



The Problems of Studying the Ballet in the Culture of the Late XIX - Early XX Centuries

Tatiana Portnova

Doctor of Art History, Professor of Choreography Art department of Slavic Culture Institute, Professor of Art History Department of A. Kosygin Russian State University

***Corresponding Author:** *Tatiana Portnova, Doctor of Art History, Professor of Choreography Art department of Slavic Culture Institute, Professor of Art History Department of A. Kosygin Russian State University*

Abstract: *The article reveals the role of the Russian ballet in the cultural pattern at the turn of the 20th century. Purpose of the article is to determine the direction of development of interaction between national choreography and artistic and imaginative interpretation of its synthetic whole against a background of complex and ambiguous processes taking course at critical stages of the Russian culture, based at the existing visual materials of archive and museum funds. An aspect of art review was selected, allowing consideration of the diverse options of synthesis of ballet and plastic arts. The attraction of the visual arts to “balletness” and the tendency of Russian choreography to rely on images of painting, graphics and sculpture characteristic to the turn of the century are two sides of the single process. In this context, the Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company, being saturated with expressive plastic spectacular imagery, served as the bright frame for the last stage of the Russian Silver Age.*

Keywords: *Russian ballet, Sergei Diaghilev, visual sources, artistic endeavors, Silver Age syncretism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the main purpose of the article, being the determination of interrelations of the Russian ballet in the context of the time period, we'd like to note that “In this connection, one should recall that the Silver Age period was characterized by motley multicolored spectrum of ideas and philosophical concepts interpreted in various art samples. Many works of this period were not only “products” of expression by their creators and not only reflected their innermost emotional and psychological states rather than served as the means of translating the mindset and ideas dear for the people of arts: writers, poets, artists, and theatre people.” [19] Conceptual significance of Russian choreography was associated with Sergei Diaghilev who achieved world fame in the art life of the early 20th century. The Saison Russe enriched and developed the traditions of national performing and staging culture. The genuine spectacular beauty and keen sense of style brought about happy stage life for many performances at the stages of the largest theaters in the world. Talented choreographers such as Michel Fokine, Léonide Massine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine expressed new trends and new ways for ballet. Theater becomes the most important factor of the cultural life of society at the turn of the century. It turns into a center around which the majority of creative intelligentsia is grouped. Almost all the major artists are connected with the theater. Works of Russian and foreign scenic designers such as Alexandre Benois, Léon Bakst, Alexander Golovin, Mstislav Doboujinsky, Boris Anisfeld, Nicholas Roerich, Pablo Picasso, Maurice Denis, Joan Miró, André Derain, Georges Braque, Maurice Utrillo etc. offered insights in the development of world theater as a whole. The very idea of the role of the artist in a performance got changed upon their emergence. Henceforth, the artist became a co-author of the choreographer, suggesting and sometimes dictating the choice of expressive means to the latter, “interfering” with their plastic thinking. Russian ballet became a new “aesthetic system” affecting various cultural areas such as music, photography, cinema and fashion. Literature in Russian and foreign languages confirm this.[9] Ballet played an ambiguous role for each artist. It was included in their creativity range with varying degree of wholeness and diverse psychological content. However, the ability to combine the interacting arts and stand at their crossroad while creating an art piece seems to be one of the fundamental and distinctive mentality features of the time. The performances had such an impact on

the artists that their work for the theater and about the theater ceased to be a random phenomenon. Many artists of the time are seeking new ways of understanding the surrounding world and translating it by non-traditional artistic techniques and expressive means.

The following art scholarly works were reviewed during this research, dedicated to: the matters of arts synthesis and expressive language: V. Volodina "Modern: issues of synthesis" (M., 1994); G. Dadianova "Plasticity and expressiveness as a category of aesthetics" (M., 1997), "Trajectories of Russian art of the late 19th – early 20th centuries" (M., 1972); the ballet art: A. Kirillov "Language of the dance: historical systematic and semiotic development and substantiation" (M., 2004), V. Krasovskaya "Russian ballet theater of the early 20th century" (L., 1971, 1972), M. Fokine "Memoirs of a Ballet Master" (1961); as well as works studying trajectories of art culture and matters of theatrical scenery of the Silver Age: R. Vlasova "Russian theatrical scenery art of the early 20th century: From the heritage of the Saint Petersburg masters" (L., 1984), M. Davydova "Essays on the history of Russian theatrical scenery art" (M., 1974) and "An artist in the early 20th century theater" (M., 1999), M. Pozharskaya "Saison Russe in Paris: Sketches of scenery and costumes. 1908-1929" (M., 1988), D. Sarabianov "Russian artists of the early 20th century. New directions" (L., 1973), G. Sternin "Art life of the early 20th century Russia" (M., 1976), "Diaghilev ballet material. Exhibition-Auction. Catalogue principally of Diaghilev ballet material. Decor and costume designs." (London, 1968). During the research on the matter it transpired that there were no advanced studies dedicated to the matter of synthesis between the ballet and plastic arts neither for the reviewed period nor for any other periods.

2. METHODS

Thanks to Sergei Diaghilev, Russian ballet became the literal epicenter of emergence and rapid spread of classical ballet all over the world. A wide range of the influence field as well as high degree of its intensity are largely due to the integrative and synthetic nature of ballet as on organic whole with its constituent parts as choreography, painting, literature and music being in a harmonic ensemble unity and convergence. The problem of our research is the comprehensive study of the specific interaction between the components of ballet art system in relation to the specific socio-cultural conditions of the ballet existence. Synthesis is the basis for interspecific relationships in the system of the ballet theatre plastic arts; it determined a comprehensive research methodology including historical, cultural, artistic and stylistic methods. They made it possible to present various facets of theatrical synthesis at the turn of the 20th century and identify established attributes of interaction between ballet and plastic arts both at the formal and content levels.

3. RESULTS

The extant visual sources (sketches of costumes and scenes, portraits of artists and choreographers, scenic design models and demonstrated video recordings of Diaghilev's ballets) demonstrate that the ballet theater merges with new art culture that becomes its faithful assistant. [10], [16]. The diversity of stylistic aspirations and schools of the ballet (classical dance, modern dance, elements of theater performances, mystery plays and extravaganzas, choreographic miniatures and impressionistic compositions) coincidentally was the process of self-determination of the new art for artists and the process of conceptualization of their own specific solutions. Ballet became the strongest catalyst for the imagination of the masters of fine arts, it provided them with a wide field for stylistic aspirations.[23]. On the other hand, the very fine art of the turn of the century is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon, a kaleidoscope of trends, movements, styles and theories (Art Nouveau, realism, impressionism, primitivism, etc.). It's not a coincidence that one may find images of almost any direction, style and method of expression in the ballet topic of the late of 19th – early 20th centuries. Each of them is based on a certain understanding of the nature of a new creative method and range of variety of its forms. Many artists of the time are seeking new ways of understanding the surrounding world and translating it by different artistic techniques and expressive means. Various creative associations emerged during this period, such as World of Art (Mir Iskusstva), Blue Rose, Russian Artists' Union and Knave of Diamonds, are characterized by diversity of manners of execution and creative methods, when the very structure of a work not only reveals the meaning of the depicted image but also sets a mood and expresses the content.

Art and dance are intertwined and this interaction indicates the ingenuousness of direct and inverse link. For instance, the artists of the World of Art association often referred to ballet in their works,

while Isadora Duncan in her so-called “antiquity” relies not so much on ancient dance but rather on ancient sculpture. The choreographer Michel Fokine's sympathy to the related arts of painting and sculpture is well known, in particular related to ancient Egyptian and Classical antiquity art. However, the facets of artists' personalities are never erased and remain even more important. A degree of contact between dancers and artists remains just as important. It is the proximity of the two arts, namely visual and choreographic, that are capable to cooperate, the possibility of two-way mutual influence and enrichment and their proximity in the historical context of the time that attracted artists to the ballet, giving them hopes for a truly creative collaboration.

Masters of the World of Art play a special role here. “Indeed, the international prominence of many members of the World of Art group, especially Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, relied upon their scenic designs for the most ambitious Diaghilev's ventures, with their desire to integrate all kinds of art, their improvisations on topic of archaics, exotics and the East, their search for new production techniques concerning choreography, music approaches and visual effects that fundamentally were the embodiment of many principles developed in the World of Art group.” [2] Sergei Diaghilev and Russian retrospectivism is one of the aspects of the exposition presented by “Dreamer Artists” (referred to as such by the art critic Sergei Makovsky), where the choreographer Michel Fokine's visual culture is embodied in. [24]. First of all, these are sketches by Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Alexander Golovin and Mstislav Doboujinsky to the ballets such as *Les Papillons*, *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, *the Firebird*, *the Cleopatra*, *Les Sylphides*, *Carnaval*, *Le Spectre de la rose*, *Narcisse et Echo*, *Afternoon of a Faun* etc.

A separate page consists of theatrical practices of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov invited by Sergei Diaghilev for collaboration in performances *Liturgy*, *Chout*, *Les Contes russes*, *Soleil de Nuit* and *Les noces*. Russian lubok picture, folk signboard and folklore are at the core of scenic design for these characters.

The other aspect demonstrates the nature of Sergei Diaghilev as a connoisseur of Russian avant-garde, who is able to include new aesthetic concepts of a period in the staging work. Experimental performances by Michel Fokine and Bronislava Nijinska are based on the forms of Cubo-futurism, Fauvism, Rayonism etc. and successfully designed within the exhibition in a form of volumetric models of costumes and scenery. The most prominent are the visual materials of performances such as *Ode*, *Le Train bleu*, *Apollon musagète*, *Le Bal*, *Le pas d'acier* etc. [3]. Russian Diaghilev ballet, in turn, had an enormous influence on Western culture has been the subject of inspiration for foreign artists and scenic designers (Pablo Picasso, Maurice Denis, Joan Miró, Henri Matisse, André Derain, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Maurice Utrillo etc.) as well as easel painters (Edward Gordon Craig, L. Keiner, Ernst Oppler, Jean Cocteau, A. Grüenberg, V. Gross, Oskar Kokoschka, Emile Antoine Bourdelle, Pierre Bonnard etc.)

Graphical, painting and sculptural works dedicated to master dancers and sketches of ballet costumes and scenery are contained in a number of museum and private collections as well as catalogues of Diaghilev's exhibitions of the turn of the century. This is confirmed by a number of illustrative programs devoted to performances of Russian ballet that are stored in the Russian state archive of literature and art and those included in the Sotheby's catalogs. [20] Avant-garde artistic trends in theater contributed to the expansion of the range of means of artistic expression using technological novelties. Visual sources show the figure of Sergey Diaghilev as the organizer of the grand theater company existing solely due to his artistic acumen and inexhaustible energy. His activity is an important episode inseparable from the Russian ballet against a background of the entire artistic culture at the turn of the 20th century.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, we'd like to note that an insight into the creativity lab of masters somehow connected with the Dyagilev's Ballets Russes company provides a visual representation of a service nature of the respective documentary material. The study of iconographic data brings about new information about the syncretism of the Silver Age, about the peculiarities of creative endeavors of the dance masters in creating new choreographic forms and the nature of the characters, as well as clarifies our understanding of the role the activity of S. Diaghilev played in the artistic life of Russia and foreign countries. In general, the study of historiography and iconography of the matter immerses us into the atmosphere of the period, demonstrates aesthetic endeavors of performers, choreographers and artists

governing the cultural process as a complex conglomeration of creative forces. This link reflects the unity of all aspects of a complex and multifaceted matter that we studied. It is in line with the fruitful tradition of Russian dramatic, directing and artistic thought for which the communication between the dramatic art and new experiments, stylistic solutions, creative methods, visual and artistic modifications was a point of reference, a fundamental principle and a living reality of artistic endeavor and cultural development.

REFERENCES

- [1] Vedervikova M.A. "Diversity of literary characters in the Diaghilev's ballet company" / M. A, Vedernikova // Innovative models and projects of the cultural space: a collection of articles by young researchers (materials of academic workshop. Moscow, December 23, 2009). – M.: MGUKI, 2009. p. 93-99.
- [2] "Vision of the dance. Sergei Diaghilev and Saison Russe" / ed. by G. Boulton, Z. Tregolova and N. Giordano. – M.: SKIRA, 2010. – p.57.
- [3] Bodlit D. "Diaghilev and Russian theater artists". Articles. Washington 1972-1974 – Russian State archive of literature and art, f.2712, op. 1, s.u.99.
- [4] R.I. Vlasova "Russian theatrical scenery art of the early 20th century: From the heritage of the Saint Petersburg masters". L.: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984, 186 p.
- [5] V. Volodina "Modern: issues of synthesis. Matters of art history." 1994, No. 2-3, p. 331
- [6] M.V. Davydova "Essays on the history of Russian theatrical scenery art." M.: Nauka, 1974 - 188 p.
- [7] M.V. Davydova "An artist in the early 20th century theater" M.: Nauka, 1999 - 148 p.
- [8] T.V. Dadianova "Plasticity and expressiveness as a category of aesthetics": an extended abstract of Dr. phil. dissertation. M.: MSU, 1997 - 48 p.
- [9] S. Diaghilev and Russian art. Articles, open letters, interviews. Correspondence. Contemporaries about Diaghilev. Comp., auth. ins. and comments by I.S. Silberstein, V.A. Samkov, vol. 1, 2. M.: Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo., 1982; - 493 p., 575 p.
- [10] Illustrative programs of performances of Sergei Diaghilev's Russian ballet. 1914-1917. - RGALI. F. 982.op.1, s.u.32;
- [11] A.P. Kirillov "Language of the dance: historical systematic and semiotic development and substantiation": MGUKI, 2004 - 472 p.
- [12] V.M. Krasovskaya "Russian ballet theater of the early 20th century". L.: Iskusstvo, 1971 - Part 1. Choreographers - 526 p.
- [13] V.M. Krasovskaya "Russian ballet theater of the early 20th century". L.: Iskusstvo, 1972 - Part 2. Dancers - 456 p.
- [14] M.N. Pozharskaya "Saison Russe in Paris: Sketches of scenery and costumes. 1908-1929". M.: Iskusstvo, 1988 - 291 p.
- [15] "Trajectories of Russian art of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. Painting, graphic art, theatrical decorative art." Essays / ed. by N.M. Sokolova, V.V. Vanslov. M.: Iskusstvo, 1972 - 271 p.
- [16] M. Rozhdestvenskaya-Vasilyeva "S. Diaghilev." Manuscript - A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum. f.479, s.u.1
- [17] D.V. Sarabianov "Russian artists of the early 20th century. New directions". L.: Aurora, 1973 - 207 p.
- [18] G.Yu. Sternin "Art life of the early 20th century Russia". M.: Iskusstvo, 1976 - 215 p.
- [19] E.S. Shtanko "Main artistic movements and trends of the Silver Age" / Bulletin of the Belgorod State University. Series: Liberal Arts. Issue No. 18 (113) \ Volume 11 / 2011 - p. 73
- [20] Ballet and Theatre Material in the large Galleries Sotheby. London. 1985-110 p.
- [21] Diaghilev ballet material. Exhibition-Auction. Catalogue principally of Diaghilev ballet material. Decor and costume designs. London: 1968 - 180 p.
- [22] Fokine M. Memoirs of a Ballet Master. Ed. by A. Chajoy. - Boston: 1961-318p.
- [23] Haskell A.L. Ballet Russe. The age of Diaghilev – London., 1968 -127 p.
- [24] Williams. P. Mihel Fokine. The choreographer who brought ballet into the 20th Century. Dance Gazette. – 1983. – № 183. C. 8 – 11

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Tatiana Portnova is an art historian and ballet historian, doctor of art history, honored worker of science and education, Professor of the Department of universal history of arts of the Russian state Humanitarian University. Department of choreography of the Institute of Russian theater, Institute of dance of the state Academy of Slavic culture. (Moscow.)

Full member of the International European Academy, Russian Academy of natural Sciences. (Moscow), Peter's Academy of arts and Science (St. Petersburg).

A member of the Union of theatrical figures of the Russian Federation and International Association of art critics AICA (Paris)

The field of scientific research is the problems of synthesis and interaction of plastic arts, ballet iconography and scenography, description and analysis of works of art , cultural heritage of the world museums. Main lecture courses: academic history of art, theory and history of styles, historical and stage costume, choreographer's staging work and art of scenography.

Citation: Tatiana Portnova. "The Problems of Studying the Ballet in the Culture of the Late XIX - Early XX Centuries". *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 5, no.9, 2018, pp. 11-15. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0509002>.

Copyright: © 2018 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.