

An East/West *Pas De Deux*: The *Ballets Russes* and the  
Orient in the Modern Western Imagination  
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*OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;*

The opening couplet of Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West," written in 1897, is one of those well-worn tautologies and all too obviously fallacious truths that seem to simply confirm his position as the most egregious of Victorian Orientalists. These verses appear, at first glance, to assert that the Orient and the Occident are not only essential spaces but eternal antinomies. In that sense, of course, Kipling's words can be seen as prefiguring much of the recent rhetoric about East and West ('Clash of Civilizations,' 'War on Terror,' 'Islamofascism,' 'Islamism,' etc.) that has been repeated *ad nauseam* and, as such, has achieved a sort of naturalized, self-evident status in spite of its obvious vacuity. "Kipling," as George Orwell writes, "is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting" (Orwell). But as Orwell also observes in the same essay, Kipling is a paradoxical writer, and not simply because he is "a good bad writer," who coined such memorable phrases as "the White man's burden,"

"somewhere East of Suez," and "who knows England who only England knows" (Orwell).

Upon closer inspection - in fact in the very next couplet: "But there is neither East nor West, nor Breed nor Birth / When two strong men stand face to face tho' they come from the ends of the earth" - the reader realizes that Kipling is making precisely the opposite point from the one the opening lines had led one to expect. The ballad recounts a story set in the Khyber Pass near the Afghan border - in what the contemporary American media glibly refer to as the "tribal region" of Pakistan - about a standoff between a Western soldier and his Eastern adversary. The tale ends when the Easterner, who has stolen the soldier's father's horse, offers to send his own son to guard the soldier as he returns the horse to its rightful owner. As such, Kipling's ballad is a very good bad poem about how human solidarity can transcend the most intractable borders of race, culture and geography. One hint of how overly-optimistic Kipling is even a century later, at least in the military realm, can be seen in the cover story of the November 20, 2010 *Independent* newspaper, which recounts the story of the death of the hundredth British soldier in the current Afghan war.

Today I would like to discuss the permeability of borders between East and West in another sphere, the arts, in an earlier

era – the beginning of aesthetic modernism in Europe and North America--and the attendant paradoxes and ironies of cultural transmission that, I hope, will call into question the very notion of such facile phrases as 'Western culture,' 'Western civilization,' 'the Muslim world,' 'radical Islam and the East,' much less the inherent world-views and innate antagonisms that supposedly exist between these clearly delineated spheres.

Like any aesthetic movement, especially one defined by a radical break with the past, European modernism has many beginnings. A number of art and cultural historians, for example, locate its beginning with the 1907 retrospective show at the Salon d'Auton in Paris of the work of Paul Cezanne, who died the year before. Cezanne, who asserted that "[p]ainting stands for no other end than itself... it is simply a pretext for line and colour, nothing more," laid the groundwork for Cubism and abstraction, and Picasso famously referred to him as "the father of us all" [Valaza]. I will assert, however, that it is just as, if not more, logical to locate that beginning two years later with the arrival in Paris from St. Petersburg of the *Ballets Russes* in 1909. Certainly modernism if it means anything means rupture—to "make it new" in the phrase of Ezra Pound, who writes, although somewhat ironically, in the 1913 poem "Les Millwin" about the young artists from the Slade School who

attended a 1910 production of *Cléopâtre* in London "with forearms / Crossed in great futuristic x's" —and certainly no one in Paris had seen anything before remotely like those first productions of the *Ballets Russes*. As John MacKenzie, Lynn Garafola and others have written, ballet was essentially an ossified, nearly moribund, art form, when the group's producer Serge Diaghilev, designer Leon Bakst, choreographer Mikhail Fokine and a troupe that included performers such as Ana Pavlova, Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky arrived in Paris. Not only did the subject matter—unbridled and orgiastic female desire, inverted sexuality, masturbatory delight, sado-masochism, homoeroticism and the link between eroticism and death—create shock, another indispensable element in the creation of a modernist aesthetic, the forms of the pieces produced by the *Ballets Russes* transcended the simply novel. They radically and permanently altered notions of what constitutes dance and of the relationships between dance and ballet and between performance and painting. The body, gestures, clothing and their relationship to notions of what we now refer to as gender were interrogated most particularly in the performances of Rubinstein and Nijinsky. But the group's investigation of form was not limited to movement and the body. The works themselves were radically re-imagined. For example, *Schéhérazade* (1910)—based on *The 1001 Nights*—was reduced from an

epic, never-ending narrative to a half-hour, non-narrative based on the outer frame tale, in which King Shahryar returns unexpectedly from a hunting trip to discover that his wife, Zobeida, is in the midst of an orgy with the slaves in the seraglio, and he proceeds to slaughter the slaves and then his wife. (In *1001 Nights*, Shahryar, traumatized by this infidelity, goes on to murder every woman with whom he sleeps afterwards until he meets Scheherazade, who avoids the fate of her predecessors by telling him riveting tales—many, not unsurprisingly, about infidelity, chicanery and brutality—every night, which she interrupts as dawn approaches). As many modernist writers would later do—for example, Joyce, in *Ulysses*, published in 1922, compressed the epic of the *Odyssey* into a single day in modern Dublin—Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes* transformed the languid, always delayed eroticism of *1001 Nights* into the sexual frenzy of Sheherazade. The *Ballets Russes* also radically redefined gender by repeatedly dramatizing powerful females such as Cleopatra, Tamar and Zobeida as insatiable and sadistic sexual devourers and by, for the first time in the history of ballet, foregrounding the male body as erotic object. The troupe's founder, Diaghilev, was an inveterate collector, curator and impresario, whose genius lay in a combination of showmanship and the ability to create novel and shocking aesthetic synergies. The designers, composers,

choreographers and performers of the Ballet Russes also redefined genre by creating one-of-a-kind *gesamtkunstwerks* -i.e. total works of art—such as *L'Après Midi d'un Faune* (*Afternoon of a Faun*), *Le Spectre de la Rose* (*The Specter of the Rose*), *Daphnis et Chloé* (*Daphnis and Chloe*), *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), and the troupe's lesser-known but equally innovative works with more overtly Eastern themes. These pieces incorporated innovative, sometimes disjunctive and, at times, almost atonal scores with harmonies and scales from the East by composers such as Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel and Satie that completely eschewed the hackneyed style of German symphonic music based on Wagnerian *leitmotifs*; sets designed by Leon Bakst that were saturated with ostensibly dissonant colors—such as green and blue—by Natalia Goncharov, whose designs for *L'Oiseau de Feu* (*The Firebird*) and *Le Coq D'or* (*The Golden Cockerel*) are manifestations of her belief that “the East means the creation of new forms, and extending of the problems of color” (Bowlt in Pritchard 107), and by Pablo Picasso, which transported Cubist lines onto the stage; and costumes by Bakst, Matisse and others with draping Asian lines, splotches of color and elaborate embroidery heretofore unseen on European stages. These juxtapositions of jarringly new sounds, costumes and scenic designs not only created new theatrical universes, they resonated in the realms of fashion design in the clothing of

Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel, both of whom worked with the dance troupe, and in Bakst and Poiret's influential interior designs. As Peter Wollen writes, "The huge success of *Scheherazade* was the pre-condition for Poiret's Oriental fashion... The Russian Ballet launched orientalism, Poiret popularized it, Matisse channeled it into painting and fine art." (12)

One further element that is essential to consider in assessing the breadth and complexity of the achievement of the Ballet Russes is the influence they have had and continue to have on both "high" and "popular" culture. In addition to the artists mentioned above who collaborated with them directly, Jean Cocteau worked closely with the troupe and wrote librettos for several operatic pieces. They also had close links to Juan Gris, Rodin, Marinetti, Virginia Woolf, Duncan Grant and others in the Bloomsbury Circle, and they spawned dozens of imitators on American vaudeville stages in the 1910s during the period the group toured there. They defined ballet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of Diaghilev's last choreographer, George Balanchine, and his collaborator Lincoln Kirstein, the founder of the New York City Ballet, who consciously modeled his career on Diaghilev's, and through the work of the two greatest male dancers of the second half of the twentieth-century Rudolph Nuryev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, both of whom acknowledged their

debt to Nijinsky, just as Balanchine acknowledged his to the troupe's other choreographers, Michel Fokine, Leonide Massine, and Nijinsky. The group's aesthetic migrated directly into modern American experimental dance in the figure of one of the troupe's principal dancers, Adolph Bolm, into Hollywood cinema through the figure of Theodore Kosloff who left the Ballet Russes after the first season in Paris and in the 1920s and became an "actor, dancer, choreographer, technical director and unofficial advisor" to Cecile B. DeMille (Garafola 9), and the group's costumes and designs were revived in the 1970s in the fashion designs of Yves St. Laurent. It also continues in exhibitions like the one currently on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, "Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the *Ballets Russes*," which attests to the lasting influence of the troupe's work in many spheres of art and culture.

Today, I would like to briefly focus on three aspects of the history and aesthetic of the *Ballet Russes*. First, it seems significant that so many of the group's earliest works were based on Arab and Islamic motifs. The first two productions presented in Paris, in 1909, the year before *Scheherazade* was presented, were *Cleopatra* and *Thamar*. *Cleopatra*, based on Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights*, portrays a sexually voracious monarch who indulges her passion at will and then kills her prey after



she is sexually satisfied. Nijinsky danced the role of a slave who begs for a night with Cleopatra, knowing the price for his pleasure will be death. Ida Rubinstein, a tall exceedingly slender dancer, who played the role of the Arab *femme fatale*, is carried onstage "on the shoulders of six slaves, in a sarcophagus which, when opened, revealed her swathed from head to foot like a mummy" (Wollen 19). Cocteau describes the scene as follows:

Each of the veils unwound itself in a fashion of its own; one demanded a host of subtle touches, another the deliberation required in peeling a walnut, the third the airy detachment of the petals of a rose, and the eleventh, most difficult of all, came away in one piece like the bark of the eucalyptus tree. (Cited in Wollen 19).

*Thamar*, produced two years after *Scheherazade*, and based on a narrative poem by Lermontov, dramatizes the story of a Georgian princess who lures a male passerby into her castle then "plunges a dagger into the heart of her captive lover" (Garafola 250). Not coincidentally, all three ballets link slavery or captivity, female sexuality, violence and death, motifs which recur with frequency in the troupe's oeuvre in the 1910s and

which prefigure preoccupations of post-war European aesthetics and the 1917 Russian Revolution. In spite of their lurid subject matter, their basis in literary works from the East emphasizes the fact that, beyond their obvious shock value, Diaghilev, who was notoriously high-brow and evinced virtually no interest in the burgeoning cinema industry, expected that these new forms of ballet would be taken seriously as works of art. Many of the pieces performed in the first ten years of the troupe's existence are overtly linked to the Arab and Islamic East—*Salome* (1913); *The Polovtsian Dances* (1909), based on Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, featuring a metatheatrical scene in which Uzbeki slaves entertain the captive Christian Prince Igor, who is offered his choice of dancers by his Uzbeki counterpart; *Les Orientales (The Orientals)* (1910), a revue of Eastern dances, which featured "The Saracens' Dance," "The Assyrians' Dance," and "The Oriental Dance" and the "Djinn's Dance," both choreographed and performed by Nijinsky; and *The Golden Cockerel* (1914), a "fable with sets more like Persian carpets or painted peasant furniture than backdrops for dancing" (Bowlt in Pritchard 107). Numerous other ballets, such as *Le Dieu Bleu (The Blue God)* (1912), with a libretto co-written by Jean Cocteau and based on a Hindu legend, and, of course, the ballets with Russian themes, are also set in the East. Other pieces with no overt connection to Asia or the East, such as *Le Chant de*

*Rossignol (The Song of the Nightingale)* (1925), based on a Stravinsky opera after a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, contains Tibetan-style costumes designed by Matisse, and *Parade* (1917), with music by Eric Satie and costumes, curtain and scenery by Picasso, contains a character called the Chinese Conjuror, who first introduces Cubist design into the theatre. Perhaps most importantly, other works by the *Ballets Russes* allow us to perceive the ways in which artistic creation in, what Howard Goodall calls "a collaborative hothouse of an unprecedented order" (in Pritchard 177), reconfigures facile political and ideological geographies.

For example, when one looks at Bakst's designs in the book *Bakst in Greece*, by Charles Spencer, and analyzes the profound influence that ancient Greece had on the Bakst's designs one can't help but see what a thin line separates the supposedly Western nymphs and shepherdesses in *Narcisse* and *Afternoon of the Faun* from the Eastern pilgrims and potentates in *The Blue God* and *Scheherazade*. And that insight prompts a second look at the costume and set of *Le Tricorne* (1919), based on Alarcon's novel *The Three-Cornered Hat*, which were designed by Picasso, who was, after all, born in Malaga, from which, on a clear day one can see the North African coast and which for eight centuries was part of the Islamic world. His Sevillian dancer,

with her stacked, pagoda-like headdress, suddenly resembles Bakst's design for the child's headdress in *The Blue God*, which was "inspired by details from Angkor Thom in Cambodia" (Pritchard in Pritchard 78), and his set for a Spanish town looks indistinguishable from an Arab town in the Maghreb right across the Mediterranean.

The other two aspects I would like to focus on are, first, the many profound paradoxes one encounters in the history and aesthetic of the *Ballets Russes* and, finally, several crucial aspects of the troupe's relationship to American culture. Of course the reason these paradoxes are so significant is that they very rapidly undermine the facile antinomies so often attributed to the East (femininity, passivity, dissimulation, excessive ornamentation, unbridled sexuality, etc.) and the West (masculinity, functionality, straightforwardness, clean engineering, productive repression, etc.) The most obvious paradox concerning the *Ballet Russes* as the vessel of what might be termed a neo-Orientalist aesthetic that profoundly altered Western modernist art is, of course, the fact that the company, its producer, choreographers, performers and many of its designers were Russian. Less obvious, but equally ironic is the fact that the principal designer of this visual universe that theatrically came to represent the Arab and Islamic universe in

the West was Leon Bakst, who was a Russian Jew - i.e. an outsider who was not, according to law, allowed to live in St. Petersburg without a permit. Although most of Bakst's collaborators were not Jewish, the troupe's varied oeuvre obviously forces us to reconsider whether Russia's position as simultaneously an Eastern and Western country makes it a singular hybrid or simply the most potent example of an increasingly widespread phenomenon that at a given historical moment created an environment that produced some of the modern world's most innovative artists.

Another paradox essential to understanding the group's aesthetic is the fact that not only did the principal choreographer Michel Fokine, Diaghilev and, of course, Nijinsky, transform ballet from a long narrative to a short non-narrative form, they shifted the focus from female to male, and more specifically the eroticized, androgynous male body. This radical shift appears all the more amazing when one considers that Fokine, Diaghilev and most of the members of the troupe were products of the seemingly stodgy Imperial Ballet School, which was wholly subsidized by the Czar and his court. It is, however, important to remember that St. Petersburg was the most cosmopolitan and Westernized city in Russia. In fact, Diaghilev and many of his contemporaries considered themselves Decadents

and prided themselves on owning copies of the works of Baudelaire and Huysmanns, which were banned in Russia. Not only were Diaghilev and these Russian aesthetes influenced by Western Decadents, they read 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature, some of which, like the works of Lermontov, portrayed the Caucasus and other Islamic regions of Russia, and Diaghilev curated an exhibition of over 300 paintings from throughout the Russian empire.

At least three other significant Western figures influenced the development of the *Ballets Russes*. The American modern dancer Isadora Duncan, a champion of a more "natural" style of dance that she associated with ancient Greece, in which, for example, she eschewed toe shoes in favor of bare feet and flowing clothes, performed in St. Petersburg in 1906 and profoundly influenced the choreographer Michel Fokine and other members of the *Ballets Russes*. Conversely, Peter Wollen suggests that, ironically, the use of loose-fitting harem pants in several of the productions by the *Ballets Russes* in Paris created an enormous vogue - which was actively promoted and exploited by the fashion designer Paul Poiret - that was responsible for freeing Western women from the confines of the tight-fitting corset that they had worn until the troupe's arrival.

The second significant Western figure is Claude Debussy, whose approach to musical composition, particularly his treatment of harmony, had been profoundly altered by hearing, as Goodall writes, "the complex resonances of the Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle." "By transplanting the exotic clash of sonorities of Eastern music into the Western palette, he radically challenged the established 'rules' of nineteenth century music." "One of a handful of visionary musicians..." continues Goodall, "[to] grasp the enormity of Debussy's approach... in St. Petersburg, was Igor Stravinsky" (in Pritchard 174). *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and the *Rite of Spring*, are, Goodall contends, a result of the collision of Stravinsky's classic training under the tutelage of Rimsky-Korsakov and his fascination with Debussy. It is difficult to imagine a more complex and fitting allegory of cultural transmission between East and West than the exchange between Debussy and Stravinsky, both of whom composed for the *Ballets Russes*.

The other significant Western figure was Oscar Wilde. Ida Rubinstein, who appeared in some of the earliest productions in Paris, approached Fokine in St. Petersburg in 1907, two years before the troupe's departure for Paris, about performing Wilde's *Salomé*. According to some versions of the story, the performance was planned and ultimately cancelled because there

was a rumor that when she removed the final veil in the notorious "Dance of the Seven Veils" she would appear in the nude. Like Wilde, Diaghilev, Nijinsky and many other members of the troupe, Rubinstein was gay, and she eventually became a significant figure in a circle of lesbians in Paris that included Natalie Barney and the painter Romaine Brooks. Diaghilev famously fired his lover, Nijinsky, when news arrived in Paris in 1914 that the dancer had suddenly married a Romanian aristocrat. It is hardly surprising that another border that the troupe's members transgressed was the one between the forbidden sexuality manifested on stage and similarly proscribed sexuality offstage.

In 1909, Fokine approached Diaghilev and suggested that he cast Bernstein, who was an actor, not a dancer, in the version of *Cleopatra* produced the same year in Paris. It seems apparent that Fokine simply transplanted Wilde's "Dance of the Seven Veils" into the *Cleopatra* the *Ballets Russes* presented. This example is but one of many of how designers, choreographers and dancers sought out Eastern and Western raw materials, stylized them and imported them into the ballets. For example, for his designs in *Le Chant du Rossignol*, Matisse used robes from the Tibet-China border that he had seen in the Buddhist gallery at the Musée Guimet in Paris (Pritchard in Pritchard 78); for



costumes in the *The Polovtsian Dancers*, the designer Roerich purchased Uzbeki fabrics from the market in St. Petersburg; and for his role in *Afternoon of a Faun* Nijinsky studied figures on Greek vases and the movements of a mechanical toy duck. As John Mackenzie writes, "With the *Ballets Russes* the Orientalist thesis of Edward Said seems at one level superficially confirmed and at another irretrievably disrupted" (199).

I would like to close with several observations about the *Ballets Russes* in America. In 1916, for the first time the group toured the US, where it was both reviled and revered. The Kansas City police chief, having been forewarned about the risqué subject matter of the troupe assured his citizens that he had instructed "Dogleaf," as he referred to Diaghilev, that theirs was a "strictly moral town" and he would not tolerate any "high brow immorality" (cited in Mackrell 94). The mayor of Boston "gave instructions that the Russians were permitted to bare only their toes," and when Adolph Bolm performed the Golden Slave in *Scheherazade* in New York, his body blackened with paint, one critic remarked that such a disturbing portrayal of cross-racial eroticism would be impossible in the segregated South, and the Catholic Theatre Movement called for an outright ban of the piece (94). Nonetheless, when Nijinsky re-joined the troupe and danced in *The Specter of the Rose* in New York, rose petals

rained down on him, and the *Herald* wrote that he was "probably the greatest [artist] that the present generation has seen here" (cited in Mackrel 105).

Because of Diaghilev's aversion to the cinema, there are no films of the *Ballet Russes*, but Hollywood did produce one film, *The Thief of Baghdad*, in 1924, starring Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. that, in some respects, captures the aesthetic of the group. As Garafola writes, the more natural style of Fokine's choreography coincides "with the requirements of silent screen acting" (4). And *The Thief of Baghdad*, writes Gaylyn Studlar, is a "gesamkunstwerk... driven by dance aesthetics at every level" that utilizes its "Leon Bakst-influenced... production design" to create "scenic décor as 'dance space'" (109). Fairbanks was the precursor of the Hollywood Western "he-man" embodied two decades later by John Wayne. In films such as *The Mask of Zorro*, Fairbanks had developed a persona as a virile man of action in the mould of the ardent imperialist Theodore Roosevelt, whose achievements as president included the brutal suppression of Phillipine nationalism in colonial war fueled by ferocious anti-Asian racism. It was thus ironic that Fairbanks should, as Studlar writes, emulate "the orientalized and feminized male body of the *Ballets Russes* danseur," and more specifically Nijinsky in *Scheherazade* (115).

Although in the film Fairbanks adopts the role of a cultural other -- an Arab thief -- and his "movements often have the look of postclassical ballet techniques" (117), his performance is undone because, unlike the aesthetic form from which he borrows - androgynous costumes, scenic opulence and oriental excess represented in Bakst, Nijinsky and the *Ballets Russes* - he ultimately asserts a non-virtuosic and clumsy masculine certitude, what Studlar calls "all-American stomping" (117). As Gary Wills has written, John Wayne's signature manly swagger was actually in part the result of **ballet lessons**, but of course those were always off-screen. In spite of pursuing the profoundly liberating possibilities of an aesthetic that continually redefines genre, geography and gender, Fairbanks like most Americans - and like Kipling's "two strong men" - continue to refuse to cross certain borders, perhaps because crossing them inevitably leads into territories in which we must acknowledge the extent to which "so-called" others reside in us.



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