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The Model of a Modern Impresario: Diaghilev’s Russian Background

Laurence Senelick

Lady Bracknell. My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

Jack. On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, Act III

Around eleven o’clock at night on April 17, 1899, the first day of Russian Orthodox Easter that year, the journalist Viktor Burenin was receiving guests in his apartment in St. Petersburg. Burenin was a prominent columnist on the influential monarchist newspaper New Times (Novoe Vremya), notorious for his unbridled attacks on political liberals and artistic innovators.1 Two gentlemen showed up at the party, both of them in top hats, unusual headgear for the season. Burenin did not know them by sight and asked them to take a seat. One of them replied, “That’s not what I’m here for,” placed his topper on Burenin’s head and smashed it down to his shoulders. The two strangers then took to their heels down the stairs, grabbing their overcoats on the way out. The assailant was twenty-nine-year-old Sergey Diaghilev; his accomplice was his cousin and sometime lover Dmitry Filosofov. This incident appears in none of the standard biographies of Diaghilev but became legendary in Russian artistic circles. Several individuals left accounts of it, though with variant details (in some retellings Diaghilev slaps Burenin’s face twice). Half a century later the anecdote was still being orally transmitted.2 What accounts for the narrative longevity of this prank? And what does it tell us about Diaghilev?


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Diaghilev’s prank was not unprovoked. Ever since its launch the previous year, his journal *The World of Art* had come under fire from Burenin. In hyperbolic invective, the columnist characterized the contents of the first issue as “insolent decadent lies of our ignorant aesthetes … nonsensical yammering of the newly self-appointed prophet of his age and his generation … a product of pride-induced insanity [from] an ego inflated to the point of megalomania as the direct result of its own worthlessness [and] internal inadequacy.” A lawyer might suggest suing for defamation of character. At the time, however, Diaghilev wrote to his backer, the millionaire entrepreneur Savva Mamontov, “Have you read Burenin yet? What great publicity!” Already he was aware of the value of negative *réclame*, anticipating that such vituperation would provoke interest in the new journal. Diaghilev reveled in insults in the press, regarding them as a mark of success. This may have been a lesson learned from Mamontov’s own example. Diaghilev’s later career certainly provides numerous instances when he would stir up a scandal or at least make no effort to avoid one and in any case turn it to his advantage.

Nor could the charge of decadence wound him personally. It was an all-purpose accusation made by conservative critics against any radical innovation in the arts. Diaghilev, in fact, was to write an essay, “Our So-called Degeneracy,” in which he championed the progressive aspect of modernist art and characterized old-fashioned realism as truly decadent. He also chose to overlook Burenin’s less than subtle reference in another article to his “ultra-swinish” relations with his cousin Filosofov. Lynn Garafola is quite wrong to say that “homosexuality was certainly in the closet during the Diaghilev period.” Not only was it widely practiced and discussed at Court and among the professional and artistic circles of St. Petersburg, but many of Diaghilev’s contemporaries, among them the poet Mikhail Kuzmin and the actor Konstantin Varlamov, were just as exhibitionistic as he in parading their predilections. Diaghilev


2 *The Model of a Modern Impresario: Diaghilev’s Russian Background*
habitually enjoyed provoking the right-minded by sporting male companions inappropriate in age and class.

Why, then, after a year of such prodding, did Diaghilev finally make a riposte? Here is the passage in Burenin’s column of April 16, 1899 that seems to have prompted the hat trick:

I don’t know whether Mr Diaghilev, publisher of The World of Art, belongs to the ranks of hobbledehoys with a penchant for outdated European and especially French fashion or to the number of charlatan dilettantes. But there is no doubt that this Johnny-come-lately is the most ridiculous of dilettantes, as well as the most impudent of modern unqualified judges of art. After all no one but Diaghilev admits to decadence with “the learned look of a connoisseur” and promotes commercial advertising in art.7

If Diaghilev had not risen to the bait when called an ignorant and vapid megalomaniac, what was there in this new diatribe that spurred him to action? Note that the tone has changed. Burenin’s earlier splutter of indignation is now a shaft of ridicule. Before, Burenin showed himself disturbed by Diaghilev’s audacity; now he looks down upon it from a great height.

The word I have translated as “hobbledehoy” in the original is “Mitrofanushka.” Mitrofanushka is the title character of Denis Fonvizin’s eighteenth-century satiric comedy The Minor, a brutish adolescent on a backwoods estate, whose name became a byword for oafish gaucherie, the product of bad upbringing and faulty education. This, along with the charges of being amateurish and mercenary, found the chinks in Diaghilev’s armor to sting him where he was most sensitive.

Reading the memoirs of Diaghilev’s early colleagues and collaborators, we are struck by the condescension with which he is treated. When he first arrived in St. Petersburg and was admitted to the inner circle of the Nevsky Pickwickians, he was seen as a “provincial,” “Dima Filosofov’s cousin,” son of a bankrupt manufacturer, untravelled, ill-read, ungroomed intellectually. Aleksandr Benois testifies to the shock at his “uncouth manners and primitive views,” a “barbarism” the country cousin took to flaunting. He was “too lazy to read a novel,” yawned at opera, seemed indifferent to the fine arts, history, or literature. When he occasionally did show an interest, he had to meet the author or composer in person.8 In this respect, Diaghilev is a forerunner of


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celebrity culture, the connoisseur as groupie, a prototype for Andy Warhol or, rather, Warhol’s admirers.

Diaghilev’s sequential and consequential immersion in the arts—first music, then painting, finally opera and ballet—can be seen as over-compensation. But by 1899, when he believed he had found his calling as editor of The World of Art and organizer of major exhibitions, he would have bridled at being called a dilettante. Diaghilev had become a clear-sighted judge of his own abilities. Four years earlier, at the age of twenty-five, he had written to his stepmother

firstly, I’m a great charlatan, albeit a brilliant one; secondly, I’m a great charmer; thirdly, a great lout; fourthly, a man with a goodly amount of logic and few principles; anyway, it looks like, if you please, that I’ve found my real aim in life—art patronage. 9

The Russian word he uses is metsenatsvo, being a Maecenas: this is patronage de haut en bas, the gracious, cultivated donor nurturing the artist with his support, both personal and financial. The Roman patron of Horace and Virgil was respected as a knowlegable arbiter. A Maecenas is not an entrepreneur or an impresario: his purpose is altruistic and selfless, the advancement of civilization. Hence Diaghilev’s umbrage at Burenin’s reference to a commercial motive behind his activities.

Most studies of Diaghilev expatiate on the expansion of art patronage in Russia at the fin de siècle, pointing out how a new generation of industrialists and businessmen of modest origin was replacing the aristocracy in promoting innovation in the arts and nurturing a Russian school without being narrowly nationalistic. They point to such figures as the millionaire textile manufacturer Alekseev who acted under the name Stanislavsky and who, with his chief investor Savva Morozov, created the Moscow Art Theatre; the museum founders Tretyakov and Bakhrushin; the wealthy brothers Ryabushinsky; and many others. In particular, they dwell on Savva Mamontov, the Moscow railway magnate whose private opera introduced easel painters as scene designers and whose example is supposed to have provided a model for Diaghilev. 10

This model goes only so far. In fact, as the art historian Igor Grabar pointed out in response to Marxist critics, Diaghilev’s The World of Art, unlike similar periodicals, had no industrial plutocrats among its publishers or its advisory editors. It was eclectic in its tastes, with no political or social axes to grind. The first collectors of the art it favored were not millionaire manufacturers, but professional men, doctors, lawyers,

9 Quoted in Natalya Dumova, Moskovskie metsenaty (Moskva: Molodaya gvardiya, 1992), 219.
10 In her study of the Ballets Russes, Lynn Garafola devotes the bulk of a chapter to this phenomenon, although without reference to any Russian sources and without demonstrating any direct connection between Diaghilev and these benefactors, other than Mamontov. Lynn Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 147-76.

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Although he was willing to accept support from Mamontov and, later, from Jewish capitalists, Diaghilev preferred to be funded by the Court and the aristocracy, not least because of the luster it shed on his enterprises. His very first “angel” for The World of Art was Princess Tenisheva, who also lent him paintings for his exhibitions, as did Prince Yusupov. The Princess cut off her funding when a cartoon portrayed her as Diaghilev’s milchcown, whereupon the tsar himself stepped in to cover the expenses with 10,000 rubles from the budget of the imperial household.  

Which brings us to the crucial difference between Diaghilev and the art patrons of the merchant class, the difference that made Burenin’s accusation of commercialism so stinging. Diaghilev’s letter to his stepmother does not end with “I’ve found my real aim in life—art patronage.” It goes on: “Everything is readily at hand, except money, mais ça viendra.” The propertied Russian Maecenases, noble or mercantile, could draw on their own resources to bankroll their projects. Diaghilev, grandson of a provincial purveyor of vodka, son of a bankrupt, had no private means. A small inheritance enabled him to furnish a flat, collect pictures, and make his first trip to Europe. Otherwise, he had to find outside backing. All the other traits he admits to—his charlatanism, charm, boorishness, logic, and lack of principles—enable him to levitate subsidies from other people’s pockets.

Since, to the casual onlooker, this might seem a higher form of begging or at best a business venture, Diaghilev was sensitive to the charge of being mercenary. The soprano Nataliya Trukhanova recalled,

He was generally taken for an adventurer. Usually this word defines a con man, a cardsharp or a scoundrel. But it could imply a risky undertaking, carried out against the odds. In cases like that, adventurers might be braver than the brave and valiant who risk their lives and not merely capital or freedom by speculation … Diaghilev’s remarkable innate gift was knowing how to turn up and win over the right persons for the requirements of his artistic projects.

This held true of both financial backers and such creative collaborators as Nijinsky and Stravinsky.

Typically, Diaghilev worked both sides of the street: he wanted to be known for artistic audacity, despite his need for aristocratic patronage. For all his dependence on Court favor, with customary audacity Diaghilev used the pages of The World of Art to twit the imperial cultural establishment and proclaim that one man of genius could

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12 Benois, Reminiscences, 208. Mamontov’s financial support ended when he was imprisoned on a trumped-up charge of embezzlement.

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outdo its whole bureaucracy. Diaghilev’s article lauding Tretyakov’s new art gallery obviously patted himself on the back:

The simplest logic says that if one lone man, not an artist, not even claiming much artistic education, basically not making much money, not high-born, the Muscovite P. M. Tretyakov, can singlehandedly found an enormous gallery of Russian painting, then the Russian State Museum, which has at its disposal not one but a hundred men, along with academic experts, its own curators, influential and authoritative people, should with its own riches be able to overshadow the Moscow gallery, and do something really grand and important for Russian art. However, nothing of the sort has happened so far.14

There is something Nietzschean in this “great man” theory of art patronage. The super-Maecenas, relying solely on his taste, flair, and organizational abilities, succeeds where an entire bureaucracy fails. Four years later, when Diaghilev was moving from the sphere of painting to that of opera and ballet, he recommended to anyone managing a theatre the motto

“war breeds heroes.” No action means no results. Before the advent of the Art Theatre Chekhov and Gorky did not exist as playwrights. Without Stanislavsky there would be no Three Sisters, Lower Depths and Cherry Orchard. Without I. A. Vsevolozhsky there would be no Sleeping Beauty or Queen of Spades or Nutcracker or Iolanta or Raymonda or Quatre Saisons or The Test of Damis. An interesting question is what we would be missing if the present management did not exist? “The Magic Mirror”?15

The Magic Mirror was the fiasco that forced the ballet-master Marius Petipa into retirement. Petipa’s great ballets had been fostered by the administrator of the Imperial Theatres Ivan Vsevolozhsky, himself a talented writer and designer of great taste and enterprise. His replacement, the career official Telyakovskiy, a bête noire of Diaghilev, was responsible for the subsequent flops.16

Ballet historians like to characterize Diaghilev as a catalyst who learned “collaborative methodology” from Mamontov’s operational principles and Vsevolozhsky’s inspirational leadership how to put together brilliant teams of artists. Diaghilev, however, was not content to leave the artists to their own devices. As Olga Haldey

15 Diaghilev, “Programma direktora teatrov,” Rus’ 220 (September 15, 1905), in ibid., 1:196.
16 To Telyakovskiy’s credit, he did hire Vsevolod Meyerhold whose opera productions introduced elements of World of Art precepts.

6 The Model of a Modern Impresario: Diaghilev’s Russian Background
points out, what he chiefly learned from Mamontov and Vsevolozhsky was to be what we now call an “artistic director,” “sponsor, impresario and stage director,” head of a creative “committee” who inspired, coordinated, and guided its members towards the realization of his overall aesthetic goal for each production. In this respect, certainly in the theatre, Diaghilev was perpetuating the Wagnerian notion of the single vision, the product of a demiurgic creative spirit, in which every element contributes to the ultimate effect. The finished product is unified and harmonious in the impression it makes on the spectator because it corresponds to the single-minded concept of this tutelary genius.

Diaghilev’s colleagues, especially those who knew him in his youth, were reluctant to acknowledge that he actually had an artistic vision. Benois, while granting him “a definite mission in life,” defines him solely as “a promoter.” He attributes Diaghilev’s realization of his mission to his “first ventures in criticism in the Novosti,” when he discovered the power of influencing the public through journalistic reviews. In other words, for Benois, Diaghilev remained the charlatan, imposing products on the public, rather than the creative force engendering the product—in this case, the idea of advanced Russian art.

A leading theme of Russian journalists and critics in the period from 1900 to 1910 was the cultivation of “talent from the people,” infusing national culture with “the original truth of the common folk.” The efforts of the Tretyakovs and Mamontovs were inspired by this admiration for a “Russian essence,” “the inexhaustible life-creating sources of Russian culture.” Mamontov was one of many in declaring that a holy spark gleamed in Fyodor Chaliapin, Stanislavsky, Maksim Gorky, whose roots were firmly planted in plebeian soil. The star performers of the period were praised for their humble origins: Maria Plevitskaya for her peasant background, Varvara Panina for her start in a gypsy chorus, Anastasiya Vyaltseva for serving as a chambermaid in a cheap hotel.

Diaghilev was too much a snob to subscribe wholeheartedly to this kind of nostalgie de la boue, but as a promoter he certainly capitalized on concepts of “Russianness.” As Hanna Järvinen has demonstrated in an insightful article on Diaghilev as the Russian Barnum, once he had launched the Ballets Russes, he turned his back on his earlier propaganda for Russian art as modernist and ultra-sophisticated. Instead, he broadcast the conventional Western view of Russia as a “political and aesthetic backwater untainted by modernity,” flattering and titillating Europeans with spectacles of Asiatic cum Slavic barbarity.

18 Benois, Reminiscences, 179.

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It is no coincidence that Diaghilev's first Russian season in Paris featured Chaliapin, who, more than a great singer, was celebrated as a “fighter,” “a native genius,” “the favorite of the general public,” or in the words of one critic “the hero of our times.”21 Diaghilev’s nose for celebrity would lead him to exploit this iconic aspect of a performer and to showcase stars rather than ensembles. Not only performers, but composers and designers might shine as stars, but it was Diaghilev who fixed them in the galaxy and lit them with a garish publicity than ran counter to the practices of the Imperial Theatres.

This lay in the future. At the time when Diaghilev bashed his hat down on Burenin’s head, he was still currying a reputation not for Russianness but for cosmopolitan refinement. After all, it was a silk top hat that he deployed in his clown act of vendetta. Characteristically, he did not challenge Burenin to a duel, although that recourse was available. (The painter Somov was later to call out Diaghilev, allegedly for slights to Leon Bakst.)22 Nor did he engage in an epistolary exchange, although he was quite capable of polemic. Instead, Diaghilev chose to return ridicule for ridicule. The ploy was successful. “From that time on all the attacks ceased and Burenin forgot that The World of Art even existed.”23 The triviality, indeed puerility, of Diaghilev’s behavior did not admit of a serious response. Frivolity in the face of earnest indignation is an element of camp. This too sets him apart from other Russian promoters of artistic movements. It is in line with Benoï’s remark that Diaghilev’s favorite instruction was “to create a stunning effect”24 or his command to Cocteau, “Étonnes-moi!”

Dandyism was an essential feature in Diaghilev’s self-promotion as a Maecenas.

His top hat, impeccable morning coats and lounge suits were noted by Petersburghers not without scornful envy. He carried himself with studied casualness, loved to show off his elegance, tucked into his shirt cuffs perfumed silk handkerchieves, which he would coquettishly draw out to press to his closely trimmed moustache.25

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23 Pertsov, Literaturnye vospominaniya (Moskva: Academia, 1933), 302-3.

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A traditional pose of crowd-disdaining affectation, this trait of artistic defiance can be traced from Byron to Baudelaire to Oscar Wilde. Sartorial distinction was one means of effacing the lout in Diaghilev. In the Russian context, however, it had a special meaning. Diaghilev’s elegant attire was an easily-read retort to those Russian intellectuals and artists who proclaimed their solidarity with the people by affecting peasant blouses and greased boots. He regarded their form of posing as reactionary, both artistically and politically. By the time he settled in France, where dandyism could not serve this programmatic function, he had to insist on the particle de (Serge de Diaghilev) to elevate his status.

Although Diaghilev was no classical scholar, he may have been aware that his chosen model Maecenas was cited in a number of Latin texts as flaunting his effeminacy by wearing loose purple tunics and “practically surpassing a woman in his leisurely softness.” Yet the friend of Augustus was also praised for his courage on the battlefield, his discretion in exercising power, and, particularly, being his own arbiter in artistic matters. Diaghilev’s self-fashioning as a fop in no way contradicted his ambition to be a powerful but benign influence in the artistic circles close to the Imperial Court at St. Petersburg. By effacing his past provinciality, Diaghilev tried to project a public persona as the consummate Petersburgher.

Contrasting characteristics of St. Petersburg and Moscow had been a literary commonplace since the days of Pushkin and Gogol. Traditionally, St. Petersburg, the capital created _ex nihilo_ by Peter the Great, was characterized as cold, bureaucratic, elegant, Western in outlook but imbued with diabolical potency, whereas Moscow was seen as hospitable, emotionally responsive, truly Russian, materialistic but prone to religious mysticism. In an article published in 1909, the year the ballet component of the _Saison russe_ came to Paris, Benois reiterated this contrast, stating that although Moscow would always attract the most brilliant talents in Russian art, it lacked discipline. St. Petersburg, even if saturnine and restrained “is disposed to extreme individuality, to elaborating remarkable expressions of the self [samoopredelenie]” but with a European penchant for community and method. “I love St. Petersburg precisely because I feel in it, in its soil, in its air a certain great and austere strength, a certain predestination.”

What Diaghilev the raw youth from the provinces imbibed from St. Petersburg and sought to emulate were precisely those elements of Europeanism and the ability to maintain a sharply defined personality within a community of the like-minded. Who is more _primus inter pares_ than the organizer who melds various talents into a viable journal or an exhibition? Who is more disciplined than the dandy who, like Beau

27 The anonymous _Elegiae in Maecenatem_, quoted in Williams, ibid., 174-76.

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Brummel, spends hours arranging a cravat to make it seem a casual improvisation? As an entrepreneur, Diaghilev demonstrated this same unwearying industry, dedication, and earnestness under the guise of triviality. But the dandy is less a narcissist than an exhibitionist. Diaghilev’s work behind the scenes, as editor of the Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres and The World of Art, and as organizer of major exhibitions of painting were satisfying to a point, but inexorably he drifted to the more ostentatious performing arts.

Diaghilev was swimming with the current. The movement initiated by Mamontov to engage modern artists as stage designers coincided with the educated public’s growing interest in both the graphic arts and such popular spectacles as the nascent cinema and the fairground booth. This fascination with the visual was noted by the painter Ilya Repin: “It is noteworthy that our contemporaries increasingly manifest a tendency to receive a different type of idea through the eyes by means of the pictorial arts.” Looking was supplanting reading.29 The theatre provided an arena for such visual receptivity. Igor Grabar called the theatre “the only realm in which the artist can still dream up a great holiday for the eyes, a place for the imagination to unfold.” Bakst pointed out that “no one wants to listen in the theatre, but everyone wants to look,” and Konstantin Korovin declared that “Colors can be a feast for the eyes, as music is a feast for the ears, the soul . . . Every rich palette is a theatre!”30 In a period of religious decline, this symbiosis of the painter and the performing arts cooperated with a readiness on the part of the audience to accept new ideas of social and political change from the stage.

Diaghilev, situated at the hub of this creative cycle, at first followed the fashion. After the success of the Russian exhibition of paintings at the Salon d’automne in Paris in 1906 and concerts there in 1907, he naturally turned to opera with set designs by leading artists. In this he was copying Mamontov and Zimin, even to the employment of Chaliapin as star attraction. There were diminishing returns to this lack of novelty in repertoire and style and he went bankrupt.

Ballet offered a fresher opportunity. There were no private ballet companies in Russia; a monopoly of the Imperial Theatres, it was consequently subject to conservative artistic policies and political decisions. The reforms and experiments that were enlivening the private theatres and even beginning to affect opera and drama on the imperial stages never came near the ballet. The ideal of the troupe kept leading performers from being treated as stars; when a danseuse (always a danseuse, never a danseur) gained celebrity, it was usually because she had become the mistress of a


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The audience was packed with well-informed balletomanes, but none of them would go beyond appreciation to organization; at best, they might invest, as did Baron Dmitry Gunsbourg and Prince Peter Lieven. Diaghilev had a clear field for himself. Engaging dancers severed from the imperial troupe, such as Nijinsky, and neglecting the classic repertoire while emphasizing the Orientalist ballets, he once more made a clear distinction between his Herculean enterprise, privately conceived and maintained, and the hydra-headed but artistically impotent establishment.

Diaghilev’s interest in ballet was prompted perhaps less by connoisseurship than by personal animus. In 1901, after an eighteen-month absence from the Maryinsky Theatre, he attended it to see Délibes’ Coppélia, his favorite ballet by his favorite composer. The inadequacy of the production led Benois to suggest that Diaghilev, at the time a minor employee of the Imperial Theatres, undertake a staging of Délibes’ Sylvia, with the collaboration of the World of Art team. All biographies of Diaghilev relate how, nominally put in charge by his superior, he plunged into preparations, how his activities offended his fellow bureaucrats, how the appointment was summarily withdrawn, how in his distress Diaghilev threatened to resign, then withdrew his resignation hoping for patronage from the dancer Matilda Kshesinskaya and her Grand Duke protector, and how he was publicly disgraced when his dismissal was endorsed by the tsar.

Significantly, it is only after this fraught event that Diaghilev turned his critical attention to dance. After five years of silence on the subject, he devoted an article to dispraise of the Maryinsky’s staging of Délibes, castigating Sylvia, “that most brilliant of all extant ballets,” as a flop produced by false economies; a Coppélia marred by shabby scenery, dirty costumes, and third-rate dancers; and La Source “castrated by civil servants.” Just he had earlier singled out Tretyakov as a demiurge capable of organizing a world-class art museum where officialdom had failed, so now he called for a super-hero to sort out the mediocre from the sublime in the performing arts.

What remains for me one of the supreme riddles is how neither last year nor today one lone man cannot be found in the entire theatrical administration who might understand that for love of the art of ballet, purely classical, may I say, true physically expressive ballet, one cannot get involved in such rubbish as these totally unnecessary fairy-tale pantomimes . . . , fairground trash . . . , barbaric hocus-pocus.

31 An English observer regretted that their selection “is largely dependent upon the taste of the Tsar and some of the Grand Dukes . . . [they] are really and practically the slaves of the Tsar.” F. Vaughan Gibson, “The Imperial Ballet Girl in Russia,” The Theatre (London) (October 1, 1897): 173.
33 A standard account may be found in Richard Buckle, Diaghilev (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 61-3.

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It goes without saying that in Diaghilev's mind such a man did exist. In suggesting reforms, he declared,

> The task of those who run theatres is not to spend all their time drafting intricate contracts, skimping on production values, and wittily reprimanding performers; all this reveals splendid administrative abilities in the people on whom the fate of the theatre depends, but they or the people around them must also have some relationship to art.\(^{34}\)

(Later, in the running of his own company, Diaghilev was to leave such mundane managerial details as contracts to Sergey Grigoriev and Gabriel Astruc.)

That Diaghilev's concern for dance was as much self-justification as artistic idealism is also suggested by the fact that he did not write another line about ballet for another three years, on the death of the choreographer Sergey Legat. Inspired by the revolutionary uprisings of 1905, the dancers at the Maryinsky had presented the administrators with a resolution calling for working groups to negotiate improved artistic and pecuniary conditions, with no penalties for their spokesmen. In return, the administration demanded that they sign a loyalty oath, which most did, including Legat, who was considered their chairman. This choice preyed on his mind and he committed suicide in October. Diaghilev's obituary of Legat, an artist he admired, barely mentions him, but puts its emphasis on how the desire of the dancers to perfect their art was suppressed by philistine and uncaring officials.\(^{35}\)

In other words, Diaghilev's rare comments on dance have more to do with politics, even office politics, than with aesthetics. It is noteworthy that Isadora Duncan's 1904 appearance in St. Petersburg, which dance historians credit as a major influence on Fokine and by extension on Diaghilev, goes totally unmentioned by the latter. His first recorded remarks on Duncan are in an interview of 1910, when he grants there may be a certain kinship of the Ballets Russes with her experiments, but points out that his project involves all the arts of theatre, not simply dance.\(^{36}\) Dance was for Diaghilev not the be-all and end-all of his enterprise, but the pretext for décor and design, music and movement, a synaesthesia whose components he alone would coordinate.

As Richard Buckle wittily puts it, “To judge from accounts left behind by those most concerned—or by their husbands or wives who wrote their biographies—[Diaghilev] contrived that each person essential to the ballet side of his scheme should think that he or she had personally persuaded him to embark on it.”\(^{37}\) This is

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\(^{36}\) “Teatral,” “Predstoyashchie gastroli russkoy opery i baleta v Parizhe, Bryussele, Londone,” *Peterburgskaya gazeta* 41 (February 11, 1910); in ibid., 1:212-13.

\(^{37}\) Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 119.
perhaps to give Diaghilev too much credit for manipulation. A number of individuals, coming at it from different angles, convinced him that ballet would have an appeal to a Western audience. Certainly, if his close friend and collaborator Benois had not been working with Fokine, it is unlikely that Diaghilev would have launched the project that became the Ballets Russes. The Benois/Fokine success with *Le Pavillon d’Armide*, animated by the talents of Pavlova and Nijinsky, may have assured him that dance could attain the syncretic perfection he was after. And the severing of opera from ballet had as much to do with financial difficulties and a ban on using scenery and costumes from the Imperial Theatres as it had to generic preferences,\(^3\) just as the preference for Fokine’s choreography to the exclusion of the Petipa repertoire erected a fence between Diaghilev’s style of management and that of the imperial administration. However opportunistic the prominence of dance in Diaghilev’s artistic program, the Ballets Russes was unquestionably a product of his taste and broad cultural interests.

Hence the critics’ frequent animadversions on the defects in his choreographic leadership. These deficiencies, along with the showmanship and sensationalism, originated in his personality. When his first ballet troupe was put together, Diaghilev the tuft-hunter rather than the aesthete was still in evidence. True, his exploitation of former members of the Imperial Ballet reflected more than nostalgic affection for certain academic works or the reflected glory of their names. He needed artists with the technical prowess to achieve the perfection he sought. Nevertheless, his insistence on the inclusion of the old-fashioned Khesinsкая for her celebrity and connections, his choice of the Muscovite Koralli for her beauty, and his promotion of the amateur but sensational Ida Rubinstein indicate that factors other than innovation or perfection in dance played a considerable part in his decisions.

Despite its name, the Ballets Russes were exclusively Russian only in their earliest years, when Diaghilev, as former *animateur* of *The World of Art* and master organizer of major exhibitions, revealed to Europe the masterpieces of Russian art.\(^3\) The longer they resided in Europe, the more Russia began to seem to him and his colleagues a backwater, resistant to the new. As late as 1912, an effort to tour the Ballets Russes to St. Petersburg fell through because Suvorin, publisher of the detested *New Times* and employer of the equally detested Burenin, asked too much money for rental of the Maly Theatre, which he owned. Igor Stravinsky wrote to Benois, “Truly, in Russia the word ‘artistic’ can be understood only ironically. Vile, petty tradesmen and villains—they serve nothing but obscenities, vulgarities, nastiness, the Burenins, Suvorins and

\(^{38}\) In later years, Diaghilev did mount opera productions, but usually when Chaliapin was available or Benois had a commission to make the designs.


\(^1\) *The Model of a Modern Impresario: Diaghilev’s Russian Background*
other lowlifes, from whom there is no escape in Russia—you choke with rage.” From the insulting column in 1899 to the exorbitant rental fees of 1912, Diaghilev’s Russian enemies held firm in their resistance to his view of art.

Russian dancers, choreographers, and designers perpetuated the name Ballets Russes until Diaghilev’s death in 1929, but with every passing year the operation became more eclectic and more “Western.” Admittedly, Diaghilev continued to recruit Russian talent, and he drew on Russian art movements and folk themes as late as Les Noces (Svadeba). However, his ambition required that his enterprise, the dissemination of the World of Art viewpoint, be cosmopolitan. Dance served his purpose best, because it is the one theatrical genre independent of speech, and hence internationally understood.

Consequently, Diaghilev chose to forge something labelled Russian into a pan-European art form, albeit with a heavy Russian alloy. The goal of creating a transnational ballet, whose significance would far exceed any local traditions or tastes was a dream he pursued steadfastly, for all his divagations and diversions. It was his taste, however, his vision, and his personal predilections that remained the ultimate criteria. From the outset the Ballets Russes were distinctly the ballet of one particular Russian—Sergey Diaghilev.

Editor’s Note: This essay is a revised version of a paper delivered by Professor Senelick in the opening session of a symposium on the Ballets Russes organized by the Harvard Theatre Collection and presented in cooperation with the Office for the Arts at Harvard and the Harvard Dance Center. “Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes, 1909-1929: Twenty Years that Changed the World of Art” took place at multiple Harvard venues from April 15 to April 17, 2009. The symposium featured more than thirty participants, drew nearly 250 attendees, and offered papers, panel discussions, dance and theatrical performances, and films by major scholars, historians, performers, and artists. One highlight of the celebration was the major exhibition in Pusey Library mounted by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson, Curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection. Drawing on the rich and deep resources for the study of the Ballets Russes at Harvard, the exhibition included original costume and scene designs, original portraits, manuscripts, scores, documents and letters, photographs, and objects. An online version of the exhibition will be mounted by the Harvard College Library in 2011 and will be accessible from the Harvard College Library’s exhibition homepage at http://hcl.harvard.edu/info/exhibitions/#online_exhibitions.

40 I. F. Stravinsky to A. Benois, February 15, 1912, quoted in Dyagilev i russkoe iskusstvo, 2:193.

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Contributors

Thomas McLean is Lecturer in English at the University of Otago in New Zealand. He is the editor of Further Letters of Joanna Baillie (2010). In 2005-2006, he held the Houghton Mifflin Visiting Fellowship in Publishing History at Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Laurence Senelick is Fletcher Professor Oratory at Tufts University, where he is also Director of Graduate Studies in drama. He is Honorary Curator of Russian Theatre in the Harvard Theatre Collection. In recognition of his scholarship, he received the St. George medal of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation for the advancement of Russian art and theatre. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2010. Among his recent publications are The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner (2010), Theatre Arts on Acting (2008), and A Historical Dictionary of Russian Theatre (2007).

Contributors’ notes for the essays in “Life is in the transitions” appear at the end of each piece.