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## 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;<sup>1)</sup>*

The opening couplet of Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West," first published in 1889, is one of Kipling's well-worn tautologies and all too obviously fallacious truths that seem simply to 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

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1) Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," in *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 234.

George Orwell writes, “*is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting.*”<sup>2)</sup> 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 “what do they know of England who only England know.”<sup>3)</sup>

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”—Kipling makes precisely the opposite point from the one the opening lines had suggested. 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 was can be seen a century later, at least in the military realm, 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.

In this essay I will discuss the permeability of borders between

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2) George Orwell, “Rudyard Kipling,” originally published in *Horizon* (1942), reproduced on The Orwell Prize website, accessed May 23, 2011, <http://theorwellprize.co.uk/george-orwell/by-orwell/essays-and-other-works/rudyard-kipling/>.

3) *Ibid.*

East and West in another sphere, the arts, in an earlier era—the beginning of aesthetic modernism, with respect to the fine arts, in Europe and North America—and the attendant paradoxes and ironies of cultural transmission, which, I hope, will call into question the very notion of such facile phrases as ‘Western culture,’ ‘Western civilization,’ ‘the Muslim world,’ and ‘radical Islam and the East,’ as well as the supposedly inherent world-views and innate antagonisms that ostensibly 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’Automne 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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

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4) Qtd. in Rosemary Bailey, “See France through Artists’ Eyes,” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2009, accessed May 23, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2009/may/17/provence-cezanne-picasso-france-travel>.

futuristic x's"—and certainly no one in Paris had seen anything before remotely like those first productions of the *Ballets Russes*.<sup>5)</sup> 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.<sup>6)</sup> 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 both 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

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5) Laura Marcus and Peter Nichols (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111.

6) John Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 197.

the seraglio; he then proceeds to slaughter the slaves and his wife.<sup>7)</sup> 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

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7) In *1001 Nights*, Shahryar, traumatized by this infidelity, goes on to murder every woman with whom he sleeps afterwards until he meets Sheherazade, 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.

style of German symphonic music based on Wagnerian *leitmotifs*. The sets for the pieces were designed by designers such as Leon Bakst, who saturated the stage 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;”<sup>8)</sup> and by Pablo Picasso, who transported the Cubist lines of his paintings onto the stage. The costumes were created by Bakst, Matisse and others using 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.”<sup>9)</sup>

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

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8) John E. Bowlt, “Léon Bakst, Natalia Goncharova and Pablo Picasso,” in Jane Pritchard, ed., *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929* (London: Victoria & Albert Publishing, 2010).

9) Peter Wollen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body,” *New Formations* 1 (1987): 12.

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.<sup>10)</sup> The Ballet Russes 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,<sup>11)</sup> and the group's costumes and designs were revived in the 1970s in the fashion designs of Yves St. Laurent. The aesthetic also continues in exhibitions like the major autumn 2010 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, "Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the *Ballets Russes*, 1909-1927," attesting to the lasting influence of the troupe's

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10) Judith Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina: Lydia Lopokova, Imperial Dancer and Mrs. John Maynard Keynes* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008).

11) Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer, *The Ballets Russes and Its World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

work in many spheres of art and culture.<sup>12)</sup>

Here, 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."<sup>13)</sup> 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.<sup>14)</sup>

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12) The Yves St. Laurent collection was part of the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibit. See, for example: Jenna Rossi-Camus, "Exhibition Review: Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballet Russes at the V&A," *Worn Through: Apparel from an Academic Perspective*, October 28, 2010, <http://www.wornthrough.com/2010/10/28/exhibition-review-diaghilev-and-the-golden-age-of-the-ballet-r/>.

13) Wollen, "Fashion/Orientalism/The Body," 19.

14) *Ibid.*



*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”.<sup>15)</sup> 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”.<sup>16)</sup> Numerous other ballets, such as *Le Dieu Bleu (The Blue God)* (1912), with a

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15) Garafola and Baer, *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, 250.

16) John E. Bowl, “Léon Bakst, Natalia Goncharova and Pablo Picasso,” 107.

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 not based on Eastern source material nevertheless feature motifs inspired by 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 and containing Tibetan-style costumes designed by Matisse, and *Parade* (1917), with music by Eric Satie and costumes, curtain and scenery by Picasso and containing a character called the Chinese Conjurer, 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,”<sup>17)</sup> 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 where on a clear day one can see the North African coast and which for eight centuries was part of the Islamic world. His Sevillian

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17) Howard Goodall, “Music and the Ballets Russes,” in Jane Pritchard, ed., *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes*, 177.

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,"<sup>18)</sup> 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, which 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

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18) Jane Pritchard, "The Transformation of Ballet," in Jane Pritchard, ed., *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes*, 78.

an Eastern and Western country makes it a singular hybrid or simply the most potent example of an increasingly widespread phenomenon, which 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—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.<sup>19)</sup> 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.<sup>20)</sup>

At least three other significant Western figures influenced the

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19) Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina*, 15-34.

20) Sjeng Scheijen, "Diaghilev the Man," in Jane Pritchard, ed., *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes*.

development of the *Ballets Russes*. The American modern dancer Isadora Duncan championed a more “natural” style of dance that she associated with ancient Greece and in which, for example, she eschewed toe shoes in favor of bare feet and flowing clothes; she 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 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.<sup>21)</sup>

The second significant Western figure is Claude Debussy, whose approach to musical composition, particularly his treatment of harmony, had been profoundly altered by hearing “the complex resonances of the Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle.” Goodall explains that “by transplanting the exotic clash of sonorities of Eastern music into the Western palette, [Debussy] radically challenged the established ‘rules’ of nineteenth century music.”<sup>22)</sup> Of the “handful of visionary musicians” who grasped “the enormity of Debussy’s approach” was Igor Stravinsky.<sup>23)</sup> *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

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21) Wollen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body,” 8-10.

22) Goodall, “Music and the Ballets Russes,” 173.

23) *Ibid.*, 174.

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.<sup>24)</sup> 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.<sup>25)</sup> 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. Diaghilev, for instance, famously fired his lover, Nijinsky, when news arrived in Paris in 1914 that the dancer had suddenly married a Hungarian aristocrat.<sup>26)</sup>

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

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24) Charles Spencer, *Bakst in Greece* (Athens, Greece: GEMA Publications, 2009), 42.

25) *Ibid.*, 81.

26) Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina*, 91.

the *Cleopatra* the *Ballets Russes* presented.<sup>27)</sup> 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;<sup>28)</sup> 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).<sup>29)</sup>

I would like to close with several observations about the *Ballets Russes* in America. In 1916, the group toured the U.S. for the first time, 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.”<sup>30)</sup> 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 *Schéhérazade* in New York, his body blackened with paint, one critic remarked that such a disturbing portrayal of cross-racial

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27) Wollen, “Fashion/Orientalism/The Body,” 19.

28) Jane Pritchard, “The Transformation of Ballet,” 78.

29) John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts*, 199.

30) Qtd. in Judith Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina*, 94.

eroticism would be impossible in the segregated South, and the Catholic Theatre Movement called for an outright ban of the piece.<sup>31)</sup> 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.”<sup>32)</sup>

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 and Baer write, the more natural style of Fokine’s choreography coincides “with the requirements of silent screen acting.”<sup>33)</sup> 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.’”<sup>34)</sup> 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,

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31) Ibid.

32) Qtd. in Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina*, 105.

33) Garafola and Baer, 4.

34) Gaylyn Studlar, “Douglas Fairbanks: Thief of the *Ballets Russes*,” in *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, ed. Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 109.



as Studlar writes, emulate “the orientalized and feminized male body of the *Ballets Russes* danseur,” and more specifically Nijinsky in *Schéhérazade*.<sup>35)</sup>

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,”<sup>36)</sup> his performance is un-done 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.”<sup>37)</sup> 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”—continues 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.<sup>38)</sup>

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35) *Ibid.*, 115.

36) *Ibid.*, 117.

37) *Ibid.*

38) Gary Wills, “John Wayne’s Body,” *New Yorker*, August 19, 1996, 38.

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## Abstract

# **An East/West *Pas De Deux*: The *Ballets Russes* and the Orient in the Modern Western Imagination**

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Using the case of the *Ballets Russes*, this paper continues an interrogation of the viability of applying Edward Said's definitions of Orientalism to the sphere of the arts. Although in his original study, *Orientalism*, Said explicitly asserts that his study is a delimited analysis focused principally on British and French 18th- and 19th-century academic Orientalism and that he is not analyzing so-called Orientalist painting and literary artists such as Flaubert, his followers, and later Said himself, extended his theoretical framework to include studies of literature and the arts.

By examining the profundity of the rupture caused in the aesthetic sphere by the arrival of the *Ballets Russes* in Paris in 1909, this study simultaneously repositions the works of the Russian ballet troupe to the center and the very beginning of European modernism and attempts to show how its radically subversive works undermine the notion of such facile categories as "East" and "West" or "Oriental" and "Occidental." In addition to examining the paradoxes of cultural transmission inherent in the group's works, which belie the existence of rigid civilizational borders in the arts, the study also proposes a reconsideration of European modernism by re-examining the place of ballet in the modernist movement; the significance of the work of the group's producer Serge Diaghilev, designers Leon Bakst and Natalia Goncharov, choreographer Mikhail Fokine, composer Igor Stravinsky and performers such as Ana Pavlova, Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky; and of the work produced in collaboration with the *Ballets Russes* by European artists, composers and designers such as Pablo Picasso, Henri

Matisse, Claude Debussy, Erik Satie and Coco Chanel.

**Key Words**

Orientalism, Ballets Russes, Diaghilev, Leon Bakst, Vaslav Nijinsky, Ida Rubinstein, Michel Fokine, Natalia Goncharov, Modernism, Edward Said, Stravinsky, Debussy, Matisse, Picasso, Thief of Baghdad, Douglas Fairbanks, Modern Dance, Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell, Scheherezade