

## The Ballet Russes and the 1918 Pandemic

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“The bees are dying and humans are not far behind.”  
— Steven Magee

On the morning of March 11th, 1918 soldiers stationed at the United States Army base in Fort Riley reported flu-like symptoms and complained of chest pain. The men were disregarded and proceeded to be deployed overseas to fight in the Great War. Unknowingly, those soldiers would be the first recorded cases of the H1N1 virus, or what it will be infamously known as the Spanish Flu. The Spanish Flu ripped through the globe with the help of the First World War during the year of 1918 and lasted until the summer of 1919. Because of constant travel and contact with others, the virus spread rapidly and caused a trail of destruction and death. Experts have found that the virus impacted one third of the world's population in 1918, an estimate of 500 million, and caused around 50 million deaths. It was also reported that more soldiers died from the virus than in combat during World War I.

“The flu virus is highly contagious: When an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks, respiratory droplets are generated and transmitted into the air, and can then be inhaled by anyone nearby. Additionally, a person who touches something with the virus on it and then touches his or her mouth, eyes or nose can become infected,” (History). But what caused the Spanish Flu to kill you? It was not the actual flu that would cause the death of its victims, but the fact that it weakened the immune system says BBC’s David Robinson, reporting that “Many flu deaths are also caused by secondary, bacterial infections that take root in the weakened body, leading to pneumonia,” (Robinson).

The name Spanish Flu was falsely given to the H1N1 virus because of Spain's constant reporting on the virus. They were one of the first countries to recognize the health concern and unfortunately had one of the highest infections in Europe. What also made it seem like the H1N1 virus was from Spain is that the country was neutral during the Great War and only reported on the spread of the virus during this anxious time. In retrospect, Spain actually thought the flu came from France and called it the French Flu in the media and most of southern Europe referred to the virus as the French Flu.

So, what does the Spanish Flu have to do with the Ballet Russes? Well, according to the United States Library of Congress, in 1917 the Ballet Russes was forced to leave Russia due to the Russian Revolution. They were struggling financially and fled to Madrid, Spain in search of opportunities to perform, and they would have a higher chance of performing in a neutral country during the Great War. As the flu spread throughout Spain they were forced to leave again in the late spring of 1918 to London. There, they did not perform on record until 1919, at London’s Alhambra Theatre; the Ballet Russes performed the *La Boutique Fantasque* (The Fantastic Toy Shop) and *Le Tricorne* (The Tricorn). But, during the 1918 pandemic, London was forced to shut down all social events, which include the theater. It was reported that, “The disease swept across Britain in three waves: mild in spring 1918; devastating in autumn 1918; and moderate in early 1919,” (Humes). It is speculated that London opened up too early during its third wave and the theater events such as the *La Boutique Fantasque* and *Le Tricorne* may have caused the disease to spread further. The

Alhambra Theatre could hold up to 1,400 people at a time and the Ballet Russes performed there twice, so there is a possibility that up to 2,800 people could have been infected.

It seemed as time has repeated itself because we are in the midst of another pandemic a hundred and two years later with a subject of the Ballet Russes in the foreground. This time, the perpetrator is COVID-19 and it caused a team of curators to disband to their home countries and work remotely on “Ballet Russes: Concealed Histories”. Much like the 1918 Pandemic, social events were put on hold and we were forced to become creative in how we display and interact with the public. The difference is that in 2020 we have the gift of the internet and have the means to create an online version of our exhibition.

### **Provocation:**

Within this essay I set out to explain the history of the pandemic of 1918, the possible participation of the Ballet Russes during the third wave of the pandemic, and touched on the 2020 similarities. After reading the essay, we would like to collect your opinions and feedback on the issue addressed here by responding to the provocations below.

→Do you prefer an online or an imperson exhibition? Why? After the 2020 pandemic will you be more interested in attending more online exhibitions?

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