

Women, Modernity, and the Ballets Russes in London, 1911-1914

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the image and role of the ballerina in pre-World War I works for the Ballets Russes in London. It argues that, despite the emergence of the central male figure in many of these ballets, the ballerina was also undergoing a modern metamorphosis of her own. The first section provides context for the arrival of the Ballets Russes in London in 1911. It is followed by a discussion of Michel Fokine's approach to choreography and the resultant works he created for the company, with an eye to how his philosophy impacted women's roles in these ballets. To better situate this "new ballet" that Fokine constructed, the third section highlights key aspects of the nineteenth-century Romantic ballerina and how she informed the roles danced by women in the Ballets Russes, drawing on critical assessments of her legacy. The ambivalent femininity portrayed through the Ballets Russes ballerina is considered in the section that follows, culminating in an image that straddles a Romantic-era heritage while incorporating aspects of modernity. As a backdrop to the company's London performances, the fifth section considers the British suffrage movement and the ways in which women's bodies became sites of debate, protest, and violence. Parallels are suggested between these corporeal aspects of the movement and women's representation onstage through two of Fokine's ballets, *L'Oiseau de feu* and *Schéhérazade*, notably through possible kinaesthetic connections between female dancers and audience members, as reflected in sketches and illustrations of the ballets. Finally, critics' reviews of the London performances are extracted to demonstrate how the Ballets Russes generated a concept of the modern ballerina as a serious artist and accomplished professional.

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In England the Russian dancers have perhaps been acclaimed with more whole-hearted fervor than elsewhere, because before their coming the land was barren. In France and Italy they had ballets of their own. They have a standard by which they can measure the visitors from St. Petersburg. But English audiences, like children presented with a new toy, first shyly wondered at the novelty of the agile strangers, and then fell into transports of enthusiasm.
 –Ellen Terry, *The Russian Ballet*

I. Introduction

Between 1909 and 1929, the Ballets Russes¹ provoked an immense shift in the trajectory of dance in the twentieth century. The troupe’s spectacular and novel assemblages of dance, music, stories, sets, and costumes dazzled and enraptured audiences that had grown tired of lacklustre, decades-old ballets that no longer held pride of place in the early days of modernity. The company’s founder, impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), brought his ballets first to Paris and then to other cities in Europe, and eventually the Americas. Exclusively a touring company, Paris and London were by far its most popular destinations.

Although the Ballets Russes existed for a brief twenty years, its legacy is vast. Ballets such as *Schéhérazade* (1911), *L’Oiseau de feu*² (1912), and *Petrouchka* (1913) continue to be performed today, more than one hundred years after their premiere. The Joffrey Ballet’s 1987 staging of *Le Sacre du printemps* in its original, restored choreography,³ and the publication of dance historian Lynn Garafola’s influential *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*⁴ two years later spearheaded a wave of renewed interest in the company’s productions and solidified its

¹ Historically, the company was known as “the Russian Ballet” or “the Imperial Russian Ballet” in English, but today the term “Ballets Russes” has come into standard usage even in English-language contexts.

² English-language translations of the titles of some ballets, such as *The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du printemps*), are commonly used, while others are more widely known by their original French titles. For consistency within this thesis, I have retained the French titles for all works.

³ As Ballets Russes performances were not recorded, the Joffrey’s 1987 restaging, based on dance historian Millicent Hodson’s extensive research, remains approximate. Hodson’s process is detailed in *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace: Reconstruction Score of the Original Choreography for Le Sacre du Printemps* (Pendragon Press, 1996).

⁴ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

relevance in the late-twentieth century. Recent years have seen a continued blossoming of scholarly and curatorial interest into the seemingly endless ways that the Ballets Russes became intertwined with various facets of modernity, from theatre to business to flamenco.⁵

One subject of recent scholarly attention is the role played by women in the company. In 2022's *La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Modern*,⁶ Garafola traces the life and legacy of Bronislava Nijinska (1891-1972), who choreographed for the Ballets Russes from 1921 to 1925.⁷ In a similar vein, 2024 saw two exhibitions focused in whole or in part on women and the Ballets Russes: the Morgan Library's *Crafting the Ballets Russes: The Robert Owen Lehman Collection*,⁸ which in part highlighted contributions by Nijinska and dancer Ida Rubinstein (1885-1960); and the McNay Art Museum's *Women Artists of the Ballets Russes: Designing the Legacy*,⁹ which turned the focus to the company's female set and costume designers, including artists Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) and Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979).

However, the question of women and the Ballets Russes has not been widely addressed in much of the scholarship on the company. In particular, the figure of the ballerina, both as a performer and in terms of the roles danced by her, has been relatively neglected;¹⁰ this is

⁵ See Gabriela Minden, *Modernism after the Ballets Russes: Movement in the British Theatre* (Oxford Academic, 2025); Ira Nadel, *The Business of Ballet: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes between Profit and the Avant-garde* (Lexington Books, 2024); and Barbara File Marangon, *Passion and Elegance: How Flamenco and Classical Ballet Met at the Ballets Russes* (Routledge, 2024).

⁶ Lynn Garafola, *La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Modern* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁷ Nijinska was the fourth of five Ballets Russes choreographers, and the only woman. She was preceded by Mikhail (Michel) Fokine (1909-1912, 1914), her brother Vaslav Nijinsky (1912-1914), and Leonid Miasin (Léonide Massine) (1915-1920), and succeeded by George Balanchine (1926-1929). The latter would later co-found the New York City Ballet with American impresario Lincoln Kirstein.

⁸ The Morgan Library & Museum, New York City, June 28 - September 22, 2024.

⁹ McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, October 12, 2024 - January 12, 2025.

¹⁰ I have encountered two important exceptions to this contention, both of which are discussed later in this text. The first is Sally Banes, who offers a close reading of three Diaghilev ballets to demonstrate the "progressive image of women created under Diaghilev's auspices" in "Early Modern Ballet: *Firebird*, *The Rite of Spring*, *Les Noces*," in *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (Routledge, 1998), 94. The second is Ilyana Karthas, "The Politics of Gender and the Revival of Ballet in Early Twentieth Century France," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (2012): 960-989, which considers the intersection of gender and the Ballets Russes early twentieth-century France, particularly within the context of French nationalism.

especially apparent in light of the extensive scholarship on company dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950) and the role of the Ballets Russes in propelling the male ballet dancer out of nineteenth-century obscurity. As Garafola notes,

[I]f, with Bronislava Nijinska, the Ballets Russes launched a major female choreographer on an international career, the company did little else to accommodate female talent, even as performers. Indeed, with the partial exception of Tamara Karsavina, the female star of the company's pre-World War I years, the ballerina went into eclipse. She did so not only as an individual, but also as a category and an idea. Reversing the trend of nearly a century of ballet history, she became a subordinate or an appendage of the new Diaghilev hero, an absence in the poetics of ballet modernism at large.¹¹

I argue, however, that rather than understanding the Ballets Russes ballerina as a fading shadow of the nineteenth century Romantic ballerina, she can be recognized as an important representation and reflection of women's changing, albeit ambiguous, roles in the early twentieth century; and this, particularly within the company's second home in London. While the question of gender within the company has been considered in the French context,¹² little has been written about the parallels between ideas of gender and modernity in Britain and the early works of Ballets Russes. As ballet occupied a very different role in the history of the two countries, the history of dance in London requires treatment distinct from that in Paris. Unlike France, where ballet had known an era of prestige and popularity, courtly affiliations, and national funding, Britain had no serious ballet heritage to speak of before the twentieth century, despite its well-entrenched status in the Britain of today.¹³ It is true that by the time the Ballets Russes arrived in Paris in 1909, ballet in France was no longer the illustrious art form it had once been. Despite its nineteenth-century demise, however, ballet's history was enmeshed in French culture such that

¹¹ Lynn Garafola, "Reconfiguring the Sexes," in *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 180.

¹² Karthas, "The Politics of Gender."

¹³ For an overview of the history of ballet in France and Britain, see Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House, 2010).

the Ballets Russes reinvigorated a tradition in France that had no counterpart in Britain. Moreover, the company's singular impact in Britain is deserving of its own study, for, as noted by Garafola of the company's London seasons, "[n]owhere has the Ballets Russes become a part of the cultural inheritance of so many educated people [...] in no other country has the company been so mythologized."¹⁴ In this thesis, I explore how the female roles in the company's prewar repertoire, especially (though not exclusively) those danced by Karsavina, provided the ballerina with an opportunity to explore and develop a new identity, and how the nuances and artistry afforded by such roles were remarked upon extensively and thoughtfully by critics, suggesting and shaping new attitudes toward the ballerina. I consider the prewar London performances (1911-1914) for two reasons: first, these works have arguably been less studied than later, more avant-garde works with regard to women's roles; second, the prewar suffrage movement in Britain, in which conceptions of femininity and debates about the female body were central, provides an important backdrop for contemplating the significance of how the female dancer was represented.

In my investigation of the intersections between women, modernity, and the Ballets Russes, I first examine how the choreographic philosophy espoused by the company's primary prewar choreographer, Mikhail Fokine (1880-1942), allowed the image of the ballerina to evolve from that of its predecessor within British dance heritage, the nineteenth-century Romantic ballerina. An analysis of the costumes and poses captured in Ballets Russes publicity photos, as well as sketches and illustrations completed by women artists, underscore the ballerina's transformation and align her with modern currents, while two individual ballets—*L'Oiseau de feu* and *Schéhérazade*—serve as case studies for how women's choreographed roles both reflected

¹⁴ Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 300.

changing social mores and shattered dominant conceptions of the dancing female body. Finally, I analyze London critics' responses to women's performances in the company to demonstrate how a portrait of the Diaghilev ballerina emerges as a highly proficient professional whose rigorous training and captivating artistry were much lauded.

Throughout this thesis, my understanding of dance and dance reception as inhabiting and informing broader social currents is reflected in the following quote by prominent choreographer and scholar Susan Leigh Foster:

Each moment of watching a dance can be read as the product of choices, inherited, invented, or selected, about what kinds of bodies and subjects are being constructed and what kinds of arguments about these bodies and subjects are being put forth ... Approaching choreography as this kind of theorizing about what a body can be and do makes evident the ways in which dance articulates with social, aesthetic, and political values ... [T]he implementation of choices both produces and reflects these values.¹⁵

The early Diaghilev ballerina in Britain, though not often a focal point of Ballets Russes scholarship, is a prime example of Foster's point: a figure that challenges aesthetic currents within British dance history and one whose image "articulates with" the debates that characterized Britain in the prewar years concerning women as physical and political entities.

¹⁵ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Routledge, 2011), 4-5.

II. Situating the Ballets Russes in London

Despite the absence of an established ballet culture in London and concomitant audience, the public were nevertheless eager to receive the Ballets Russes during the initial seasons. Cyril Beaumont (1891-1976), who would become one of the most prominent dance critics and historians of the twentieth century, noted that British audiences “went to the performances of Diaghilev’s ‘Ballets Russes’ in a spirit of reverence, as worshippers to a shrine where something rarely beautiful was to be revealed; and the performances acquired a particular fragrance from that manner of approach.”¹⁶ Beaumont’s synaesthetic allusion was not misplaced; informed by Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “complete work of art,”¹⁷ Diaghilev presented audiences with ballets that entwined music, choreography, narrative, set design, and costuming in the pursuit of a multisensorial artistic whole.¹⁸

Several events precipitated the British public’s eagerness to witness the troupe perform. The company’s well-publicized success in Paris, where it had performed since 1909, no doubt primed London audiences to expect a magnificent show, and solo tours given by company dancers in London, including Tamara Karsavina (1885-1978) and Anna Pavlova (1881-1931),

¹⁶ Cyril Beaumont, *The Diaghilev Ballet in London* (Noverre Press, 2017), 39. Beaumont achieved renown as the ballet critic of *The Sunday Times* from 1950 to 1959 and as the author of multiple books on ballet. According to his memoirs, Beaumont attended every London season of the Ballets Russes but the first.

¹⁷ Diaghilev brought the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to perhaps even fuller fruition than Wagner did in his operas. As notes music scholar Thomas Grey, “The Ballets Russes enterprise also highlights the logical, practical importance of a professional impresario role (Diaghilev) in negotiating a more complete integration of media than Wagner had achieved, something that Wagner’s idealistic theorizing and his antagonism to a commodified culture ‘market’ would not have countenanced.” “The ‘Splendid and Shameful Art’: Dancing in and Around the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*,” in *Musicology and Dance: Historical and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Davinia Caddy and Maribeth Clark (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 149.

¹⁸ As the company evolved, its artistic approach would become more experimental and less concerned with a strict harmony of music and dance. In his biography of Diaghilev, Sjeng Scheijen notes that with Massine’s 1920 version of *Le Sacre du printemps*, “[t]he synthetic approach that had informed the Russian ballet in the Fokine years, rooted in the theories of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was no more. This new, analytic take on the relationship between dance and music would shape the aesthetic of the Ballets Russes for the rest of the company’s days and was to have a lasting influence on the future of classical dance in Europe and America.” *Diaghilev: A Life* (Profile Books, 2010), 361.

before the arrival of the Ballet Russes, benefitted from such reputation. In reference to such an event, the British theatre weekly *The Stage* proclaimed in 1909, “Naturally the principal attraction in the current bill is the appearance of the much-heralded and ‘much-boomed’ troupe of Russian Imperial Dancers, who, if reports are to be believed, have created something approaching a sensation in Paris by their work.”¹⁹ Such “famous Russian dancers,” as they were billed, had thrilled audiences and given them a taste of the proficiency and artistry of the Russian technique [Figure 1]. Prior to the arrival of the Ballets Russes, much exposure to ballet in London at the turn of the century was in the context of music halls, where excerpts from full-length ballets were shown as part of variety evenings featuring musical numbers and assorted variety acts, such as comedians, acrobats, singers, and animal acts. The variations performed in music halls were often taken from ballets written in the Romantic tradition, but the variety show format precluded the performance of lengthy ballets, meaning that there were no elaborate sets, sustained storylines, or musical development. As the variations were essentially performed void of narrative or artistic context, the focus often rested on the display of the individual performer’s technical skills and physique, inviting an audience more in search of “spectacle” than an artistically resonant whole. Skilled though the music hall dancers may have been, it would have been difficult to extricate their performance from the frivolity of its context, and a widespread belief that the dancers also worked as prostitutes further undermined any attempt to have them taken seriously as artists.²⁰ Even in larger productions, as notes dance historian Nesta Macdonald, “[a]fter the triumphs of the Romantic ballets of the 1830’s and 1840’s ... ballet in

¹⁹ *The Stage*, July 1, 1909, quoted in Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929* (Dance Horizons, 1975), 18.

²⁰ Dance historian Alexandra Carter notes that while many members of the public believed that music hall dancers moonlighted as prostitutes (an idea not entirely divorced from reality but exaggerated and reinforced in fictive works and later academic sources), the dancers themselves were at pains to defend their integrity and the talent and training required of their profession. “Prejudicial to Public Morality,” in *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet* (Routledge, 2004), 117.

England had degenerated into a formula of large-scale spectacles, full of complicated stage effects, in elaborate productions with large numbers in the *corps de ballet* ...”²¹ The Russian dancers, who organized full evenings of ballet and whose foreign cachet no doubt piqued the public’s interest, challenged these stereotypes and exposed audiences to the prospect of seeing ballet as something more than light entertainment to be enjoyed between a boxing match and a male impersonation number.²² In *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, author Samuel Hynes describes how the arrival of Russian dancers in London in the years preceding the Ballet Russes’ performances signalled a change in the public’s understanding of what ballet might offer: “Then, in April 1910, Anna Pavlova came to London with a small company of dancers from the Russian Imperial Ballet [...] Her success established serious ballet as a possible art in England; by giving English audiences a taste of great dancing in a traditional repertoire she prepared the way for the arrival in 1911 of Diaghilev’s company and modern ballet.”²³ A serious art form it may have been, but Russian ballet stars prompted gossip like any public figure. When *Tatler* magazine devoted its June 21, 1911 cover to dancer Mathilde Kschessinska (1872-1971), the caption accompanying the portrait read, “Certainly Madame Kschesinska [sic], the darling of the Russian aristocracy, is a wonderful dancer, and her art stands on a plane by itself. She is reputed to be immensely wealthy, and her jewels and dresses are always the *dernier cri* in the capital of the Czar, with whom she is a great favourite” [Figure 2]. And finally, the company’s first London performance, which took place at the coronation gala of King George V and preceded its opening

²¹ Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed*, 17.

²² Alwyn Turner notes that while female impersonators also performed in music halls, they were not nearly as popular as their male counterparts, perhaps because “there was less of a sexual charge here, the audience not wishing to be tricked into finding a man attractive,” alluding to the gender and predilections of most music hall audience members. “Women and Men,” in *Little Englanders: Britain in the Edwardian Era* (Profile Books Ltd., 2025), 223.

²³ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton University Press, 1968), 339-340.

season, was poised to garner respect and praise, as demonstrated by the following adulatory text in the souvenir program:

And here we must lay stress upon the remarkable fact of the equal pre-eminence of the masculine element with that of the ever-attractive feminine. They possess the same technical perfection, the same grace, the same '*science de la plastique*,' in which their art abides. For three successive seasons these marvellous artists have been the rage of Paris. The connoisseurs and flâneurs of the French *Opéra* have raved over the '*stupéfiante virtuosité, si pleine d'aisance de la troupe la plus riche et la plus homogène que l'on puisse concevoir ...*'²⁴

This text was perhaps intended to legitimize the *male* dancer, who would have been a novel and somewhat dubious character to London audiences accustomed to seeing women dancing male roles *in travesti* in music hall ballets.²⁵ But the stress on the “equal pre-eminence” of the masculine and feminine, and the “technical perfection” and “stupefying virtuosity” of the “richest and most homogenous troupe” also challenges the conception of ballet as petty entertainment and repositions it as a technically demanding art form practiced by professionals and capable of eliciting acclaim.

In London between 1911 and 1914, the Ballets Russes embarked on one to two seasons each year, performing works from among a repertory of nearly thirty ballets.²⁶ New works were added to the company's repertory consistently throughout its existence, but many of its most popular ballets were shown over multiple seasons. Prewar, there were a total of 124 evening or matinee performances in London, and since the ballets were short, often composed of a single act, audiences would have typically seen three to four such works, often interspersed with

²⁴ Quoted in Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed*, 30.

²⁵ Macdonald notes that by the early twentieth century, “[t]he male dancer had become subservient to the female star—indeed, sometimes a stalwart girl in *travesti* supported her.” *Diaghilev Observed*, 17.

²⁶ Information about the London prewar programming has been extracted from the comprehensive list of all Ballets Russes performances as compiled by Jane Pritchard and published in “Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes—An Itinerary. Part 1: 1909-1921,” *Dance Research* 27, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 108–98.

excerpts from operas,²⁷ at any given performance. The company's most-performed ballets in prewar London were *Prince Igor*, *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, *Schéhérazaïde*, *Le Carnaval*, *Thamar*, and *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, each having been performed over twenty-five times in the four-year span in question. *L'Oiseau de feu*, *Petrouchka*, and *Cléopâtre* were each performed at least fifteen times in the same period.²⁸ In contrast, despite its stature today, *Le Sacre du printemps* in its original choreography was only performed three times in London during its initial run in 1913.²⁹

The prewar ballets, narrative in nature, varied widely in the type of stories they told. All were choreographed or revised by Fokine, save Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), *Le Sacre du printemps*, and *Jeux* (1913). Each ballet invited the audience into a distinct universe, set in its own time period and geographic location, and accompanied by music from a number of composers. *Le Spectre de la Rose*, for example, opens on the bedroom of a young girl who drifts to sleep after receiving a rose at a ball, only to enter a vivid dream where the spirit of the rose, now personified, partners with her in a joyous dance. In the tragic *Petrouchka*, the title character is a lovelorn clown, one of three puppets brought to life at a Shrovetide fair in Saint Petersburg. When he is killed by his rival in a duel, his ominous spirit vows revenge. In *Thamar*, the Queen of Georgia tempts a suitor with a night of passion only to murder him and discard the lifeless

²⁷ Diaghilev began his theatre career in Europe by staging the Russian opera *Boris Godunov* in Paris in 1908, then introducing ballets in 1909 as part of the Paris opera season. His involvement in the arts in Europe, however, predated both his operas and ballets, as he had mounted a successful exhibition of Russian painting and sculpture in Paris at the *Salon d'Automne* of 1906. In Russia, among other endeavours, he had co-founded the journal *Mir iskusstva* (*The World of Art*, 1898-1904) with Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, who were later to design for the Ballets Russes. The journal gained the patronage of Tsar Nicolas II in 1900, and that same year, Diaghilev was appointed head of special assignments for the Imperial Theatres, a post which gave him unique access to the dancers who would later populate the ranks of the Ballets Russes. For a comprehensive account of Diaghilev's professional undertakings, see Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*.

²⁸ Each London season spanned approximately two months. A list prewar season dates, ballets, and the frequency with which they were performed is included in the Appendix.

²⁹ Nijinsky's original choreography was performed five times in Paris and three times in London in 1913. The ballet was later re-choreographed by Massine and performed by the company sporadically from 1920 onwards. The work has since been reimagined by many choreographers, perhaps most notably Pina Bausch in 1975.

body, while *Le Carnaval* presents a light-hearted series of romantic entanglements in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*.

If the ballets they performed evinced uncommon diversity, the dancers' training was uniformly exceptional. Although the Ballets Russes never performed in Russia, all its dancers in the early years had trained at the Imperial Theatre School and were employed by the Imperial Russian Ballet, which performed at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg.³⁰ In a 1911 article in *The Times*,³¹ the author takes pains to describe the exalted status of ballet in Russia ("the object of the tenderest solicitude on the part of the Court"), the government-funded training of young dancers, and how the Imperial Theatre School looks after students' every need as they complete their intensive academic and dance education. Details of graduates' guaranteed employment and fully pensioned retirement at thirty-five were presumably meant to convince the British reader of the solemnity of a Russian dancer's career.

British papers commended not only the discipline and proficiency of the dancers, but the gravity of their art. In 1911, in what has been described as "the first analytic article the *Times* ran on the Russian Ballet,"³² the author asserts that the Ballets Russes did not simply present British

³⁰ The Ballets Russes' European seasons were scheduled to coincide with the dancers' holiday schedules, permitting them dual employment with both the Mariinsky and the Ballets Russes.

³¹ "The Russian Imperial Ballet," *The Times*, February 18, 1911.

³² Amy Koritz, "Usurping High Culture: The Russian Ballet, I," in *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early-Twentieth-Century British Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 123. The article being referred to is "Music: The Russian Ballet," *The Times*, June 24, 1911. The author of this article, as for most reviews of the Ballets Russes in British newspapers, is not identified, but it is possibly Henry Cope Colles, who became the chief music critic for *The Times* the same year this article was published. Before dance criticism evolved into an independent field, dance reviews were generally published in the Music review section. Even today, ballets are often known by the composer's name rather than the choreographer's, as in "Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*." According to Susan Leigh Foster, the term "choreography" only came into widespread use in the twentieth century, being "first used in response to the innovations in ballet introduced by Nijinsky and Fokine when their works toured to Britain and the US. *Le Sacre du Printemps* prompted a large number of reviews when it premiered in 1913 that invoked choreography to identify Nijinsky's radical innovations in vocabulary and sequencing of movement. Many of the other Ballets Russes productions likewise inspired the use of choreography to name the new blendings of classical steps with other sources of movement." *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Routledge, 2011), 43-44.

audiences with a novel diversion, but that the ballets themselves invited a different sort of spectatorship. Unlike English ballet, the music critic writes, which “has been able to please the people without calling for any mental exertion on their part,” Russian ballet,

has not depended for its existence on giving immediate pleasure (the bane of all democratic art), but has been able to follow its own bent. It has not had to husband the imaginative energies of the spectators, but, on the contrary, has been able to pursue the proper aim of all arts—to trouble and exert their imagination.

The author stresses that while the Russians were indeed more technically accomplished than British dancers, technique in itself (as with other forms of art) is not terribly interesting. Of much greater import is that they use that technique in the service of ideas: “Russian ballet dancing never for one moment escapes from its subjection to ideas—and, moreover, artistic ideas, that is, conceived at a high pitch of emotional intelligence.” What the critic surmised was true: Fokine himself would expound on this notion three years later, when he would describe the philosophy he applied to creating ballets, in which the story of the ballet itself would determine all manner of choreographic and design choices. His approach would fundamentally alter the image of the ballerina.

III. Fokine’s “new ballet” and the reception of the Ballets Russes in London

From 1909 to 1912, Mikhail Fokine choreographed nearly all Ballets Russes productions,³³ establishing a legacy as one of the most important and innovative choreographers of the twentieth century. As a graduate of the Imperial Ballet School, Fokine was well-versed in the classical tradition, but he took pains to distinguish his works from those on which he was raised. In 1914, Fokine had a letter published in *The Times* in which he detailed how his own “new school of art” was distinct from both “the traditional ballet, which continues to exist in the Imperial Theatres,” and from “the principles of Isadora Duncan,” a modern dancer who had been touring Europe and the Americas since the first decade of the 1900s.³⁴ Fokine first describes the hallmarks of the “old ballet” as characterized by artifice: ballerinas wear a stiff bodice and pointe shoes, the legs are held in a turned out position, and dancers perform a “strictly established system of steps, gestures, and attitudes.”³⁵ Such ballets are something of a collage, he contends, with the choreographer drawing on a limited vocabulary of acceptable movements and bodily positions arranged in various patterns to convey the story. He then describes how Isadora Duncan rejected this “old ballet” and introduced an opposite form of dance: “natural dancing, in which the body of the dancer was liberated not only from stays and satin slippers, but also from

³³ The original choreography for three ballets performed during Fokine’s tenure is attributable to other choreographers, with revisions or additions by Fokine. These are *Le Festin* (1909), a collection of works by Fokine, Marius Petipa and others; *Giselle* (1910), originally by Jean Coralli, Jules Perrot, and Petipa (1841); and *Swan Lake* (1911), based on the revival by Petipa and Lev Ivanov (1895). Fokine would make a brief return to Diaghilev’s company in 1914 following Nijinsky’s dismissal, creating the ballets *Papillons*, *La Légende de Joseph*, and *Le Coq d’Or*. For production details on ballets produced by Diaghilev, see Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, Appendix C.

³⁴ *The Times*, July 6, 1914. “The Imperial Theatres” refers to the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg.

³⁵ The conventions of Romantic-era ballets and of modern dance are considered in greater detail later in this thesis.

the dance-steps of the ballet. She founded her dancing on natural movements and on the most natural of all dance-forms—namely, the dancing of the ancient Greeks.”³⁶

However “liberated” the modern dancer was, Fokine believed that neither classical nor modern dance allowed for the diversity of technique necessary for incorporating the many and varied aesthetic traditions that have existed across place and time. Rather, the “new ballet,”³⁷ Fokine explains, takes as its starting point the subject of the ballet, so that the choreography and design flow from the demands of the story. Fokine’s emphasis on naturalism reflects his broad interest in human history: “In the course of the ages,” he muses, “man has repeatedly changed his plastic language and expressed his joys and sorrows and all his emotions under a great variety of forms, often of extreme beauty. For man is infinitely various, and the manifold expressiveness of his gestures cannot be reduced to a single formula.”³⁸ Indeed, among the prewar ballets he

³⁶ At the turn of the twentieth century, modern dance was gaining momentum in London at around the same time as Diaghilev was enjoying his early success with his “*Saisons Russes*” of Russian opera in Paris. Modern dancers such as Maud Allan, Isadora Duncan, and Ida Rubinstein, among others, wrote extensively about their practice, posing modern dance as the antithesis to what they saw as artificial, mechanized balletic movement. Patronized and performed almost exclusively by women, they lauded bodily freedom unconstrained by the exigencies of classical technique, claiming modern dance encouraged “authentic” movement and emotional expression. Unlike classical ballet, modern dance did not require any specific training or mastery of a common vocabulary of movement at its inception; this is no longer the case, as it is now codified, taught alongside ballet in professional dance schools, and considered part of a dancer’s formal and necessary training. For a discussion of women and modern dance in the early twentieth century, see Edward Ross Dickinson, “Art, Women, Liberation,” in *Dancing in the Blood: Modern Dance and European Culture on the Eve of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). For an overview of the evolution of modern dance throughout the twentieth century, see Elizabeth Dempster, “Women Writing the Body: Let’s Watch a Little How She Dances” in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter (Routledge, 1998). Dempster notes that “[a]s the principles of modern dance have become progressively codified into systematic techniques, the concept of a ‘natural’ body, pre-existing discourse, can no longer be sustained. Modern dance, now distant from its creators’ originating ideas, is passed on through highly formalized training programmes; and like the classical system, this training involves erasure of naturally given physical traits and processes of reinscription,” 225.

³⁷ The term “ballet” becomes somewhat murky with the malleability of Fokine’s choreography to suit the piece. A fairly broad definition of ballet has since come into common usage: “Strictly speaking, the term ballet should only be applied to works based on the *danse d’école* and subsequent permutations of the academic form, but with the enormous cross-fertilization of dance in the 20th century the term took on a much broader meaning and is now frequently used to describe a wide range of non-classically based theatrical dance.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, 2nd ed., ed. Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell (Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁸ As an antidote to the confines of both classical and modern dance, Fokine proposes “The Five Principles (of the Russian Ballet)” in the same *Times* article. Briefly, these are:

1. The steps should be “representati[ve] of the period and character of the nation represented”;

choreographed for the Ballets Russes, we encounter classically-inspired works such as *Les Sylphides*, but there are also several examples of ballets set in a relatively specific time and place, such as the ancient or folkloric East (*Schéhérazade*, *L'Oiseau de feu*), ancient Egypt (*Cléopâtre*), medieval Georgia (*Thamar*), the age of Louis XIV (*Le Pavillon d'Armide*), and nineteenth-century Russia (*Petrouchka*). In line with Fokine's philosophy, the choreography and design followed suit: it would be strangely anachronistic, for instance, to dress characters in *Cléopâtre* in tutus and pointe shoes and have them execute steps developed centuries after Cleopatra's reign. Instead, Ta-Hor, a character in the ballet originally danced by Anna Pavlova, wears a long, straight dress in a fabric covered in geometrical motifs, dons a band across the forehead, and adopts a stereotypical pose, elements reminiscent of ancient Egyptian paintings [Figure 3].

Because dance, like other art forms, achieves meaning in part through the observance, rejection, and transformation of recognizable forms, shared knowledge between audience and choreographer helps to successfully transmit meaning. Foster explains this collaboration as follows:

Throughout the creative process of articulating these [individual and collective] identities, the choreographer engages a tradition of representational conventions, knowledge of which is shared to a greater or lesser extent by both dance makers and dance viewers. To achieve the meaning she envisions, the choreographer selects from among these conventions, implementing, innovating, and even challenging aspects of the tradition ... However immediate the dance's message may appear to viewers, their understanding of the dance will be based on their ability to decode the choreographic coding of meaning.³⁹

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2. Dancing and miming should only be employed if they are essential to the plot;
 3. "Conventional gesture" may only be used when necessary and should otherwise be replaced by "mimetic of the whole body";
 4. Expressiveness should advance from the face to the whole body, and from the dancer to the ensemble;
 5. All arts involved in creating a ballet are of equal import, without "any specific 'ballet' conditions [imposed] on the composer or the decorative artist," who are "give[n] complete liberty to their creative powers."

³⁹ Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 9.

Foster's text speaks to customary dance forms (steps, poses, gestures, costumes, narratives) shared by the choreographer and the audience that act as shorthand for conveying meaning. When Fokine presented the ballerina with both unfamiliar and traditional (classical) traits simultaneously, the very "representational conventions" that had characterized ballets prior to the Ballets Russes were laid bare by their absence, alteration, and juxtaposition with novel forms. This expanded visual and kinetic vocabulary embodied by the Fokine ballerina, in turn, may be understood as a harbinger of women's changing roles more broadly. Fokine's approach introduced a strikingly modern image of the ballerina, challenging the image of the female dancer that had been projected by one of the most significant influences on turn-of-the-century British dance culture, the Romantic ballet. To better understand the significance of the "new ballet" that Fokine's innovations brought about, and why characters like Ta-Hor would have been so novel, the following section situates the ballerina within the specificities that characterized dance in Britain before the arrival of the Ballets Russes.

IV. Critical perspectives on the Romantic ballerina

In Paris, London, and elsewhere in Europe, the Romantic ballet⁴⁰ enjoyed a brief period of immense popularity in the 1820s and 1830s, only to fall out of fashion in the 1850s.⁴¹ Such ballets were often driven by a story of forbidden or impossible love and incorporated supernatural or otherworldly forces, which typically found shape in the character of the sylph, the ethereal, unattainable object of the male dancer's desire.

One salient aspect of Romantic ballets, evident in emblematic works still performed today such as *La Sylphide* (1832),⁴² *Giselle* (1841), and *Paquita* (1846), is the reliance on gendered choreography, narratives, and costuming conventions. "As Romantic sentiments came to dominate tastes," notes Karthas, "the ballet, through its representations of the dancers, increasingly perpetuated the cultural production of femininity in both France and Victorian England."⁴³ The image of femininity portrayed through the Romantic ballerina finds its prime example in the Italian "superstar" dancer Marie Taglioni (1804-1884), "whose technique was so novel that the ballet and femininity conflated."⁴⁴ Taglioni rose to fame across Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, including in London. Credited with the popularization of dancing

⁴⁰ While the term "Romantic ballet" is widely accepted, some writers have argued that ballets of the nineteenth century were not comparable to other artistic output of the era in their failure to reject academicism. For a counterpoint that stresses the Romantic elements of ballet, such as an interest in the ethereal, the dichotomy of body and spirit, and the theme of tragic love, see Deborah Jowitt, "In Pursuit of the Sylph: Ballet in the Romantic Period," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Jens Richard Giersdorf and Yutian Wong (Routledge, 1998). If characterized by Romantic themes rather than chronological dates, the Romantic ballet could also be said to include later works, notably Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1877). Diaghilev himself dismissed Tchaikovsky's works, deriding "leur style conventionnel, basé surtout sur l'acrobatisme et tout contraire aux tendances esthétiques de la nouvelle école qui vient de triompher en Europe." Sergei Diaghilev, "À M. le rédacteur du *Times*," *The Times*, March 10, 1911.

⁴¹ Molly Engelhardt, "Marie Taglioni, Ballerina Extraordinaire: In the Company of Women," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 6, no. 3 (Winter 2010): par. 3.

⁴² Not to be confused with *Les Sylphides*, a Ballets Russes work that premiered in Paris in 1909.

⁴³ Karthas, "The Politics of Gender": 963.

⁴⁴ Engelhardt, "Marie Taglioni": par. 3.

on pointe,⁴⁵ Taglioni used the novel technique to accentuate the ethereal nature of her characters, as is reinforced through images of Taglioni that depict her barely touching the ground [Figures 4 and 5]. While such images are necessarily the product of the artist's vision and do not conform strictly to reality, the artist's choices do underscore how the image of the ballerina was popularly received, as such illustrations were frequently included in programmes, souvenir booklets, and magazines⁴⁶ that would have circulated among larger audiences than those who were able to see the ballet in person. Taglioni is depicted as ghostly, nearly weightless, perched on the tip a miniscule foot as if about to take flight. Her disconnectedness from the earthly realm is further accentuated by her soft and distant gaze, implying her belonging to or longing for another realm. Her impossibly round shoulders, emphasized by an open neckline, eliminate all angularity in her upper body, and the long tutu conceals the musculature in her legs that would have been required to sustain an arabesque on pointe. The tiny waist created by a corseted bodice impeded grand movement of the upper body and encouraged the adoption of demure poses. The bucolic settings and the inclusion of wings, flowers, and greenery on her person further encourages the fusion of her femininity and the natural world.

Dance scholarship in the late-twentieth century has investigated the representation of ballerinas in the Romantic tradition with mixed approaches and conclusions. Some critiques have focused on the ballerina's limited agency within an industry dominated by male interests, while others have considered how a gendered approach to ballet secured the ballerina's dominance

⁴⁵ Although Taglioni is often credited with being the first to dance on pointe in *La Sylphide* in Paris in 1832, dance scholars have suggested other dancers may have pioneered the technique earlier. For a history of the development of the pointe shoe from the Romantic era to today, see C. Aaron Lawry, "Pointe Shoes: A History of Reinvention, Commodification, and Mystification," *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 48, no. 1 (2022): 55-64.

⁴⁶ For a survey of images of Taglioni that were circulated during her lifetime, see Edwin Binney, "Longing for the Ideal: Images of Marie Taglioni in the Romantic Ballet," *Harvard Library Bulletin* XXXII, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 105-148.

onstage and in the public's imagination. In her feminist critique of the Romantic tradition, Susan Leigh Foster notes that the choreographic vocabularies for how male and female dancing bodies were expected to move were opposed; in women, "dainty and complex footwork," large *écartés*, "extended balances," and *pointe* work was prized, while men were expected to execute "high leaps, jumps with beats, and multiple pirouettes."⁴⁷ Foster notes that such choreographic differentiation was an invention of the nineteenth century, in contrast to the eighteenth-century custom for men and women to perform the same choreography in unison. In the nineteenth century, women's dancing was performed corseted and on *pointe*, with an emphasis on delicacy and ethereality in playing the role of the submissive love interest, as noted above, while men's dancing underscored their power and elevation in their conquest of the ballerina.⁴⁸ Foster understands the Romantic ballerina as passive: a controlled figure, outfitted in constrictive attire, required to appear so light as to be nearly incorporeal, made a spectacle by the male dancer who lifts, turns, guides, and displays her body, and who exists only to satisfy the male dancer's sexual appetite and desire for control. The very nature of this gendered dance is characterized by inequality in the choreography: the dancers do not desire each other, but rather "[s]he is the registering of *his* desire. *She* is attraction itself which *he* presents for all the world to see."⁴⁹

In her thoughtful reflections on the nature of Romantic ballet, dance critic and choreographer Deborah Jowitt presents an attenuated understanding of the ballerina, drawing attention to her inherently ambivalent character. She writes:

[B]allet librettists and choreographers—almost without exception male—revealed confused emotions in regard to women. On the one hand, almost all the stories were told from the hero's point of view; on the other, the ballerinas dominated the stage. Even in ballets

⁴⁷ Susan Leigh Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," in *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture, and Power* (Routledge, 1996), 4.

⁴⁸ Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," 3.

⁴⁹ Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," 2.

where the hero dreamed the heroine, she was clearly superior to him—enchanted, evasive, unrestricted by his codes, and able to drift about on her toes.⁵⁰

Lynn Garafola also takes up the question of gender and the Romantic tradition, emphasizing how the nineteenth-century ballerina profited from a balletic tradition constructed entirely around her persona. Garafola sees this figure from a different angle than do Foster and Jowitt: she is now a powerhouse, the embodiment of ethereal lightness and otherworldly grace, the incarnation of idealized femininity, the central attraction whose story is told time and again in dances created for and performed by her. Ballet in the nineteenth century, she contends, “was uniquely an expression of the feminine as embodied in the ideology and physical presence of the ballerina,”⁵¹ and pointework, “more than any other aspect of female technique, defined the ballerina; it was her exclusive province and an analogue of the idealism traditionally embodied in her roles.”⁵²

As the long nineteenth century drew to a close, however, the “expression of the feminine” embodied in the Romantic ballerina became less aligned with the expanding concept of what the feminine could encompass. The ballerina is not a stagnant cultural figure, forever fossilized in her glory days of the early 1800s. As Foster contends, “[o]nly by analyzing those changes that reorganized male and female vocabularies and the coordination of male and female interaction can one see ballet not as a mere reflection of social changes but as one of the endeavors that produce such changes.”⁵³ The ballerina under Fokine never fully shed her sylph persona, but it became one of many she now embodied. Multitudinous, the modern ballerina came not only to resemble the modern woman, but to suggest her potential.

⁵⁰ Jowitt, “In Pursuit of the Sylph,” 210.

⁵¹ Garafola, “Reconfiguring the Sexes,” 180.

⁵² Garafola, “Reconfiguring the Sexes,” 183.

⁵³ Foster, “Choreographies of Gender,” 13.

V. The Ballets Russes ballerina and ambivalent femininity

Fokine's belief that ballet should draw on a plurality of movement styles, and that the time period in which the ballet is set should determine the quality of movement and attendant costuming, culminated in a series of widely varying examples of how ballerinas looked and moved onstage, and for how they adhered to or broke away from expected forms, not the least of which was the sylph. In a 1911 photograph taken by British photographer Emil Otto Hoppé, we see company dancer Sofia Fedorova (1879-1963) in character as a maiden in *Prince Igor* [Figure 6]. The ballet is centred on the Polovtsians, a Turkic nomadic people dating from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. Her loose tunic, distinctive headwear, lack of ornament, and the bucket she carries suggest that she is engaged in physical labour, while her natural pose and downcast gaze lend her an air of humility and non-interest in the viewer. Beaumont describes the maidens' dance as follows:

They dance with slow languorous movements, their bodies swaying rhythmically to the fluttering of the rose-coloured veils which they hold above their heads between outstretched hands. They turn round and fall on one knee ... Now they sway their bodies from side to side with rippling movements of their arms. They incline their heads backward and forward, then rise to their feet.⁵⁴

The rhythmic, but seemingly languid movement of the dancers, communal and grounded, stands in stark contrast to the strict, prescribed, delicate, and restrained steps of the Romantic period.

By contrast, in Stanislaw Julian Ignacy's 1912 photograph of Tamara Karsavina in *Thamar*, Karsavina is dressed as the Georgian queen, her long hair plaited with pearls and topped with regal headwear, her body entirely covered in rich brocade layers, a melding of modesty and ostentation [Figure 7]. She looks directly at the viewer, seemingly forbidding us to draw closer.

⁵⁴ Cyril Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets: A Guide to the Principal Ballets of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1938), 561.

In the ballet, she eventually kills her lover, pictured behind her, and Beaumont describes her stage presence in ominous terms: “the queen, though never rendered obtrusive, is made to dominate the whole like some evil spirit.”⁵⁵ Worlds away from the sylph, *Thamar* presents yet another image of the ballerina: self-possessed, violent, callous.

The Ballets Russes did not completely eschew the Romantic tradition. Their most-performed prewar ballet, *Les Sylphides*, in particular, retains the image of the ballerina popularized by Taglioni [Figure 8]. However, such a production would have been seen in concert with several other ballets at any given performance, as demonstrated on posters advertising an evening’s lineup [Figure 9]. The scholarship on Ballets Russes productions typically treats ballets individually or grouped according to theme. However, it is also useful to consider how the works performed in a given season were in dialogue with each other in order to gain a fuller understanding of how the company’s repertoire functioned as a whole, as audiences would not have seen works performed in isolation.

L’Oiseau de feu, for example, a one-act ballet scored by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971),⁵⁶ which was performed in London in the 1912, 1913, and 1914 seasons along with *Les Sylphides* (and several times in the same performance), also includes a supernatural female character in the titular Firebird, though her appearance is unmistakably distinct from that of the sylph [Figure 10]. The corset and tutu have been replaced with a fairly unstructured bodice and gauzy breeches, allowing full freedom of movement. The virginal white, largely unadorned costume has given way to a riotous mix of beading, embroidery, and feathers. An illustration by designer Léon Bakst (1866-1924) provides a sense of the costume’s brilliant colours, as well as the

⁵⁵ Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets*, 594.

⁵⁶ *L’Oiseau de feu* was Stravinsky’s first commission from Diaghilev, and the two would collaborate frequently in the years that followed, with Stravinsky composing the scores for *Petrushka* (1911), *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), *Pulcinella* (1920), *Le Chant du Rossignol* (1920), *Renard* (1922), *Les Noces* (1923), and *Apollon Musagète* (1927).

underlying musculature of the dancer's legs [Figure 11].⁵⁷ Nevertheless, given the supernatural subject of the ballet, there is more than one nod to Romantic tropes: in a posed photo with Fokine, the Firebird dances on pointe, turned out, in a supported pas de deux [Figure 12]. A closer look at the story further reveals the Firebird's ambivalent femininity.

According to Beaumont's description of *L'Oiseau de feu*,⁵⁸ the first scene follows Ivan Tsarevitch, a Russian prince who is hunting in the woods. He comes upon the Firebird and attempts to shoot her with an arrow. He misses, but captures her in his arms and she struggles to free herself. Spent, she offers him one of her golden feathers to secure her release, which he accepts. In the second scene, Ivan, still in the woods, comes upon a group of women. The leader of the group urges him to turn away to avoid trespassing on the grounds of Kōstchei, an evil enchanter who will capture him. Undeterred and overcome by his sudden love for the maiden, he proceeds toward the castle as a "motley horde of demons and goblins"⁵⁹ descend upon him. As Kōstchei is about to capture Ivan, Ivan produces the golden feather, summoning the Firebird. The Firebird dances each group of goblins to sleep and points Ivan to Kōstchei's soul, contained in a large egg hidden in a tree trunk. Ivan smashes the egg to the ground and the stage goes black. The lights return, revealing the maidens and others celebrating their freedom and proclaiming Ivan their saviour.

Dance critic and historian Sally Banes has written on the role of the Firebird as a challenge to the gender roles and tropes that are present in Romantic-era ballets, asserting that "what is not widely discussed is the progressive image of women created under Diaghilev's

⁵⁷ The prominent décolleté, talons, and pointed babouches do not seem to have been translated into the final costume design.

⁵⁸ Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets*, 581-584. Beaumont notes that the story of *L'Oiseau de feu* is a pastiche of several Russian fairy tales.

⁵⁹ Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets*, 582.

auspices.”⁶⁰ In her close reading of the female characters and gender dynamics in *L’Oiseau de feu*, Banes highlights the Firebird’s alternating dominant and relenting stances, suggesting that the bird engages in “benign deception ... to creat[e] the fiction that he is dominating her”⁶¹ in a choreographed negotiation of power and submission. “And most puzzling,” Banes notes, “is that at first glance, the pas de deux of Ivan and the Firebird seems to be about power—his struggle for domination and hers for freedom—rather than about love”⁶² as is typical and expected of the pas de deux. To use Foster’s terminology, while the form of the pas de deux is a recognizable “representational convention” of a Romantic work, the tradition is challenged when the content is a quest for power and not for love.

Ultimately Banes invites a political reading of this work, wherein the Firebird, representing the natural order, oversees the story’s proper resolution, just as the “natural” ascendancy of the Tsar may be understood as the binding force that holds Russia together. “It is the legitimization of the political order as part and parcel of the natural order that underwrites the relation of Ivan and the Firebird throughout this ballet,” writes Banes, stressing that “[u]ltimately this ballet is not about sexual politics but about national ideology.”⁶³ This interpretation may be in line with the original intention of the work, but it does not forcibly exclude the possibility of an alternate reading that understands the Firebird and the maiden as representations of an ambivalent womanhood, a reading that merits consideration given the politics of suffrage that consumed Britain at the very time *L’Oiseau de feu* was being shown. The next sections provide an overview of how women’s bodies were implicated in the prewar suffrage movement and

⁶⁰ Banes, “Early Modern Ballet,” 94. In this respect, Banes also discusses Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* and Nijinska’s *Les Noces*.

⁶¹ Banes, “Early Modern Ballet,” 97.

⁶² Banes, “Early Modern Ballet,” 97.

⁶³ Banes, “Early Modern Ballet,” 99.

contemplates the ballerinas' roles in *L'Oiseau de feu* and in another highly successful Diaghilev ballet, *Schéhérazade*, within this context.

VI. Suffrage and the female body onstage

In her consideration of the Ballets Russes ballerina in France, Ilyana Karthas notes that “in the early twentieth century, we find critics increasingly locating artistic value in corporeal movement and, in turn, struggling to reconcile the new technical virtuosity on the stage with gender boundaries, especially those concerning the female body.”⁶⁴ This point of view is worth contemplating in the British context, for when the Ballets Russes exploded onto the London scene, contentiousness around the female body had reached a fever pitch: as the call for women’s suffrage was gaining terrific momentum, women’s bodies, both imagined and in corporeal form, became sites of debate, ridicule, resistance, pride, and suffering. The body of the ballerina, in turn—publicly accessible but shielded by the separation of stage and spectator—reflected the ambivalence of the female form while suggesting its potential.

In Britain in the few years that preceded World War I, the boundaries of the suffrage movement extended beyond a call for women’s enfranchisement. Historian Susan Kingsley Kent describes the extent to which the politics of suffrage touched on every aspect of women’s lived experience:

[A] provocative mass movement in support of women’s suffrage vigorously challenged the ideology of separate spheres and the understandings of masculinity and femininity and of male and female sexuality that underpinned liberal practice ... The domestic ideology of separate spheres for men and women, and the notions of masculinity and femininity and of male and female sexuality that informed it, had been vigorously, publicly, and spectacularly contested, and masculinity discredited.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ilyana Karthas, “The Politics of Gender”: 979.

⁶⁵ Susan Kingsley Kent, “Crises of Masculinity: Sex and War, 1908-1918,” in *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990* (Routledge, 1999), 262.

In *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14*, art historian Lisa Tickner demonstrates how suffragettes⁶⁶ employed the visual language of banners, posters, and pamphlets to gain support for their demands, while detractors created, co-opted, and circulated images of women in photographs, illustrations, and caricatures in an effort to undermine the cause.⁶⁷ Both sides recognized the appeal of the image as shorthand: suffragettes needed to create a visual association between traditional femininity and enfranchisement just as detractors attempted to vilify the suffragette by making her seem ugly and masculine. Some women needed convincing, too, as not all were in favour of the suffrage movement. Some women saw suffrage tactics as too unruly and violent; others simply did not think their cause was worthwhile. The Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, for example, "argued that it was perfectly appropriate for women to vote in local elections, since councils dealt with social issues, with public health, education and the like, but that national government was concerned with defence, diplomacy and strategic industry—areas in which women played no part."⁶⁸

In many ways, this legal and political debate with tremendous consequences for women's lived experience was played out in visual terms: Tickner notes that competing images of womanhood were pitted one against the other, reflecting how "the Victorian and Edwardian public expected to see the virtues and vices of femininity written on the body, and were coached by moralists, novelists, journalists, illustrators and the writers of etiquette manuals in the detailed interpretation of physiognomy, gesture and pose."⁶⁹ Suffragettes and their detractors used a

⁶⁶ The term "suffragette" is commonly used today to describe women who advocate for the right to vote. It was initially coined by the *Daily Mail* in 1906 as a derisive term to ridicule the women's cause. As is often the case, the targeted group eventually co-opted the term to undermine its intended effect. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) even named their newspaper *The Suffragette* from 1912 to 1914.

⁶⁷ Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁶⁸ Turner, *Little Englanders*, 240.

⁶⁹ Tickner, *Spectacle*, 151.

variety of tactical strategies involving the body in their respective campaigns. Representations of women in photographs, illustrations, and comics were created and coopted by the antisuffragist movement, which insisted that militancy marred a woman's appearance, and played this character against images of more "natural" and attractive women, among which images of the wife and mother predominated. A poster designed for the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage entitled "A Suffragette's Home," for example, depicts a disgruntled man confronting the viewer when he arrives home to find his suffragette wife in torn socks, his home uncared for, and his child asleep on the floor [Figure 13]. His wife appears ashamed or upset, shielding her face from view in a pile of fabric, while the burnt-out lamp and cool colours suggest that the light and warmth he would expect of the home has been extinguished. Meanwhile, suffragettes created imagery intended to placate and reassure both opponents of suffrage and women themselves that giving women the vote would not undermine their traditional roles, but rather strengthen and bolster the social order. Circulating and promoting the appropriate imagery was crucial; visual representation in many ways had a greater impact than the intricacies of debate, and was more apt to reach a wide audience, including those unable or unwilling to read. The "essential purpose" of suffrage propaganda, argues Tickner, "was to demythologize the dominant ideology of Edwardian femininity, to fill out its absences and exploit its contradictions."⁷⁰

So too were women's physical bodies woven into the fabric of the debate. Kent describes how, in an effort to explain why women were not suitable to vote, doctors and scientists testified to the limits imposed by women's biological nature, which rendered them "too emotional, too unstable, too lacking in intellectual capacity to participate in the running of government."⁷¹ In counter-attack, the physical force used by men to counter suffragists' demonstrations through

⁷⁰ Tickner, *Spectacle*, 152.

⁷¹ Kent, "Crises of Masculinity," 269.

acts of restraint, incarceration, and violence were used to discredit the idea of men's superior intellect and capacity for emotional containment. Kent notes that "[m]ilitants and nonmilitants alike expressed appreciation that 'brute' sexuality in men had finally been exposed" and provided good cause to question gender stereotypes and the separate spheres ideology.⁷²

Women used their own bodies as tools of protest as well. Writer and former professor of literature Wendy Parkins discusses the press coverage of the suffrage movement, with a focus on Mary Leigh, a prominent member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU): "In narratives, tributes and photographs of Leigh, it was Leigh's body which was singled out for attention: its strength, agility, deportment and dress represent a feminist agency derived from corporeal performance."⁷³ Suffragettes adorned themselves in purple, white and green, the colours of the WSPU, wearing, as it were, their political demands on their bodies.⁷⁴ In more extreme measure, imprisoned suffragettes entered hunger strikes, jeopardizing their own health for the cause. "Such protest," notes Parkins, "insisted on the suffragettes' status as embodied political subjects: they framed their hunger strike in political terms and understood their bodies as a powerful means of dissent."⁷⁵ Force feeding, a particularly violent practice whereby women who entered a hunger strike were restrained and fed through a tube inserted in the nose, was depicted in suffragette campaigns to publicize the barbarity by which their protest was being met [Figure 14]. Physical protest reached its most acute form in May 1913, when suffragette Emily Wilding Davison fatally threw herself in front of the king's horse at the Epsom Derby.

⁷² Kent, "Crises of Masculinity," 267-268.

⁷³ Wendy Parkins, "Protesting Like a Girl: Embodiment, Dissent and Feminist Agency," *Feminist Theory* 1, no. 1 (2000): 66.

⁷⁴ Parkins, "Protesting Like a Girl": 65. Parkins also notes that Harry Selfridge, an outspoken supporter of women's suffrage, championed the movement by dressing Selfridges department store windows in WSPU colours.

⁷⁵ Parkins, "Protesting Like a Girl": 70.

VII. *L'Oiseau de feu*

The suffrage movement framed women's bodies as sites of both conquest and protest. As a contemporaneous cultural event, revisiting *L'Oiseau de feu* with a view to this context suggests a new way of thinking about the interplay of the ballet's three main characters.⁷⁶ Banes contrasts the demure, virginal, maiden (a role echoing in the Romantic tradition) with the voluptuous, sensual Firebird, noting how their opposing demeanours prompt the prince to dance with them in kind: "The Firebird is powerful; Ivan immediately grasps her and struggles with her. Tsarevna is demure, and Ivan keeps a civil distance."⁷⁷ The juxtaposition of the Firebird against the maiden presents competing visions of the feminine: the maiden's, whose power is dependent on her potential as a love interest to the prince, and the Firebird's, whose power is self-contained and emanates from within. The prince's first instinct when confronted with the magnificent creature is not to admire or even to capture her, but to hunt her, struggling to supplant her power with his own. When he fails, he lays in wait until a physical struggle ensues, with the prince vying for dominance, she for survival. It is only when she gives him of her body—the golden feather—that he relents, satisfied that he has conquered.

L'Oiseau de feu parallels the implication of the female body in the struggle for power that was so crucial to the suffrage campaign. The Firebird, too, is at once vigorous and vulnerable. She is also targeted for her difference, and not protected like the maiden, who embodies more Romantic-era ideas of femininity. And yet, like the suffragist, she occupies an ambivalent visual space: she is made to appear wild, unruly, and primitive, but dances on pointe and evinces a

⁷⁶ I am indebted to dance historian Ramsay Burt, whose article suggesting a relationship between the British suffrage movement and *Le Sacre du printemps* was influential in developing this portion of the thesis. See "Le Sacre du printemps in London: The Politics of Embodied Freedom in Early Modernist Dance and Suffragette Protest," in *Russia in Britain, 1880–1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, ed. R. Beasley and P. R. Bollock (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁷ Banes, "Early Modern Ballet," 97.

striking beauty. The prince initially attacks her, but she is later his saviour. Her struggle for freedom is also physical, and likewise culminates in a breach of bodily integrity. As a modern female role, the character of the Firebird occupies a liminal space: unmistakably new but not entirely divorced from her Romantic predecessor. She is aligned with the contemporaneous and ambivalent political position of women, whose bodies became sites of power and subdual, and whose careful coupling of tradition and progress was central to their cause.

Beyond the representation of women, the embodied nature of dance lends itself to the suggestion that the movement witnessed onstage offered audiences new ideas about their own corporeal potential. In the context of Stockholm theatrical dance at the turn of the twentieth century, performing arts scholar Lena Hammergren proposes that “new performance structures, new aesthetic expressions and new movement vocabularies were suddenly introduced, then offering the viewers the possibility to engage in new kinds of corporeal sensations and perceptions.”⁷⁸ Fokine’s works around the same time also offered audiences new forms of movement, notably showing women dancing in ways that were much more free than what was permitted by classical technique. The question as to whether women in the audience translated the movement onstage to kinaesthetic sensations in their own bodies is difficult to ascertain absent written accounts of their lived experience. However, performance studies scholar Anna Paliy suggests “that a serious consideration of the woman spectator as an active participant in theatrical dance performance, through her own artistic practice, is indispensable to building a more holistic view of ballet’s role in reinventing the modernist subject-object relationship.”⁷⁹ To

⁷⁸ Lena Hammergren, “Embodied Spectatorship? Interpreting Dance Reviews Around 1900,” *Nordic Theatre Studies* 29, no. 1 (2018): 13.

⁷⁹ Anna Paliy, “If Napkins Could Talk: Women’s Action Sketching at the Ballets Russes,” *Feminist Modernist Studies* 4, no. 3 (2021): 300. Paliy also discusses sketches by French artist and writer Valentine Hugo (1887-1968) at the Ballets Russes’ Paris performances.

this end, Paliy considers sketches of the Ballets Russes by artist Laura Knight (1877-1970) and, in particular, a series of sketches depicting Karsavina as the Firebird.⁸⁰ A close reading of the sketches, she proposes, “aids in dissolving the conceptual membrane historically insulating the dance spectator apart from the stage performer.”⁸¹ In this light, the sketches may be understood as evidence of the artist’s kinaesthetic response to *L’Oiseau de feu*. Paliy describes the sketches, “guided by a strong kinetic instinct of the hand,” as follows:

Knight isolates particularly energetic positions executed by Karsavina ... using brisk, confident motions of the hand. Each of her lines exceeds the precise shape of her physical subject, creating large mirroring tails resembling apostrophes, one anticipating the next ... In the loose extension of her elbows, which allows her to recoil in self-embrace, we glean a coy sensuality. In the slender trunks of her legs, calves are explicitly defined using thickening and overlapping lines. She is represented in balletic turnout, and yet standing on the full weight of her feet rather than en pointe which was by then the norm. These details indicate that what interested Knight in Karsavina was not the possibility of idealizing her appearance as a romantic fairy tale character but rather a chance to visualize the woman as a self-reliant athletic figure, subverting *The Firebird*’s very genre of storytelling while presenting a modern feminine physique. Indeed, Knight’s depiction of Karsavina matches that of the “Fokine ballerina” emergent at the time.⁸²

Paliy further notes that the sketches echo Garafola’s description of the ballerina body Fokine sought to create, “one that moved freely and expansively, arching, stretching, twisting, bending, in a way that enhanced its plasticity and three-dimensionality ... this unfettered body, with its curves and softened contours, was the basis of the ‘femininity’ he prized in his women dancers.”⁸³ Knight’s “brisk, confident motions,” mirroring the Firebird’s own character, may be evidence of her own bodily response to the female body she viewed onstage, just as she may have defined her calves using “thickening and overlapping lines” to emphasize her own sense of what such musculature must feel like. Interestingly, Paliy mentions that Knight did not depict

⁸⁰ These sketches are housed in a private collection and are, unfortunately, not publicly accessible and were not reproduced in Paliy’s article.

⁸¹ Paliy, “Women’s Action Sketching”: 302.

⁸² Paliy, “Women’s Action Sketching”: 303-304.

⁸³ Garafola, “Reconfiguring the Sexes,” 183.

Karsavina on pointe, which is at odds with the costume shown in publicity photographs. The shoes may have been changed during the show's run, or Knight may have selected moments when Karsavina was off-pointe for her illustrations; either way, the ambiguous nature of her footwear as illustrated by Knight suggests a further way in which *L'Oiseau de feu* represents the ballerina at a crossroads between old and new.

VIII. *Schéhérazade*

A very different picture emerges of the female body through the ballerina in *Schéhérazade*, a one-act ballet based on the *One Thousand and One Nights* folk tales. It was first performed in London in 1911 and is set to music by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908).⁸⁴ The scene is a harem dominated by the overbearing Shah Shahryar, who is suspicious that his wives have been unfaithful. Once he leaves for a hunting trip, the wives, including the favourite, Zobeida, free the Shah's slaves⁸⁵ and encourage them to partake in an orgiastic celebration. As Beaumont recounts, “[s]oon the floor is covered with a mad revolving throng, drunk with wine and consumed with passion.”⁸⁶ When the Shah returns unexpectedly, he is enraged by the sight. He and his men slay the wives and slaves, and as just as the Shah is set to kill Zobeida, she snatches a dagger from one of the men and kills herself.

Where the Romantic ballet revolves around the male dancer's desire for the unattainable woman, *Schéhérazade* unabashedly represents women as desirous, sexual, and active. Hoppé's photograph of Karsavina in the role of Zobeida reflects these traits [Figure 15]. Her curved back, forward lean, raised arms, and lifted leg accentuate how her costume allowed for unhindered movement. The loose fit used to achieve this quality is attenuated by careful placement of seams and ornamented gathering of fabric, creating a garment that reveals the sensual shapes made by

⁸⁴ The score was written prior to the ballet, in 1888.

⁸⁵ Like some other works in the company's repertoire, elements of *Schéhérazade* reflect a historical worldview in which racism, homophobia, and antisemitism were ubiquitous, often unquestioned, and rarely decried. In Garafola's essay in the catalogue for the 2024 exhibition *Crafting the Ballets Russes*, she states that “[r]acist representation pervades the works of the Ballets Russes and the culture of its time. The Golden Slave, the virtuosic role danced by Vaslav Nijinsky in the 1910 ballet *Schéhérazade*, set in Persia, is feminized and emasculated: key aspects in Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism's distorted representations. In Ida Rubinstein's role in *Schéhérazade* as Queen Zobéide, antisemitic allusions to her appearance and name underlined the racialized exoticism, coupled with eroticism, that titillated Paris audiences of the Belle Époque.” Robinson McClellan and Lynn Garafola, *Crafting the Ballets Russes: Music, Dance, Design: The Robert Owen Lehman Collection* (The Morgan Library & Museum, 2024), 53. Choreographers such as Alonzo King have reimagined the ballet for contemporary audiences, attempting to rid it of its prejudicial tropes and celebrate its Middle Eastern origins.

⁸⁶ Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets*, 577-578.

the body while eliminating the artificial curves created by the corset. Her gaze is not that of an ingénue, but a confident, curious woman. Her outstretched hands (rather than the delicately curved hands of classical technique meant to elongate the line of arms) communicate multitudes: she seems to be at once pushing away an invisible adversary, reaching for an object of desire, and protecting herself from an unknown threat. Illustrations of the ballet echo these themes. A 1912 volume of the art, music, and literature magazine *Rhythm* includes two works by artist Anne Estelle Rice (1877-1959) representing *Schéhérazade*, both exaggerating the role of the costumes in contributing to the overall sense of pliancy and expansiveness created by the women's figures [Figures 16 and 17]. Tellingly, Rice omits the "Golden Slave" from her illustrations, who is often understood as the principal character in the ballet, in favour of depicting the Shah's wives; by contrast, Beaumont had the impression that the "whole ballet was dominated by Nijinsky's performance."⁸⁷ As with Knight's *L'Oiseau de feu* sketches, Rice's works can be considered as a translation of her kinaesthetic response to the ballet onto paper. The figures seem to traverse the page horizontally, taking up a wide swathe of space. The lines of the figures' bodies reverberate in the costumes and props that seem to fuse around them. In the second figure, the reaching pose of what is perhaps a jump depicted in mid-air conveys extraordinary athleticism. Rice is also careful, even in her highly symmetrical, almost graphic works, to distinguish the dancers through details of their costumes, calling attention to the individuality of the referents.

Scholars vary in their reading of *Schéhérazade*. Garafola, for instance, identifies this ballet and several other early works, including *Cléopâtre* (1909), *Thamar*, *La Tragédie de*

⁸⁷ Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets*, 580. The same issue of *Rhythm* also contains Rice's illustrations of *Le Spectre de la rose*, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, *Thamar*, and *Le Dieu bleu*. Despite the centrality of the male role(s) in each of these ballets, Rice chose to depict predominantly the women in most of her sketches, reinforcing the possibility of a kinaesthetic kinship between viewer/artist and performer.

Salomé (1913), and *La Légende de Joseph* (1914), as ballets that “exploited the theme of voluptuous sadism” in which “female sexuality and female power were a deadly combination, with more than a touch of misogyny.”⁸⁸ It is, after all, Zobeida and the other women who instigate the freeing of the slaves and encourage them to fulfill their (female) desires, culminating in the final tragedy. Film theorist Peter Wollen also underscores the ballet’s “eroticized and sado-masochistic vision,”⁸⁹ but points out the importance of the women’s agency: “it is the woman who is desiring, the slave who is desired. This is in line both with the introduction to the *Thousand and One Nights*, the main source, and the decadent image of the *femme fatale*, both of which stress the libidinal power of woman, once her desire is released.”⁹⁰ While Orientalist tropes accentuating the heightened sexual appetite of the other clearly come into play, concurrent readings of the ballet that stress the women’s self-determination are also possible.

Just as the suffrage movement called into question accepted ideals concerning women’s sexuality, so do representations of “deviant” female sexuality onstage suggest new ways of conceiving of women’s sexual identities. Kent writes that feminists held a “deeply-felt conviction that the regimes of male sexuality and female subordination called into being by separate sphere ideology had to be transformed. The suffrage movement, [suffragette Christabel Pankhurst] insisted, constituted ‘a revolt against the evil system under which women are regarded as sub-human and as the sex slaves of men.’”⁹¹ *Schéhérazaïde* presents a narrative in which women, as concubines, are plainly cast in a “sex slave” role, but who refuse to succumb to

⁸⁸ Garafola, “Reconfiguring the Sexes,” 182.

⁸⁹ Peter Wollen, “Out of the Past: Fashion / Orientalism / The Body,” in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Verso, 1993), 17.

⁹⁰ Wollen, “Out of the Past,” 18.

⁹¹ Kent, “Crises of Masculinity,” 271. Pankhurst was a co-founder of the WSPU.

the expectation of subservience. Cultural historian Mica Nava espouses a view of the ballet that acknowledges the women's transgressions as acts of defiance:

Women in this narrative make use of the absence of the despotic patriarch to resist his authority and betray him, an ominous message about the absence of men—in the colonies, at war and work—and the domestic entrapment of women ... most discursive constructions of sexual relations between occident and orient were between dominant western males and eastern females, and *Schéhérazade*, insofar as it emphasized the transgressive libidinal desire of women and eroticized the black male, confounded this.⁹²

Although Nava's account incorporates broader themes that there is space to deal with sufficiently here, including colonialism and the representation of race, the point is nevertheless made that the women in *Schéhérazade* act of their own volition, and it is their desire that propels the action of the ballet forward. What is absent from these and other accounts, however, is a treatment of Zobeida's death as the final act of defiance. When confronted with the Shah and his imminent violence toward her, Zobeida prefers to take her own life than to fall victim to his aggression. Seen within the context of suffrage, where so many women were silenced, tortured, and violated for claiming their right to full legal personhood, the martyred figure of Zobeida similarly defies expectations of gendered subdual and refuses to relinquish control over her final moments.

The next and final section relies on British newspaper reviews of the Ballets Russes to offer an alternate viewpoint of the ballerina's changing role, not in the roles she played, but as a cultural figure.

⁹² Mica Nava, "The Cosmopolitanism of Commerce and the Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and the Tango 1911–1914," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 175. The "black male" is in reference to the Golden Slave played by Nijinsky, lamentably in blackface.

IX. The Ballets Russes ballerina through critics' eyes

It will perhaps come as no surprise that the women who danced such arresting roles garnered critical interest as dancers. Critics evinced a deep respect for Diaghilev's ballerinas as accomplished technicians and artists, signalling a willingness to view the legitimacy of dance as a profession for women. Dancers such as Mathilde Kschessinska, Tamara Karsavina, and Anna Pavlova were far from ignored even as they danced alongside Nijinsky. Reflecting the close attention that audiences paid, these three early ballerinas were differentiated in the public's eye; as Nesta Macdonald notes, "Kschessinska had London's curiosity, Pavlova ... its amazed admiration, but Karsavina had its heart."⁹³

In reference to the music hall ballet, dance historian Alexandra Carter remarks how "for women to venture out of the home into the world of the theatre, and therein demonstrate evident professional skills, was so at odds with patriarchal values that her motivation and her concomitant lifestyle could only be made comprehensible if construed as sexual."⁹⁴ The contrasting nature of reviews cited here attest to a significant shift in the status of ballerinas' work. Instead of focusing on the pleasure derived from looking at dancers' bodies, critics of the Ballets Russes commented on ballerinas' technique and artistry, noting by turns their musicality, expressiveness, and versatility in responding to the exigencies of different roles. Fokine's insistence on crafting ballets in which the dance and design were appropriate to the story no doubt underscored the dancer's challenge in mastering a wide technical vocabulary and repertoire.

Tamara Karsavina, a principal with the Imperial Ballet until 1918 and who performed with the Ballets Russes from 1909 until 1922, has been characterized as "one of the most

⁹³ Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed*, 63.

⁹⁴ Carter, "Prejudicial to Public Morality," 121.

renowned dancers of the early twentieth century,” known for her “intelligence, independence, courage, and resilience,” and as “a model of female strength and self-reliance.”⁹⁵ Fantastically popular, Karsavina earned critics’ early admiration and respect for her versatility and athleticism. As a 1912 reviewer in *The Times* remarked of her performance in *L'Oiseau de feu*, “Mme. Karsavina surpassed herself in agility, grace and sensuous beauty of movement, although she had already taken part in two other exacting ballets. These consisted of a repetition of *Thamar* and the first production this season of *Les Sylphides*,”⁹⁶ acknowledging the extraordinary stamina and athleticism required to embody multiple roles over the course of one evening. Of her performance in *Giselle* in 1911, a critic for *The Stage* swoons, “That *première danseuse*’s portrayal of oncoming death is as pathetic as her performance of the several suave numbers associated with the heroine is charming; and both she and her agile comrade [Nijinsky] were on Monday applauded to the echo for their surprising feats.”⁹⁷ Her versatility is again highlighted in Ellen Terry’s 1913 book, *The Russian Ballet*, where she describes how Karsavina, “who in other roles shows a nervous force, a tragic power, a strange and luring grace which account even better than her dancing for her triumphant prominence, is so gentle, so modest, so suppliant in the ‘Spectre de la Rose,’ that she becomes the incarnation of snow-white youth, dreaming of a heavenly lover.”⁹⁸ Her 1913 performance in *La Tragédie de Salomé* garnered praise for its finesse: “Mme. Karsavina’s dancing was an extraordinary *tour de force*. There was not a touch of exaggeration and not an ugly movement, and the way in which passionate longing and regret

⁹⁵ Karen Eliot, “Tamara Karsavina,” in *Dancing Lives: Five Female Dancers from the Ballet d’Action to Merce Cunningham* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 60.

⁹⁶ *The Times*, June 19, 1912.

⁹⁷ *The Stage*, October 19, 1911. The critic was reviewing the performance of October 16th, in which Karsavina danced in *Giselle* and *Schéhérazade*. The “several suave numbers” likely referred to her roles in *Schéhérazade* and *Cléopâtre*.

⁹⁸ Ellen Terry, *The Russian Ballet* (Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd., 1913), n.p. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45299/45299-h/45299-h.htm>.

were expressed by purely choreographic means was quite extraordinary. Her exquisite miming was seen earlier in the evening in Stravinsky's brilliant and tragic *Pétrouchka*.⁹⁹ In an early article in *The Times* in which the reviewer heaps praise on the company, he seems a touch confounded by Karsavina, of whom he claims "no words can do justice to the grace of her actual dancing; yet her face is so expressive that one forgets all about her feet."¹⁰⁰ In review after review, it is Karsavina's skill as a dancer, evinced by her ability to metamorphose into distinct roles and to evoke the emotional state of her characters, that is the subject of critics' praise.

Karsavina garnered more press than other company ballerinas of the period due to her being cast in the leading role in multiple ballets in every prewar season in London. In her short tenure with Diaghilev's ballet, however, Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) also thrilled audiences and garnered ample critical praise.¹⁰¹ In a sweeping adulation for *Les Sylphides*, one critic even praised the quality of both Pavlova's and Nijinsky's jumps (a particular strength of Nijinsky's) in equal terms: "these two dancers, with their swift, elastic leaps and fluttering butterfly movements, were so incredibly light and vivacious as to seem hardly human."¹⁰² Of her portrayal of Giselle's descent into madness, another critic writes, "we were not prepared for such a wonderful exhibition of counterfeit dementia as that given us at the end of the first scene. It was awful; it was nerve-wracking, and only the dancer's consummate art rescued it from the repulsive ... though the agony was piled on to breaking point ... the house was with the dancer, eyes and heart, till the curtain fell, when the enthusiasm was unbounded."¹⁰³ This particularly

⁹⁹ *The Times*, August 1, 1913.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, July 22, 1911.

¹⁰¹ Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed*, 52. Pavlova only danced with the company in the 1911 London season, and only in seven performances. Her previous solo tours, however, meant that critics and audiences would have already been familiar with her when she performed as part of the Ballets Russes.

¹⁰² *The Times*, November 2, 1911. This quote is also referenced in Amy Koritz, "Usurping High Culture."

¹⁰³ *The Standard*, October 30, 1911. Quoted in Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed*, 51. Giselle, a peasant girl abandoned by her lover when he is revealed to be a nobleman, is driven to insanity by the heartbreak that eventually kills her.

sensitive critic understood the inherent difficulty in portraying Giselle's psychological torment in a way that elicits pathos without veering into the appalling. The critic of *The Times* also praised the work of Sofia Fedorova, whose "impersonation of the part [of Ta-Hor in *Cléopâtre*] lifts the work from sensuous spectacle into an intensely vivid tragedy,"¹⁰⁴ recognizing the artist's role in infusing the ballet with its full dramatic potential. In *Prince Igor*, Fedorova "holds her own in astounding feats of agility, as in fiery spirit with the adolescents in whose evolutions she participates. The girl is a wonder at this man's work!"¹⁰⁵ In the guise of a compliment, this reviewer belies his own incredulity that a woman should be capable of such vigour and athleticism as Fedorova demonstrated. As the reviews attest, the image of the modern ballerina began to take form. No longer a simple spectacle, she became what we arguably consider to be the dancer of today: an expressive and accomplished artist of extraordinary physical capacity.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, November 17, 1911.

¹⁰⁵ Terry, *The Russian Ballet*, n.p.

X. Conclusion

This thesis situates the Fokine ballerina in prewar London within the broader social and political currents impacting the status of women in early twentieth-century Britain. It posits the ballerina as an ambivalent figure that both retains and reneges elements of her Romantic past while incorporating facets of modernity, mirroring women's efforts to wield political rights while negotiating what those changes signify for their self-conception and public image as women. Ultimately this thesis suggests the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between stage and reality, where the spirit of the time might be understood to manifest itself through the movement and appearance of the dancers, which in turn suggested a rethinking of the potential ways in which women could be in the world, culturally, physically, and professionally.

Women continued to contribute to the success and innovation of Ballets Russes until the company folded following Diaghilev's death in 1929. Its repertory expanded as the company began to choreograph more experimental, abstract works, breaking barriers of what had been seen on the ballet stage and incorporating elements of cubism and other artistic movements into its productions. In addition to the contributions made by Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncharova, and Bronislava Nijinska mentioned earlier, there were other women whose influence and support helped shape the company's legacy. For instance, when the "complex and irregular rhythms of Stravinsky's music" for *Le Sacre du printemps* proved difficult to interpret, dancer and pedagogue Marie Rambert (1888-1982) was instrumental in bringing Nijinsky's ballet to life by instructing dancers in the Dalcroze method of rhythmic gymnastics.¹⁰⁶ Coco Chanel (1883-1971), who was a close friend of Diaghilev's, is another example: she designed the costumes for

¹⁰⁶ Burt, "The Politics of Embodied Freedom": 138.

1924's *Le Train bleu* and was also an important patron of the company, financing the revival of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1920 with Massine's new choreography.

Women who danced with the Ballets Russes also continued to exert influence on the ballet world after their tenure with the company ended. Dame Ninette de Valois (1898-2001), who danced with the Ballets Russes from 1923 to 1925, would go on to found the Royal Ballet in 1931, one of today's most important ballet companies worldwide. Karsavina, also influential in establishing the Royal Ballet, supported de Valois' venture by designing innovative pedagogical methods for the Royal Academy of Dance and by coaching one of the company's most successful dancers, Margot Fonteyn (1919-1991). A photograph documenting Karsavina, at nearly seventy years old, teaching the role of The Firebird to Fonteyn in 1954 is an important testament to the force of kinaesthetic memory and to the enduring, and perhaps malleable, significance of Fokine's ballets [Figure 18].

The Ballets Russes helped carve a space in the London cultural scene for ballet and, in tandem, a role for the ballerina as a serious artist and professional. But where the Ballets Russes helped to reframe the image of the ballerina and contributed to the valuation of ballet within British culture, with that exalted status has arguably developed a sense of exclusivity. As a profession, ballet is often reserved for the few who can afford it and whose physical attributes fall in line with narrowly-defined expectations, and particularly so for women dancers. As a cultural product, it is often accessible only to those who have the means to attend performances, and who feel welcome in performance spaces. As we continue to grapple with how privilege stemming from race, gender, sexuality, and class is woven into our social fabrics, so must we acknowledge how this privilege limits ballet's potential for expression, artistry, story-telling, and

reflection of varied experiences. Choreographer, dancer, and artist-scholar Adesola Akinleye argues that:

By making ballet synonymous with funded, cis-straight narratives, those who benefit often draw on deep-rooted class, racial and gendered biases to create hierarchical structures for how the art is valued. The interaction between concepts of race, gender, inheritance and ownership of ballet have played a critical role in instituting and sustaining racial and economic subordination through funding and exposure being exclusively available only to a few. This has justified a right to exclude from support and exposure based on limited concepts of what and who ballet can be expressed through. Amidst this process, ballet has effectively become the property of the few who assumed the right to exclude others.¹⁰⁷

Fokine himself believed that “art belonged to the broad masses of people, not to the narrow circle of balletomanes that attended the Mariinsky.”¹⁰⁸ For ballet to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, its unique forms and heritage must welcome new voices, new bodies, new stories, and new audiences, and continue the project began by the Ballets Russes to make ballet a living art.

¹⁰⁷ Adesola Akinleye, “Introduction: Regarding claiming ballet/reclaiming ballet,” in *(Re:) Claiming Ballet* (Intellect Books, 2021), 15.

¹⁰⁸ Garafolia, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 10.

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XII. APPENDIX: BALLETS RUSSES LONDON SEASONS, 1911-1914

Information presented here was extracted from Jane Pritchard, "Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes—An Itinerary. Part 1: 1909-1921," *Dance Research* 27, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 108-98.

Season	Dates	Theatre	No. of performances
1911(1)	21 June to 31 July	Royal Opera House	18 (incl. Coronation Gala)
1911(2)	16 October to 9 December	Royal Opera House	25
1912	12 June to 1 August	Royal Opera House	26
1913 (1)	4 February to 7 March	Royal Opera House	16
1913 (2)	25 June to 25 July	Theatre Royal, Drury Lane	23
1914	9 June to 25 July	Theatre Royal, Drury Lane	41

London seasons of the Ballets Russes, 1911-1914. The number of performances refers to the number of dates on which the company performed; each performance typically consisted of three to four ballets.

Work	1911(1)	1911(2)	1912	1913(1)	1913(2)	1914	Performances
<i>Les Sylphides</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	43
<i>Le Spectre de la rose</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	38
<i>Prince Igor</i>	x	x	x	x	x		38
<i>Le Carnaval</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	34
<i>Schéhérazade</i>	x	x	x		x		34
<i>Le Pavillon d'Armide</i>	x	x	x		x		26
<i>Thamar</i>			x	x	x	x	26
<i>L'Oiseau de feu</i>			x	x	x	x	20
<i>Petrouchka</i>				x	x	x	16
<i>Cléopâtre</i>	x	x		x		x	15
<i>L'Après-midi d'un faune</i>				x	x		12
<i>Narcisse</i>			x	x	x	x	10
<i>Le Lac des cygnes</i>		x	x		x	x	8
<i>La Légende de Joseph</i>						x	7
<i>Papillons</i>						x	6
<i>Daphnis et Chloé</i>						x	5
<i>Midas</i>						x	5
<i>Giselle</i>		x					4
<i>Jeux</i>					x		4
<i>L'Oiseau d'or</i>		x					4
<i>La Tragédie de Salomé</i>					x		4
<i>Le Dieu bleu</i>				x			3
<i>Le Sacre du printemps</i>					x		3
<i>Aurore et le Prince</i>		x					2
<i>L'Oiseau et le Prince</i>				x			1

Works performed by the Ballets Russes in London in order of frequency, 1911-1914

XIII. FIGURES

LONDON COLISEUM,
CHARING CROSS.

Managing Director OSWALD STOLL
Manager DUNDAS SLATER

WHIT-MONDAY, MAY 16th, 1910
AND UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE
TWICE DAILY AT 2.30 and 8.0 P.M.

THE FAMOUS RUSSIAN DANCERS:
Mdlle. TAMARA
KARSAVINA
Mdlle.
BALDINA
And M. THEODORE
KOSLOFF

Who made so striking a success at the Chatelet
Theatre, Paris, and the London Coliseum last year

AND

Mdlle. ANDERSEN	Mons. TARASOFF
" ADAMOWITSCH	" GERBER
" CHEREPANOWA	" GOTSCHITOWSKY
" DAMACHOWA	" KOTROWSKAIE I.
" WICHNIAKOWA	" KOTROWSKAIE II.
" MALTSCHANOWA	" ALEXIS KOSLOFF
	" TSCHOUKOFF

ALL FROM THE IMPERIAL OPERA HOUSES
OF ST. PETERSBURG AND MOSCOW.

Figure 1. Programme for Karsavina's second season at the London Coliseum, 1910.

Reproduced in Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929*. Dance Horizons, 1975.



Figure 2. Mathilde Kschessinska on the cover of *The Tatler*, June 21, 1911.

Reproduced in Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929* (Dance Horizons, 1975).



Figure 3. Anna Pavlova as Ta-Hor from *Cléopâtre*, 1909. London Museum.



Figure 4. Marie Taglioni in *L'Ombre*, c. 1840. Hand-coloured lithograph. Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 5. Marie Taglioni in *Flore et Zéphire*, 1831. Hand-coloured lithograph by R. J. Lane after a drawing by A. E. Chalon. Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 6. Sofia Fedorova in *Prince Igor*, London, 1911. Photograph by Emil Otto Hoppé. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Manfred Heiting Collection.



Figure 7. Tamara Karsavina and Adolph Bolm in *Thamar*, 1912. Photograph by Stanislaw Julian Ignacy, commissioned for *Comoedia Illustré*.



Figure 8. Studio photograph of Vera Nemchinova in *Les Sylphides*, c.1910-1930. Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 10. Tamara Karsavina in the title role of *L'Oiseau de feu*, 1910. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library.



Figure 11. Léon Bakst, Costume design for *L'Oiseau de feu*, 1913. MoMA, The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection.



Figure 12. Tamara Karsavina in the title role and Mikhail Fokine as Prince Ivan in *L'Oiseau de feu*, 1910. Library of Congress, Ballets Russes de Serge Diaghilev Collection.

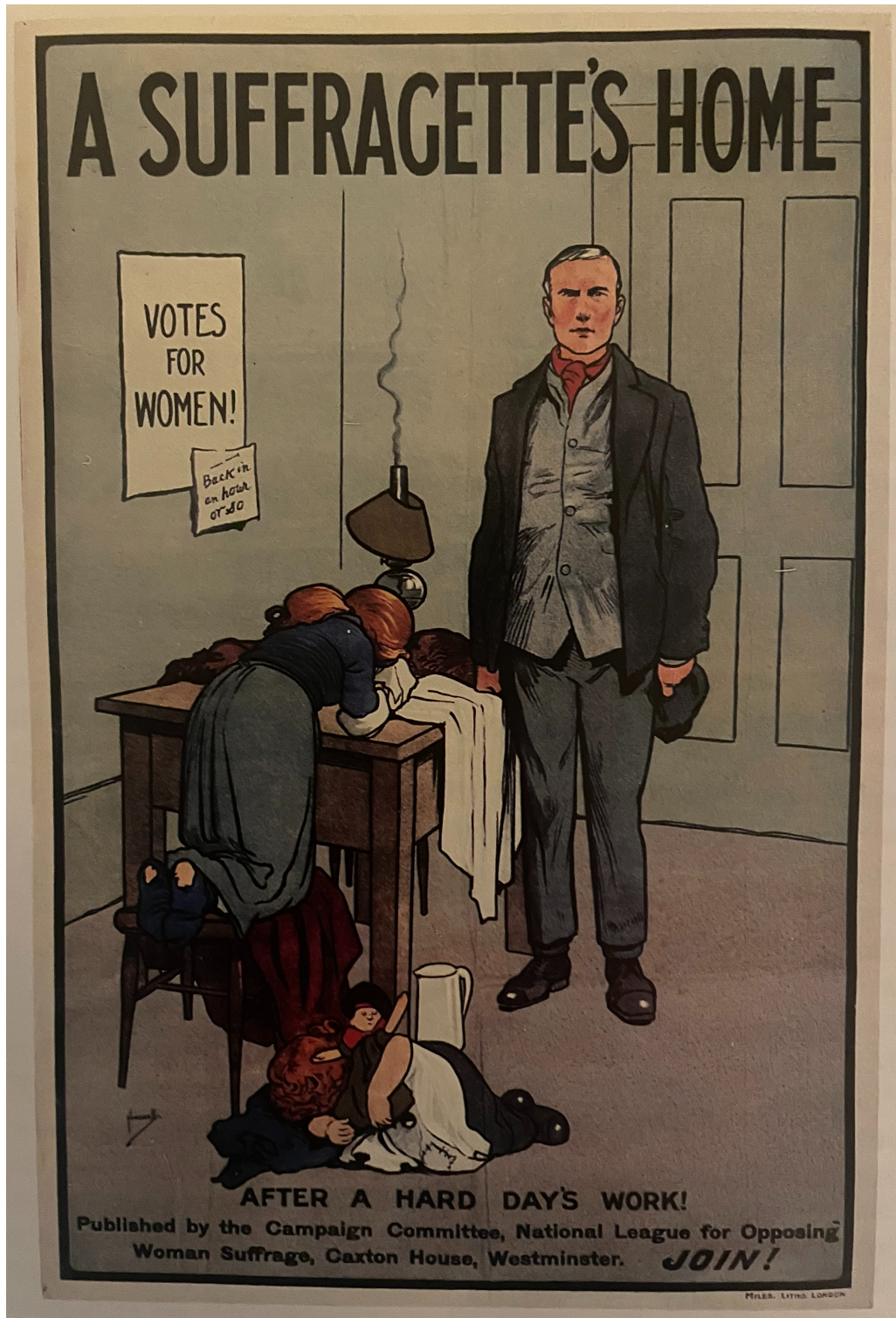


Figure 13. John Hassall, "A Suffragette's Home," 1912. Published by the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.

Reproduced in Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.



Figure 14. Alfred Perse, poster produced for the Women's Social and Political Union, 1914.



Figure 15. Tamara Karsavina as Zobeida in *Schéhérazade*, 1910. Photograph by Emil Otto Hoppé. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Manfred Heiting Collection.



Figure 16. Anne Estelle Rice, illustration of *Schéhérazade* for *Rhythm* 2(7), 1912.



SCHÉHÉRAZADE

ANNE ESTELLE RICE

Figure 17. Anne Estelle Rice, illustration of *Schéhérazade* for *Rhythm* 2(7), 1912.

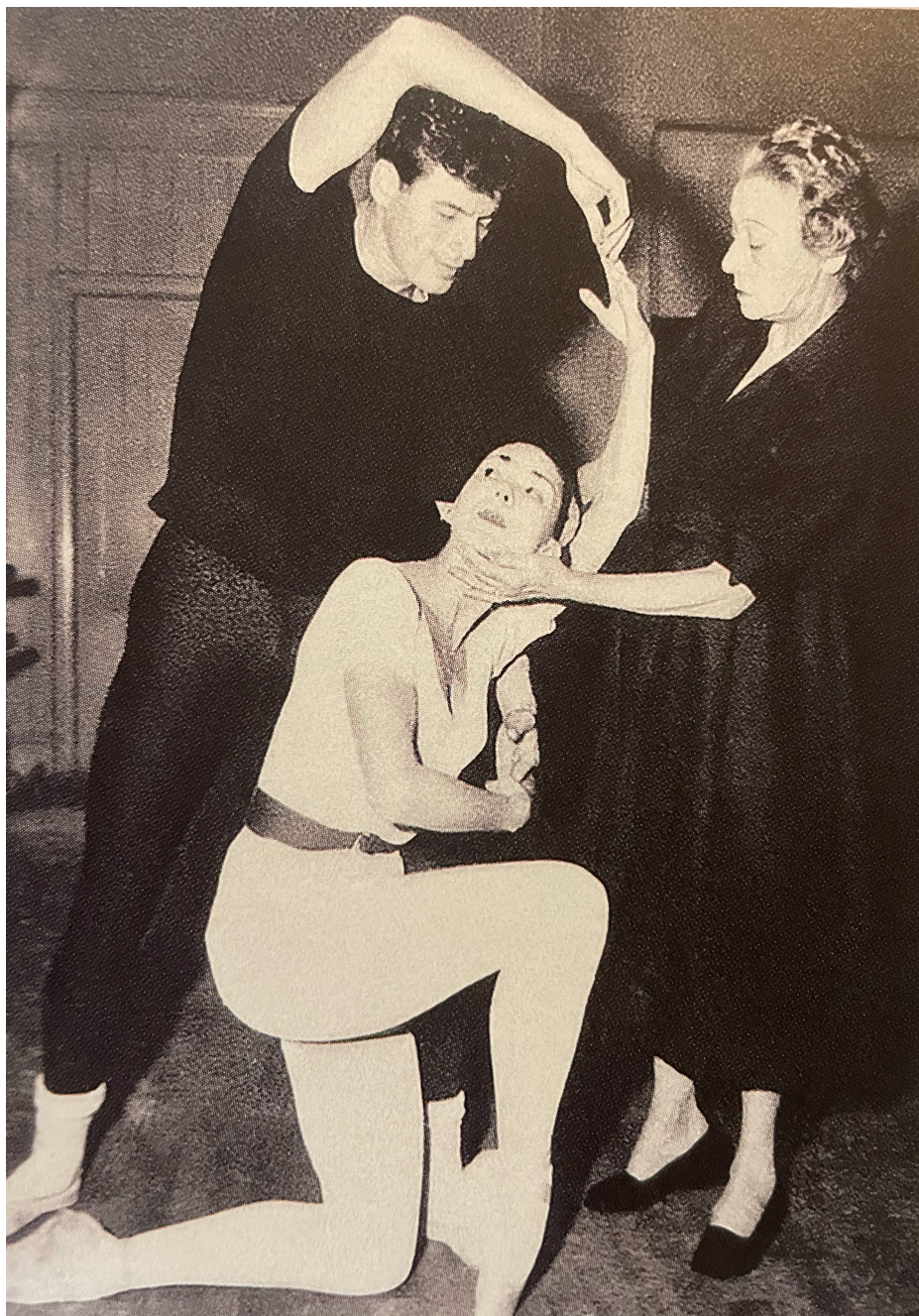


Figure 18. Tamara Karsavina (r) teaching the role of the Firebird to Margot Fonteyn, with Michael Some, for a revival by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, Edinburgh, 1954.

Reproduced in Robinson McClellan and Lynn Garafola, *Crafting the Ballets Russes: Music, Dance, Design: The Robert Owen Lehman Collection*. The Morgan Library & Museum, 2024.