography.

Astonish me! Creative Australia responds
 Enjoy a tour of the exhibition to survey some of the profound creative influences that the Ballets Russes tours had upon Australian modernist artists and designers.

AUGUST
A cultural revolution
 Artistic Director David McAllister and Music Director Nicolette Fraillon discuss the four-year project *Ballets Russes in Australia: Our Cultural Revolution* in relation to the Arts Centre’s exhibition.

Inspired by the past and present
 Hear from contemporary visual artists who have created new works of art in response to The Australian Ballet’s 2009 Ballets Russes programme.

SEPTEMBER
Modernity comes alive in music
 Participate in an insightful discussion on the impact of great Ballets Russes scores upon Australian composers in the early 20th century through to composing for ballet with today’s technology.

*Event dates unavailable at time of printing.

Further details 03 9281 8000 theartscentre.com.au

CANBERRA
Capturing the Ballets Russes
National Library of Australia
9 April to 26 September
 Drawing on the Library’s comprehensive Ballets Russes collections, this exhibition reveals the artists who created the Ballets Russes and its experimental productions, the dancers who captivated Australian audiences, and Australian artists they inspired.

Photographs, paintings and drawings describe the dancers’ working days and nights. Personal letters and snapshots provide insights to their feelings about dancing in a new country. Rare business cables, souvenir programmes, magazines and books reveal how the print media captured the evanescent art of dance at a time when Australia was ripe and hungry for new experiences.

The exhibition includes a centenary tribute to the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose inaugural Ballets Russes (1909-1929) revolutionised ballet. It also celebrates those Ballets Russes artists who settled in Australia and established our earliest professional ballet companies.
Further details 02 6262 1271 nla.gov.au/events

The Ballets Russes 1909-1939
National Gallery of Australia
11 December 2009 to 28 March 2010
 This celebratory exhibition will trace the Ballets Russes story through the company’s designers, displaying the costumes and some original designs for its major productions. Evoking the exoticism and drama of the Ballets Russes’ performances the exhibition will show aspects of their influence on early 20th century design.

The National Gallery of Australia holds one of the world’s most extensive collections of costumes from the Ballets Russes companies. The Gallery is undertaking a major conservation project where more than 100 of these costumes are being prepared for the exhibition. Many will be revealed to the public for the first time since they were last worn.

A catalogue and a dedicated website will support the exhibition. The public programme aims to bring the Ballets Russes to life through film, performances and events focusing on dance and design.
Further details 02 6240 6411 nga.gov.au

All scheduled public programmes correct at time of printing