

How did the Ballet Russes revolutionise dance?

The new digital exhibition “Concealed Histories” shows the revolutionary impact a group of dancers, composers, artists and choreographers made on ballet as a classical dance form in the 20th century. Originally conceived by impresario Sergei Diaghilev, the Ballet Russes is highly regarded as the most influential ballet company of the 20th century. The Ballet Russes was an exploration of dance and music that brought Russian folklore to European and American audiences, as well as advancing the careers of many of the dancers, painters, designers and musicians involved in the productions. Sergei Diaghilev brought together some of the greatest artists of the early 20th century to modernise and revolutionise theatre and dance with his Ballet Russes. His shows throughout the years, not only captured the waves of history but also kept causing new ones. In the visual arts, in music and in choreography, he was a vital agent in commissioning successive stages of modernism and in redefining classicism. Audiences went to the Ballet Russes to discover novelty, sensation, shock and the changing world of 1909-29.

Recognising the vitality of contemporary art, Diaghilev called upon innovative Léon Bakst, Natalia Goncharova, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Nikolai Roerich (Stamberg, S. (2020) and Giorgio de Chirico, among others, to create dynamic set designs and exquisitely decorated costumes that shared a unified aesthetic. Diaghilev’s vision was to transform traditional ballet into a composite art form that helped revolutionise ballet and make it more accessible to Western audiences. Designing sets and costumes, these artists translated the visual languages of cubism, futurism, surrealism, and other vanguard movements from the solitary studio to multi-disciplinary collaborative stage. At the same time, the mythological and exotic subjects that had dominated the Ballet Russes’ repertoire gave way to modern themes, such as beach culture, films, and sport, enraging some and enthralling others as ballet edged closer to popular culture.

When Diaghilev took his Ballet Russes to Paris in 1909, he was already a reputable figure in Russian cultural circles. The troupe consisted of the most respected dancers from the Imperial Ballet and it was this injection of new ideas by Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes that ballet became a major attraction in Europe through the innovative combinations of dance, music and stage settings. "They were the dancers so radical they nearly caused their audience to riot. When the Ballet Russes performed their first official season in Paris in 1909, their exquisite skill, subversive style and exotic stories electrified a capital and changed the face of ballet for ever" (Davies, L., 2009).

Interestingly, the Ballet Russes never actually performed in Soviet Russia as most likely the provocative nature of the performances would not have been acceptable to the Soviet regime. The dancers were also not just Russian but also from many nationalities such as Anton Dolin (English) Ninette de Valois (Irish) as well as the choreographers which were also international such as George Balanchine. (Encyclopedia Britannica. n.d).

Ballet Russes went against traditional dance forms and turned ballet into a much freer form of expression. Also, it was a total experience and brought attention to the costumes, choreography, music and stage settings. The body movements and the themes were more provocative, groundbreaking and more sexual. Fokine and Nijinsky were both revolutionary in their approach to ballet and preferred not to use restricted body movements whereas traditionally ballet moves were confined mainly to the lower part of the body. "Reacting against nineteenth-century ballet technique, Ballets Russes used a variety of unconventional movements: twisting torsos, abrupt shifts of weight, stamping feet and flexed wrists and ankles" (Bellow, J., 2013).

Modernism covered many movements such as Dadaism, Futurism, Expressionism, Constructivism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. Modernism moved away from existing thought and reinvented established forms of expression and avant-garde ideas. It was a means of finding new forms of expression and breaking away from the past. Many of the performances of the Ballet Russes took ballet on to new levels. Collaborations between the different artists made the performances extremely innovative and constantly challenging the way ballet had been performed before. At the same time, he brokered remarkable marriages between dance and the visual arts. He hired only “real” artists, who ranged from virtuos colourists of Russo-Orientalist fantasies to fauves, futurists, cubists, surrealists, and others whose art spanned a broad spectrum of international modernism. (L. Garafola / Experiment 17 (2011) 31-46 33)

Even though Ballet Russes did not perform in Russia, the Russian influence was still central. It was an amalgamation of many artists and crossing many cultures which made it a universal expression of art. Diaghilev’s legacy is long lasting and many new companies that sprang up afterwards were influenced by his

vision. Also, many of the individuals involved with the Ballet Russes started their own companies. For example, Nijinsky opened a ballet school in Los Angeles and Balanchine started the New York Ballet School and the School of American Ballet. Fokine also was the creator of the American Ballet Theatre. Therefore, the extent to which the Ballet Russes helped in the establishment of ballet as a popular art form cannot be underestimated. It was through the links of these people with Diaghilev that they were able to have a platform to develop their ideas and establish their schools in America.

The collaboration between Diaghilev, Alexandre Benoit and Leon Bakst gave ballet the recognition it has today. As a result of Diaghilev's work, the public began to see ballet in a new light. As well as Benoit and Bakst's scenery designs, Igor Stravinsky composed musical scores that became classics, and Fokine and Nijinsky provided the choreography. Fokine and Nijinsky were symbolic of the progressive style of the Ballet Russes and their contributions still inspires and endures today. (Harvard College Library., 2015). Many of Diaghilev's ballets have been reworked over the years as they were so groundbreaking at the time, such as the Rite of Spring.

"The fact that ballet today deals with the human condition rather than just classical dancing is owed directly to the Ballets Russes," contends Oakland Ballet artistic director Ronn Guidi, who sees the Diaghilev imprint on the innovations of such companies as the American Ballet Theatre and the Joffrey Ballet. "As a choreographer, I find myself asking, How would Diaghilev look at this? What would he do here?" Among the many other choreographers who feel a kinship with the Ballets Russes is Millicent Hodson, who's worked with the Joffrey on one of its centenary programs. "It is a model of collaboration that Diaghilev achieved," says Hodson. "There's this dream all artists have that somehow they will be larger than the sum of their parts." (Forbes.com. 2017)

Furthermore, the Ballet Russes was the manifestation of Modernism as it became a troupe which was universal, it brought together many different artists in collaborations and styles of art which took ballet onto new levels and into new realms. It was experimental and at times may have shocked but always was at the forefront of new forms of expression. Diaghilev, through the Ballet Russes, was an innovator and introduced exotic costumes, stage sets and provocative choreographer into ballet and can be seen as an ongoing experiment in finding new forms of expression until the present time.

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